

Contributing Factors for Successful Practicum by Primary Trainee Teachers

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Abstract

Practicum is an opportunity for teacher trainees to put into practice the knowledge and skills they have acquired through their methods and education courses. This paper provides the results of a study conducted on the contribution of school environment, practicum handbook and expectations, attitudes and qualities of the associate teacher and lecturers' visits and advice, on the performances of teacher trainees during the practicum. It was concluded that conducive school environment, clear practicum guidelines and expectations, supportive associate teachers and supportive lecturers all contribute towards the success of practicum.

Introduction

At teacher training institutions trainees are transformed through simulated environments and real classroom practices to achieve the outcomes that are necessary in a quality teacher. One component of teacher training is 'practicum', more generally known as teaching practice. Ideally conceived, the practicum is a purposeful series of supervised engagement of trainees in classrooms in which trainee teachers apply, refine and reconstruct theoretical knowledge, thereby developing their teaching competencies (Turney et.al). Simply put, it is a time when the trainee teachers put into practice and trial the knowledge and skills they have acquired through the methods and education courses offered in diverse subject areas.

Well designed teaching practicum is needed to ensure that teacher training institutions produce high quality teachers (Zeichner, 2010; Sabar, 2004). A teacher's ability to meet the challenges and abilities of work is to a certain extent dependent on his professional preparation; i.e. the theoretical and practical components of his professional preparation (Lingam, 2004). Bronfenbrenner (2000) noted that development, be it cognitive, social or behavioural, depends in part on the school setting, teachers, supervising tutors and other professionals with whom a trainee teacher interacts while on teaching practicum placement.

Becoming a teacher depends on the interaction of multiple variables amongst which the personal characteristics and resources of the trainee teachers, the guidance and support from the supervisors, and the characteristics of the ethos of the placement school play a major role (Arregui, Perez and Garcia, 2009; Caires, Almeida and Martins 2010; Flores and Day 2005; Haritos, 2004; McNally et al. 1997; Newman 2000). The extent to which trainee teachers interact with tutors and teachers vary depending on the existence of supportive structures such as school-college partnerships, school based mentorship, and regular visits to schools by supervising tutors from teacher education institutions (Sivan and Chan, 2009).

Trainee teachers who successfully collaborate with teachers in their practicum placement schools tend to enjoy 'legitimate peripheral participation', a key element of creating a community of practice among teachers and novices (Wenger, 1998). Trainee teachers who receive appropriate support from mentors or cooperating teachers during teaching practicum tend to have a stronger commitment to teaching (Guarino, Santibanez, and Daley, 2006). As Koerner, Rust, and Baumgartner (2002) found out, trainee teachers consider an effective teaching practicum to be collegial, open and friendly. Opportunities for trainee teachers to collaborate with teachers in the school also foster belongingness and acceptance (Johnson, 2010).

The practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which trainee teachers develop a personal teaching competence (Handal and Lauvas, 1987). As novices entering the teaching profession, trainee teachers are often overwhelmed by the challenges of beginning their careers (Berliner, 1994; Feldman, Rearick and Weiss, 1999, Moore, 2003; Veenman. 1984). Where teaching practicum is carefully coordinated, trainee teachers carefully mentored, their workload well measured, and pedagogical orientations in schools

and teacher education institutions well aligned, trainee teachers are better able to accomplish their goals through teacher training (Zeichner and Conklin, 2005).

Classroom teachers who work with beginning teachers in practicum settings play a crucial role in pre-service teacher education (Glickman and Bey, 1990; Guyton, 1989). Associate teachers are expected to be caring, giving trainee teachers attention and being helpful to the would-be teachers (Bowman, 1990; Bruneau, 1992).

This study examined the above factors from the context of actual experiences of trainee teachers. Specific factors examined were (a) contribution of school environment, (b) practicum handbook and expectations, (c) attitudes and qualities of the associate teacher(s), and (d) lecturers visit and advice to trainees.

The Study

This study was conducted with second year students enrolled in the Higher Education Diploma (Primary Schools) programme at the Fiji National University during the academic year 2013. A random sampling was done using the students scoring high grades in practicums. The sample comprised forty-five second year trainee teachers (55% females, 45% males). They were informed of the scope of the study and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Their prior approval was sought before engaging them in the study. Data was collected through the use of a semi-structured questionnaire where the trainee teachers provided their experiences. The questionnaire was provided to the students one afternoon and collected the following day.

School Environment

Almost all students (n=44) responded that the school environment played a vital role in the success of their practicum. Only one student (n=1) stated that the school environment was not so conducive and did not contribute much towards his success in teaching practice. A major factor was a 'threat-free' environment. This was seen as a place where the teachers were friendly and approachable. With approachable teachers, the trainee teachers could easily interact with the associate teachers. The attitude of the headteacher was also critical. Some students (n=18) stated that their head teachers were very professional and assisted them a lot in their practicum.

One student recorded: 'At no point in time the students and staff made me realize that I was just a "trainee"'. Another summed her experiences on school environment as:

'Very friendly, welcoming and helpful. Every day I got to learn something new from my associate teacher, colleagues and head teacher. My associate teacher and head teacher were very supportive. If I had to recommend anyone for teaching practice, I would tell them to go to my practicum school. Though it was remote, the environment will call you there again and again.'

Practicum Handbook and Practicum Expectations

100% of the students stated that the practicum handbooks provided a very clear guideline during the practicum. The following statement summarises this aspect of the experiences: *'The practicum handbook provided to us was very helpful since everything was clear and well explained, it guided me throughout the practicum and I was able to meet all the expectations that were required'*.

As the outcomes for each week were clearly stated in the practicum handbook, it also guided the associate teachers to cross check if the trainee teacher's work was up to date.

Attitude and Qualities of Associate Teachers

All the trainee teachers stated that the associate teacher played a vital role in making their practicum a successful one. The qualities noted in associate teachers were: being humble and knowledgeable (qualified); being good role models; being helpful, confident and patient; continuously encouraging the trainees, and providing regular feedback on their performance. The following statement summarises this aspect:

'My AT was really helpful to me. She gave me confidence and strength in teaching. She motivated me to be a hardworking person. I have learnt so many things from her, things important in teaching field, qualities of a good staff member, my attitudes towards the head teacher, assistant head teacher and those who are more experienced than me. She taught me how to discipline my students, etc. My associate teacher was the only reason why I was so successful during the practicum.'

Lecturer Visits and Advice

Two visits were made by the lecturers to assess and guide individual trainee teachers. All students stated that lecturers' visits were important as these provided them opportunities to discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Students also felt that the lecturers encouraged and motivated them to do better in the practicum. The following is a typical comment: *'Lecturer's visit made me improve my teaching. My weaknesses were identified and I got a chance to make myself well informed and used different strategies in my teaching. I improved on my grammar and made my lessons student centred'*.

Conclusion

Practicum serves as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching; it is also a context in which trainee teachers develop personal teaching competencies (Handel and Lauvas, 1987). Literature supports that practicum is an integral part of teacher development process. Practicum has been considered an important pre-service learning context; it provides classroom experiences, is useful in evaluating teaching ability, and supports socialization within the profession. It also stimulates the development of teaching skills in the pre-service teachers, provides a protected field of experimentation, allows insights into new perspectives on the profession, and increases motivation to continue studying (Fisher 1986; Watts 1987; Alexander et. al 1992).

This study established that the success of the practicum depends on a number of factors. A conducive school environment, clear practicum guidelines and expectations, supportive associate teachers and supportive lecturers contributed towards the success of the practicum. As trainee teachers were guided by their associate teachers and the head teachers, they could clearly state and agree that successful practicum requires support from them.

It is suggested that the contributing factors must continue to be strengthened. Students should be provided with a conducive teaching and learning environment where the head teacher, associate teacher and other staff are supportive towards trainee teachers. The lecturers must continue to make timely visits and provide constructive feedback so that students are fully aware of their strengths and weaknesses. With continued guidance and feedback the trainee teachers can be better developed into classroom teachers.

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