

ADDRESSING THE KEY ELEMENTS THAT SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL CLINICAL EXPERIENCE OF FINAL YEAR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

This paper explores final year pre-service teachers' perceptions on the key elements critical to support successful final year in-school clinical experience. The paper also focuses on how teacher education program helps prospective teachers move from being a student to a professional able to take responsibility for others. The paper is an outcome of a survey targeted to 104 TESL student teachers who had undergone 14 week guided clinical experience in various schools in Malaysia. Additional qualitative data were gathered via a focus group interview. The key elements identified by student teachers for successful school placement are effective communication especially in building positive personal and professional relationships with mentor teachers and supervisors. Concerns were also raised about the need to fulfill the needs of diverse groups of learners. Pre-service teachers also highlight the need to gain information related to their decision in teaching.

Keyword: Pre-service clinical experience, teacher training, effective communication

Introduction

The trainee teachers enrolled in the final year of the Bachelor of Teaching English as a Second Language (B.Ed TESL) programme at University Technology MARA, a four year undergraduate programme targeting the preparation of professional and workplace ready language practitioners. Thus training programme aims to develop measurements on how we are helping prospective teachers move from being a student to becoming a professional teacher. The program also aims at how successful the clinical experience is as an induction into the teaching profession.

In school placement and clinical experience in education, in common with other professions, concentrates on the mastery of particular teaching skills, the development of professionalism and socialization of the professional norms and moral codes of the teaching practitioner (McCormack, 1997).

Darling-Hammond (2006) in her book *Powerful Teacher Education*, suggests the extent and quality of teacher education matter for teachers' effectiveness and add significant value to the general knowledge and skills that teachers with a strong subject matter background bring to the classroom. In her comprehensive study of seven

exemplary teacher education programs at Alverno College, Wheelock College, Bank Street College, University of California at Berkeley, University of Southern Maine, Trinity University, University of Virginia, Darling Hammond revealed that the colleges were distinctive and very different in their goals and curriculum, demonstrating that there is no one single formula for excellence. However different from the paths were, there were certain intersecting avenues showing several common features. Those features are as follows:

1. A common clear vision of good teaching permeates all coursework and clinical experiences.
2. Well defined standards of practice and performance are used to guide and evaluate coursework and clinical work.
3. Curriculum is grounded in knowledge of child and adolescent development, learning, social contexts, and subject matter pedagogy, taught in the context of practice.
4. Extended clinical experiences are carefully developed to support the ideas and practices presented in simultaneous, closely interwoven coursework.
5. Explicit strategies help students (1) confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning and students and (2) learn about the experiences of people different from themselves.
6. Strong relationships, common knowledge, and shared beliefs link school and university-based faculty.
7. Case study methods, teacher research, performance assessments, and portfolio evaluation apply learning to real problems of practice.

Clearly an effective teacher education preparation must be grounded in theory yet provides student teachers with relevant and extensive practical experience to prepare skillful teachers highly capable from their first days on the job. The clinical experience is an essential component of any teacher education programme as it provides a rich and real learning environment for teacher trainees to learn to reason and think critically. The demands of the diverse classrooms are such that 21st century teachers must be able to tailor curriculum and teaching as well as teach explicit strategies to allow students to become successful learners. (Asariah 2009, Lee 2004, Darling Hammond 2006). Ultimately the key to better schools is better teachers and powerful teacher education programs can produce those teachers.

Malaysia has seen major policy changes in education in the last 5 years ranging from increased budgetary freedom for schools, greater autonomy for high performance schools and the introduction of standards of teaching. At the same time stakeholders such as parents and employers expect greater accountability from educational institutions. Consequently governmental policy with respect to accountability and accreditation and

the development and implementation of standards of teaching places higher demands on teacher education programmes to churn out work ready professionals and practitioners who are pedagogically and psychologically competent and technologically proficient (Asariah 2009).

Teacher preparation in Malaysia

Teacher education falls under the jurisdiction of the Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MOE). The standardized curriculum at the 27 Institutes of Teacher Education (ITE) or previously known as the Teacher Training Colleges encompasses six main components a) teacher dynamics, b) knowledge and professional competence, c) knowledge in subject option and specialization, d) self-enrichment, e) co-curricular activities, and f) practicum. Fundamentally the curriculum for the training of Malaysian primary school educators focuses on the student's professional, academic and personal development (MOE 2006). Alternatively, the training of secondary school educators is conducted by local public universities and each offers its individual teacher education programme. Below is a synopsis of the teacher education model implemented at the Faculty of Education, University Technology MARA.

Teacher Education Model at the Faculty of Education, University Technology MARA Malaysia

The Faculty of Education main mission is to educate professional

Bumiputera teachers for secondary schools and tertiary establishments in Malaysia. Founded in 1997 the Faculty commenced with 4 departments,, TESL being its mainstay and niche department.

The B.Ed TESL is a four year programme awarding students an Honours degree in TESL and a qualified Teacher Status. For three years, the program focuses on subject matter preparation and pedagogic mastery. This comprises of courses required by the University, education component subjects providing a strong foundation in education, general professional studies course majoring in the principles and theories of secondary teaching of English and a minor either in English Literature, Counselling or Music. The clinical experience or practicum takes place at the end of the third year and students are assigned to a school for 14 weeks. The involvement of the local schools is established through the appointment of teacher experts who bring in their own knowledge and experience direct to the university during the practicum seminars. The series of practicum seminars help students link the theories and knowledge with the practical realities of teaching. During the actual teaching practice or clinical experience, students work closely with mentors from the school as well as their university supervisors. The clinical experience is a vital induction into teaching and most students look forward to it as the culmination of their training. In the final semester, students return to complete their

final year and participate in the post practicum seminars. The seminars provide them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, to learn from the opportunities and attempts of linking theory and practice, to reflect on their challenges in developing and sustaining a professional culture, as well as the need for lifelong learning and continuous professional development. For some the final semester is also the turning point as the student teacher envisions the future- to teach or not to teach.

Method

This research sought to identify the key elements that support a success in school placement for final year pre-service teachers.

The key question in exploring the hypotheses established was:

- What are the elements that student teachers identify as contributing to a successful clinical school experience?

20 survey questions were developed from the key question. The research instrument method was a survey, a “one-shot design” (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington & Okely 2006) and gathered on a single occasion during the post practicum sessions, within a week of completing the 14 week-structured clinical experience. The average completion time for the survey was 15 minutes and students had the opportunity to return their responses anonymously.

The scope of data collection was further extended with a 90 minute- focus group discussion with 8 trainee teachers. The group discussion contextualized the data collected and created an interactional situation to interpret and give further details regarding the clinical experience. Patton (1990) highlights the fact that the group discussion is “a highly efficient qualitative data-collection technique [which provides] some quality controls on data collection in that participants tend to provide checks and balances on each other that weed out false or extreme viewsand it is fairly easy to assess the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view...among the participants” (USE PAGE PLEASE)

The practicum cohort surveyed was the batch of April 2010 comprising a total of 104 TESL trainee teachers.

Result and Discussion

Three critical elements were identified as keys to success for a positive clinical experience. These keys were building relationships and effective communication, being able to reach out to troubled and reluctant learners and making important teaching decisions that were informed and supported by research.

Table 1.1 Critical elements for success in clinical experience

Selection of questions	Percentage responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree”
	N = 104
Understand how different students are learning	74
Set challenging and appropriate expectations of learning and performance for students	62.5
Help all students achieve high academic standards	50
Understand how students’ social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development influences learning	76
Identify and address special learning needs and/or difficulties	54.4
Choose teaching strategies for different instructional purposes and to meet different student needs	76
Help students become self-motivated and self-directed	73
Resolve interpersonal conflict	51
Understand how factors in the students environment outside of school may influence their life and learning	81.5
Conduct inquiry or research to inform your decisions	34.6
Develop rapport and work with mentor and supervisor to support learning	38

As shown in the above table, the survey showed that the graduates felt significantly prepared on 14 of the twenty dimensions of teaching skill, awarding a score above 70 %. 81.5%, of the student teachers were confident that they understand how factors in the student environment outside of school influence their students’ life. Overall in terms of teaching skills the student teachers felt that the program had prepared them well for the clinical experience and gave them sufficient preparation to understand and teach their learners.

However several elements emerged scoring the lowest score and the highest distress. Firstly only 54.4 % of the respondents said that they could identify and address special learning needs and or difficulties

among students, and 50% of the student teachers felt that they could help all students achieve high academic standards. Of greater concern is that 34.6% of the teachers asserted that they were not prepared to conduct inquiry or research which could be used to inform their decisions. Finally only 38% of the students were able to develop rapport and work with mentor and supervisor to support learning. In the focus group discussions the three elements were discussed further to provide elaborations.

Effective communication & building relationships

The student teachers reported that getting to know the mentor teacher personally and professionally was their greatest challenge. All trainees

were assigned a mentor from the school and another supervisor from the university. Most respondents identified that establishing a positive relationship with both individuals was a crucial factor determining the success of their clinical experience.

“Getting to know my mentor and also finding out what she expects of me is really difficult. She is extremely busy and I get very little feedback”

(Student JB)

“My mentor expects me to teach like her and discourages me from trying out anything different. I’m quite frustrated as I have other ideas but I don’t want to get low grades....” (Student TA)

“My supervisor from the faculty is open minded but she has high expectations....”

(Student KD)

***YELLOW HIGHLIGHT MEANS:
THIS INFORMATION IS IN THE
RESULT PART AND THEORITICAL
FOUNDATION/ BACKGROUND***

Current thinking on teacher development suggests that the supervisor and trainer should focus on the teacher as a person. Like students, trainee teachers have individual strengths and weaknesses, as well as varying degrees of knowledge and experience. The objective of the clinical experience is to allow trainee teachers to experience classroom teaching via collaboration with other professionals and to bridge the gap between theory and practice. To do this requires patience, opportunities

for practice and self-awareness.

Kinsella (1994) defines peer coaching as follows:

Peer coaching is a structured process by which a trained faculty member voluntarily assists each other in enhancing their teaching within an atmosphere of collegial trust and candor, through 1.) development of individual instructional improvement goals and clear observation criteria; 2) reciprocal, focused, non-evaluative classroom observations and 3.) prompt constructive feedback on those observations.

The data from the study indicates that the mentor teacher should not perceive herself as the model teacher with model lessons, nor allow the trainee teacher to view her as such. Maintaining a relationship that is open and honest where both parties can learn from each other, engaging in professional discussions and conversation are important aspects of this positive relationship.

Over half of the participants identified that by using effective listening skills and clear communication, positive relationships can be forged with mentor teachers in school and supervisors. *“A willingness to listen, being able to accept criticism, being humble”* are important trainee characteristics that expedite successful forging of relationships.

Another challenge faced by the teachers in this study is the availability of time to interact and conduct discussions. All student teachers were aware of the need for

flexibility to allocate time that was mutually convenient for their mentor and supervisors. The following were identified as popular options for meeting times: 'during recess time'; 'before school'; 'after school' and the last resort would be 'arrive early, leave late' or the social network option 'try Facebooking'

The data also highlighted very vividly that avoiding communication with mentor had a negative impact on the overall experience. It was definitely not the case of "no news is good news".

Reaching out to troubled and reluctant learners

For a majority of novice teachers in this study, aspects of language learning, classroom management, discipline and developing ways to reach out to troubled and reluctant learners are clearly important issues that must be resolved. Increasingly schools are detecting a higher number of students suffering from social, emotional or behavioural handicaps, and some students are growing up in impoverished or abusive homes. (NST 2011) Our trainee teachers need special methods to establish education and strong relationships with such learners.

"I have this student who is so depressed because the parents are separating. She doesn't participate in anything and sometimes doesn't come to class. What do I do?"

(Student TA)

"Some of them are doing things that they shouldn't do...smoking...clubbing .How Puan ... they tell me these things... but should I report them?"

(Student ZM)

" Madam one of my student is pregnant, she is very passive in class and ignores me. Help me Mam !"

(Student MM)

Evidently student teachers need knowledge on diagnostic approaches as well as the pedagogy and repertoire of teaching strategies to reach these troubled students. The researcher firmly advocates that the faculty introduce graduates to issues such as teaching the exceptional child, children and youth at risk and students with learning challenges. Currently the Faculty offers a minor counsel and when dealing with challenging students this is clearly an advantage

Our trainee teachers are not merely language teachers but are also "critical pedagogue" and agents of change. (Brown 2001) Teachers deliver language lessons as well as are involved in relationships and participates in students' lives. We live in a world that is desperate for change, a change from discrimination to tolerance, from hopelessness to empowerment, from competition to cooperation. It is this balance of delivering the technical knowledge as well as being able to relate with students that are important characteristics of good language teachers. The comments below show that these teachers are attentive of

the need to reach out to their troubled students.

"I realize that if I want to help my students I need to go the extra mile.."

" I want to help them, how do I motivate them ... "

" ... because of my age they turn to me for help and I really want to help them.."

Research based teaching

Second language teachers are always on the search for better ways to help students. This implies that teachers are involved in educational research. However since formal research tends to be perceived as a difficult process, most teachers feel that it is out of their reach. The trainee teachers participating in this study voiced their concerns regarding their competencies in reaching out to their students especially those with learning difficulties. As much as the teacher education program strives to prepare teachers with required skills and relevant pedagogical knowledge, it is impossible to equip teachers with the skills related to all possible circumstances. Therefore it is pertinent that teachers conduct research and reinforce their teaching with reading. This awareness of the need for research based teaching was voiced by many of the trainee teachers:

" I wanted my mentor and my supervisor to help me solve my problem, the students were not motivated.. I didn't know what to do.."

(Student LJ)

"There was no one right way to teach grammar and I had to find something fast, I looked up on the internet.."

(Student MM)

" My supervisor said it was up to me, she asked me to find out basically read.. . She said I would know best what is most suitable for my students ..."

(Student KD)

YELLOW HIGHLIGHT MEANS THIS SHOULD BE GIVEN CO'MMENTS

" I really didn't have much time to read but I realized I had to .. I felt better prepared ...also it gave me ideas to improve my lessons"

The knee-jerk reaction of most student teachers was to turn to the mentor or supervisors for aid. In most cases they were advised to take charge of the problem and to develop their own solutions. This provided the trainee teacher with an excellent opportunity to embark on action research as well as research based teaching. Research is not a difficult process but a powerful tool to systematically study and solve some of the problems in our day –to-day experience (Kervin *et al* 2006). Trainee teachers must be encouraged to take charge by firstly identifying the problem via careful observation, before selecting the appropriate intervention. This is an important part of professional development and is a vital aspect of successful final year in school placement. The skill of researching is also vital at the postgraduate level

as students are expected to exhibit innovative and creative abilities as well as originality. (Faizah & Hazadiah 2010). It is therefore strongly recommended that action research and classroom assignment-based research is emphasized in our teacher preparation programs to equip trainee teachers with this valuable skill which in turn will improve their own understanding of the teaching – learning process below is

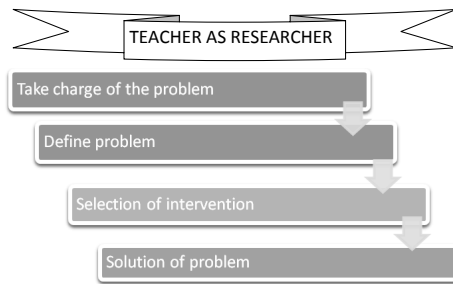


Figure 1
Teacher as Researcher

YELLOW HIGHLIGHT MEANS WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

Conclusions

This study is about how students are transformed into educators and professionals. It is concerned with how students develop their identities as teachers, extend their professional relationships, establish their moral codes and norms. In particular it explores student teachers voice and captures their perceptions on what they see as the key elements that support successful final year clinical experience.

There are a number of implications of this research. Firstly it was apparent from the data that the key element in successful final year clinical practice lies in developing positive personal and professional relationships. The process entails an accurate assessment by the student teacher which includes acknowledging their own personal strength and weaknesses before acquainting themselves with the mentor and supervisor's ways. Secondly it was imperative that student teachers take a proactive approach both in creating convenient discussion opportunities with mentors and supervisors as well as taking charge of the teaching experience and any classroom predicament.

Final year clinical experience is critical to teacher preparation and through introspection and awareness of their competence student teachers are in a more favorable position to succeed in clinical practice.

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