

STUDENT TEACHERS PERCEPTION TOWARDS TEACHING PRACTICUM PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

One of the requirements to qualify as a teacher is to undergo a teaching practicum during which one gains teaching experience. This practicum is considered as the most significant way in helping student teachers to become effective classroom teachers. This study investigates UniSZA student teachers perception towards teaching practicum and the challenges encountered by them. 45 Diploma in Teaching of English (TESL) Semester 5 students at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics (FLL), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) were chosen as respondents. The research employed qualitative methodology with questionnaire administered to examine the respondent's answer for every question asked. The findings indicated that the student teachers have different perception and expectation regarding teaching practicum but most of them looked forward to it. The result of this study also highlighted two prominent challenges encountered by the student teachers that were to adapt with the school environment and the classroom management. Findings of this study would provide a deeper understanding on the Teaching Practicum organized by the Faculty of Languages and Communication.

Keywords: Teaching Practicum, Student Teachers Perceptions, TESL

INTRODUCTION

Education, according to Cobb, Darling-Hammond, and Murangi (1995) has never been more challenging and pertinent than in today's global world. It is considered as one of the most important factors in the development of a nation. In order to build a superb nation and citizens, the education system must be ideal with the needs of the future. Therefore, the education and preparation of teachers is a critical issue in national development. The demand for quality teachers has become the goal of teacher preparation programs around the world (Cobb, 1999).

To become a teacher, one needs to undergo a teaching practicum during which one gains teaching experience. According to Britzman (1991), student teachers often report the practicum as the most important and valuable part of their teaching practicum. Renwick (1992) found that many student teachers in three New Zealand colleges of education referred to teaching practice as the 'most significant way in which their training had helped them to become effective classroom teachers' (p.60). "New teachers have two jobs-they have to teach and they

have to learn to teach. No matter how good a pre-service teacher program may be, there are some things that can only be learned on the job.” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1026).

Most teachers develop their classroom skills fairly early in their teaching careers. Teachers have to know how to adapt the theories that they have learnt and when the most suitable time to use it to counter student’s behaviors and ability. Teachers entering the profession may find their initial teaching efforts stressful, but with experience they acquire a repertoire of teaching strategies that they draw on throughout their teaching.

Calder (1989) found that while most student-teachers found teaching practice to be a satisfying and valuable experience, some did not find it so. Some even went so far as to hide problems from their peers in case they should be seen as failures in the eyes of peers. Teaching practicum is the period when student teachers are aided to put into practice the theories and principles of education which they have learnt in the classroom.

In University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), students of Diploma in TESL would have to do their teaching practicum in Semester V for 12 weeks. During the practicum, the students have to teach at least 8-10 hours a week. They are exposed to the regulations, discipline and ethics of the teaching profession as well as the duties of a teacher. It would be interesting to know what Diploma in TESL students of UniSZA think of the teaching practicum that they underwent and challenges encountered by them. Since its establishment in 1999, no research has been carried out to investigate TESL students perception of the practicum itself. The findings would not only help future student teachers of UniSZA but also the Faculty of Languages and Communication to make any suitable changes to the programme, if necessary.

This research is confined to UniSZA only, thus the results cannot be extrapolated to other higher institutions, where the students have different backgrounds and environments.

Objectives

In general, the research tries to:

1. find out student teachers’ perceptions of the teaching practicum.
2. examine challenges encountered by student teachers during teaching practicum.
3. provide suitable suggestions to improve the teaching practicum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Language Center of Kolej Ugama Sultan Zainal Abidin (KUSZA), later known as the Faculty of Languages and Communication of UniSZA, was established in 1999. It offered its first programme, the Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) in May 1999. The main purpose of this programme is to produce trained and good English Language Teachers to teach at government primary and secondary schools in Malaysia.

The course duration for this programme is three years or six semesters, with five semesters are for classes and one semester for teaching practicum. There are 14 weeks for each semester. The courses offered are divided into three main courses which are University courses, Education courses and Programme courses. All the students including TESL students are required to register and pass all the courses offered. Teaching practicum is offered in semester 5 and all TESL students need to undergo their teaching practicum as a requirement of the programme.

Teacher Education

The requirement a person must fulfill in order to become a teacher is to undergo a teacher education programme of some sort. This, according to Furlong et.al, (1988) is to make sure that the person is competent enough to be a teacher. He points out that the most effective way to assure that persons admitted to practice are competent is through a formal, rigorous, scholarly, prescribed program of preparation. University offering teacher education program has to be concerned with requirements needed to produce teachers. The concern is justified because it is the only way that reasonable standards can be enforced for admission to practice, and it is the only way the members of a recognized profession can be protected from the competition of unqualified persons.

There are those who express grave doubts about the value of professional education courses, instilling the feeling that anyone who knew his subject would be able to teach it (Chandler, 1993). These people are of the opinion that a teacher only needs a thorough knowledge of subject matter in order to be effective in teaching. However, as pointed out by Richey (1993:71):

“...a passenger who has traveled extensively by air may feel that his experience qualifies him to pilot a plane. He may know much about aerodynamics, theory of flight, engines, flight patterns, regulations, schedules, etc. But if he should attempt to take charge of a flight, without having gone through the necessary long and intensive program of training, he immediately would discover the difference between being a pilot and flying as a passenger.”

The importance of undergoing a teacher education programme to be teachers is highlighted by Turner & Fattu (1993). In their research, it was clearly indicated that teachers who have had a methods course perform better than those who have had none. They also found out that teachers who have had teaching experience perform significantly better than those without such experiences. The same goes to teachers with one year of experience where they perform better than those with no experience and teachers with three to five years' experience perform significantly better than those with one year of experience.

Teaching Practicum

To become a teacher, one needs to undergo a teaching practicum during which one gains teaching experience. A person cannot really learn how to teach without actually doing it. Teacher preparation or pre-service teacher education should establish the bases for professional to engage in ongoing development. There is a process of preparation towards the achievement of a range of result, which is specified in advance (Widdowson, 1999). It means the practicum provides the opportunity to observe some difficulties and find possible solutions which could be applied in many other teaching settings. It is the teaching experience that helps teachers to gain awareness of their performances, and gives them tools to become effective manager of their classroom.

Wallace (1990) states that the teaching practicum gives student teachers the chance to apply knowledge and skills gain elsewhere or to develop strategies for handling the different dimensions of the language lesson. Practitioners are expected to develop a critical view of the teaching situation and to implement their previous knowledge in order to create new strategies for becoming effective teachers. Student teachers face and respond to difficult situations (Woodward, 1992), but they have many possible actions, reactions and strategies to choose from. Groundwater-Smith (1993) noted: "The practicum experience is one fraught with difficulties, dilemmas and challenges as the student attempts to negotiate his or her way along a hazardous path of competing professional policies and practices" (p. 137). Therefore, it is necessary to place first-time teachers in situations

where they can listen to students, find out about them as human beings, find out their level, and get use to being with them in a classroom and come out unscathed.

In *Panduan Mengajar* (1992) written by Abdul Rahim Abdul Rashid, Abdul Aziz Abd Talib, Abd Ghaffar Md Din and Mohammad Haron, teaching practicum, student teachers are sent to various school in which they are given the opportunity to put into practice all of the theories regarding teaching that they have acquired. Each of the student teachers is assigned to their own supervisors. These supervisors will be in charge of assessing the student teachers in order to determine the student teachers' level of achievement and decide whether the student teachers are competent enough to be a teacher. The supervisors assess the student teachers through their performance in teaching and all the criteria needed.

The teaching practicum is often a stressful experience for student teacher trainees. The purpose of the teaching practicum is to integrate educational theory with practice. It is assumed that the teaching practicum will provide student teacher trainees (mentees) the opportunity to develop a professional identity, teach and participate in multiple, complex and concrete experiences essential for meaningful learning and teaching (Brock & Grady, 1998). Teacher mentoring is seen as a vehicle in the preparation of student teacher trainees understanding of how to learn and practice effectively with the help of school mentors. Mentoring needs to be done meaningfully, effectively and systematically.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this study, a qualitative research procedure was employed to collect data. A questionnaire was designed to identify student teachers' perception regarding teaching practicum and the challenges encountered. The questionnaire consists of 2 main sections and for section A, there are 11 open ended questions that need to be answered by the respondents. Since this part is open ended questions, respondents are free to answer the questions based on their opinions and experiences. In this part, all the questions are about teaching practicum program. We want to know student teachers perception and what they encountered during their teaching practicum. Once the data was collected, students perceptions of the teaching practicum programme would be examined and some suggestions would be provided.

Respondents

The population of this study consists of Diploma in TESL students at the Faculty of Languages and Communication, UniSZA, Terengganu. The sample comprises 45 Semester 6 students enrolled in TESL course. For this study, there are 6 male and 39 female students.

Data Analysis

The answers gathered from the questionnaire were scrutinized and analyzed accordingly. All the answers were analysed according to the objectives of the research stated earlier. Answers which were of the same nature were grouped together and formed one set of opinion. The most significant answers were analyzed and a conclusion is made based on the results. It is repeated for all the other items in the questionnaire.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

All the data and information gathered and presented here were based on the questionnaires distributed to the respondents. The findings have been divided into two main components, which are Perceptions and Challenges Encountered.

Perceptions

Majority of the student teachers expressed positive sentiments pertaining the teaching practicum programme. They expressed the views that they had started the course with high expectations and believed that this teaching practicum would be something fun and enjoyable. Most of them were very excited and looked forward to this teaching practicum. For them this is their chance to put in practice what they have learnt with regard to teaching. Despite having high expectation and good reaction to this teaching practicum, some of them also felt worried and nervous because of lack of self-confidence.

When asked about how they found about the practicum, most of the student teachers said that this teaching practicum is not so easy for them. Majority of them put it as average. Some of them stated that it is very difficult and only a few highlighted that this teaching practicum is easy. Some student teachers have bad or negative perception regarding the teaching practicum introduced to them. They had doubts on their ability in teaching language. They were also worried about their classroom management.

Regarding the time given for observation, majority of the student teachers conveyed that they were given enough time to prepare for observation. They agreed that the time given by their supervisor was sufficient and adequate. However some of them expressed that the time given was too short. They were not prepared and ready for the observation. Another aspect highlighted by the student teachers regarding Observation was the preparation of the lesson plan. According to them, it seemed like there was no standardized format to follow. Even though there was a workshop held by the faculty pertaining to lesson plan, the observers seemed to want their own style in writing lesson plan. This kind of situation confused student teachers because they did not know which one to follow, the one given by the Faculty or the observers. Some students also highlighted that their observer only observed them on the first few minutes of the class session, while others said that their observer were with them from beginning to the end of the class. This kind of things made students wonder whether they all were properly evaluated or not.

About the kind of interaction with the supervisors, most student teachers said that they had formal interactions with their supervisors. They said this kind of communication limited their view on certain topics. They were shy and reluctant to express their thoughts and ideas to the supervisors. However there were some who commented that they had good interactions with the supervisors. They said their supervisors gave lots of advice pertaining teaching. Some student teachers commented that informal discussions with their supervisions helped them a lot. With informal interaction they learnt to be more open and able to speak about their feeling and were no longer reluctant to share their thoughts.

Of the skills that they have improved, majority of the student teachers mentioned that their teaching skills and confidence have increased. They also learned that their classroom skills such as handling students in the class and their skill in using Audio Visual Aids for teaching have also improved. They also said that their social relation with staff and other teachers was also enhanced.

Brookfield (1990) made the point that when students speak about learning they do so in "highly emotional terms" (p. 45). This was certainly the case for the student teachers involved in this study. They expressed the following feelings in their questionnaires throughout the three months of their involvement in the study: excited, frustrated, guilty, anxious, pleased, relieved, confused, disappointed, encouraged, reassured, unsettled, nervous, worried, impatient, upset, angry, exhausted, inspired, tense, pressured, inadequate, satisfied. Throughout the practicum the student teachers experienced a wide range of feelings as well as fluctuations in these feelings.

Some of the students highlighted that they were not motivated and felt that the teaching practicum a burden for them. They felt demoralized when thinking about teaching and prefer to sit in the final exam rather than going out for teaching practicum. The practicum was perceived as a 'testing time', rather than a 'learning time' and mistakes were seen as 'failures' rather than 'learning opportunities'. This finding is consistent with Calderhead (1988) who found that the student teachers in his study viewed the field experience as a test to be passed, rather than as a learning experience. The effect of this interpretation was that the student teachers were not able to see their "lows" as a normal part of learning, but rather they became a focus which resulted in self-doubt and self-depreciation. This affected not only their professional lives, but also their personal lives. There was a very negative effect for the student teachers on their self-esteem.

Challenges Encountered

During the period of teaching practicum, the student teachers had to face many problems and difficulties. Most of them highlighted that their biggest problem was the pupils themselves. Majority of the student teachers complained that their pupils have behavioral problems. They said that the pupils were so naughty, and they did not respect the teachers teaching. In addition, pupils rarely paid attention to the teachers in class because of their lack of understanding of the English language. The student teachers had to use mother tongue in teaching the English subject.

Student teachers also faced problem with classroom management where most of them admitted that their class most of the time was in chaotic situation. Student teachers also stressed lack of cooperation from the other teachers and staff at their participating school. This made it very difficult for them to seek advice and guidance from well experienced teachers especially pertaining with preparation of lesson plan. Even worse some of the student teachers reported that their presence had been taken advantage by other teachers. They were asked to do many kinds of works. Some were asked to draw murals.

Another aspect that student teachers had to face is classroom cleanliness where, poor level of cleanliness affected the teaching and learning process. The class was littered with rubbish, especially at the back of the classroom. Even though dustbins were provided, it was still dirty.

Even though student teachers had to face many challenges during teaching practicum, they confessed that the practicum itself gave them a new experience pertaining with teaching. During practicum they learnt not just how to deal with pupils but also how to adapt with their new environment. Majority felt that it was something new and a very fun experience. With teaching practicum, they had chance to escape from normal classes and avoid final exam which is held every semester. Others emphasized on pupils that they had taught, even though most of them admitted their pupil so naughty and troublesome, they had a good time together. Student teachers

and pupils created a strong relation along the way through the teaching practicum. They felt some kind of strong bond with each other.

Majority of the student teachers stated at the end of the study that the "ups and downs were a part of being a student teacher". Brookfield (1990) noted that such fluctuation was one of the most familiar rhythms of significant learning. He explained that "Learners embrace the unfamiliar while concurrently longing for the familiar. They take two steps forward and one step back" (p. 63). He claimed that this process is highly emotional because it "involves great threats to students' self-esteem, especially when they are exploring new and difficult knowledge and skill domains" (p. 204).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings discussed, certain conclusions have been made. These conclusions were discussed in accordance with the objectives of the study mentioned earlier.

Student Teachers Perceptions of the Teaching Practicum

The first concern of the study was the student teachers perception of the practicum on the whole. Majority of the student teachers expressed positive sentiments, such as started the course with high expectations. They believed that this teaching practicum would be something fun and enjoyable. They were also very excited and looking forward to face the practicum. For them this is their chance to put in practice for what they have learnt before regarding with teaching. Only a few of them were nervous and afraid to endure the practicum. They were worried and nervous because of lack of self confidence. They were also worried about losing control in classroom. They had doubts on their ability in teaching language.

Other than having high expectation and good reaction on this teaching practicum most of the students' teachers still found that this teaching practicum was not so easy for them and most of them rated the teaching practicum as average. Some of them stated that it was very difficult and only a few of the student teachers highlighted that this teaching practicum was easy. Some of the student teachers have bad or negative perception regarding the teaching practicum introduced to them. These findings regarding perceptions and expectations either positive or negative are confirmed with what Brookfield (1990) made the point that when referring to "highly emotional terms" (p. 45).

Challenges Encountered

The challenges encountered by student teachers during teaching practicum were also the focus of this study. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the practicum itself gave the student teachers a new experience regarding teaching. During the teaching practicum, they learnt not just how to deal with students but also how to adapt with their new environment, and majority of the student teachers felt that teaching practicum's experience was something new and very fun. Others emphasized on problems they faced with students that they had taught. Even though most of them admitted their students so naughty and troublesome, they still had a good time together. Student teachers and students even created a strong relation within them along the way through the teaching practicum.

Other challenges encountered by the student teachers were duration for preparation before their supervisor comes to supervise their teaching. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that enough time was given to the

student teachers to get prepared for the observation. Only some expressed that time given was unacceptable, meaning that they did not have enough time.

As a conclusion majority of the student teacher expressed positive view regarding with teaching practicum programme. Most of them had high expectations and some of them said that teaching practicum was fun and enjoyable, but there was a few students teacher felt nervous and worry before the teaching practicum start, this is due to they lack of self confident. They are worry about how to control the pupils and how to adapt with the school. Even though they happy and look forward towards this programme, they also think that teaching practicum is not an easy job, this is because during their teaching practicum, they face a lot of problems in order to finish their practicum.

For them the biggest challenge comes from the pupils themselves. Majority of student teachers expressed that their pupils were naughty and hard to listen to what they said in classroom. Things like this happened many times and when the pupils did not listen to what they said, they lost their patience and this made them look like they were losing control of the class. As we all know, classroom management is very important. For them to control the naughty pupils is the hardest thing. Student teachers also had problems not only with the pupils but also problems to adapt with school environment.

Most of them highlighted that this teaching practicum should be held longer, not just three months. For student teachers themselves they felt that three months of teaching practicum were not enough for them to adapt with a life as a real teacher. Insufficient time made them unable to perform at their best in teaching.

Teaching practicum not only gave student teachers' problems, but also gave them a lot of new experience especially in teaching. They gained new knowledge on how to handle naughty pupils. With teaching practicum, the student teachers got to know that the pupils were naughty not because they did not want to learn, but they were naughty because they wanted the student teachers to acknowledge their existence in the class. They know that they are not smart enough to get the student teachers attention in learning, so instead they turned to be naughty pupils. So when the student teachers realized what the naughty pupils wanted, they created a very good relation with the pupils.

The teaching practicum also indirectly improved student teachers in aspects of teaching skills and boosts their confidence level. This is important for them as future teachers. Majority of them admitted that their ability in controlling class and manipulating audio visual aids had increased.

In general, majority of the student teachers felt that the teaching practicum is a very good platform for them to become future teachers. They learnt many things along the way during the teaching practicum. They learnt to be real teachers because they faced real situations and dealt with real pupils. For them this programme gave them precious experience and priceless memory.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn from the study, it would be recommended that the teaching practicum be held longer than 3 months. Some students need more time to adapt with the school environment and get along with their students. 3 months seems to be too short for them. Another thing is, the teaching practicum should be held at the beginning of the school term. It is because most of the big events in school are held at the beginning of

the year. This situation puts student teachers in a great loss because they could not get involved in most of the school activities.

It is also recommended that evaluation done on the student teachers be based on more than four times of observation. This is because according to student teachers, they felt that they were unable to unleash all of their good quality and their true potential. When the observations are done more than four times, students' progress can be measured precisely and the evaluation for the students can be fairer.

It is also suggested that only a standardized lesson plan be used by the student teachers and the observers. It should be made clear to all the student teachers and observers involved to use only one style of writing lesson plan so that problems encountered this semester as explained earlier would not happen again in the future. Observers should not be allowed to insist their own style in writing lesson plan.

There should also be a standardized observation made on the student teachers. The observers should follow strictly the guidelines given in doing the observation. Some student teachers said that their observers only observed them on the first 15 minutes of the class session, while others said that their observers were with them from starting to the end of the class. This made students wonder whether they all were properly evaluated or not.

It is also recommended that the Teaching Methodology class be held in semester four and not in semester three. This is to ensure the smooth flow of the lessons taught in the Teaching Methodology class to the Teaching Practicum program which is held in Semester 5. Having the Teaching Methodology class in semester 3 and teaching practicum in semester 5 as what happens now will create gaps in the transmission of knowledge. It puts student teachers on the losing end. Furthermore the Teaching Methodology class plays an important role in helping students especially when dealing with real classroom environment. It is believed that having the Teaching Methodology course directly before the teaching practicum will help students with their teaching practicum.

It is hoped that every recommendation and positive aspects of this research is taken into consideration since it can help prepare better teaching practicum programme in the future. Further research should look at the perceptions of the teacher observers on the teaching practicum.

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