

Professional Development of Pre-service Teachers: The Case of Practicum Experience

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Abstract

This paper focuses on pre-service teachers' professional development during teaching practice. The cohort studied comprised participants in their final year Bachelors degree programme undertaking the Graduate Certificate in Education at a university in Fiji. Results indicate that overall, pre-service teachers were satisfied with the practicum experience, and that the practicum experience contributed well towards their professional preparation for work expected of them in Fiji's secondary schools.

Introduction

Teachers comprise the most critical input into the education systems globally. This contribution - teachers as a factor of production - is even more significant in small developing states; in these countries, educators have a limited supply of educational resources to draw on, and work in isolated and social problem infected areas. Teachers' ability to meet the complex and challenging demands of work successfully depends on their professional preparation. An integration of both the theoretical and practical components of the teacher education programmes is decisively formative in the development of good quality teachers (Yost, Semner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). For small island states of the Pacific, the need for good quality teachers has been highlighted by various researchers, policy makers and commentators of education over many decades (Hindson, 1995; Stewart, 1975; Chandra, 2000; OECD, 1994; UNESCO, 2007). The UNESCO discourse of quality stresses the importance of

an appropriate teaching programme that enhances professional learning of future teachers. The concern in this paper, then, is to explore the practical component of the teacher education programme at one university in Fiji, and its impact on pre-service teachers' professional preparation.

The Practicum in Teacher Preparation

With the current pace of educational reforms and the unchecked rise in stakeholder expectations, the work of teachers has become increasingly complex and demanding (OECD, 2006; Ramsay, 2000). In Fiji the introduction of and greater reliance on internal assessment, school development planning, performance management systems and other initiatives is putting a lot of pressure on teachers. Teachers are now routinely called upon to do more with less, especially with less support coming from the principal stakeholder, the government (Jingam, 2012). The new and changing demands on teachers necessitate better quality of the teachers in schools. These changes require teacher education institutions to revisit their teacher education programmes continually, in order to address gaps in the preparation of teachers to cope with various work demands they are likely to encounter in school settings. This is essential because the quality of the teacher education programmes to a large extent determines the ability of the beginning teachers to cope with these demands.

Literature suggests that a reflective professional model of teacher education programmes would encourage reflective practice and help teachers continue to improve their performance at work (Schon, 1987; Tickle, 1994; Yost, Senter & Fortenza-Bailey, 2000). The application of the rubrics of action research, such as critical reflection, can enable student teachers to bring about ongoing improvements in their learning and professional work at school (French, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994). In this regard, both the theoretical and the practical components of teacher education programmes would better prepare teachers to meet the challenges and responsibilities of work expected of them in schools. Also, it will prepare teachers to inquire and reflect on their daily practices and continue to improve their performances in different areas of school work. This will enable teachers to take more responsibility for their own learning in order to become better classroom practitioners. In the process of becoming a teacher, many hold that the value of practi-

cum experience superseded the theoretical component in teachers' professional learning for the work in schools (Arends, 2009; Cairns, Almeida, & Viera, 2012; Ewelein, Korthagen, & Brekelmans, 2008; Oosterheart & Vermunt, 2003; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). To this extent at least, this calls for best quality practicum experience at all times to enable future teachers' success rather than them struggling in their work settings.

Dissatisfaction with the way teachers are prepared for future work and learning have been expressed consistently. Campbell, for example, states that teacher education programs 'need to do a better job in preparing teachers for the reality of the classroom and the school' (1992: 41). Only during the field-experience do the trainees come to know better about the ground realities of their future workplaces. Also, they are given the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills learned in various courses taught. These experiences help trainees to think of ways to cope best with the challenges and demands they are likely to face in schools. In light of this, in some contexts, such as Britain, 80 per cent of teachers' professional preparation takes place in school settings (McNamara, 1992). In fact some teacher education programmes in Britain are fully delivered in schools (Gilroy, 1992). This is a clear indication of the value accorded to practical experience in schools rather than in the on-campus taught courses. The school-based teacher education programmes appear to have a promising potential for teacher preparation (Hagger & McIntyre, 2006).

Gilroy (1992) proposes that the move to school-based learning was also political – as it aimed to drive teacher education away from universities. Since teaching staff in the universities tend to devote more time on activities such as publications and research which form the bases of their promotions, tenures and increments, they tend to neglect or undertake minimum student supervision (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). Without taking the practicum supervision as part of their core function seriously, student teachers' professional preparation could be adversely affected. This could be a contributing factor towards the move to school-based teacher education programmes in some jurisdictions such as Britain. Teacher educators need to nurture and support students as much as possible during practicums in order to improve their agency beliefs such as, personal resources and characteristics, didactic competence and interpersonal competence (Malmberg & Hagger, 2007). Thus heavy involvement of university teaching staff in teaching practice supervision could enhance

student learning and strengthen school-university partnership.

Despite the reforms in teacher education, hands-on real-world experience is vital for teacher development. A response from a student doing practical experience in a school highlights the significance of practicum experience in professional preparation: 'Student teaching experience alone is sufficient. Hands-on experience is important. Courses such as, philosophy, principles, etc. are no use' (Su, 1992: 242). If this is so, then this terse assertion would warrant consideration of better planning and implementation of school practicums for the long-term benefit of the teaching profession.

However, several studies illustrate disturbing findings related to school practicums (Lingan, 2002; Queensland Education, 2000; Turney et al., 1985, 1982). Some highlighted the negative impacts of practicum in areas such as supervision, which had been found to often being irregular and sparse, with supervisors rushing through assessments and not providing adequate advice and guidance to the trainees (Beck & Kosnik, 2000; Turney et al., 1985, 1982). Lack of feedback from supervisors may leave the students in a state of ambivalence and could hinder their development during the practicum experience.

Evidences also show that the work of associate teachers, provided they are well selected and their work requirements are well clarified, could make a positive difference in pre-service teachers' learning experiences (Beck & Kosnik, 2000). Better prepared associate teachers need to be assigned to student teachers during practicum experience. Associate teachers and university supervisors 'are significant others' who contribute towards the professional preparation of student teachers (Britzman, 2003). Since the associate teachers spend considerable time with student teachers, they can contribute more towards their learning (Ball, 2000; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2002).

A Queensland study showed that the beginning teachers found the amount of time allocated to practicum was too little, resulting in a lack of positive contribution towards their professional preparation (Queensland Education, 2000). In order for the trainees to have adequate exposure to teachers' areas of work, school practicum needs to be of sufficient duration. With regard to segments of practicum, Turney et al. point out that they are 'narrow in scope, lacking in purpose, haphazard in organization ... too generalized, repetitive and differentiated', and may cause negative effects in trainees' preparation for school work (1985: 6-7). Lingam (2002) conducted a study

with the trainees at the then Lautoka Teachers College (LTC) in Fiji, which showed that time devoted to practicum was too short. Furthermore, the findings highlighted two other significant shortcomings: the paucity of resources for teaching and learning, and the need for urgent attention to the question of feedback from lecturers. A more recent study on teaching practice conducted in Malawi found similarly that student teachers had varied experiences, some positive and others negative (Mitka, 2008). One of the negative experiences was the shortage of material resources, which impinged adversely on their work in schools.

According to Hopkins (1985) certain factors appear to affect the quality of the practicum experience. These factors classify into three major groups: environmental, operational and structural (Hopkins, 1985).

The environmental category is associated with the milieu in which the trainees operate. For example, the support given by teachers of host schools, peer support, demands of work and the reality of classroom life are some of the variables in this category. The 'operational category' refers to those variables emanating from supervisors from teacher education institutions, such as the quality and quantity of supervision, the quality of feedback, and the contact between supervisor and student teachers. The 'structural category' refers to those variables that are the result of negotiations between host schools and teacher education institutions, such as teacher education liaison with schools and sequencing of practical experience.

Without favourable environmental, operational, and structural variables, the practicum experience is unlikely to contribute positively towards trainees' professional preparation for work in schools. For example, the process of supervision, developing and applying effective teaching skills, and socialisation can be adversely affected and contribute towards the type of teachers they become in future.

A Study of Experiences with the Practicum Component

A study designed and carried out specifically to explore trainees' experiences of the practicum component of a pre-service teacher education programme in Fiji was conducted. The following research question was examined: What are the pre-service teacher trainees' perceptions of their recently completed practical component of the secondary teacher education programme?

It is important to note that in the Fiji context as well as in other small island developing states of the Pacific, there is currently a dearth of research studies on varying issues in education in general and teacher education in particular (Crossley, 2010; Sanga, 2012). With reference to the role of teaching practice in teacher education programmes, only one study has thus far been conducted in the local context, that by Lingam (2002) which focused on pre-service primary teachers. Otherwise, local research literature is limited on all dimensions of teaching practice. The significance of the present study, thus, lies in its potential to supply relevant information and valuable insights into the practical component of the pre-service secondary teacher education programme in the local and similar contexts beyond. Informing the teacher education provider of the strengths and weaknesses of the practicum experience should in itself prove useful and helpful. The findings may propel the provider to look for ways to organize the practical component better, so that the trainees are better prepared to cope with the ever changing demands of work in schools. Such strategies might include, for instance, drafting of appropriate policies relating to teaching practice, thereby strengthening the secondary teacher education programmes.

In addition, the findings of this study may act as a catalyst for further research by others on exploring varying issues relating to pre-service teacher preparation for the workplace, especially in developing contexts such as the micro-states of the Pacific. The present study would begin to build the stock in the almost non-existent literature in many different dimensions of education.

The context of the study is a university in Fiji which since its inception, has been offering teacher education programmes to cater for the region's demand for secondary teachers. In the early part of the 21st century two further teacher education programmes, the primary and the early childhood teacher education programmes, were introduced (Lingam, 2010). At the time of this study, the university was undertaking a mammoth task of reviewing all its academic programmes, including the teacher education programmes, to ensure graduates leave the university with suitable attributes that would enhance their opportunities for employment.

At the university, the pre-service secondary teachers complete two blocks of teaching practice during the four-year programme, one in their third year, which is of three weeks duration, and one in the final year, which is an extended one of 14 weeks duration.

Matters of Method

A survey questionnaire was employed to gather data needed for the study. Since the sample size was large, a survey was adjudged the best means of gathering data (Gay, 1992; Neuman, 2006). The questionnaire used was similar to the one the author had previously developed and employed with the pre-service teachers at what was then the Lautoka Teachers College, to determine their perceptions of the practicum component of the programme (Lingam, 2002).

The questionnaire was prepared on the basis of a synthesis of the literature reviewed. Selection and construction of questions also took account of the researcher's knowledge of the teaching profession on the basis of his years of service as a classroom teacher and later as a teacher educator in tertiary institutions in Fiji. These work experiences at the school and teacher education institution levels provided him with broad and deep knowledge about teachers and teaching as well as enabling his dispassionate identification of issues that warrant investigation.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part I consisted of closed questions requiring the pre-service teachers to rate each of 17 factors related to the practical component on a five-point Likert scale. This helped identify the most and least common factors influencing the pre-service teachers' practicum experience in schools. Part II contained open-ended questions that gave opportunities for the pre-service teachers to express their views on the factors that most positively and negatively impacted their practicum experiences (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993). The return rate for the completed questionnaires was 67% (40 of the total pre-service teacher population of 60 on school practicum in the first semester of 2012).

Since this is the first study on the practical component conducted at the institution, targeting a specific group using a purposive sampling technique seemed appropriate (see Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 2009), in this case the pre-service secondary teachers who completed their final practicum component of their programme. The sample was recruited through an invitation extended to these teachers via Moodle to participate in the study. As noted, 40 of the total of 60 who were invited actually took part in the study.

The questionnaires were administered in June 2012, to the pre-service teachers who had agreed to participate. A cover letter in-

cluded with the questionnaires informed the participants about the purpose of the research and of their rights and involvement, before confirming their voluntary participation with the study. Confidentiality of the details of the participants was ensured.

Results

The quantitative data was analysed using a common statistical mean (Mehtrens & Lehmann, 1991). For the qualitative responses, an interpretive-descriptive method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was used to determine the positive and negative factors relating to the school practicum. The study is exploratory and reliant on people's words and meanings (cf. Belenky, 1992, cited in Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The method is based mainly on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) in grounded theory. In interpretive-descriptive research the approach to data collection and analysis is inductive. In addition, relevant quotations from the open-ended question responses are presented as they give the most vibrant demonstration of the pre-service teachers' perceptions of their practicum experience. In choosing to do this, the researcher adopted Ruddock's suggestion that 'some statements carry a rich density of meaning in a few words' (1993:19).

Table 1 provides a summary of the results for the quantitative data. The high mean scores (over 3) indicate a view that the teaching practices were more frequently present and in turn a high level of satisfaction for those areas by the pre-service teachers. On the other hand, low mean scores (under 3) reflect a perception that the practices occur less frequently and as such pre-service teachers were less satisfied.

Positive Influences

Table 1 shows that across a total of 17 factors, trainee teachers rated ten positively and seven negatively. Assistance from associate teachers was rated highly. Of the negative factors, the unavailability of resources for teaching and learning and studying on-campus courses via print mode were rated as the least helpful factors.

Always guided me in my work and was there whenever I needed her...

My associate teacher was very helpful to me and I learned a lot about how to conduct classes. It made my teaching experience very enjoyable...

Associate teacher's positive comments and constructive feedback helped me a lot during the practicum...

My associate teacher provided the most assistance during the practicum. Every class I taught, my associate teacher gave me feedback on my lesson plan and teaching. [and] taught me how to write the behavioural objectives and strategies to use for effective teaching.

My associate teacher was a more experienced teacher and had been giving me positive comments which motivated me in what I prepared and did for my students.

... was very helpful with providing guidelines on what to teach and how to make good lesson plans ... also carried out numerous assessments of my teaching ... helped me a lot.

... guided me throughout the practicum into becoming a better teacher every day and this was very encouraging.

Table 1: Factors Affecting Practicum Experiences

Positive Factors	Group Mean (N = 40)
Assistance from the associate teacher	4.2
Duration of practice teaching	4.1
Practice Teaching Handbook	4.0
Opportunities for lesson observation	4.0
Sharing ideas with other trainees	4.0
The school environment	3.7
Assistance and support from other teachers in the school	3.4
Children's response to my work	3.4
Help/guidance given by tutors during on-campus classes	3.2
Assistance gained from reading texts about teaching	3.1
Negative Factors	
Feedback from lecturers after assessment	2.8
Time for reflection	2.8
Time allocated for preparation	2.8
Briefing sessions conducted at the campus	2.1
Familiarization visit to the school	2.1
Studying courses in print mode	2.0
Availability of resources for teaching and learning	2.0

*Note: A group mean above 3.0 is regarded as positive and below 3.0 as negative.

Participants considered the allocated time for the practicum as a positive factor. The following are some of the comments illustrating this:

The time for the practicum was enough. We had two weeks in segment one and then 14 weeks now. This long duration helps us know more about work in schools.

The time allocated for the practicum is enough to experience and learn about the work we are going to do in future.

Time was sufficient . . . We were there in the school for 14 weeks.

Another area worth mentioning is the Practice Teaching Handbook, which the trainees felt contributed positively towards their professional learning. For example:

The handbook provided guidance for me to carry out my . . . practicum in terms of what I had to do.

The handbook was useful in guiding us to do all the work within 14 weeks . . . it had all the requirements listed.

The trainees considered opportunities for lesson observation as contributing positively towards their learning. Some of the typical comments were:

... They made us feel free to come and observe their lessons . . .

... We had ample opportunities to observe lessons of our choice . . .

... Teachers were happy to have us to observe their lessons.

On the school environment typical comments were:

... I found the school environment conducive for the practicum . . .

... I enjoyed my practicum and this school should be used in future also for the trainees' benefit.

... The school . . . was neat and clean and I liked going and doing my practicum there every day.

Also, the pre-service teachers reported that they found sharing ideas with their peers impacting positively (4) on their professional preparation:

... My weakness and strength, I was able to share and evaluate with my fellow colleagues.

... While making lesson plans, we trainees sit together and discuss our lesson plans and objectives.

The other most positive influence highlighted by the pre-service teachers, was assistance and support from other teachers in the school.

... They were very friendly and created a homely environment in the school . . .

... They were all helpful and provided a lot of assistance.

Added to all these, the trainees found children's response to their work as encouraging to them in terms of their professional preparation. For example:

... School children's response made me feel happy about my work.

... Many school children were from my village and in the afternoons when we meet they provide me with feedback on my lessons.

Negative Influences

The perceptions of negative influences during the practicum included limited availability of resources for teaching and learning, insufficient feedback from lecturers, and the requirement for simultaneously studying an on-campus course via print mode.

The strongest negative factor was the unavailability of resources for teaching and learning. The following are some of the comments made:

... Teaching and learning resources were limited. No computers and workspace for making charts.

... There were not enough textbooks and resources in the school to prepare good lessons.

... Lack of printing resources and the requirement is to have typed materials in the folder . . . we do not get any allowances to do typing.

... resources for teaching and learning is quite expensive and we do not have enough money to have things printed.

... I had to buy teaching aid such as charts and markers . . . photocopying notes costs 10 cents a page and we do not have enough money for all these.

... We spend a lot of money to photocopy . . . schools do not allow trainees to photocopy in school.

... The school does not have computers to help in our work.

Equally unhelpful was studying formal courses while doing the practicum. Comments on this aspect included:

- ... *We were already busy with our practicum and then we had to overload by doing the ED359 Educational Research course.*
- ... *This can affect our practicum.*
- ... *Too much work as I was doing another course while doing the practicum.*
- ... *Practicum is demanding and we should devote all our time on it and not on other courses.*

Another negatively rated item was the briefing sessions at the campus prior to the practicum proper. Comments on this included:

- ... *There was no proper briefing sessions conducted at the campus. I think we need briefing sessions to know about the expectations.*
- ... *The School of Education should organize workshops to constantly guide us in our preparation for practicum.*

Another noteworthy factor negatively affecting trainee development, or lack of these, was feedback from the University lecturers. Some examples of this dissatisfaction are:

- ... *There was no feedback from the lecturer who assessed my teaching. I do not know my performance.*
- ... *The lecturers did not provide a lot of feedback ... short of time.*
- ... *The lecturer rushed in providing feedback and left for another school.*

On the basis of suggestions made by Hopkins (1985), the factors are grouped under three broad categories, as shown in Table 2. Data demonstrates that the environmental factors were felt to be the most favourable for the practicum, ahead of the structural and operational factors. There is a concordance of both quantitative and qualitative data on the positive impact of environmental factors on pre-service teachers' practicum experience.

On the other hand, one structural factor featured negatively while two featured positively. A strategy to improve the structural factors would be to support pre-service teachers in their professional preparation by encouraging critical reflection during on-campus courses, as suggested by a number of experts (Campbell, 1992); French, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994; Lingam, 2012; Schon, 1987).

Table 2: Categories of factors influencing practical experience

Category	Mean
STRUCTURAL	
Positive factors	
Help and guidance given by tutors during on-campus classes	3.2
Assistance gained from reading texts about learning and teaching	3.1
Negative factors	
Time for reflection	2.8
ENVIRONMENTAL	
Positive factors	
Assistance from the associate teachers	4.2
Sharing ideas with other trainees	4.0
Opportunities for lesson observation	4.0
The school environment	3.7
Assistance and support from other teachers in the school	3.4
Children's response to my work	3.4
Negative factors	
Nil	
OPERATIONAL	
Positive factors	
Duration of practice teaching	4.1
Practice Teaching Handbook	4.0
Negative factors	
Time allocated for preparation	2.8
Feedback from lecturers after assessment	2.8
Briefing sessions conducted at the campus	2.1
Familiarization visit to the school	2.1
Studying courses in print mode	2.0
Availability of resources for teaching and learning	2.0

Even a module on action research would help develop skills needed for critical reflection. At the same time, this would help trainees realize that critical reflection should be ongoing in a teacher's world of work. Also, more assistance needs to be provided to trainees during the taught courses so that they can connect theory with the work expected of them in schools. Lecturers need to emphasize the connections between the theoretical component of the

programme and the work expected of teachers in schools. Making constructive links between the taught courses and teachers' world of work will help better prepare pre-service teachers for the practicum. This will bring theory and practice closer together, as highlighted by Campbell (1992) and Yost, Senner & Forlenza-Bailey (2000). In addition, provision of more textbooks as supplementary reading materials relating to teaching and teachers' work would further contribute towards the trainees' professional learning and development.

Of significance is that six operational factors were rated negatively. Except for two factors (the duration of practice teaching, and impact on the pre-service teachers in their professional preparation. They rated the duration of the practicum positively. When time is sufficient for hands-on experience, trainees get an exposure to a wide range of work expected of teachers in schools (McNamara, 1992). However, in other studies, such as the Queensland Education (2000) and the LTC study in Fiji (Lingam, 2002), the beginning teachers found the allocated time insufficient. Thus the finding in the present study confirms that the trainees consider the extended time of 14 weeks allocated for the practicum as useful in their preparation.

Pre-service teachers were emphatic in their feeling that they did not receive proper and constructive feedback from the lecturers after assessments. The finding here is consistent with findings of the study conducted by Turney and his colleagues (1985, 1982). Feedback is vital to the success of the practicum experience. This factor is totally within the control of the teacher training institution. This is a major weakness of the university. This finding also has significant implications on the matter of the University quality assurance processes, which for the teaching practicum component at least, has failed. This research did not investigate the reasons for the lecturers not doing what is necessary to provide effective practicum.¹

For the purpose of producing quality teachers, it is crucial for the university staff to spend as much time as possible with the trainees in the field in order to guide them as well as provide them with constructive written and oral feedback (Britzman, 2003; Beck & Kosnik, 2002).

¹ Factors may include large class sizes assigned to each of the lecturers, competing time demands, for example, their on-campus teaching commitments, or lack of departmental leadership in this regard.

The lack of teaching and learning resources affected trainees the most in their preparation for work in schools. This is consistent with the findings from other developing country jurisdictions, like Malawi (Mfika, 2008). It is vital that pre-service teachers be supported with suitable teaching and learning resources to enhance their professional work and learning. Curriculum materials such as textbooks and prescriptions should be readily available to the trainees to enable them to prepare well for the lessons. The establishment of a curriculum resource centre at the campus with all the necessary resources for learning and teaching, together with ICT facilities, would be an appropriate goal, promising manifold benefits.

On the basis of data obtained from the sample of pre-service teachers, it becomes abundantly clear that they felt that a number of factors affect their professional preparation negatively. Work to improve the structural and operational areas of the practical component needs to increase significantly. Otherwise, prospective teachers may not benefit much from the practicum, which will have adverse flow-on effects on their post graduation performances. Both the major categories need to be strengthened. The provider of teacher education should not be complacent with the environmental factors, and always seek to strengthen them in whatever way possible to ensure that they continue to make a positive difference in the process of pre-service teachers' learning to become teachers. The most positive rating was the assistance from the associate teachers, which can be further improved with the fostering of a pool of well qualified, experienced and willing teachers desirous of contributing to the building of the capacities of others in the profession.

Conclusion

While many factors contribute or impede pre-service teachers' preparation for work in schools, a well conceived practicum component is essential in maximizing trainees' learning. Irrespective of adequate theoretical preparation, the success of prospective teachers cannot be guaranteed unless and until they undergo top quality practical experience in schools. In so doing, the ability of prospective teachers to carry out the manifold demands of work can be greatly enhanced, to the benefit of the learning experience of the nation's children. Thus teacher education institutions need to undertake the school practicum component of the teacher preparation programme more authentically to ensure trainee teachers find field-based ex-

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