

Practicum Component: Preparation of teachers for the real world of work

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In an attempt to investigate the impact of practice teaching, this study identified factors that contribute positively and negatively to the professional preparation of beginning teachers. Data by means of a questionnaire survey were collected from 106 beginning teachers who were asked to reflect on the field-based experiences completed whilst on teacher training at Lautoka Teachers' College in Fiji. The analysis of the data shows that there are a number of factors having a negative impact on the professional preparation of teachers. The results of the study indicated the lacunae in the field-based experiences.

Introduction

The ability of teachers to meet the challenges and responsibilities of work is to a certain extent dependent on their professional preparation, i.e. the theoretical and practical components of their professional preparation. The former relate to the taught courses and the latter includes work carried out by the trainees in the school setting. It is the intent of this paper to focus on the practical component and to add some knowledge about this area of pre-service teacher education. It is part of a broader attempt to improve the professional preparation and training of future teachers to cope with the work expected of them in the field. First, some documentation from the literature associated with practice teaching is provided. The paper then discusses the perceptions of beginning teachers about the practice teaching sessions they completed whilst on training. Finally, the author offers some suggestions in the light of what the beginning teachers' experienced.

Literature

Irrespective of adequate theoretical preparation, the success of future teachers cannot be guaranteed unless and until they undergo quality practicum experience. Most writers on this subject (for example Hagger, Burn & McIntyre, 1995; Williams, 1994; McNamara, 1992; Katz, 1984) argue that the practicum component has far greater impact on the professional preparation and training of teachers than the theoretical study of teaching. McNamara (1992) reports that in the United Kingdom, 80 per cent of teachers' professional preparation now takes place in school settings. Field-based experience, therefore, is accorded a higher value than the on-campus taught courses, as it equips beginning teachers with survival strategies (Katz, 1984). In a study by Su (1992: 242) it was perceived by one respondent as all-sufficient: "Student teaching experience alone is sufficient. Hands-on experience is important. Courses such as philosophy, principles, etc. are no use".

During the practicum, trainee teachers get an opportunity to learn from experienced teachers and to apply knowledge and skills learned in the taught courses. In addition, they get exposure to the different areas of teachers' world of work. In essence, the trainees come to realise how best to cope with the challenges they will face in the field. Therefore, efforts need to be made by teacher education institutions during teacher preparation programmes to "continuously relate how theory informs practice and how practice informs theory in both the practicum and on-campus components" (Campbell, 1992: 35). By making connections with work required of teachers in the field, the ability of future teachers to undertake the demands of work can be enhanced.

Teacher education institutions need to pursue the practicum component authentically so that trainees perceive it as positively

impacting in their development as future teachers. Some writers on this subject have expressed dissatisfaction in the way teachers are prepared. Campbell (1992: 41), for example, states: "Teacher education programs need to do a better job in preparing teachers for the reality of the classroom and the school". Perhaps Campbell (1992) believes that teacher education institutions fail to connect adequately the pre-service program with the range of work and responsibilities expected of teachers in the field. Linking pre-service programs with the demands of work in the field is essential if a graduating teacher is to be considered effective in his/her future workplace.

In order for the trainees to have adequate exposure to the teachers' world of work, the field-based experience needs to be of sufficient duration. A recent Queensland study reported that beginning teachers found the amount of time devoted to practicum was too little and this impacted on their professional development (Queensland Education, 2000).

An extensive body of literature (for example, Turney et al. 1982; 1985) demonstrate disturbing findings related to practicum: supervision visits were often too irregular and few, and supervisors were often rushed, consequently not providing adequate advice and guidance to the trainees. With regard to blocks of practicum, Turney et al. (1985: 6-7) point out that they are "narrow in scope, lacking in purpose, haphazard in organization ... too generalized, repetitive and differentiated", and may cause effects "opposite to those intended".

According to Hopkins (1985) certain variables appear to affect the quality of the field-based experience. These variables could be classified into three major groups: structural, environmental and operational.

The structural category refers to those variables which are the result of negotiations between host schools and teacher education institutions, such as teacher education institution liaison with schools,

and sequencing of field-based experience. The environmental category is associated with the milieu in which the trainees operate. Support given by teachers of host schools, peer support, the demands of work and the reality of classroom life are some of the variables under 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 teacher. The major point to be derived from this review is that favourable structural, environmental and operational variables can enhance field-based experiences.

In the subsequent sections, I describe the study and discuss the preparation for practice teaching in a Fiji context.

The sample

The survey was conducted using a questionnaire to investigate the views of 106 teachers' about their practicum experience. These teachers had just started their teaching careers, having graduated from a primary teacher training college, Lautoka Teachers' College (LTC), the previous year. This institution provides the bulk of teachers needed for the nation's primary schools. They were asked to reflect on their practicum experiences whilst at LTC.

At this College, trainees undergo three segments of field-based experience, each of four weeks' duration over the two year pre-service programme. The first segment is home-based and the other two segments are college-based. Table 1 shows the timing of the practice teaching schedule.

In the case of home-based field-experience, the student teachers are given the opportunity to be attached to schools near their homes. In the college-based field experience the trainees are placed in schools allocated to them by the College. These schools are usually located in

places which are accessible both to the College lecturers for the purpose of supervision, and to the trainees who travel from the College.

Table 1: Segments of practice teaching

Year One: Semester One Nil	Semester Two Practice Teaching 1 Home-Based
Year Two: Semester Three: Practice Teaching 2 LTC-Based	Semester Four Practice Teaching 3 LTC-Based

Data Collection and Analysis

The questionnaire was designed on the basis of the review of literature and the author's experience of working in a teacher education institution. It listed 17 factors that relate to professional preparation for teaching practice.. The teachers were asked to rate these factors on a four-point scale (1 = most negative; 4 = most positive), according to how much they had contributed to their preparation. This provided the quantitative data. In addition, the teachers were required to choose and comment on three of the most positive and three of the most negative influences experienced during their practicum. This feedback formed part of the qualitative data.

The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using a common statistical mean. The items having means of 2.5 or more were categorised as positive, whereas items having means of lower than 2.5 were categorised as negative. Some quotations from the free response section are presented. They speak for themselves

about the teachers' perceptions of their practice teaching. As suggested by Ruddock (1993: 19) with reference to qualitative data, "some statements carry a rich density of meaning in a few words".

Results

Table 2: Results of questionnaire responses

Factors Seen as Positive	Group Mean N = 106
Practice Teaching Handbook	3.3
School children's response to my work	3.1
Familiarisation visit to the school	3.0
Sharing of ideas with other trainees	2.9
The school environment	2.9
Assistance and support from other teachers in the school	2.8
Assistance from the Associate Teacher	2.5
Factors Seen as Negative	
Opportunities for lesson observation	1.8
Assistance gained from reading texts about teaching	1.7
Help and guidance given by tutors during college classes	1.6
Briefing sessions conducted at the college	1.6
Time for reflection	1.3
Duration of practice teaching	1.3
The subject tasks allocated	1.2
Time allocation for preparation	1.2
Feedback from college tutors after assessment	1.0
Availability of resources for teaching/learning	1.0

The results show that out of a total of 17 factors, only seven were rated as positive and the remaining 10 factors were rated negatively by the teachers. Of the positive factors, information contained in the Practice Teaching Handbook was rated as very useful. This was followed by school children's responses to the teachers' work and then by their familiarisation visit to the school. As can be seen from Table 2, the least helpful factors were feedback from college tutors after assessment and availability of resources for teaching/learning.

With respect to their comments on positive factors associated with field-based experiences, the majority of the teachers highlighted assistance from the associate teachers as the most positive influence in their preparation. The Practice Teaching Handbook followed this. Some of the positive comments about these aspects are given below.

The associate teachers are indeed very helpful, always guide us throughout our practice teaching (and) also improve our weaknesses.

The associate teachers provided a lot of help as far as a teaching career is concerned. The Handbook provided us with all the information about what has to be done.

The third ranked positive area reported by the respondents was the familiarisation visit to the school. Some comments:

It made me ready for what was to come. It was important as we were able to familiarise ourselves with the school (before the practice teaching proper began).

Other aspects noted by the beginning teachers included assistance and support from other teachers in school and sharing of ideas with their

peers as contributing positively to their professional preparation.

Perceptions of negative influences during the practice teaching ranged widely. One of the factors negatively rated by the beginning teachers was the duration of practice teaching blocks. Another was the time allocated for lesson preparation. The following are some comments by the teachers:

The time was too short for practice teaching. As soon as we started to enjoy the lessons with the children, we had to come back to the College.

The time allocated for preparation is not enough. Lesson plans and teaching aids preparation require a lot of time.

The variables presented in Table 2 can be regrouped according to the broad categories advanced by Hopkins (1985). This is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Categories of Factors Influencing Practicum

Category	Group Mean
Structural	
Positive Variables	
NIL	
Negative Variables	
Assistance gained from reading texts about teaching	1.7
Help and guidance given by tutors during College classes	1.6
Briefing sessions conducted at the College	1.6
Time for reflection	1.3

Environmental	
Positive Variables	
Children's response to my work	3.1
Sharing of ideas with other trainees	2.9
The school environment	2.9
Assistance and support from other teachers in the school	2.8
Assistance from the associate teachers	2.5
Negative Variables	
Opportunities for lesson observation	1.8
Availability of resources for teaching and learning	1.0
Operational	
Positive Variables	
Practice Teaching Handbook	3.3
Familiarisation visit to the school	3.0
Negative Variables	
Duration of practice teaching	1.3
The subject tasks allocated	1.2
Time allocated for preparation	1.2
Feedback from college tutors after assessment	1.0
Availability of resources for teaching and learning	1.0
	N = 106
<i>Note: Group mean above 2.5 is regarded as positive and below 2.5 as negative.</i>	

Discussion of the Results

In terms of the three broad categories of factors that were identified in this study, the structural category did not receive any positive feedback from the beginning teachers. All the structural variables were considered by them as negatively impacting on their professional preparation. Therefore, it appears that some structural changes in the programme are necessary: more supplementary reading materials, more tutorial assistance, better briefing on what is expected of the trainees and more time for reflection.

In the environmental category, the teachers identified five factors as positively contributing to their preparation and two factors as adversely impacting on their preparation. The latter relate to opportunities afforded for lesson observation, and availability of materials for teaching/learning.

With regard to the operational factors, only two factors were considered positive and five as negative. These factors are associated with the duration of practice teaching; the time allocated for the trainees for lesson preparation OR to prepare themselves for the practicum????; the subject tasks allocated to them; the feedback from the tutors, and the availability of educational resource materials for teaching/learning. Overall, the environmental factors seemed to be more helpful than the other two categories of factors. It is clear that, on the whole, much needs to be done in the structural and operational areas.

Both theoretical and practical knowledge is required of teachers, especially beginning teachers, for effective performance in the different areas of work and responsibilities. The results of the research, however, reveal that the teachers felt that a number of negative things adversely affected their field-based experiences. The findings presented here regarding the duration of field-based experiences is consistent with the recent findings of the Queensland study. This is worrisome as it implies

that the teachers considered field-based experiences of little value in their professional as well as personal development as future teachers. As mentioned earlier, field-based experience is important for pre-service teachers in order for them to make sense of the real world of work of the teachers (Hagger, Burn & McIntyre, 1995; Williams, 1994; McNamara, 1992). One can conclude that the sample group of teachers had struggled to make sense of their fieldwork; it did not enhance their odyssey of professional development.. If we want to mould trainees to become effective teachers, then we need to strengthen the impact of practice teaching.

The disturbing findings presented here are similar to those reported elsewhere (Turney et al. 1982, Turney et al. 1985). Such lacunae in practice teaching are likely to have negative bearing in the quality of teachers for the maelstrom demands of work in the field.

Trainee teachers will not gain much from practice teaching unless attention is paid to creating appropriate conditions for their professional preparation. It appears that the trainees are not provided with sufficient feedback that would help to improve their teaching. The currently available contact time with the tutors needs to be increased. This should be quality contact time rather than a mere increase of contact time. Greater opportunities to reflect on their work and the outcomes in the classrooms need to be afforded. As suggested by Hopkins (1985), the three major categories of factors need to be addressed to ensure that they are favourable. Only then will the trainees achieve optimum benefit from field-based experiences.

The way forward

The perceptions of these teachers related to field-based experiences are important and need to be considered by teacher educators. Based on the data presented, it is clear that there are a

number of areas that need improvement to ensure that trainee teachers find field-based experiences fruitful and rewarding in their professional preparation. The present situation is worrisome as it implies that the sample teachers considered field-based experiences of little value in their professional as well as personal development as future teachers. There needs to be a concerted effort to bring about improvement in all the three categories of factors associated with field-based experiences. Some suggestions for LTC in improving trainees' perceptions of field-based experiences are advanced under each category of factors.

i) Structural Changes

Linking the components of the College study to the professional tasks required of teachers upon joining the teaching profession is a structural improvement. The neophytes are basically required to carry out the same professional tasks as the veterans. Making connections between the College study and the teachers' world of work will help to prepare pre-service students for the sort of professional tasks they will be required to carry out, and the knowledge and skills needed to effectively carry out these tasks (Campbell, 1992).

Furthermore, the notion of 'transformative intellectuals' as proposed by Giroux and McLaren (1986) is a way forward in the preparation of teachers. Velayutham (1994: 87) elaborates on this principle in the following way:

It is proposed that if teachers are to perform effectively we should not redesign their work as such. Instead, ways and means should be found to redesign their work environment which could create those kinds of enabling, conducive and facilitative organizational conditions in which the desired changes could occur. It is then that a society can expect its teachers to contribute to the process of social reconstruction and emancipation.

Also, to make courses more practical and more closely aligned to professional practice, school-based teacher education could be an alternative (Grenfell, 1992). Instead of the current 'blocks' of teaching practice, trainees could teach at the host schools throughout the school term. There is thus ongoing contact between school and college, which will bring theory and practice closer together.

ii) Environmental Considerations

The provision of relevant educational resources, especially those related to curriculum materials currently used in schools, needs to be improved, so that the trainees become familiar with the curriculum materials. This, in turn, will help them prepare for their lessons more effectively. In this respect, the views, beliefs and information available in the school's environment need to be exploited. In addition, more opportunities need to be afforded to the trainees to observe lessons at all class levels and across the primary curriculum. This will prepare them for teaching at any class level in the primary school.

iii) Operational

College tutors need to spend more time with the trainees in the field. Better collegiality as well as constructive written and oral feedback are needed to help professionally develop trainees to become effective teachers. In this respect, staff commitment as well as allocation of adequate financial resources for practicum supervision are vital.

There are certain areas rated positively by the teachers in the sample and it is imperative that teacher educators take note of these and continue to build on these strengths. This, together with a review of the practicum in the light of this small, but indicative survey, will improve the quality and effectiveness of the LTC practicum.

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