

Journal Reflections of Pre-Service Teachers during Teaching Practice on Fiji

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Introduction

This paper discloses the personal thoughts and feelings of pre-service teachers reflecting on their experiences during their second phase of a fourteen-week practicum in local schools on Fiji. Each reflection comes from the journals in its original form, part of an assignment at The University of the South Pacific, in Fiji. The journals are meant to express their hopes and desires for the classes they taught, their methods for dealing with issues as they arise, and the tribulations and triumphs encountered in the process. These are noteworthy if highly subjective anecdotes that one assumes are of intrinsic interest to both scholars and prospective pre-service teachers. They are certainly of interest to the Practicum Coordinator, who needs to observe and scrutinize the pre-service teachers' experiences. There is a need to focus on the meaning of the experiences from the trainees' perspective, and to scrutinize those events which are unexpected. Successes and failures are equally significant; indeed, disappointments expressed by the trainees might provide valuable insights into the relative effectiveness of the practicum.

The purpose of this paper is to primarily disclose the journal reflections, with a subsequent paper being tasked to interpret the major issues that arise, and the meaning and significance of these issues for teacher training. The goal is of course to increase teacher efficacy through teacher preparation programs. The challenge remains for the Coordinator as she struggles to refrain from short-term judgment and remain focused on a fine balance between accomplishing the university teaching goals and processing the experiences of teaching reflected in the student journals.

Literature

Teaching practice is a reliable process in an authentic setting where the pre-service teachers experience and demonstrate the sum total of curriculum and teaching competencies learnt at the teacher institutions, under the guidance of a experienced and competent teachers. A compact, efficiently organized practicum beats any textbook explanation of the school and classroom. It places the teacher trainees on the other side of the fence for the first time. They see the real world of teaching (Quick & Sieborger, 2005). And as such practicum provides for the genuine context within which the pre-service teachers are exposed to experience the difficulties and richness of the practicality of being a teacher. Daher (2013) believes that practicum is the most powerful instrument of education to bring about desired changes in the trainees. Reflection gives teacher trainees the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of one's own teaching during the practice stage.

The student teachers' feedback on their experiences need to be part of the focus for teacher educators and education experts to improve and if need be, restructure and revamp the teacher preparation program, thereby increasing the power of teaching. Tisher (1990: 76) reports that "student

teachers believe that the practical experience of observing expert teachers, receiving feedback, and practicing strategies are the most important factors in their growth as teachers". Hougan (2008) believes that the pre-service teachers' self-reflection should not be a difficult process. He further articulates that sometimes just writing down a few notes on what they can improve on is enough. The main idea is to find a system that allows the trainees to adjust and improve on their lessons.

Context

The excerpts come from the pre-service teachers from The University of the South Pacific, in Fiji, who are undertaking their second phase of fourteen weeks practicum in schools. They all had been asked to write a 'Reflective Journal' on their teaching practice experiences. It can be determined from the excerpts that the trainee teachers gained relevant opportunities to learn from the school professionals. It also seemed to break their personal myths of being successful teachers in the classroom and gave them great opportunity to learn a lot of teaching and classroom management skills from the teacher experts in the schools.

Organization

The pre-service teachers' excerpts are divided into three sections. The first one states the students' specific comments on their first experience in the classroom during practicum. The second section lists the trainees' comments on teaching practice in general. And the final section notes the student teachers' concluding remarks on their experiences.

Section One: Specific comments on Pre-service Teachers First Experience in the Classroom

Respondent 1

It was the first day of my first-ever teaching round. I was excited but anxious, so to keep calm I concentrated on my breathing. I was to teach lesson one, two and three! I was fairly jittery. This must be what's it's like to be on fire,' I thought to myself. My stomach was churning and I was beginning to wonder what I was about to undergo. First up would be Chemistry. OMG! I was badly perspiring by the time my associate teacher came to take me to the class. The waiting was over. 'OK, here goes. I will be ok, I told myself.' I followed my teacher to the classroom. 'So you ready to start' he asked. 'Oh, yes' I said a little hesitantly. Then I croaked, 'But I am really nervous!' When we arrived at the class he introduced me. His eyes focusing in on me, and I looked down feeling uneasy. 'Now', he started, 'Be nice to madam. She's a bit nervous.' Forty four pairs of devilish and now intrigued eyes turned on me. Aagh! I felt so tiny.

Respondent 2

The beginning was hard, for I remember at the university you're hearing all these ways and methods and it all sounded so easy. But when you actually get out there in the schools it's different, when you try putting it into actions. I was sort of stumbling through things and making many mistakes, it was a real struggle and a real battle. What I didn't really have was any modeling to follow.

Respondent 3

I can still remember my first day at school, students staring as I walk by them; teachers looking on, busy getting sorted for the day. I felt like I could hear their thoughts: who is she? Why is she here? A parent or new teacher? I was told to see my Head of Department to inform me of who was going to be assigned as my Assistant Teacher.

Respondent 4

On the very first day of school, after assembly, I was told to go and supervise a year 10 class and I was shocked in surprise that no teacher will be assisting me there because the school was running short of teachers at that moment. As I entered the classroom with a student, the fifty plus students kept on talking with each other. Suddenly, they all became calm and then I introduced myself to them. At that moment I made a mistake by saying to them that I am a practical teacher because some of the students take that as an advantage.

Respondent 5

Seeing unfamiliar faces and being in the environment which was very new to me with the different vernacular language spoken gave me a similar feeling of those who were lost in the wild jungle. Those people who were always helplessly seeking for comfort and refuge when they were in the middle of the jungle without knowing where to move to. I really didn't believe what I faced that moment because when I prepared myself to school that morning, I thought that I would face no problem. I thought that the situation would be similar with what I had been into during my school years back in my country. However, this was very distinct from what I thought and so the fear of staying in this new school expanded inside my body.

Section Two: Overall comments on teaching practice experiences*Respondent 6*

I am fascinated with my profession because I have learnt that a teacher not only teaches a subject or a language, a real teacher teaches about life.

Respondent 7

During the observation period one trainee wrote: I fell asleep in class. Then, I dreamt about playing volleyball with my friend. Unconsciously, I threw my pencil case to the blackboard and all of a sudden the class became so quiet because of me. Instead of scolding me, my associate teacher cracked a joke and all the students laughed.

Respondent 8

I found that this job could be quite stressful. During the early weeks of my stay, all the trainee teachers were given lots of supervision each day. Never would a day go by when we were not given less than three supervisions. My associate teacher gave me a simple advice. He said for me to learn to say no to teachers or I would not be able to meet the requirements of my university course.

Respondent 9

Given very less time, I felt that I had adjusted well with the new environment, learning the content from teachers, how to teach better, how to control students, what to do when students do not listen, how to explain to academically poor students.

Respondent 10

Sometimes the teachers complained that some of the forms were very mischievous so I took up the challenge to go and test whether I could handle the students. At first, I felt that by scolding children, I can gain respect but soon I realized that I was only creating fear and hate for myself. There was a huge shift in my technique of controlling students.

I became friendlier, yet more firm than before rather than being a person who scolds children all the time. While observing other teacher's classes, I did not focus on the content but rather on the style of the teacher. I always asked myself whether I could do something similar to the teacher. My style however was very different from other teachers. I felt that the students should be given the content as a puzzle to do and true learning would occur when they themselves make sense of it.

Respondent 11

I felt that this job was quite stressful but one should not get angry and should always mingle with other teachers to relieve bad moments. My associate teachers taught me to keep laughing and enjoying with teachers once you are outside the class.

Respondent 12

I was given a white board marker to write notes in the class but I was scared to use that in class because I was not used to it. My writing on the white board was very horrible so I was writing slowly and that was one drawback and challenge for me.

Respondent 13

I was blessed enough to blend well with the teachers in sharing their teaching skills with me. For example, in the science lab they were able to show me how to improvise and to change teaching technique in a difficult situation during delivering of lesson to students. I wish I had these teachers during my schooling year at high school.

Respondent 14

One challenge I faced during my practical was controlling large classroom having total roll of 45-50 students. This is where classroom control is so difficult to maintain in the allocated one hour period. As a result, it consumes a lot of time and teachers do think that it's a factor that teachers could not achieve their task.

Respondent 15

The challenge I faced was coping with slow learners. I did not account them as slow learners that might race discrimination with upper students. I had to be patient with them, apply multiple teaching techniques that enable them to understand. Although it was tough I really enjoyed it as I tend to lift their standard. The problem arises when there is late in coverage then I have no choice to deliver the lesson at a very fast phase that leaves slow learners behind. At times, I feel incomplete with my work seeing this slow learners perform poorly.

Respondent 16

The only failure I encounter is the implementation of constructive learning to large number of students as in year 3, 4 and 5. It was difficult to control the class and the resources provided were very limited to large class. At times, I ran out of time for the reason of managing the class.

Respondent 17

One of the most significant things I found out was that teachers were very skillful and talented. All the teachers I observed had their own techniques and were also resourceful when delivering their lessons. Also, they were always well prepared and active inside the

classroom. This really helped them in capturing the students' attention and to achieve the objectives for that lesson. Teachers' extraordinary teaching strategies were clearly shown by students' obedience and interest in the lesson.

Respondent 18

I came to realize the importance of group activity whereby students learnt a lot from their peers since they understood each other better. The students were very responsive and performed better. When the head of social science department came to assess me I used group work and moved around the classroom directing and motivating students and explained in the language they understood better. My reporter commented that she learnt a lot from me because her class was teacher centered all the time. I came to realize that though we are student teachers but we can still make a difference and influence others

Respondent 19

My associate teacher was a university graduate of year 2000. However, his students were all I- taukei and the teacher always found it difficult to understand his students or to impart knowledge to the students as the students are poor in English. Also the teacher does not know his content well. Thus, it was really relieving to him when I came. I had to take his classes, teach the students and translate my teaching in I'taukei language. Through this I had to do research and extra reading on the content. I had to go another mile. This had helped me a lot and I gained a lot of knowledge.
[I-taukei refers to Indigenous Fijians].

Respondent 20

From what I observed and learned from the teachers I thought that when it came to my time to take the class, teaching would be very easy. However, my assumptions were incorrect since the time I started my teachings. Most of the students from the year I was assigned to burdened me with the way they reacted and behaved inside the classroom. I didn't believe my eyes to see that most students always behaved differently from what I had observed before. Take for instance, if they wanted to stand up or shout out to their friends in the classroom despite the fact that I was there teaching them, they just did it pretending that I did not exist inside the classroom. I was very frustrated with the way they behaved.

Respondent 21

Almost three times in a week there is staff or department tea. This is a good thing because teachers and the admin staff get to meet, discuss, and share ideas and problems. It also makes the teachers feel superior that their hard work is appreciated by the school.

Respondent 22

Taking part in events such as prefects' induction, Easter service, inter-house , inter-school sports competition and parents teachers interviews organized by the school taught me a number of important lessons. The most important lesson that I had learnt here was that teachers' responsibility was not just to develop students' academic performance only but to develop other performances as well such as physical and spiritual performances.

Respondent 23

One very common thing I noticed was that students make noise when we go to supervise. I knew the saying that 'An empty mind is a devils workshop' holds very true. To overcome this problem, I started talking to the students and sharing with them interesting educational games, jokes, moral stories, and riddles, etc. I saw that students get excited and get involved in all this and they actually share some of theirs as well and do not make unnecessary noise. I realized such activities could be very good teaching strategies to gain student attention and make class interesting.

Respondent 24

One of the common problems with ethnic school is that I-taukei students are swearing in their language to subject teacher and other non I- taukei students. In the beginning I would get irritated and often counseled students with regards to this problem. Until I realized that students could have developed this method to buy into my class time so I applied the technique of ignoring these swears in the class and continued teaching. In two weeks' time I noticed that this behavior began to reduce and students knew that despite all the swearing the class would continue as planned.

Respondent 25

One of the things I appreciated was the recognition of special children in school and helping them to learn. These children have been neglected for having learning problem for a long time. It was good to see that teachers and the principal were taking out time to help them overcome these problems. I saw that giving them attention has made them keen to study.

Respondent 26

My experience with my university lecturer was quite a memorable one because with all my ready made plans and expectations for the lesson, it started with a few students coming in late to class after lunch which I had to address before the start of the lesson. This added more to the pressure I was feeling at the time. That incident swayed me a little but I quickly got back on track with the lesson.

Section Three: Pre-service teachers' concluding remarks*Respondent 27*

Just improved so much in teaching kids to think for themselves by asking productive questions. I don't think any university course could have given me what teaching practice gave me in these few months.

Respondent 28

Being a teacher means that we need to be a role model, have good leadership skills and knowledge and teacher who is friendly and kind.

Respondent 29

I would like to say that giving us a chance to do practicum at various schools before entering the real field of teaching was a worthwhile decision. This was because it enhanced our knowledge and skills with new ideas and teaching pedagogies on how to work with parents, our peers and students in a school. It also helped us explore the real environment of teaching in the sense that teaching was not only teachers major

responsibility in the school but also should be equipped with other various knowledge and skills in order to cater for students' other needs such as physical and spiritual needs.

Respondent 30

Personally, I experienced many great moments while teaching. These were days when I ended so happy and enthusiastic that I knew I had selected the right profession. On the other hand, I had days where I definitely questioned teaching as a career. These were days where the students seemed uninterested, too talkative, or even worse and nothing got accomplished.

Respondent 31

I had always envied myself as a confident educator. My first step in the school environment, I knew that I would excel because I was confident and thought I knew it all. But as my first week flew I found that it was different, it was challenging!

Respondent 32

Being organized and good planning are two things I learnt during this experience. Organization allows me to be an effective teacher. Throughout the whole process I found out that I am still learning. I will never know everything as there are always changes taking place. I have realized that I am a lifelong learner.

Respondent 33

When I first arrived for this practicum, I was not expecting to gain as much experience or inspiration than I had. For the first time I was able to see how the students respond towards me as a teacher and a playmate. I could tell with each and every one of them that they more than enjoyed their time with me. Even with the smallest facial expressions and body language, it was easy to see that they were enjoying every minute of the day.

Respondent 34

One of the important things that I learnt during my teaching practice is that lesson preparation plays a crucial role in the success of a lesson. If a lesson is prepared well, then the likelihood of having a great lesson increases. The opposite is true if one fails to make adequate preparation for a lesson. I realized that students are quite smart in a sense that some of them are able to make out if a teacher goes into the class prepared or not. I have seen that when the teacher is not prepared, class disturbances become a common occurrence where students are not focused and end up misbehaving.

Respondent 35

From the practicum that conducted, invaluable lessons have been learnt with regards to my role as a teacher. I now see that lesson planning is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Without planning, one becomes susceptible to the taunts of students. They also lose their credibility in the eyes of the students they teach. I learnt therefore that relationships between teacher and students affect how teaching and learning occurs in the classroom. I found that good judgment must be used during lesson delivery to ensure that any change in the lesson plan is actioned. I also see that by taking time to reflect on my experiences, learning from my weaknesses and thinking of ways to improve in future lessons is a very important tool in teaching and learning.

Summary

There has never been a “one-size fits all” solution to the issues and dilemmas of the pre-service teachers, but it is important to record and interpret their voices and different responses. Such raw subjective data provides the opportunity for positive as well as negative outcomes to be explicated for their meaning and significance. They provide opportunity to prepare for and practice what to do in the face of the unexpected, thus, completing the possible consequences of the responses. Hence, the anecdotes of the pre-service teachers’ teaching experiences have been recorded in this paper in its raw form. The reader finds journeys of triumph and fear, of discovery, of learning and ‘unlearning’. The old myths of classroom teaching have surely been demythologized in different ways by each individual. These journal entries, if interpreted rigorously in the proper context, may enable the trainees to face challenges and seek solutions to the challenges they encountered ranging from interpersonal to pedagogical issues.

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