The Practice and Challenges of Practicum Implementation Program at A Malaysian Teacher Education Institute

[1]Ramesh Sathappan, [2]Premaraj Gurusamy

[1]Department of Languages, Temenggong Ibrahim Teacher Education Institute, Johor, Malaysia,

[2]Kolej Matrikulasi Kejuruteraan Johor/UTM, Malaysia

jhnmesh@yahoo.com, premrajg755@gmail.com

Abstract

This study is set to assess the practice and challenges faced by TESL students at a local teacher training institute during their first practicum practices at selected Malaysian primary schools. This research is of significant value, as the 17 student- teachers' experiences need to be made known; the findings on the transitional move from a safe protected college environment into the unknown territory of school surroundings. Each of these trainee-teachers had leapt into the role of a teacher in the 21st century language class. They would each maintain daily and weekly reflective journals throughout their practicum period to document their teaching concerns and the level of confidence they put into their abilities to teach and manage their primary school students. These findings from the questionnaires were reported. The data obtained from the study participants were analyzed qualitatively. The results of the study reveal that:- i) student-teachers have positive perception towards the role of practicum program in promoting their pedagogical skills as well as subject matter knowledge; ii) school mentors failed in providing the necessary support for practicum student-teachers. This research enables to shed more light into the areas of second language teaching in the classroom as the findings would be able to provide more support for future management and development of teacher education. Furthermore, these student-teachers could understand themselves better throughout the month extended practicum. The ability to self-monitor and self-appraise themselves are valuable skills to be acquired by these student-teachers for their personal and autonomous and continuous self-assessments to become effective second language teachers.

Keywords: Student-Teachers, Perspectives, Practicum Practices, Challenges

1.0 Introduction

17 TESL student teachers (4 males and 13 females) of a Malaysian local teacher training institute had a taste of their first teaching practicum in local Chinese national-type primary schools. They are currently in the 5th semester of their degree courses. They will be doing their second practicum in their 6th semester followed by their internships in their 8th semester.   Thus, it is of paramount importance to carry out this research to shed more light into the challenges that these students had faced during their first month of teaching. The findings from this research would definitely help these students in their future training.

1.1 The First Practicum Practices

The first phase of practicum aims to enable student teachers to apply all theories and methods of the teaching and learning processes in actual classroom situations. These student-teachers would experience teaching in real school environments from the perspective of a teacher.   Among the main objectives of this phase (as stated in Jadual 3, 2014) are to teach positive attitudes and instil professionalism in teaching practices among the student-teachers. It can also sharpen these student-teachers' reflective and self-assessment skills through their portfolio preparations, and finally, to enable these trainees to strategize and conduct co-curriculum activities in school.

1.2 Significance of the Research and Research Problems

These student-teachers were divided into 8 Chinese national-type schools, supervised by eight lecturers from the researchers' teacher training institutes. These trainees were also co-supervised by experienced schoolteachers who functioned as their mentors. The lecturers were required to observe their assigned student-teachers twice, whereby their school mentors were required to observe them three times. Only during the final occasion, both the lecturers and their school mentors would see the student-teachers at the same time.

This study is expected to benefit practicum stakeholders' by providing tangible evidence about the current practices and challenges of the practicum implementation program. Therefore, this investigation is essential to determine the extent of effectiveness and attainment of the objective of the program in the case of the Malaysian Teacher Education institute. As a result, this might be helpful to suggest and devise possible solutions to minimize the weaknesses of the program and to spread out the healthy side of practicum experiences of teacher education to others.

Research Question 1: How do student-teachers perceive the roles of practicum program in promoting their pedagogical skills and subject matter knowledge?

Research Question 2 : Do student-teachers get the necessary support from their mentors during the implementation of the program?

As this research was just a preliminary investigation on the student-teachers' practices and challenges; thus, only the above two research questions would be answered in this article. This research would have its limitation; one being it was conducted in a Chinese national-type school context, which means, the study findings are limited based on the instrument used to collect data in a school with the Chinese as the majority. Thus, the results might not reflect other types of national schools. Second, the subject participants consisted of only 17 students, whereby more significant numbers would provide more conclusive evidence for research.

2.0 Literature Review

A teacher education program is considered as an imperative to heighten the capacities of teachers for the successful and meaningful teaching learning process in the school. It is challenging to ensure the quality of education without having academically competent and professionally responsible teachers in the school. Tadesse and Meaza (2007) explained that for teachers to accomplish their roles, there must be a well-designed and successfully implemented teacher training program to produce teachers who are academically competent, professionally skilled, and ethically committed to their profession. Thus, Teacher education program should prepare student-teachers based on professional standards that require them to integrate theory and practice in a problematic way (Wikstrom, Patternson, and Zeek, 2006). This is because teacher candidates who are well prepared in teacher education become more confident in their knowledge of teaching practice and comfortable about effective teaching to diverse student populations in various settings (Smith and Rhodes, 2006).

According to Northfield and Gunstone (1997), the fundamental purpose of teacher education is to assist teachers in learning to apply important ideas about teaching and learning. Secondly, the teacher education institution must be presented in ways that achieve some balance between the existing context and role of teaching and the possibilities of improving teaching learning. Concerning the purpose of higher education program, Hailmariam (2007) noted that the primary purpose of the teacher education program is to prepare highly qualified teachers to adequately play their role and facilitate the teaching learning environment meaningfully. Hence, the teacher education program has been viewed as the most crucial and determinant that can be made a significant difference in the educational development of the country.

Practicum is an organized school experience of student-teachers, in which student-teacher practices the skills being learned in the teacher education program under the direct supervision of the trained teacher of the school. An integral part of all initial teacher education programs is the school-based practicum, where pre-service teachers get an opportunity to develop their teaching and knowledge in classroom situations (Grootenboer, 2005). This program is designed to help teacher candidates develop and exhibit their knowledge, skills, and outlooks that will enable them to become master teaching professionals. Thus, the Practicum program enables student-teachers "to go beyond the memorization of facts to the application of ideas" in the actual classroom situation (Wickstron, Patterson and Zeek, 2006). This program provides student-teachers to engage actively in learning and teaching processes such as student-teacher interactions, implementation of instructional methods, and subject knowledge matter (Fekade, 2009). Therefore, teacher education program requires modelling the teaching and learning approaches to promote the vision of the profession for which they are preparing pre-service teachers (Russell, 2002).

During the practicum, an active mentor is the one who eagerly models and supports new teachers to develop successful classroom practices and techniques that will enhance the learning of student-teachers. Research displays that mentor for future pre-service teachers will require providing with role models and shaping the vision of their future teaching profession. Mentors are to be responsive to and supportive of all circumstance in which the learner is operating (Rhodes and Hamptom, 2004). They added that the mentor is responsible for contributing self awareness to learners, managing their learning, providing feedback and therefore, it is considered as a source of support to learners in the achievement of their objectives. The significant school responsibilities mentors include: supporting students to identify targets for development and offering advice about alternative strategies, monitoring the progress of students' teaching files, planning and delivering collaborative teaching activities, discussing students' lesson plans and evaluations, and advising appropriately, observing students teaching and providing constructive feedback; supporting students to reflect on and analyze their practice; and providing written feedback on practice (Chapel, 2003).

According to Cohen et al. (2002, cited in Amdework 2007), school mentors have the following responsibilities:

■ Advising student-teachers how to teach their particular subject knowledge;

■ Developing the student-teachers understanding, and appreciate how students learn and how learning can be planned;

■ Encouraging student-teachers on classroom management and the planning of school co-curricular activities and assessments;

■ Taking over all the responsibilities from the elements of initial teacher education that includes; school based assignments and assessing the performance and developments of student-teachers competencies in teaching skills, subject knowledge and application of classroom managements, assessing and record keeping and professional events.

Similarly, Rhodes and Hamptom (2004) pointed out the following as the responsibilities of mentors:

■ The mentor should encourage, coach, and nurture the learner to build an existing experience;

■ The mentor should help the learner to be proactive rather than reactive in teaching;

■ The mentor should share ideas, skills, and value with the learner;

■ Both mentor and the learner should be learning from one another. The mentor should offer support for the learner to set out new ideas; and

■ The mentor should introduce the learner to other colleagues who will provide help.

As indicated above, school mentors have made the responsibility of observing, evaluating and virtually supporting student-teacher during the practicum program such as: providing constructive feedback immediately after school observation, encouraging student-teachers to engage vigorously in their lessons and showing a positive attitude towards the profession. Mentor teachers need to model effective teaching strategies and classroom management skills to support pre-service teachers in their teaching practices (Harrison, 2008). This is because it is impossible to attain the aim of school based field experience without the support of school mentors (He, W., Means & Lin, 2006).

Handling field experiences is a challenge that many teacher education programs are facing, and it presents a range of problems, including supervision of students, difficulty in developing and maintaining collaborative relationships between a host of teachers and Teacher Educators, communication between all parties, and accessibility of paperwork. The Practicum program is viewed as a stressful component in teaching and managing school students' behaviour. Concerning this, Toren and Iliyan (2008) indicated that beginner teachers faced challenges of adjustment to schools' cultures, overloaded with work, and individual differences amongst pupils. Similarly, Nonis and Jernice (2011) indicated that student-teachers show unhappiness during their practicum due to stresses of being overloaded, being not watched by their supervisors, poor rapport with school communities, and problems with understanding the needs of their students given that they had a very short time in the schools.

3.0   Methodology

The 17 student-teachers were sent to 8 Chinese national-type primary schools in Johor Bahru district. Their first phase practicum carries two credit with 160 hours for guided- and self-learning. The language classes were about 30 to 60 minutes in duration, with an average of 8 hours per week for each student-teacher. The 17 student-teachers were informed that their names would be kept confidential.   These teacher trainees were also required to maintain a portfolio that would consist of their assigned school background and their records of teaching and learning processe and co-curriculum activities. For this study, a qualitative approach was employed. The primary data gathering tool for the research was a questionnaire.

3.1 Analysis

Three sets of questionnaires were prepared and distributed to student-teachers which are "Student-Teachers Response towards the roles of Practicum Experience in promoting their Pedagogical Skill," "Student-Teachers' Response towards the Roles of Practicum Experience in Promoting their subject Matter Knowledge" and "Support Offered to Student-Teachers by School Mentors." All the questionnaires comprised close-ended questions. The close-ended questions were prepared based on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Qualitative techniques were used for the data collected. The obtained data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and then interpreted with the necessary research questions. Finally, based on the data collected, summary and conclusion were drawn, and recommendations were forwarded.

4.0   Findings

The 17 student-teachers had been given a questionnaire before they started their first phase of practicum practices.   There were 21 constructs altogether in the polls which were distributed to the student-teachers'.

4.1 RQ 1: How do student-teachers perceive the roles of practicum program in promoting their pedagogical skills and subject matter knowledge?

This part deals with the views of student teachers towards the role of school-based practicum experience in promoting their classroom teaching competencies such as their pedagogical skills and subject knowledge. Therefore, under the presented tables (Tables 1 & 2) depicted the data collected from student-teachers about the above mentioned issues (pedagogical skill and subject matter).

Table 1: Student-Teachers' Response towards the roles of Practicum Experience in promoting their Pedagogical Skills.

Statements		Rating Scale					Mean
		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA	
The Practicum program helped me to improve my lesson plan preparation	F	13	2	1	1	-	4.6
	%	76.4	11.8	5.9	5.9	-	
The Practicum program helped me to improve classroom management	F	7	7	1	2	-	4.1
	%	41.2	41.2	17.6	11.8		
Practicum program helped me to produce subject relevant teaching aids	F	6	7	2	2	-	4.0
	%	35.3	41.2	11.8	11.8		
Practicum program helped me to try out different teaching strategies in the actual classroom	F	7	9	1	-	-	4.4
	%	41.2	53	5.9	-	-	
Practicum program helped me to know how to deliver feedback for learners	F	8	6	2	1	-	4.2
	%	47	35.3	11.8	5.9	-	
Practicum program helped me to know how to motivate students	F	7	6	2	2	-	4.1
	%	41.2	35.3	11.8	11.8	-	
The practicum program helped me to know how to prepare test-items	F	3	4	7	2	1	3.4
	%	17.6	23.5	41.2	11.8	5.9	
The practicum experiences helped me to know how to record and keep students results confidentially	F	7	6	2	1	1	4.0
	%	41.2	35.3	11.8	5.9	5.9	

N.B. F = frequency, SA= Strongly Agree, A = Agree, UN = undecided, DA = disagree, SDA = strongly disagree, N = 102

As the above Table 1 displayed, 88.2 (SA+A) of student-teachers indicated that with the practicum experiences, they had improved their lesson plan preparations. Proportional to this, the computed mean result of that item was found to be 4.6, which means that the practicum program helped candidate teachers to enhance their lesson plan preparation.

Concerning the contributions of practicum experience in enhancing their classroom managements, most of the student-teachers (70.6%) reported that the practicum experiences helped them to improve their skills of classroom managements. In proportional to this, the computed weight mean result of that item (mean = 4.1),

indicates that the practicum program has contributed for candidate teachers to enhance their skills of classroom management.

Further, respondents were also asked to indicate whether the practicum experiences had helped them to produce subject relevant teaching aid. Accordingly, 76.5% (A+SA) of the respondents reported that their practicum experiences were helping them to provide subject suitable teaching aids. The computed mean for that item (mean = 4.0), implies that the practicum program enabled student-teachers to enhance their ability to produce subject suitable teaching aids. Moreover, the majority of the student-teachers (94.2%) reported that the practicum program had helped them to try out different teaching strategies in actual classroom situations.

Furthermore, student-teachers were asked to rate the values of practicum experiences in improving their skills of test preparation. Accordingly, most of the student-teachers (41.1%) priced strongly agree + agree indicated that practicum program is valuable in enhancing their skills of test preparation. Here, the overall mean results of that item (mean = 3.4), shows that satisfactorily practicum program was helping student-teachers to develop their skills of test preparation. Concerning the last question, the majority of the student-teachers (76.5%) reported that the practicum program had helped them to understand how to record and keep students' results confidentially. Here, the highest percentage of the respondents perceived that with the practicum experience, they were able to know how to register and maintain student's achievement confidentially.

Generally, from the above data, one can understand that student-teachers have positive perception towards the role ofthe practicum program in promoting their pedagogical skills. This finding is consistent with the ideas of Qazi et al. (2012) who stated that school-based practicum program has an integral role in enhancing student-teachers pedagogical skill and in preparing them for the realities of classroom teaching through developing skills in them as lesson planning, preparation of subject relevant teaching aids and worksheets and classroom management skills.

Table 2: Student-Teachers' Response towards the roles of Practicum Experience in promoting their Subject Matter Knowledge.

Statements		Rating Scale					Mean
		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA	
The Practicum program helped me to improve subject matter knowledge	F	6	7	2	2	-	4.0
	%	35.3	41.2	11.8	11.8	-	
The Practicum program helped me to improve confidence in teaching the course	F	7	6	2	2	-	4.1
	%	41.2	35.3	11.8	11.8	-	
Practicum program helped me to apply theory into practice	F	7	9	1	-	-	4.4
	%	41.2	53	5.9	-	-	
Practicum program gave me the hands on experience that I need in my field of study	F	8	6	2	1	-	4.2
	%	47	35.3	11.8	5.9	-	

N.B. F = frequency, SA= Strongly Agree, A = Agree, UN = undecided, DA = disagree, SDA = strongly disagree, N = 102

As it is indicated in the above Table 2, a considerable number of student-teachers (76.5%, SA+A) indicated that with the practicum experiences, they improved their subject matter knowledge. Also, the highest percentage of student-teachers (76.5, SA+A) reported that with the school-based practicum experiences, they improved their classroom teaching confidence. The computed mean result of that item (mean = 4.1), implies that the practicum program had helped candidate teachers' to improve their classroom teaching confidence.

Furthermore, student-teachers were asked to indicate whether the practicum program had helped them apply theory into practice in the real situation of the school. Accordingly, a substantial number of student-teachers (94.2%) confirmed that the practicum program had helped them to apply theory into practice in the real situation of the school. This is shown from the computed mean result of that item (mean = 4.4). Also, the majority of student-teachers indicated that with the practicum experiences they obtained actual teaching experiences that they needed for their field of studies (mean = 4.2).

4.2 RQ2: Do student-teachers get the necessary support from their mentors during the implementation of the program?

This part intended to assess whether student-teachers got appropriate support from their school mentors during practicum implementation. Accordingly, Table 3 depicted the results of the data collected from the student-teachers of the adequacy of support they acquired from their respective school mentors.

Table 3: Support Offered to Student-Teachers by School Mentors

Statements		Rating Scale					Mean
		SA	A	UN	DA	SDA	
My mentor repeatedly observed me when I teach in class	F	1	3	2	7	4	2.4
	%	5.9	17.6	11.8	41.2	23.5	
My mentor gave me constructive feedback about my lesson plan preparation	F	1	3	3	7	3	3.1
	%	5.9	17.6	17.6	41.2	17.6	
My mentor guided me in handling learners in the class	F	1	4	4	6	2	2.8
	%	5.9	23.5	23.5	35.3	11.8	
My mentor follows the schedule for observing my classroom teaching	F	2	3	4	7	1	2.9
	%	11.8	17.6	23.5	41.2	5.9	
My mentor gave me constructive advice on how to conduct my action research project	F	2	3	3	7	2	2.8
	%	11.8	17.6	17.6	41.2	11.8	

N.B. F = frequency, SA= Strongly Agree, A = Agree, UN = undecided, DA = disagree, SDA = strongly disagree, N = 102

As seen in Table 3, overwhelming percentages of student-teaches (64.5%) rated that their school mentors did not repeatedly observe them while they taught in their respective classroom. In line with this, the computed mean result for the corresponding item was found 2.4, which means that school mentors were not repeatedly

observing student-teachers' classroom teaching practice. Additionally, 58.8% (SDA + DA) of the respondents depicted that they did not obtain constructive feedback from their mentors about their lesson plan preparation. The computed mean result for the item above (mean = 3.1) shows that the adequacy of support that student-teachers acquired from their respective mentors' about their lesson plan preparation was low.

What is more, 47.1% (SDA + DA) of the student-teacher revealed that their school mentors did not follow the time schedule to observe them during classroom teaching practice. Similarly, about the level of guidance given by the mentors in handling learners in the class, 47.1% (SDA + DA) of the participants indicated that proper guidance that: to them. Finally, student-teachers were asked to rate whether their school mentors had helped them how to conduct their action research project. Accordingly, 53% (SDA + DA) of student-teachers were dissatisfied with the support they obtained from their mentors concerning their action research projects. The mean result of that specific item (mean = 2.8), shows that school mentors were not effective in offering support for student-teachers about their action research project. According to Chapel (2003), school mentors have the responsibilities of supporting students to identify   targets for development, offering advice about alternative teaching strategies, monitoring the progress of students' teaching files, planning and delivering collaborative teaching activities, discussing students' lesson plans and evaluations and advising appropriately, observing students teaching practice and providing constructive feedback.

5.0 Discussion

The findings of this studyindicate that student-teachers have a positive perception of the role of the practicum program in promoting their classroom teaching competence. Majority of the student-teachers perceived that the practicum program helped improve their pedagogical skills and subject matter knowledge. A substantial number of student-teachers agreed that they were beneficial from their practicum experiences. More specifically, student-teachers suggested that with the practicum experiences they had improved their lesson plan preparation, the ability to produce subject relevant local teaching aids, classroom management skills, and helped them to try out different teaching strategies in the actual classroom. Also, the student teachers indicated that the practicum program had helped them to improve their subject matter knowledge, the confidence of teaching, and to link theory and practice in the real situation of the school.

The data uncovered that the practicum students-teacher of the Teacher Education Institute failed to obtain adequate support from their respective school mentors. Practicum program needs sufficient help and supervision; however, the findings of this study indicate that school mentors lack in: repeatedly observing student-teachers classroom teaching practice, providing constructive feedback about their lesson plan preparation, offering advice for student-teachers on how to conduct their action research project, and providing written feedback timely within days of classroom observation. As a whole, the findings of this study reveal that student-teachers were less satisfied with the support that they got from their respective mentors during their practicum implementation program.

6.0 Conclusion

It appears that school mentors, as well as student-teachers of the Teacher Education Institute, have favourable feeling towards the role of practicum program in promoting their classroom teaching competencies and in providing them hands on experience that they need for their respective field of study. For effective implementation practicum program, continuous support, guidance, and follow up are considered as the most crucial components of the program. However, practically student-teachers in the case of the Teacher Education Institute were not getting adequate support and guidance from their respective school mentors. This could be due to work overload, lack of motivation, time constraint, lack of mutual understanding among practicum stakeholder, and poor coordination of the program.

7.0 Recommendation

To meet the purpose ofthe practicum program, student-teachers need to get adequate feedback and support from their mentors as well as tutors. However, a report from the student-teachers indicated that their respective mentors failed to do so. Thus, school mentors should adequately support student-teachers to prepare them for the real world, having the required qualifications. They need to provide feedback timelyabout student-teachers' lesson plan preparation, action research project, classroom teaching practice, and needs to guide how to select and apply instructional methods in the class.

It was also found that the involvement of mentors in undertaking the activity of practicum was discouraging. Therefore, the Teacher Education Institute, with the concerning bodies ought to create appropriate strategies that initiate vigorous involvement of school mentors in the activities of the practicum program. To meet the purpose of the practicum program, the linkage between the Teacher Education Institute and the placement schools should be strengthened. For this reason, the concerned bodies of the Teacher Education Institute should build a strong link with placement school and have to work jointly in planning and implementing the activities of the practicum program.

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