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Teaching Practicum in the Teacher Education Institutions in Cambodia: A Cross-Case Analysis

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Abstract
The teaching practicum, which is an integral part of any teacher's education, is considered the most crucial and influential stage for student teachers. This study explored the commonalities and differences in teaching practicum programs in three teacher education institutions in Cambodia. Employing a cross-case analysis, the author triangulated the data by examining teaching practicum guidelines, reviewing related documents, and interviewing the practicum-in-charge (n = 12). As data display and analysis techniques, the researcher utilized qualitative comparative analysis, in which the relationship among cases was arranged in a "truth table" by variable to synthesize the commonalities and differences. Inductive content analysis was used to thematically analyze the documents. This study found that the organization of the teaching practicum at the three teacher education institutions was less productive in bridging the theory-practice gap because of an unclear follow-up system throughout the implementation process. Moreover, the assessment was inappropriate and unreliable. Additionally, mentoring activities were insufficient and ineffective for helping student teachers. This study has the potential to contribute to the field of teacher education, specifically the teaching practicum, and provide insights for policymakers, because there is little local literature available.

Key Words: Assessment, cross-case study, mentoring, teacher education, teaching practicum organization

Introduction

In teacher education, the teaching practicum (TP) is considered the most essential and influential stage for student teachers (STs) and is an integral part of pre-service teacher education (Allen & Wright, 2014; Cohen, Hoz, & Kaplan, 2013; Hobson et al., 2005; Phin, 2014). It allows STs to become exposed to the actual world of teaching and increases their knowledge about the complexity of classroom practices, which helps enhance pre-service teachers' inspiration, attitudes, and commitment to the teaching profession (Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre-Hernández, 2018). During the TP, STs learn in-depth practices in connection with applied theories that enable them to adjust their practice in a well-grounded fashion and learn how to improvise in an actual classroom setting (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Although many studies have confirmed the growing importance of the TP as the central component of teacher education worldwide (Allen & Wright, 2014; Cohen et al., 2013; Tatto, 2021), some have reported that it is frequently confronted with core dilemmas. A systematic analysis of empirical studies (Cohen et al., 2013) revealed that

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a perennial dilemma for the TP is its unclear organizational structure. The relationship between stakeholders is not bridged, owing to the lack of a planned organization in the teacher education program. Another perpetual dilemma for TP is the assessment method. Some studies found that assessment tools such as classroom observation and reflection reports were not particularly effective (Canh, 2014; Lawson, Çakmak, Gündüz, & Busher, 2015; Merç, 2015). Other studies in this area also critique mentoring programs as one of the core dilemmas of the TP. For instance, Lawson et al. (2015) reviewed the literature and observed the key issues with mentoring programs, such as the ambiguous roles of mentors, unclear perceptions of good mentoring, ineffective feedback quality, and lack of cooperation with STs. Since issues related to the quality of the TP have been the subject of discussion among teacher education institutions (TEIs) globally, in many cases, STs complete their TP simply as a degree requirement without undergoing the deeper practice expected by the programs.

As in other countries, little is known about the quality of the implementation of the TP in TEIs in Cambodia. For instance, the Cambodia Secondary Education Blueprint, developed by Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) to determine the challenges and successes of the current system, reported some key challenges, one of which was the low and ineffective standard of the PRESET curricula at TEIs (MoEYS, 2021). The TP is poorly coordinated and does not provide worthwhile learning experiences for STs, who become teachers without any long-term practical classroom teaching experience. Another report under the project to establish a foundation for a Teacher Education College (TEC) (2016–2022) noted that the TP encountered some challenges (JICA, 2023). For instance, stakeholder collaboration uses a poor and unclear organization system. Schools alleged that practicum put a lot of responsibility on them, while school mentors complained that they faced difficulties in dealing with STs. In light of another report by NIE-Singapore (2017), the practical component of TEIs does not provide sufficient authentic teaching opportunities for STs. A more structured and well-organized TP is required to enhance students' confidence and teaching capabilities. Moreover, TEIs and school mentors should have close supervision and systematic endeavors that require a common vision and strong collaboration.

Despite all the aforementioned studies on the issues and challenges of the TP in TEIs in Cambodia, a cross-case analysis appears to be necessary to determine the hidden factors that have escaped the attention of current reforms. In this regard, the researcher purposively selected the National Institute of Education (NIE), Phnom Penh Teacher Education College (PTEC), and Battambang Teacher Education College (BTEC) as cases for cross-comparison, because they were within the scope of teacher education reforms. As mentioned, the overall vision for strengthening TEIs is to start the reform with the NIE and the two TECs to promote teaching and innovation (MoEYS, 2019). In this sense, the NIE and TECs were considered agents of change that led to the reform of the Cambodian education system. The NIE is the only teacher educa-

tion system in Cambodia that provides a two-year graduate diploma in teaching at the high school level (NIE, 2022). Moreover, the NIE pursues the professional development of teacher educators, teachers, and school administrators through workshops, seminars, and other training activities, and it administers in-service postgraduate programs such as a Master's and Ph.D. in educational leadership and curriculum development. In addition, TECs, currently consisting of PTEC and BTEC, were established with the support of a JICA project in 2017 (JICA, 2017). PTEC and BTEC provide bachelor's degrees (12+4) in teaching to lower secondary school teachers.

Literature Review

Overview and organization of the TP

The TP has multiple terms that can be used interchangeably, such as field experience, teaching practice, and school experience. Theoretically, the TP is defined as a helpful journey in professional growth and teaching studies (Keogh, Dole, & Hudson, 2006). The findings across the international literature support the idea that the TP is beneficial for bridging the theory-practice gap (Beck & Kosnik, 2002; Clarke, Triggs, & Nielsen, 2014; Elligate, 2007; Hamaidi, Al-Shara, Arouri, & Awwad, 2014). It provides STs with the opportunity to learn by teaching, applying theory to practice, and observing and reflecting on their teaching skills (Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre-Hernández, 2018). The TP is an opportunity for STs to construct their identity as teachers and to be enculturated into the teaching profession. The primary aim of the TP is to equip STs with teaching experience in a classroom setting before they become teachers (Cohen et al., 2013).

Regarding TP lengths and organization, some studies that came to similar conclusions on the organization of the TP suggested that the period considered adequate for the TP varies from one TEI to another depending on the philosophy and unique goals of each institution. Some TEIs choose longer stays within the entire TP, whereas others prefer multiple placements of short duration (Ulvik & Smith, 2011). The average practicum time should be approximately 15 weeks for STs to have sufficient teaching practice (Pungur, 2007). Although the TP in every TEI may vary in organization, duration, or sequence, as long as they follow a common course of professional development that starts with an introductory period, STs gradually take on teaching duties and finally take full responsibility as a teacher (Selechopoulou, Sakkoulis, & Asimaki, 2021).

The TP is a complex phenomenon that involves various stakeholders, such as the practicum-in-charge, TEI mentors (i.e., the teacher educator or supervisor from the TEI), school mentors, STs, and school administrators working collaboratively to make the TP successful. Previous studies showed that ineffective TP experiences were due to the absence of collaboration between TEIs and placement schools (Allen & Wright, 2014; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Bloomfield

(2009), studying in an Australian context, suggested that when engaging in practicum reform, the relationship between TEIs and the placement school must change from a poorly rewarded service to a more collaborative relationship that aims to be beneficial to the professional development of school mentors. Therefore, TPs should be framed properly and more well-defined with purposeful implementation in teacher preparation programs (Grobgeld, Teichman-Weinberg, Wasserman, & Barchilon Ben-Av, 2016; Mena, Hennissen, & Loughran, 2017).

Assessment

In addition to the organizational difficulties of the practicum procedure, measuring STs' performance is a major concern. In teacher education, assessment is not only a means of certification and qualification but also a tool for professional development (Cochran-Smith, 2005). During the TP, STs are evaluated using formative and summative assessments to measure several performance indicators within the scope of professional practice, professional knowledge, and professional relationships. Assessing STs' performance entails many different considerations, such as classroom management, lesson plans, reflection reports, and classroom observation of mentors. Matsumoto-Royo and Ramírez-Montoya (2021) concluded that the assessment process involves four tasks: (1) classroom observations, (2) portfolios, (3) questions during rehearsals, and (4) reflection papers written by STs. Moreover, a narrative literature review by Yahya, Mansor, and Abdullah (2017) classified assessment methods into two categories: traditional and authentic. During classroom observation, a traditional assessment method, STs are assessed using several criteria, such as teaching pedagogies, classroom management, and lesson plans (Al-Malki & Weir, 2014). ST assessments should be based on professional standards that connect STs' learning to classroom teaching to leverage improvements in both STs' competence and the program (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Mentoring

Mentoring appears central to STs' teaching quality and, ultimately, to the achievement of teacher preparation programs (Shanks et al., 2022). Mentoring helps STs reduce their feelings of isolation, increase confidence in teaching, improve problem-solving skills, and develop self-reflection (Schuck, Aubusson, Buchanan, Varadharajan, & Burke, 2018; Tonna, Bjerkholt, & Holland, 2017), especially in terms of time management and workload, to achieve better socialization in the school environment (A. J. Hobson, Ashby, Malderez, & Tomlinson, 2009). While the value of mentoring has been recognized, some studies have found that various challenges lead to its ineffective implementation. For instance, mentoring can lack role clarity and there may be no shared understanding among stakeholders (Andreasen, Bjørndal, & Kovač, 2019), plus ineffective and judgmental feedback rather than reflective or constructive feedback

(Lawson et al., 2015). Some literature suggests that the considerable need for mentoring preparation should be considered to equip mentors with a common understanding of their roles and responsibilities, and to provide adequate assistance, efficient feedback, and proper guidance to STs during their practicum (Koç, 2012; Mutlu, 2014). Payant and Murphy (2012) studied the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders during a TP and reported that difficulties in collaborating with mentors and unclear definitions of mentors' roles and responsibilities negatively affected the practicum process.

While a substantial number of studies have addressed issues and strategies for improving the quality of TPs, studies targeting the implementation of TPs in TEIs in Cambodia have been comparatively absent. To date, the practicum-in-charge does not have a clear role, or clear descriptions of which tasks are obligatory or optional. Moreover, establishing a system for meaningful and sustained collaboration between TEIs and placement schools remains a gap in the literature (Cohen et al., 2013). Addressing this gap for further investigation, this cross-case analysis aimed to explore the commonalities and differences in the implementation of the TP by comparing the organization, assessment methods, and mentoring activities of the three selected cases. This study aimed to answer the following two research questions:

1. How do the TPs of the NIE, PTEC, and BTEC differ in terms of organization, assessment, and mentoring?
2. What can be done to improve the current implementation of TPs in these reform institutions?

Methodology

Research design

The current study employed a qualitative research design in which a cross-case analysis approach (Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008) was used to explore a particular phenomenon (in this case, the TP), where the main focus was on exploring the commonalities and differences across cases and thereby contribute to generalization. As a data display and analysis technique, the researcher utilized qualitative comparative analysis (Ragin, 1992), which focuses on arranging the relationships among cases in a "truth table" by variable to synthesize common causes and outcomes.

Data sources and sampling method

The main data sources were TP guidelines and related TP documents (i.e., evaluation reports, observation sheets, and portfolios).

Table 1.
Data Sources from Each TEI

Source	NIE	PTEC	BTEC	Total
TP guidelines	1	1	1	3
Evaluation reports	1	1	1	3
List of STs and Mentors	4	4	4	12
Score list	1	1	1	3
Observation sheet	1	1	1	3
Reflection report	1	1	1	3
Sample portfolio	1	1	1	3

Note. TEI= Teacher Education Institution, NIE= National Institute of Education, PTEC= Phnom Penh Teacher Education College, BTEC= Battambang Teacher Education College

Semi-structured interview data from 12 practicums-in-charge (i.e., the program representatives or the person responsible for the whole TP process) were analyzed for a deeper understanding of the specific phenomenon and a more comprehensive view to identify the experiences, challenges, and operations of the TP in each case. To recruit study participants, the researcher employed a purposive sampling technique (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016) where the main focus was to explore information-rich cases for an in-depth study. Before the interviews, participants' profiles were collected and screened thoroughly.

Table 2.
Number of Participants from Each TEI

TEIs	NIE	PTEC	BTEC	Total
Vice principal	1	1	1	3
Study office	1	1	1	3
Department of education	1	1	1	3
Faculty of Research	1	1	1	3

Instrument

A semi-structured interview protocol was employed, allowing interviewees to control and focus on a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied (Hancock, Algozzine, & Lim, 2021). The interview protocol was designed by the author with the following focus themes: (1) the participants' tasks and responsibilities before, during, and after the TP; (2) the organization of the TP such as the duration and method for matching teacher mentors and STs; (3) follow-up activities; (4) the assessment method; and (5) their perception of the current TP (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016). Interview questions were sent to senior researchers in the field of education to ensure validity and variability. In addition, a discussion of feedback and input with coworkers was conducted at a 120-minute meeting after the presentation of the phenomenon under study. Finally, the interview was piloted with two teacher

educators at the NIE, one from the Department of Education, and the other from the study office.

Data analysis

Document analysis

This study adopted the content analysis approach of Blair (2015) regarding qualitative data coding techniques. The analysis was based on three phases: (1) developing prior codes by focusing on the research problems, (2) adjusting the prior codes according to the purpose and research questions and drawing out the possible codes, and (3) reviewing the collected documents related to the teaching practicum in TEIs to revise the codes with the previous ones to create the final codes. Sub-coding was performed after the initial coding scheme was applied. Next, to increase the reliability and ensure the accuracy of the analysis, the documents were repeatedly revisited to check for the consistency, patterns, and descriptions of each code. Finally, a common codebook for analysis was created using the main themes, codes, and subcodes. After creating the codebook, a cross-case comparison was conducted to explore the commonalities and differences in the implementation of the TP in each case.

Interview analysis

To analyze the interview data, the researcher converted the raw audiotape and transcript data into meaningful and readable resources. The codes for the interview data were developed mainly following the common codebook of the document analysis because both data types are used to confirm the information written in the document with the real practice. Data analysis consisted of three steps: (1) developing and applying a code that represented the themes; (2) identifying themes, patterns, and relationships; and (3) summarizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2016). All interviews were conducted separately based on the times nominated by the interviewees. The interviews were conducted in the Khmer language, which was transcribed and translated into English for illustration. Each interview lasted for approximately 40–50 minutes. To report the findings, the codebook was reviewed to compare themes from the document with the interview data.

Table 3.
Overview of the analysis of both data types: categories, descriptions, and examples from the interview

Categories	Description of the category	Example from the quotation
1. Organization of TP	lengths, duration, credit numbers, and types of practicum placement.	The sequence of the current TP is much better than the previous program. The flow of the TP each year allows STs to be exposed to the teaching job step by step before they can teach independently in the classroom. (TEC#1)
2. Assessment criteria	the types of assessments to measure STs' performance which include classroom observation, writing reports, and portfolios.	Classroom observation is the main assessment tool for assessing the STs' performance. We have no authority to check whether the assessment is accurate or not. (NIE#4)
3. Mentoring	the kind of activities for supporting STs during their TP	The role of the faculty staff is to facilitate the TP process. It is probably a great idea in the document, but it is all-consuming, and I do not think it could work properly. (TEC#2)

Ethical approval and informed consent

The research title, data collection method, and participant sampling were presented to and approved by the Graduate School Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Regarding confidentiality and anonymity, identity coding was conducted for each interviewee (i.e., NIE#1, NIE#2, PTEC#1, PTEC#2, and BTEC#, BTEC#2…). Informed consent was obtained from each participant; the form indicated the purpose of the study and asked permission to record and use the data. Participants were asked to choose a convenient time for the interview. The respondents had the right to skip any question at any time during the interviews.

Findings

This section presents the findings gained from the document analysis and interview in three parts: (1) organization of the TP, (2) assessment, and (3) mentoring. Since PTEC and BTEC implement the same TP guideline, the acronym TECs is used to refer to these two institutions.

Organization of the TP

Table 4.
Sequence of the TP in the NIE and TECs

TEIs	Year and types of TP	Credit	Duration
NIE	Year 1: Non-Final practicum	1	4 weeks
	Year 2: Final Practicum	3	12 weeks
TECs	Year 1: School Experience	2	2 weeks
	Year 2: Teaching Assistantship	5	5 weeks
	Year 3: Practicum I	5	5 weeks
	Year 4: Practicum II	10	10 works

Table 4 summarizes the organization of TP programs in the selected cases. In general, the sequences, credit systems, and durations are organized differently based on the level and responsible roles of each program. The cross-case analysis revealed that TP is emphasized more in lower secondary TEIs (TECs) than in upper secondary ones (NIE), in that they provide a longer time to learn to teach and more diverse practicum sequences. The way the TP operates across the entire program and the position it occupies within each curriculum is at the discretion of the administrative bodies of each TEI. The goals and functions of the TP within each program are linked directly to the sequences that frame the TP. Although the TP of both programs begins during different years of study, the sequencing varies, and the credit system differs; consequently, both programs follow a common course of development in their TP. In particular, both TP programs start with an introductory period that facilitates adjustment to the school environment, engagement in administrative work, and a period of observing teaching in an authentic classroom setting (Bernstein, 2000; Whatman & MacDonald, 2017). After this initial period, STs typically progress to more hands-on teaching responsibilities, where they gradually assume a larger role in the classroom.

To understand more about the organization of TP in each institution, the researcher interviewed the practicum-in-charge to disclose their perception. One participant explained:

> NIE#3: *The current TP is much better now. In the previous program, STs did not have much chance to familiarize themselves with the classroom. They only listen to the orientation and get to know their school mentor. The school mentor then explained to them what to do and introduced them to the pupils. Some STs have the chance to observe their school mentor whereas some other STs start their teaching immediately.*

Some participants stated that they needed to collaborate more closely with the school mentors to gain a shared understanding of the needs and challenges and discuss how best to support the STs during their TP. Some participants also noted several shortcomings that prevented them from investing more heavily in fostering practicum procedures, such as heavy workloads, limited time availability, and resource constraints.

TEC#6: "*Organizing the TP practicum is not a simple task. The study office has a lot of things to do such as preparing official documents for the MoEYS, contacting the placement schools, matching the TEI mentors with STs, arranging their schedules, and preparing many practicum documents. This process is so complicated and keeps us very busy."*

NIE#4: *"[…] Besides the organizational difficulty, we admitted that we did not follow up the implementation process properly because we had a lot of work to do and a lack of staff to help. However, we understand that communication with school staff should exist sometimes during the TP."*

Although, the participants in this study admit that the organization that frames the TP is well-conducted and beneficial to STs' learning, to ensure the quality of the TP, considerable attention should be paid to the implementation process, which requires constant follow-up and proper management.

Assessment criteria

According to Table 5, which summarizes the assessment criteria for both programs, the investigation showed some similarities and differences in how STs were assessed.

Table 5.
Assessment Criteria of the TP in the NIE and TECs

Main assessment criteria	NIE	TECs
1. Classroom observation	50%	50%
2. Reflexive conference	20%	20%
3. Writing portfolio	20%	30%
4. Professional ethics	10%	

(a) Classroom observation: Both institutions use classroom observation as the key element for assessing STs' performance (50%). TEIs mentors and school mentors are involved in assessing the STs by conducting observations and assessing the STs sepa-

rately. Regarding the number of observations, the TEC guidelines mention that TEI mentors are required to observe twice and school mentors five times. However, the NIE guidelines do not mention how many times both mentors are required to observe STs. At the end of the TP, both mentors share their evaluation reports and assess the STs together with other criteria, such as the portfolio and their performance during the reflexive conference. However, one noticeable difference is that, in the NIE guidelines, during classroom observation, other STs are also required to observe their peers using the observation form. The purpose of the peer observation is to discuss the reflection conference. Another difference is that at the NIE, STs' professional ethics are assessed separately, whereas the TECs embed this in the teaching task.

(b) A portfolio refers to a collection of documents consisting of reflection reports, lesson plans, and other teaching materials created by STs (Klenowski, 2000). Information from the guidelines shows that both institutions listed similar criteria for portfolio inclusion. The only difference is that at TECs, the portfolio gains a higher score (30%) than at the NIE (20%).

(c) In this study, the term reflection session is used to refer to a "reflection conference" and "reflexive conservation" used by both institutions. This is the process of sharing and providing feedback on STs' teaching performance. Both institutions gave equal scores to this session (20%); however, the implementation and purpose of this session had interesting similarities and differences. A detailed description of the reflection sessions is provided in the following section.

An analysis of the grade reports of the STs revealed that the assessments were inaccurate and not performed properly. Some mentors gave full marks to all STs in different activities, and some gave the same mark to STs in the upper and final parts of the list. Some participant explained that:

> TEC#10: *"They use the same assessment sheet but both of them evaluate the same thing differently and it was inconsistent or sometimes it was too consistent that they got everything the same."*

> NIE#4: *"[…] it is beyond our authority to check whether the assessment is accurate or sufficient."*

Mentoring activities

The data analysis from the documents in both TEIs produced three main mentoring activities: (a) pre-practicum, (b) during practicum, and (c) reflection.

Pre-practicum

This is typically a training course designed to prepare STs for practice. The specific content, structure, and names of the courses varied between the two TEIs, but they

had similar purposes.

At NIE, this program is called the *"Peer-Mentoring Program."* It occurs twice during the two-year education period, in the second semester of year 1, and the first semester of year 2. The purpose of this program is to provide STs with pedagogical mentoring skills and support them through a practicum before their fieldwork. This peer-mentoring course consists of two chapters, the first focusing on the theoretical study of how to practice pedagogical mentoring and provide feedback. The second chapter focuses on case study clubs and role-playing sessions that help STs apply their teaching and mentoring skills in simulated real-world situations.

In the case of TECs, this program is called "Professional Practice and Inquiry" (PPI). Similar to the NIE, this program happens twice during the four-year education period, once in year 1 and once in year 4. The purpose of the PPI course in year 1 is to provide STs with a foundation for understanding the patterns of applying the knowledge they have acquired to reflect on and link the theory and practice of their work during the practicum. The PPI course in year 4 aims to prepare STs for graduation, in which they will continue to develop their professional skills even without the help of teacher educators and mentors.

During practicum

According to the document analysis, there are two main mentoring activities that play important roles in supporting STs, one of which is classroom observation, and the other is feedback-sharing sessions. Regarding classroom observation, both documents described similar strategies for observing STs. Generally, classroom observation consists of three phases: before, during, and after the observation. Before the observation, the STs prepare lesson plans, discuss them with TEI mentors and/or school mentors, and adjust the plan or prepare the teaching materials accordingly. During the observation, mentors observe the STs teaching without any intervention. After the observation, there is a feedback session in which mentors provide information to the STs about their teaching progress. The session focuses on STs' learning and solutions to their challenges. An observation sheet is used as a tool for keeping detailed records of the STs' strengths and weaknesses, and it is important to minimize the possibility of disagreements and arguments in post-lesson meetings.

Reflection session

A reflection session is a meeting during which mentors and STs have the opportunity to contemplate and discuss teaching in depth. Different terms and procedures are used for the reflection sessions. In the case of the NIE, the term "Reflection Conference" is used. The purpose of this session is not to instruct in teaching methods, nor is it about checking the STs' work. It is about hearing STs' voices regarding their experiences of success, challenges, and difficulties and finding common solutions. NIE men-

tors moderate the session, and they are not the ones who provide solutions or critiques but rather help set the agenda and lead the discussion. Finally, the NIE mentors conclude the comments, provide feedback, and help find further support, if needed. The term "Reflexive Conversation" is used in TECs. The purpose of such a conversation is to strengthen the theory-practice relationship as STs take their first steps as teachers. The conversation is led by TEC mentors, but active participation from STs is required. For year 1, these conversations are held twice. The first time is not included in the evaluation; however, for the second time, the mentors evaluate the STs' participation during the conversation, which is a part of the official evaluation of the TP every year. For years 2, 3, and 4, the conversations occur three times each. The first and second times are not for evaluation, but the third time is.

Some participants from the three cases highlighted the pre-practicum course as a crucial preparation for improving TPs. Participants who highlighted these themes pointed out that, with the pre-practicum course, STs were prepared well before being sent to the TP, especially on how to observe their peers, provide feedback, and learn how to deal with challenges in the classroom through various scenarios during the course.

> TEC#1: *"[…] Before STs conducted their TP, they attended a course called "Professional Practice and Inquiry". This course played an important role in guiding STs through the process of the practicum. They get familiar with what will be going on during the TP and they learn to prepare for it. "*

> NIE#4: *"[…] I think the "Peered-Mentoring" program is a useful course for STs to learn some useful skills such as observation skills and the art of giving constructive feedback to their peers. These skills will help them to learn critically and become future teachers with the concept of mentoring."*

While some practicum-in-charge acknowledged that mentoring could provide opportunities for STs to learn, they viewed this as challenging. They commented on the difficulty of managing the practicum process in terms of a lack of collaboration among stakeholders, less attention from committee members, and unsupportive coordination from school mentors.

> NIE#2: *"To be honest, we had no time to check how many times the TEI mentors observed the STs or how the mentoring sessions were going. It is solely dependent on the individual mentors' work."*

> TEC#2: *"The role of the faculty staff is to facilitate the TP process. It is probably a great idea in the document, but it is all-consuming, and I don't think it could work properly."*

Discussion

In this cross-case study, the researcher explored the commonalities and differences between three TP programs in three reform TEIs in Cambodia by analyzing the TP guidelines, reviewing related documents, and interviewing the practicum-in-charge. The three themes identified across both programs are discussed in this section.

Organization: The participants are positive, yet difficult to manage

Regarding the organization of the TP, it appears that participants from the three institutions appreciated the duration and flow of each type of TP. They commented that the quality and quantity of the current TP matter for the success of STs' learning. The TP provides the opportunity for STs to apply theory to practice from the beginning of their education, and this process shapes them step by step and gradually develops their teaching skills. This is similar to the findings of Eret-Orhan, Ok, and Capa-Aydin (2018) stated that TPs that begin earlier appear to function more effectively in shaping STs professionally.

On the other hand, the participants commented that their roles and responsibilities had some significant tensions and challenges which impacted the quality of the implementation. The allocation of sufficient human and time resources significantly affects meaningful communication between the practicum-in-charge and other stakeholders during the TP. This indicates that the practicum-in-charge's role brings supportive collaboration into placement schools. However, to date, there are no clear instructions that define which tasks are obligatory or optional, nor do the preparations address the entire scope of their responsibility (Grobgeld et al., 2016; White, 2013). The need to create and foster strong collaboration among all the stakeholders involved in the TP has been widely acknowledged (Darling-Hammond, 2006); in particular, attention from the TEIs to the implementation process is strongly required, which means that having the practicum-in-charge jointly engaged in the practicum process is obligatory.

Assessment: Needs revision and requires a follow-up system

Classroom observation is used as the main strategy for evaluating STs' teaching, followed by portfolios, reflection sessions, and (in the NIE case) teacher professional ethics. Although a variety of assessments are used, some studies argue that methods such as classroom observation and reflection sessions are more suitable for formative assessment rather than summative assessment because these methods only reflect the state of practice in some classroom teaching and do not measure professional development in a more holistic manner (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2015). However, using classroom observation as a means of evaluation causes fear of failure, anxiety, and possible negative feelings toward observers, which might easily demotivate them and cause tension. Moreover, mentors' knowledge and skills in assessing STs were not utilized; they also lacked clear know-how and had no mutual understanding (Melesse, 2014).

As per current practices, the TEC practicum guidelines state that TEC mentors observe two lessons and school mentors observe five lessons. Reflecting on this point, school mentors are expected to spend more time in schools with STs; therefore, they require a greater number of observations. Some studies argued that this strategy creates a weak link between TEIs and placement schools, no strong convincing agreement, and more accountability to placement schools (Melesse, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). In contrast, as mentioned in the NIE guideline, the number of observations depended on the mentors themselves when discussing their team. It implies that the assessments were conducted according to the mentors' positive will, which means that if the mentors were lazy or busy, the assessment may have been conducted carelessly, and if the mentors were authoritative or committed, the assessment may have been more appropriate and dedicated (Melesse, 2014). Other studies have also shown that some mentors are unwilling or reluctant to mentor STs and, in many cases, some school mentors disappear from the classroom when STs arrive, leaving STs to take charge with little or no mentoring at all (Mutemeri & Chetty, 2011; Odendaal, 2015).

The evidence from the documents and quotations indicated that ST assessments were poorly conducted, and mentors paid less attention to supporting STs' learning. Most mentors merely completed the final evaluation rather than providing continuous feedback to improve the STs. Yahya et al. (2017) suggested that to support STs properly, the assessment should be seen as ongoing professional development in which STs receive feedback on their strengths and areas for improvement. Other studies have also recommended that the assessment of peer evaluation processes provides feedback to STs about their teaching performance (DeMink-Carthew, Grove, & Peterson, 2017; Mathewson Mitchell & Reid, 2017). This evaluation process helps STs to reflect on and learn from best practices as well as the drawbacks that they should be aware of and prepared for.

Moreover, the observation criteria differ from one TEI to another because there are no standard criteria for evaluation (Al-Malki & Weir, 2014). Some studies have suggested that TEIs should consider authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, e-portfolios, and exhibitions of performance, such as videos of teaching, teaching materials, booklets, and cases or scenarios about the phenomena that they have experienced (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000; Oakley, Pegrum, & Johnston, 2014; Yahya et al., 2017).

Mentoring: Helps to bridge the theory-practice gap, yet requires a specific framework

The body of evidence that emerged from the data revealed that the participants in this study had a positive perception of mentoring activities. Most of the practicums-in-charge from the three cases considered the inclusion of mentoring activities as the most important part of successful ST teaching practicums. Moreover, linking

pre-practicum coursework is a stepping-stone for integrating theory into practice. This concept aligned with Korhonen, Heikkinen, Kiviniemi, and Tynjälä (2017) that mentoring enhanced STs' professional development and improve instruction proficiency among STs during their TP.

Although the participants in this study acknowledged the power of mentoring in supporting STs, sometimes it is challenging for them. Managing the implementation of mentoring is difficult due to the lack of collaboration among stakeholders, unsupportive coordination from the placement school, and the committee members take this issue for granted. According to Payant and Murphy (2012), difficulties communicating with stakeholders and unclear definitions of roles and responsibilities negatively affect quality. To enhance the success of a mentoring program, a well-defined purposeful implementation is required (Mena et al., 2017), and communication with placement schools has been suggested (Matsuda, 2022).

Limitations

Owing to its limited size and scope, this study leaves many unanswered questions and fertile ground for further investigation. Since the scope of this study is mainly focused on the information written in the document and the interview with the practicum-in-charge who are mainly involved in the preparation and implementation of TP, this study suggests that gathering the voices of other stakeholders involved in the TP is necessary to gain an understanding of the complex interactions involved. More importantly, classroom observations and fieldwork are required to understand these phenomena in each context.

Conclusion

The findings reported in this cross-case analysis of the TP have threefold in common. First, the analysis demonstrated an absence of close follow-up and support systems. The literature suggests that the practicum-in-charge plays a central role in ensuring the quality and validity of the implementation. Second, mentors' abilities to assess STs are mandatory in the TP assessment process. Moreover, the use of classroom observation as the main assessment method has received considerable criticism in the literature. Third, some mentors lacked mentoring skills, workload, or commitment. As mentioned in the TP report, there is a call for more frequent classroom observations and collaboration between TEIs and school mentors. Furthermore, the lack of support and motivation from stakeholders, namely the management teams from TEIs and placement schools, was also mentioned. Regarding the main differences of this cross-case study is the duration. The TECs seem to have more opportunities to emphasized on TP than NIE because they have longer years of training. In conclusion, this cross-case analysis provided insights into how the three diverse sets of TEIs organize and implement the TP. The concepts discovered in the cases painted the big picture of how

to enhance the quality of the TP program.

Implications

Learning from the strengths and limitations of each program, this study suggests the following:

- Establish a practicum office solely responsible for organizing and supporting the practicum procedure at each teacher education institution. Having this kind of office helps strengthen collaboration among stakeholders through a solid follow-up system during the implementation process.
- Revise assessment criteria by considering authentic assessment methods that require evidence-based judgment, such as writing portfolios, exhibitions of performance, or problem-based inquiries, rather than depending primarily on classroom observations.
- Create a clear mentoring framework that enables mentors to share a mutual understanding and common vision. Moreover, implementing a regular Professional Learning Community to offer training in mentoring skills is recommended to generate an environment where mentors feel free to network and share their mentoring experiences.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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