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LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE: ESL STUDENT TEACHERS' REFLECTION DURING PRACTICUM THROUGH REFLECTIVE JOURNALS

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Abstract

Reflection is a prospective alternative in exploring student teachers' thinking during practicum. The data gained from student teachers' reflection are significant in informing teacher education programs on how to equip pre-service teachers to become quality teachers. It is also crucial in addressing issues and conflicts highlighted by student teachers when they interact with the real context. However, student teachers have to be guided and coached on how to reflect critically as without coaching and guidance, the reflection would demonstrate practical and technical level of thinking and little critical level of reflection will be generated. This study is conducted with 6 student teachers who were in semester seven of their Bachelor in Education with honours Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program. The student teachers were asked to write reflective journal entries throughout the 14 weeks of their teaching practicum experience. The aim of the study is to identify the focus of the student teachers' reflection and the challenges faced by them during practicum. Data were gathered using the reflective journal entries and semi-structured interviews with all the participants. The data were analysed according to emerging themes and coded accordingly. The findings indicated that the student teachers focus on three main themes in their reflections which are managing learning, pedagogy and teacher attributes. While the challenges highlighted were difficulty in socializing with members of the institution, lack of professional support and lack pedagogical skill.

Keywords: Reflective journal, reflective thinking, student teacher, practicum, journals.

INTRODUCTION

Practicum has been described as a crucial component in teacher education as the experience has been reported to have an impact on student teachers' personal and professional development and it supports the development of quality beginning teacher (Crookes, 2003; Darling & Hammond, 2006; Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2014; Wong, Rosnidar & Syakirah, 2015). Practicum refers to the supervised teaching experience student teachers gathered in the real context of teaching and learning to support their entry into the teaching profession. Practicum is regarded as the peak of the teacher education program (Cameron & Wilson, 1993; Barry & King, 2002; Darling & Hammond, 2006) as it provides the platform for student teachers to utilize their knowledge and skills about teaching and learning hence bridging theory and practice in the real context (Qazi, Rawat & Thomas, 2012; Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2014; Aizan, *et al.*, 2014; Wong, Rosnidar & Syakirah, 2015).

Student teachers consider practicum as crucial in providing valuable experiences of teaching in the real context. Practicum allows the student teachers to reflect on their beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about teaching and learning and put them in practice (Starkey & Rawlins, 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2014; Aizan, *et al.*, 2014; Wong, Rosnidar & Syakirah, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reflection is considered as one of the key elements in developing quality thinking teachers who reflect on their own teaching philosophy and focus on their pedagogical reasoning skills (Rieger, Radcliffe & Doepker, 2013; Zhu & Zhang, 2014; Aizan, *et al.*, 2014; Wong, Rosnidar & Syakirah, 2015). Reflection in teacher education also has been reported as a practice that promotes student teachers' motivation to improve in their teaching ability and their own profession accountability (Adibah Ismail *et al.*, 2002; Hanipah, 2003; Nor Hasniza, Mohammad Yusof & Johari; 2008).

Reflection is a concept introduced by Dewey and he defined reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supported form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it tends" (1933, p. 7). He further illustrated that reflective thought "transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious" (1933, p. 195). Dewey (1933) mentioned that two main components are involved in reflective thinking which is the process and the content.

Another influential work in reflective thinking is Van Manen's (1977) framework that aimed to assist teachers and educators in reflecting on their past decisions and actions to inform their future interactions in the classroom. Van Manen (1977) proposed a framework that categorized reflective writing into three hierarchical categories; technical reflection, practical reflection and critical reflection.

Table 1. Van Manen's (1977) Levels of Reflectivity.

<i>Level of Reflection</i>	<i>Features</i>
Technical	The technical level refers to reflections on the methods and strategies employed in teaching. Teachers analyzed the success and failure of the instructional decisions made.
Practical	At the practical level, reflections are on the underlying assumptions made on teaching and learning and the impacts of the decisions on the students learning experience in the classroom.
Critical	Reflections at the critical level consider moral, social and ethical factors that might have an impact on the students' learning experience.

Source: Van Manen (1977)

Reflection in teacher education relates to teachers' thinking or cognition about their actions and decisions and their cognition about teaching and learning which is deeply influenced by their beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and experience (Woods, 1996; Borg, 2011).

The Higher Education Sector, Ministry of Education Malaysia has highlighted the importance of bridging theory and practice in teacher education programs (Hanipah, 2003). Reflective practice is one of the key elements that has been reported to promote critical evaluation that makes student teachers become more active in reflecting on their behaviour, pedagogical decisions and connecting the theories underpinning their decisions (Adibah Ismail, *et al.*, 2002; Hanipah, 2003; Nor Hasniza, Mohammad Yusof & Johari; 2008, Zhu & Zhang, 2014; Aizan, *et al.*, 2014). Reflective practice also promotes self-improvement process that develops student teachers teaching quality (Nor Hasniza, Mohammad Yusof & Johari; 2008; Aizan, *et al.*, 2014). It is also a key exercise that enables exploration of emerging thoughts, deeply held beliefs, changes in beliefs and perceptions, self-awareness of beliefs and principles and show converging patterns and trends (Woods, 1996; Collier, 1999; Kabilan, 2007; Borg, 2011, Intan Safinas, 2013; Noriah, 2014).

Realizing the importance of reflective practice in professional development of pre-service teachers, all teacher education institutions in Malaysia have put an emphasis on the practice of reflection particularly during practicum. Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) for instance made it a requirement for all student teachers to provide their self-reflection of their teaching after each lesson conducted. The aim of the self-reflection section is to get the student teachers to think about their lessons and how they can improve the lesson to further develop the effectiveness of their teaching.

Several studies however have reported that student teachers reflect at superficial level during their reflective practice (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Collier, 1999; Bean & Stevens, 2002). Therefore, teacher education institutions are encouraged to emphasize on developing trainees reflective skills. Trainees need to be taught on how to write constructive reflection that get them to explore their thoughts, feelings, behaviour, actions and underlying beliefs and assumptions (Yinger & Clark, 1981; Aizan, *et al.*, 2014; Wong, Rosnidar & Syakirah, 2015).

To ensure the reflections done by the student teachers in this study are structured, a four step critical reflection process is used based on the work of York-Barr, *et al.* (2006). The reflection process is presented in the following Figure 1.

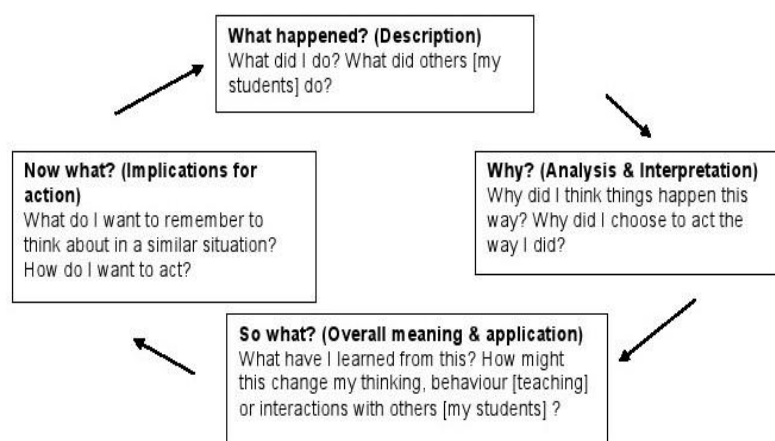


Figure 1. York-Barr, Sommers, Ghre and Montie's 4-Step Reflection Process Framework (2006).

The Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the focuses of student teachers' reflection during practicum?
2. What are the challenges faced by the student teachers?

METHOD

A number of 6 student teachers participated in the study. The students were in semester 7 of their undergraduate study of Teaching English as a Second Language. The student teachers were asked to write a reflective journal entry every week throughout the 16 weeks of their practical teaching.

A number of 63 reflective journal entries (RJE) were collected and analyzed. Interviews were also conducted with the student teachers to gather their retrospective comments on the experiences described in their RJE.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study aimed to explore the focus of students' reflection during practicum. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the reflection is based on individual's experience, beliefs, knowledge, assumptions and it is heavily influenced by the context (Woods, 1996; Borko & Putman, 1996; Borg, 2011, Intan Safinas, 2013, Noriah, 2014). Three main themes emerged from the analysis of the reflective journals which are managing the learning environment, pedagogy and teacher attributes.

The first theme, managing the learning environment, relates to the trainees' specific context and it is one of the most dominant themes in this study. It is a generic theme highlighted by all of the participants at the beginning of their practicum. The subthemes are familiarizing with the school structure and the community, building relationship with the students, teacher and staff and understanding the learning context, the needs and preferences of the students.

Pedagogy is the second theme that emerged and being reported by all of the participants. The theme centres around pedagogical reasoning and actions based on the interaction with the context and what worked and did not work in the context. Understanding what the students know and how

they learn and how these informed the selected instructional strategies is a generic subtheme reported by all the participants. The reflection showed evidence of evaluation, assessment and awareness and understanding of teaching among the participants (Taggart, 1988; Isikoglu, 2007; Starkey, 2012)

The third theme, teacher attributes concerned development of qualities and dispositions of a teacher, understanding and connecting to the role as a teacher and relating to individual beliefs, assumptions and views about being an English language teacher. The participants' exposure to the real context has given them the opportunity to explore their own identity and notions as a teacher. They learn to resume their position of authority and their feeling of being accountable for students' learning increased as their interaction with the context grew.

These findings support previous studies on pre-service teacher reflection during practicum that indicate student teachers' focus on managing their classes, improving their teaching, understanding the context and how to teach, stimulating their awareness of their beliefs, assumptions and values about teaching and learning (Isikoglu, 2007; Subramaniam, 2012; Starkey, 2012). The data also provides evidence that the student teachers converge in their focus of reflection during practicum hence showing their concern as collective issues that need to be addressed by teacher training institutions.

The three challenges highlighted by the student teachers which are the process of socializing with the school community, lack of professional support and pedagogical skill can have huge impacts on the student teachers' professional development. The data echoed data from past studies on the concerns and conflicts faced by student teachers during practicum (Kyriacou & Stephen, 1999; Ong *et al.*, 2004; Tan, 2008; Goh & Matthew, 2011). The trainees clearly need coaching and guidance in enhancing learning and make their experience meaningful.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified significant insights on the focus of professional learning among pre-service teachers during practicum. Clearly, the student teachers share collective focus during their practicum particularly at the beginning of practicum experience. The insights form a significant basis to revise the content of teacher education program and the practicum structure to address student teachers preparation for practicum. School orientation is clearly crucial in preparing the pre-service teachers prior to placing them in the real teaching and learning context. The institution needs to revise the structure of the program and include school orientation, teacher assistantship and internship to provide the trainees with opportunities to develop interpersonal skills and familiarity with context. They will then be better prepared for their practicum.

Mentor teachers have to be trained and coached to provide more constructive feedback and structured mentoring practice on the student teachers. Student teachers require strengthening in skills and strategies to manage the classroom and diverse learners.

Issues and conflicts experienced by pre-service teachers during practicum need to be addressed with more partnerships with schools that will enable selection of good mentor teachers and more opportunities for school exposure and teacher assistantship. The student teachers will have the platform to interact with the real context and learn from the engagement through observation and experience.

In addition, student teachers need to be exposed to reflective thinking. They need to be guided and coached on how to reflect critically and they need to be equipped with critical reflective skills to promote higher level reflection. Proper scaffolding has to be injected in assisting the student teachers to reach a higher level of reflection. Reflective journals can be a good practice to be employed in some of the courses during teacher training to promote reflective thinking from technical and practical level to critical reflection level. The higher level the students achieve in their reflective thinking, the more they develop their understanding of teaching and learning from the surface level of reflection to a more integrated analysis and understanding of teaching, learning and teacher attributes.

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