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Pauline S. Goh

Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

Bobbie Matthews

Flinders University

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Listening To the Concerns of Student Teachers In Malaysia During Teaching Practice

Pauline Swee-choo Goh
Sultan Idris Education University
Malaysia

Bobbie Matthews
Flinders University

Abstract: This study examined the concerns and experiences of Malaysian student teachers during their practicum. The 14 student teachers who volunteered were asked to maintain a reflective journal throughout their practicum to document their teaching concerns and confidence to teach. Eighteen derived concerns were identified and placed into four main themes: (a) classroom management and student discipline; (b) institutional and personal adjustment; (c) classroom teaching; and (d) student learning. Specific comments were sought to provide citations that represented their concerns. This paper has intended to draw attention to the underlying reasons given by student teachers about their concerns prior to and during the practicum in order to integrate areas of concern into future management and development of teacher education. The value of the study was in the pursuit of using student teachers' own capacity to self-assess and appraise their circumstances as a research area in teaching; and showed how the understanding of learning to teach could be enriched through their own self-awareness of the circumstances surrounding them.

Introduction

Teaching practice (or more popularly known as the practicum) is recognised as one of the most important aspects of a teacher education (Farrell, 2008). Teacher education institutions worldwide, including Malaysia, are under increasing pressure to prepare their student teachers better for the actual world of teaching, and the practicum provides an avenue by which this expectation may be addressed. During practicum, the student teachers are given the opportunity to experience and 'experiment' their knowledge and skills in an authentic teaching and learning environment (Kennedy, 1996).

Researchers have tried to increase understanding of the value of the practicum to student teachers from various perspectives ranging from the preparation, actual participation, and the learning outcomes of the practicum. Various qualitative investigations (e.g. Rodman, 2010; Trent, 2010; Etherington, 2009; Faizah, 2008) have included reflective thinking as a helpful method to describe the reality of student teachers' experience during the practicum as it allows more meaningful understanding of the practicum from the point of view of the

student teachers. This method is used in the present study to provide insights into the formative experiences student teachers undergoing their practicum have in learning to teach, from a distinctly Malaysian perspective. What were their thoughts and feelings, what hindrances did they experience, what fears and worries plagued their experiences were some of the questions this study sought to answer. The more known about the concerns faced by student teachers during their practicum, the greater the possibility of reducing stress and improving their success and maximizing the benefits of the practicum for them.

Concerns of Practicum Students

Thirty years ago Lock (1977) suggested that the types of concerns student teachers encountered should be given more attention to enable better preparation of new teachers and that the study of problems faced by student teachers was warranted. There was a better chance of eliminating problems encountered by student teachers if more was known about the difficulties they faced and the source of their concerns. Two decades later, Briggs and Richardson (1992) cautioned that the many problems faced by student teachers during their practicum could possibly have been an omen of future conflicts. Similarly, Chan and Leung (1998) advocated that it was necessary to focus on the concerns expressed by student teachers during teaching practice as areas of importance for future development in teacher education.

More recently, studies on teaching practice gave focus to the challenges faced by student teachers and how they might have affected various aspects of teacher education. For example, Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) highlighted the theory to practice and overall school context concerns faced by student teachers and how they successfully managed to gain invaluable experiences during their practicum. Youn (2000) found that the concerns experienced by beginning teachers could have ranged from classroom discipline, motivating students, organisation of class work or insufficient teaching material. She cautioned that the concerns faced by beginning teachers were real and these concerns did have the ability to limit and frustrate their already complex teaching situation. These issues needed to be addressed at the institutional level.

From a Malaysian context, Ong, Ros, Azlian, Sharnti and Ho (2004) discovered that pressures felt during student teachers' practicum prevented them from positively engaging in theory and practice. They identified supervision, workload other than teaching, pedagogical and content knowledge as challenges many student teachers faced during their practicum. Student teachers could also have been overwhelmed by the numerous realities of the classroom, students' expectations of spoon-feeding which can be defined as emphasizing teaching as telling and learning as mere listening (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), and the challenges of mixed-ability classes (Kabilan & Raja Ida, 2008).

During the teaching practicum, student teacher experienced a learning situation that was unique and different from campus-based learning as they were called upon to respond to new circumstances. At the same time, they were required to be courageous and willing to use new methods and modes of doing things. They also needed to contend with their own ideas associated with becoming a teacher. In addition, they were faced with the daunting task of trying to integrate knowledge and understanding about teaching from a theoretical perspective into actual practice; they now needed to be actively engaged in teaching to be professional as well as content

knowledge teachers (Shulman, 1987). Although the practicum served as a bridge that would have provided the student teachers with the experience to develop their own personal competence and professional identity as teachers (Dobbins, 1996), the practicum experience was also fraught with difficulties and concerns which might have influenced the development of student teachers. However, the acts of reflectively thinking and re-examining would allow the student teachers to see a 'tie-in' of new knowledge and a reconstruction of existing knowledge to solve concerns faced during their practicum (Pomerantz & Pierce, 2004). Similarly, Rodman (2010) concurred that through self-reflection on teaching practices, student teachers would be encouraged to further develop their understanding of teaching. Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) emphasised that it was important that individuals be given the opportunity to reflectively recall on experiences in the light of their current knowledge and understanding.

Reflective Thinking through the Reflective Journal

Reflective thinking allows individuals to step back and deliberate on their own thoughts and actions. It is a conscious self-examination that reviews events that have occurred and gives meaning to feelings, thoughts and actions by questioning motives and attitudes (Dewey, 1933). It is about allowing the individuals to 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985, p.19). Reflective thinking is a process that permits the evaluation of actions taken. The use of reflective thinking encourages individuals to consider what they have done in particular situations and plan subsequent activities (Wolf & Siu-Runyan, 1996). One of the ways that can be used to capture experiences and thoughts from reflective thinking is through a reflective journal (Loughran, 1996).

Reflective journal writing encourages individuals to record their thinking through narration and so 'by writing about experiences, actions and events, student teachers will reflect on and learn from those episodes' (Loughran, 1996, p. 8). Further, it can 'clarify and extend individual thoughts and concerns and provide supervisors with a means of consistently supporting interns' inquiry into their development as learners and teachers' (Collier, 1999, p. 174).

The writings collected from the reflective journals are those that are generated by the individuals themselves which might be difficult to obtain through other means (Wellington, 2000). Hall and Bowman (1989) find that through a reflective journal, individuals are also able to reflect on socialisation and professional growth issues that they would not normally be aware of. Reflective journal is a way to stimulate reflective thinking and provides one of the best methods for teachers to assess their own teaching-learning issues (Zeichner & Liston, 1987).

This is the position which the study has undertaken. The notion is that Malaysian student teachers involved in the practicum will begin to think of themselves as professional teachers and use the practicum periods to reflect upon real experiences and concerns and have it documented in their journals.

The Study

The Context

The Bachelor of Education in Science degree from the Sultan Idris Education University Malaysia prepares student teachers in the teaching of biology, physics or chemistry. Student teachers are required to attend courses from both the Faculty of Science and Technology for subject content, and the Faculty of Education and Human Development for general education subjects such as teaching models, methodology and strategy, assessment, and classroom and organizational skills. They have a two-week school orientation program spread over the seven semesters of their education. Practicum occurs in the eighth semester where the student teachers are placed in selected secondary schools for 14 weeks. Each student teacher is assigned a university-based supervisor and a school-based mentor who are experienced teachers to support and guide them during their practicum.

The Participants

A total of 16 student teachers from the Sultan Idris Education University Malaysia were invited to participate in the study, 14 accepted and gave their informed consent: all were female. The 14 student teachers were assured that published results arising from the study would not identify any individuals or schools they were attached to. In addition, they were assured that they could withdraw themselves or any information they provided at any time. All transcriptions were completed solely by the researchers and pseudonyms were used to preserve confidentiality. Approval was given by the principal or the deputy principal of each school the student teachers were attached to. Necessary ethical protocols were observed in line with the protocols provided by the university the first author was attached to.

Methods

This study is based on the participants' capacity for reflective thinking. Each of the 14 participating student teachers attended a pre-practicum briefing in a one-to-one basis with the first author to discuss what their participation would entail. The participants were asked to maintain a reflective journal throughout their practicum to document their teaching experiences, concerns and their confidence to teach. There were no fixed number of entries, but the participating students were advised to write as often as they felt necessary. Some guiding questions to assist the participants in the reflection process included:

- What are you reflecting on? You don't necessarily have to reflect on the entirety of something. You can choose certain aspects. For example, a single lesson, the students, school environment, etc.
- Give a description of the circumstances, situation or issues related to what has been selected: *Who* was involved? *What* were the concerns, issues, or worries? *When* did the event happen?
- Reflection occurs at this stage as you interpret the activity or evidence and evaluate its appropriateness and impact. Reflect upon your experience, your piece of evidence, or the activity.

Upon completion of the practicum, the participants visited the first author to submit their written journals and for those who were unable to do so, sent their journals through the post.

Analysis

The analysis of the student teachers' reflective journal consisted of a series of steps:

- Step 1: The journals were read and re-read using a method of 'free' and 'open' coding to find common themes that emerged which pertained to student teachers' concerns experienced during their practicum.
- Step 2: A more careful analysis was conducted where each text was compared using an iterative reading and re-reading to establish similarities and differences in the written documents. 'Chunks' of text with similar or different themes were highlighted with pens of different colours.
- Step 3: Highlighted texts were then re-typed into separate documents, representing emerging themes. Each document was read in totality to obtain a 'picture' that was documented by the student teachers. Each theme was again divided into different derived concerns. Specific comments were sought to provide quotations that represented each derived concerns. Those written data that were written in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) were translated as closely as possible into English so that the original intention of the writer was not lost.

A total of four themes were identified which had 18 derived concerns. They are listed in Table 1.

Emerging themes	Derived concerns	Occurrences
Classroom management and student discipline	(a) Classroom management	6
	(b) Lack of discipline among students	5
	(c) Student behavioural problems	5
Institutional and personal adjustments	(d) Adjustments to the role as teachers	10
	(e) Meeting expectations of school-based mentor	3
	(f) Impressing school-based mentor	1
	(g) Working harmoniously with the school staff	7
Classroom teaching	(h) Appropriate use of teaching methodology and strategies	10
	(i) Organization of teaching activities	6
	(j) Using English as the medium of instruction	3
	(k) Mastery of the subject matter	3
	(l) Teaching other subjects	1
	(m) Availability of adequate or appropriate teaching aids	2
	(n) Adequate time to cover the curriculum	1
Student learning	(o) Understanding of the subject matter	12
	(p) Affective, emotional and social growth.	5
	(q) Attracting student's interest and attention	5
	(r) Effect change in behaviour	5

Table 1: Derived concerns from student teachers' journals

Results and Discussion

Classroom Management and Student Discipline

Participants reported that classroom management was their most worrisome issue. However, their reflections showed that they were not clear about the differences between classroom management and lack of student discipline in class and tended to use the terms interchangeably. Classroom management relates to events that occurred in a classroom such as maintaining order and cooperation to prevent problems from arising; whereas disciplinary problems occurred in the act of handling and managing students' behavioural problems (Levin & Nolan, 2000). Examples of some misconceptions were: '... among my concerns, the worst was in controlling my class from the point of class management and students who were too noisy', and another wrote that '... aspects of classroom management especially the behaviour of the students', and another said '... I was worried that I was not able to control class because I have a kind and lenient personality'. Katy was worried about managing her science practical sessions. She wrote that her training did not prepare her well to do so: 'I was not introduced to proper methods to run a practical session or to handle the situation if something untoward were to happen'.

Many wrote about their attempts to control disruptive behaviour so that lessons could be carried out by using psychology and understanding the emotional makeup of their students. Sharifah wrote: 'I did not feel confident in my teaching as I felt unable to control some of the students in the classroom' while Lina shared that 'I must use positive psychology and ways to approach the different behaviour of my students'. Others needed to alternate between being a 'strict disciplinarian' to being 'an understanding teacher' depending on the behaviour of their students. Many felt they were quite unprepared for the plethora of disruptive behaviours that could occur and that could disrupt their well planned lessons. Some were surprised that the students did not seem to want to behave. Nurul's experience with her students' bad behaviour was quite traumatising that she cried in her first week: 'I cried because I have failed and was worried that I cannot control my class...'. She wrote that: '... the practicum changed my confidence somewhat, before practicum, I felt confident to teach, but after experiencing students who were disrespectful of teachers, the experience made me feel otherwise'. This scenario was also apparent in a study by Faizah (2008) where all her student teachers on practical teaching had problems with class control and disruptive behaviours. Faizah reported that the student teachers resorted to punishment and this only exhausted them because they had to yell and walk around more frequently. Page (2008) suggested that discipline has been regarded as one of the most prevalent problems experienced by new teachers and therefore, was considered a serious problem in most schools.

Adjustments

Many participants were concerned about their transition from being a student teacher to being a teacher. The journals indicated that there were adjustment concerns which were either of an institutional type or of a personal nature. Institutional adjustments were centred on their assimilation to the norms of the school and their relationship with other teachers in the school. They were worried about adjusting to the school environment such as: '... not being able to uphold my responsibilities well', 'being accepted by the other teachers' or about 'the school environment and if

the other teachers could help'. Hayes (2003) described it as an 'anticipatory emotion' prior to a school placement. Participants' emotions were one of excitement and enthusiasm but threaded with both agitation and doubt. The feeling of fear of the unknown and uncertainty would generate both feelings of excitement and anxiety.

Personal adjustments were emotional concerns about the perceptions of the school staff to them as trainee teachers and the acceptance by students of them as teachers. They were concerned about their adequacy and competency as teachers. Zaitun wrote that she was 'worried that if I became too strict, the students would hate me'. Participants felt the need to make a good impression on the school staff. They were concerned about meeting their school-based mentor's expectations of them as teachers or having an overly strict mentor teacher who was hard to impress or please. Rose felt that although she had no issues with her school-based mentor, she was not able to work harmoniously with the other school staff as she perceived there was some prejudice toward her as a trainee in the way she was treated: '... my mentor teacher was very helpful and I 'clicked' with her ... but the other staff did not seem friendly and I felt that they were biased towards trainee teachers like me'. Wong (2009) in her interviews of 120 new teachers found that recognition, support and affirmation of teaching competencies were important concerns. New teachers needed to know that they were recognised in their teacher roles and accepted as autonomous professionals. Unfortunately, Rose did not elaborate on the nature of the prejudice in her journal.

Classroom Teaching

The participants detailed concerns about the limitations and frustrations of their teaching situation. Many participants' written evidence showed that during their practicum experiences, many were worried about 'how' and 'what to teach'. Some of the participants wrote about their concerns of 'choosing the correct methodology and techniques that were appropriate' while others wrote about the need to use newer and creative ways of teaching. Lina wrote: 'I prepared my content for the day well and prepared all sorts of alternative teaching aids to ensure my learning outcomes were met ... once when I was badly prepared, I was confused and nervous'. Nora wrote that 'conducting experiments was a challenge to me'. As teaching involved many instructional skills, it could be an arduous task even for experienced teachers, it was therefore not surprising that teachers who were just beginning to get a taste of actual classroom situation would be anxious about handling teaching methods and strategies (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005).

Many participants documented concerns about their own teaching activities and performances. They wrote about trying to improve their teaching performance and the need for adequate preparation. Participants were particularly concerned about using English to teach. Statements that showed these concerns were: '... there would be times during teaching, I got lost as I forgot the English words that were equivalent to *Bahasa Melayu*' or 'I was worried that I would use the English words inaccurately ...'. Some indicated that they were not confident during the first few weeks to teach in the English language and were concerned about not being able to find the correct words or use the correct grammar. Lina reflected that having a dialogue with students in English was also a worry because of her lack of proficiency in the language.

Another cause for concern was the participants' mastery of their subject matter, whether they had enough knowledge in the content and adequate teaching aids

and materials. Lina shared that ‘I was concerned about my mastery of biology and science ... I had to answer challenging questions given to me by my students’. Amelia was concerned about the subject she was being given because the subject that was other than what she was trained to teach: ‘I could not perform well because I was given another subject that was not a science subject, but I tried my best’. Participants worried about adequate teaching aids, materials and equipment to assist them in the teaching: ‘... the science lab in the school did not provide me with the equipment and material that I needed, these situations affected my teaching effectiveness’.

Another concern that appeared to impede students was the lack of time to complete the curriculum. There were worried about completing the required syllabus within the 14 weeks time frame. Many wrote about the helpfulness of their school-based mentors in going over their teaching plans and advising changes. It would seem that the students gained confidence if greater support was given by their mentor teachers.

Student Learning

Aspects of student learning were participants’ concerns for their students’ understanding of the subject matter and the concerns for their students’ personal growth and moral development. Participants questioned whether they had made an impact in the lives of their students. Fuller and Boun (1975) suggested that teachers who had more concerns for their students more than about themselves have reached a level they called ‘impact concerns’. Teachers at this level were more concerned about the needs of their students and the effect of their teaching/learning process upon their students’ achievement. They questioned whether their students were getting the preparation to be successful in their lives.

Some of the participants detailed concerns for their students’ understanding and their developmental needs. To enable the participants to grasp their students’ understanding better, some wrote that they encouraged questioning and Amelia tried to ‘relate what was learnt with the reality of the students’ environment’. She indicated that she attempted to instil interest and ‘wanting to know’ among her students by being creative in her teaching and in the process of doing it: ‘increased my own motivation toward becoming a teacher who is dedicated and encouraged to assist my students’. On the other hand, Alina wrote that ‘I know that when I faced an academically weak student, I would endeavour to make my lessons interesting to enable me to attract their attention in the hope that they would develop from being weak academically to being moderately strong academically... that way I knew I would have done a good job in helping my students to be more effective learners at the end of this practicum’. Another concern was the students’ tendency to play truant and this caused concern among the participants as such habits jeopardized understanding of the subject. All the students participated fully in any extra tuition classes organized by their respective schools that were seen as being an opportunity to further assist academically weak students.

Besides academic needs, some participants also said that success in a student’s life was not always about academic achievement but students must also be successful affectively, emotionally and socially. Alina succinctly reflected:

In my opinion, teaching is a process of delivering knowledge to students who are taught. The knowledge I impart must also be real and able to be realized within the students’ own world. However, academic knowledge alone is not enough; knowledge should also encompass students’ physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

A few of the participants related that they felt an emotional attachment and a greater connection with their students on more personal levels as the weeks progressed. Amelia wrote she formed a strong teacher-student relationship by ‘deeply knowing and understanding my students to effect change in their learning’. Many participants expressed the need for their students to succeed. Some wrote that they derived pleasure knowing that their students could grasp difficult concepts.

Alina summarized her feelings and probably that of her fellow student teachers when she wrote:

Upon completion of this practicum, I am optimistic that I shall use this experience as my ‘provision’ to fall back on when I become a teacher in the near future, God willing and thanks be to God. But I know I shall need to improve continuously my knowledge so that I can face future challenges and concerns ahead.

On the other hand, Lina summed it up with: ‘I am like a budding flower in this area (teaching) and should work hard to learn many things from shaping students to imparting knowledge about something to my students’.

In every written reflection, there will always a large amount of data that cannot be comprehensively reported. However, providing an avenue for the student teachers to write freely and reflect on their teaching tasks gave invaluable insights into how trainee teachers in their instructional experiences managed their practicum, but more importantly for the student teachers to develop their own ‘voice’ while on their professional quest for growth.

Implications and Recommendations

Teacher educators must recognize the issues of practicum students and have them addressed to lessen the anxiety felt by the students as they go out to learn the ‘how’ and ‘what’ to teach. Concerns that are prominent among all practicum students are managing students’ behaviour and discipline, and aspects of classroom management. Although there are discussions and observation of behavioural issues during the student teachers’ school orientation program, student teachers do not appear to be able to draw upon their knowledge to find solutions. As such, greater emphasis should be placed on these. With student population in classrooms becoming more diverse in both abilities and needs, and Malaysia is no exception, student teachers should be assisted to understand better the concept of discipline as overcoming student problem versus classroom management as order within a class enabling a conducive learning environment. According to Freiberg and Driscoll (2005), classes that are not managed well will generally lead to student discipline problems and can inhibit effective instructional approaches from occurring. Schools, on the other hand, can also play the part by providing assistance to practicum students regarding classroom management and controlling disciplinary issues in classrooms.

The transition from being a student being taught to being a teacher teaching is not easy and adjustments are to be expected. Hayes (2003) cautions that the emotional welfare of teacher trainees should not be overlooked as it could have an impact on their success and failure as future teachers. Some form of support network to allay fears and anxiety for practicum students should be initiated. In addition, instead of a one-off 14 weeks practicum, as currently practiced in the university, the period student teachers are placed in schools could be extended and more visits to schools arranged to allow student teachers greater opportunity to become familiar with school routines, to work with and to observe experienced teachers.

Encounters such as difficulty in choosing and using teaching strategies and techniques are also important concerns and are perceived as important for successful teaching in order to achieve positive learning outcomes. Although Millrood (2002) cautions that there is no one clear strategy in the teacher's professional paradigm for the act of teaching, nevertheless, special attention could be given to exposing student teachers in teaching institutions to varieties of teaching methods and how these methods can be used effectively and be implemented. Assignments should engage student teachers in real school issues and actual teaching problems.

It is evident from the reflections received that the concerns of the student teachers were felt sincerely. They were passionate in their writings as they related their 14 weeks experiences – both personal and professional concerns associated with their role as 'trainee teachers', and as they grappled to understand their working environment better. However, because of the practicum and student teachers' involvement in the study and the requirement to be reflective in their writings, they have engaged not only in analysing their experiences, but have also come to terms with some of the conflicts and dilemmas of teaching. They confronted their own attitudes and values about their teaching. This was evidenced from, for example: 'teaching required not only skills but a lot of patience to succeed as a good teacher'. Another wrote: 'I felt that teaching was very challenging because it tested both your physical and mental strength'. Yet another realized her strength and weaknesses, another saw the holistic process of teaching which according to her: 'was not simply imparting the content of a subject, but a combination of proper class management, controlling behavioural issues, proper sequencing of lessons, and above all instilling a sense of fun among my pupils as they attained knowledge'. How teacher education programs are able to harness and encourage the development of such self-awareness or 'growth experience' would go a long way towards creating a high but realistic level of confidence and optimism in Malaysian students aspiring to be teachers.

Incorporating a structured approach for student teachers on practicum to reflect on their learning would provide them with the opportunity to develop their reflectivity and accept responsibility for their own professional development.

Conclusion

It is not enough to simply identify and categorize the problems practicum students face, but it is more important to provide ways to prevent and manage those areas of concern and have it integrated into education courses. How to integrate the theoretical aspects learnt at university and the practical reality of the classroom need to be established in order to assist student teachers 'survive' the practicum experience. Education courses need to be more applicable to actual school settings and environment. A systematic way for teacher educators to periodically review course content to ensure that problem areas are included in the curriculum should also be established. There also seems to be some merit that by allowing practicum students an avenue to explore reflectively in a meaningful way their own experiences would help promote independence and critical thinking necessary for the challenges ahead as future in-service teachers.

Further in-depth studies and also perhaps a larger qualitative study through interviews and classroom observations of the practicum students could be conducted to identify the strategies used by the practicum students to overcome their concerns. Documented strategies could be useful for future student teachers during practicum,

for in-service teachers in schools, and for teacher educators to use as training materials.

The researchers contend that any future findings not only add to the existing knowledge but can enrich and improve the student teachers' lot and to promote their future successes.

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