

Learning To Teach: Perspectives From Malaysian Student Teachers About Their Concerns During Their Practicum

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Abstract

The practicum has come to be known as one of the most important areas of a teacher education program. During the practicum, the student teachers are attached to a school and are assimilated into all aspects of the teaching profession. However, there is scarce data about what concerns and worries student teachers experienced prior to and during their practicum. This paper aims to address this gap. The paper explored what the concerns of student teachers were through their written self-reflection and to then analyze the data in relation to Fuller's Model of Teacher Development. The data revealed that the student teachers wrote about different levels of 'self', 'task' and 'impact' concerns prior to and during their practicum experiences. This paper would like to draw attention to the underlying reasons given by student teachers about their concerns prior to and during the practicum in order to integrate these areas of concern into future development in teacher education.

Introduction

Teaching practice (or more popularly known as the Practicum) is recognized as one of the most important aspects of a teacher education in upholding the quality of teaching. Quality will never lose its luster when it comes to educating future teachers because in turn, these same teachers will be responsible for implementing and upholding quality in their respective educational environment (Funk & Hoffman, 1982). With a focus on quality, teacher education institutions are under increasing pressure to better prepare their student teachers for the actual world of teaching, and the practicum provides the avenue by which this expectation can be addressed. But it is also a known fact that student teachers' learning in the practicum is a complex process paved with issues and concerns. During the practicum, student teachers attempt to link theory to practice and attend to both personal and professional issues associated with the role of 'being a teacher' including the affective and cognitive demands of that experience (Dobbins, 1996; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Yourn, 2000;

Zeichner, 1986). Therefore, if more are known of the concerns encountered by student teachers, the greater will be the chances of eliminating the concerns and assisting them to better succeed in teaching.

Those studies which have looked at the problem of teachers tended to use beginning teachers as subjects. However, beginning teachers are discernibly different from a student teacher in a practicum. Practicum is the end process of a teacher education and student teachers are empowered to teach but with the support and assistance of their supervisors or mentor teachers. Beginning teachers, on the other hand, are those in their first, second or third year of full-time teaching and have legal, professional and ethical responsibility (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990). Therefore, although the experiences of beginning teachers have implications for student teachers, it does not completely parallel the experiences of student teachers.

Few studies have looked into the difficulties and concerns experienced by student teachers undergoing their practicum from a qualitative perspective, especially so in Malaysia. Those few studies originating from Malaysia tended to examine the roles of the student teachers' supervisors and mentors during practicum (for example: Kalwant Kaur, 1996; Ligadu, 2005; Maznah, 1999; Norasiah, 2001). Hence, this study will focus on Malaysian student teachers during their practicum and will allow their own 'voice' to come through with regards to how they learned to be teachers and their concerns that arise from their practicum experience. The study will explore concerns student teachers faced before their practicum and what takes place during practicum. Intentions of the study are that it will inform current and future practice and to provide a better insight into the reality of the practicum experience in a Malaysian context.

The Study

Context

The Malaysian school system is divided into six years of primary and five years of secondary education. The context of this study is secondary schools in the southern states of Malaysia. Although *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) is the medium of instruction in all schools in Malaysia, the teaching of Science and Mathematics are in English.

The student teachers in this study were studying for their Bachelor of Education, specializing in the teaching of either Biology or Chemistry, at a university of

education in Malaysia. Altogether the student teachers spent eight semesters in the university (which is equivalent to four years). During their seven semesters, student teachers spent most of their time on the university campus undergoing mandatory education and specialization courses. They have 2 weeks *Rancangan Orientasi ke Sekolah* (School Orientation Program) interspersed within the seven semesters. Practicum occurs in their eighth semester where the student teachers are placed in selected secondary schools for 14 weeks.

Aim

The study aimed to:

1. Identify the concerns to teach of student teachers during their practicum. It is hoped that through the student teachers' insights into their teaching experience, theories of teaching can be further enhanced and a greater understanding can be obtained of the different processes a student teachers undergo during their practicum.
2. Analyse and categorize the concerns based on an acceptable model of teacher development, specifically the three-dimensional developmental model identified by Fuller (1969). This second aim hoped to further advance the understanding of the notion of 'survival' (Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Bown, 1975) as student teachers progress through their practicum.

Participants

Participants in this study were Bachelor of Education student teachers specializing in teaching science. A total of 14 student teachers participated in the study, all were female. The author held the dual role of supervisor and researcher.

Study Design and Data Collection

This study was based on the intention to reproduce a 'lived in' reality of the participants. Phenomenological assumptions states that participants are inextricably related to the contexts in which they live and work. It was deemed one of the better ways to understand how the participants "experience, conceptualize, perceive and understand various aspects of, and phenomena in, the world around them" (Marton, 1986, p.31). Towards this end, a phenomenological approach using the student teachers' capacity for self-reflection would allow them to determine what an experience meant to them as they interact with self and their social realities (in this case, the schools, the students, and other teachers in which they function), and to provide a detailed description of those experiences. The data for this study was

collected through an analysis of the student teachers' written self-reflections before and after their practicum.

The participating student teachers attended a pre-practicum on a one-on-one meeting with the researcher and completed 3 open-ended personal response questions. To ensure confidentiality, only the researcher read the student teachers' responses. The one-on-one session also informally discussed the three questions which asked about their concerns about teaching, the reasons for those concerns, and their confidence in teaching.

During the 14 weeks of the practicum each student teacher received two visits from their supervisor (also the researcher). The visits were to observe the teaching of two lessons, to discuss the overall preparedness of the students, and to meet up with the student teachers' *guru bimbingan* (mentor-teacher) in school. On each visit, the researcher requested them to analyze their teaching experiences, their concerns and their confidences to teach and to write it down. According to Marble (1997), keeping a written commentary can provide student teachers with an opportunity to reflect on what they experienced during their training period and also to assist in directing their own learning. Upon completion of the practicum, the student teachers visited the researcher to submit their written reflection and for those who were unable to do so, sent in their reflective writings through the post.

Analysis

The findings from the 14 student teachers' self reflection written in English or *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay Language) prior to and after the practicum were analyzed for emerging themes. The analysis was sorted according to themes. The themes were categorized into Fuller's (1969) three stages of teacher development namely: (i) self concern, (ii) task concern and (iii) impact concern. Fuller's (1969) study found that teachers with little or no teaching experience have pre-teaching concerns and was mostly concerned about self. They were concerned about their success as teachers (Fuller & Bown, 1975). At this self concern stage, the dimensions beginning and inexperienced teachers concerned most about were their:

adequacy and survival as a teacher, about class control, about being liked by pupils, about supervisors' opinions, about being observed, evaluated, praised and failed ... having too much work with too many students or having too many instructional duties ... time

pressures, inflexible situations, lack of instructional materials...
(Fuller & Bown, 1975, p.37).

As the teachers progressed in their classroom teaching, they began to focus their attention on themselves as teachers. They began to become concerned about the task of teaching, finding more efficient ways of performing the tasks of teaching and exploring strategies in teaching (Fuller, 1969). In the final stage, Fuller explained that teachers became concerned about the impact they make upon their students' needs. Dimensions in the final stage included being concerned about the students' learning outcomes, being concerned about students' social and emotional needs, and being concerned about understanding students' learning capacities.

Results and Discussion

The results presented here represent the perspectives of the student teachers involved in this study. The student teachers' concerns about teaching were categorized according to Fuller's three types of concerns, namely, concern with self, concern with task of teaching, and concern for students' needs and learning. Analysis of the participants' written self reflection identified a number of concerns. Written data from the self reflection that were written in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) were translated as best as possible so that the original intention of the writer was not lost.

Prior to the practicum student teachers highlighted concerns about classroom management, indiscipline among students, mastery of the subject matter, of failing to teach well, adjustments to the role of teachers, meeting expectations of their mentor teachers, adequate or appropriate teaching aids, and own personal characteristics that may hinder effective teaching.

All 14 student teachers wrote that classroom management as their most worrisome concerns. However, their reflections showed that they were not clear about the differences between classroom management and indiscipline in class and tended to use them interchangeably to mean the same thing. Classroom management are events that occur in a classroom such as maintaining order and cooperation to prevent problems from arising whereas disciplinary problems are the act of handling and managing students' behavioural problems (Kounin, 1970; Page, 2008). Examples of this misconceptions were (translated): '... among my concerns, the worst is in controlling my class from the point of class management and students who are too noisy', and another wrote that 'aspects of classroom management – the behaviour of the students', or '... worried that I am not able to control class because I have a kind

and lenient personality.’ One participant was also worried about managing her practical science sessions as she wrote that her training did not prepare her well to do so; ‘I was not introduced to ways and methods to run a practical session or to handle the situation if something untoward were to happen’ (translated).

Participants were particularly concerned about using English to teach. Statements that showed this concern were (translated): ‘... there will be times during teaching, I may lose and forget the English words that are equivalent to Bahasa Melayu. I am worried that I will inaccurately use the English words...’. Most indicated that they were not confident to teach in the English language and were concerned about not being able to find the correct words or of using the correct grammar. Having a dialogue with students in English was also a worry for most participants.

Other themes that emerged and appeared to cause concerns were participants’ mastery of their subject matter, whether they had enough knowledge in the content and adequate teaching aids and materials. One wrote that ‘I am concerned about my mastery of biology and science ... I worry if I am able to answer challenging questions given to me by my students’ (translated). Another was more concerned about being given subjects that was other than what she was trained to teach; ‘I can’t perform better (sic) if given another subject especially not science subject’. Student teachers hoped that there would be adequate teaching aids, materials and equipment to assist them in the teaching; ‘I am worried that the science lab in the school do not provide me with the equipment and material that I need, such situation will affect my teaching effectiveness’ (translated).

Some student teachers were concerned about their adjustment from being a student to being a teacher. Adjustment concerns were either of an institutional type or of a personal nature. Institutional adjustments were centered on their assimilation to the norms of the school and their relationship with other teachers in the school. They were worried about (translated); ‘not being able to uphold my responsibilities well’, ‘being accepted by the other teachers’ or about ‘the school environment and if the other teachers can help’. Personal adjustments were emotional concerns about the perceptions of the school staff of them as trainee teachers, acceptance of students to them as teachers. One wrote that she was ‘worried that if I am too strict, the students will hate me’ (translated). Student teachers were also concerned about meeting their mentor teachers’ expectations of them as teachers or having an overly strict mentor teacher that was hard to impress or please.

It would appear that many of the concerns prior to their practicum experiences belonged to 'self' concerns. There were very few 'task' and 'impact' concerns except for one student who showed 'task' concerns when she wrote about her concerns regarding achieving her planned objective and about inadequate time to cover the curriculum.

In the analysis of the written reflection after their practicum, the second and third stages could be identified, although 'self' concerns were still evident. Although the student teachers did display features similar to that proposed by Fuller (1969) and Fuller and Bown (1975), not all of the student teachers showed marked sequential steps of 'self', 'task' to 'impact'. Instead the writings showed movement to and fro within the stages.

The student teachers detailed concerns about their limitations and frustrations of their teaching situation. Student teachers' written evidence showed that during their practicum experiences, many were worried about 'what to teach' and 'how'. They showed concerns about their own teaching activities and performance. They wrote about trying to improve their teaching performance and the need for adequate preparation especially when using English to teach. Some of the participants wrote about their concerns of 'choosing the correct methodology and techniques that are appropriate' (translated) while others wrote about the need to use newer ways of teaching. Another wrote that: 'I need to prepare my content for the day well and prepare all sorts of alternative teaching aids to ensure my learning outcomes are met ... once when I was badly prepared, I was confused and nervous' (translated). As teaching involves many instructional skills (Freiberg & Driscoll, 1996), it is an arduous task even for experienced teachers, it is therefore not surprising that teachers who are just beginning to get a taste of actual classroom situation will be anxious about manipulating teaching methods and strategies.

Many wrote about their attempt to control disruptive behaviours so that lessons could be carried out by using psychology and understanding the emotional makeup of their pupils. One participant wrote: '... must use psychology and ways to approach the different behaviour of my pupils' (translated). Another needed to alternate between being a 'strict disciplinarian' to being 'an understanding' teacher depending on behaviors of their pupils. Many felt they were quite unprepared for the plethora of disruptive behaviours that could occur and that could disrupt their well planned lesson. Some were surprised that the pupils did not seem to want to behave, one participant was quite traumatized with bad behaviour that she cried in her first week:

‘I cried because I have failed and was worried that I cannot control my class...’ (translated).

Many were worried about completing the required syllabus within the 14 weeks frame. Some wrote about the helpfulness of their *guru bimbingan* (mentor teacher) in going over their teaching plans and advising changes. It would seem that the students derived confidence if greater support was given by their mentor teachers. One participant felt that although she had no issues with her mentor teacher, she was not able to work harmoniously with the other school staff as she perceived there was some prejudice towards her as a trainee in the way she was treated.

Two themes which showed that there were ‘impact’ concerns were the student teachers’ concerns for their students’ understanding of the real world and the concerns for their students’ personal growth and moral development.

Some of the student teachers detailed concerns for their students’ understanding and their developmental needs. To enable the student teachers to better grasp their students’ understanding, some wrote that they encourage questioning and try to ‘relate what is learnt with the reality of my students’ environment’ (translated). One student teacher indicated that she attempted to instill interest and *ingin tahu di kalangan murid saya* (wanting to know among her students) by being creative in her teaching and in the process of doing it: ‘increased my motivation towards becoming a teacher who is dedicated and encouraged to assist my students’ (translated). Another wrote that ‘I know that when I face an academically weak student, I will endeavor to make my lesson interesting so that I am able to attract their attention in the hope that they will develop from being weak academically to being moderately strong academically... that way I will know I have done a good job in helping my students to be more effective learners at the end of this practicum’ (translated). Another concern was the students’ tendency to play truant and this caused concern among the practicum student teachers as such habits jeopardized the understanding of the subject. All the student teachers participated fully in any extra tuition classes organized by their respective schools as being opportunity to further assist academically weak students.

Besides academic needs, some student teachers also expressed concern about whether they have been successful towards their pupils’ affective, emotional and social growth. A few of the student teachers related that they felt emotional attachment and a greater connection towards their students on more personal levels

as the weeks progressed. Many student teachers expressed the need for their students to succeed. Some wrote that they derived pleasure knowing that their students could grasp a difficult concept. However, in all written reflection, discipline and class management issues continued to plague the student teachers.

Altogether the 14 participants did exhibit three kinds of concerns about teaching which was similar to that proposed by Fuller (1969) and Fuller and Bown (1975). Prior to the practicum, the participants depicted mostly 'self' concerns. They felt that student discipline, classroom management, trying to adjust to a new working environment, working with others, and meeting the expectations of their supervisors were important and worrying. The emerging themes relating to the second stage, the 'task of teaching' were associated with teaching methods and strategies, lesson planning, ensuring completion of syllabus, and working with problematic pupils were part of the student teachers performing their teaching duties. The third stage was 'impact' and within this stage, student teachers detailed their concerns for their students' learning, understanding, and the students' emotional, affective and moral needs. Recurring comments on student discipline and issues of classroom management were present in all three stages.

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

Implications and Recommendations

A direct implication of this study for teacher education institutions and teacher educator is to make these concerns as part of any new curricular and course content. If teacher education institutions can recognize the issues of practicum students and have it addressed, the anxiety felt by the students can be lessened as they go out to learn the 'what' and 'how' to teach.

Concerns which were prominent and cut across all three stages were managing students' behaviour and discipline, and aspects of classroom management. As such, greater emphasis should be placed on these. With student population in classrooms becoming more diverse (e.g. abilities and needs), and Malaysia is no exception,

teachers should be assisted to better understand the concept of discipline as overcoming student problem versus classroom management as order within a class to enable conducive learning environment.

Encounters such as difficulty in using and choosing teaching strategies and techniques were also important concerns and were perceived as important for successful teaching and achieving learning outcomes. Special attention should be given to exposing student teachers in teaching institutions varieties of teaching methods and how these methods can be effectively used and implemented.

It was evident that the concerns of the student teachers were felt in their writings. 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 grapple to better understand their working environment. However, because of the student teachers’ involvement in the study and the requirement to be reflective in their writings, they were not only engaged in analyzing their experiences, but were also coming to terms with the conflicts and dilemmas of teaching. They were also confronting their own attitudes and values about their teaching. One wrote that: ‘teaching requires not only skills but a lot of patience to succeed as a good teacher’ (translated). Another wrote: ‘I feel that teaching is very challenging because it tests both your physical and mental strength’. Yet another realized her strength and weaknesses, another saw the holistic process of teaching which according to her: ‘is not simply imparting the content of a subject, but a combination of proper class management, controlling behavioral issues, proper sequencing of lesson, and above all instilling fun among my pupils as they attain knowledge’ (translated). How teacher education program can harness and encourage the development of such self-awareness or ‘growth experience’ among trainee teachers on their practical experiences would go a long way towards creating a high but realistic level of confidence and optimism in our students aspiring to be teachers.

Conclusion

It is not the intention of the researcher to provide generalizations for all practicum students but rather to gain insights into the formative experiences of the practicum students teaching, particularly in Malaysia, as they involve themselves in the process of actual teaching. Stages of concerns as described by Fuller (1969) and Fuller and Bown (1975) were experienced by all of the participants, though there were overlaps between the three stages. However, it is not enough to simply identify and categorize

the problems practicum students faced but more importantly - ways to prevent and manage those concern areas must be integrated into their education courses.

The researcher hoped the study could prove useful to teaching institutions as they set out to ensure teachers are prepared for the experience and to promote their success.

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