Pedagogical Innovations for Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

Teaching practicum plays a significant role in teacher education programs and helps to upgrade teachers' professional competencies. The teaching practicum component employed by the Faculty of Education, The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), and the Faculty of Education, University of Colombo provides a systematic mechanism for fostering the professional development of teachers through their Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programmes. This comparative study was done to identify strategies and innovative methods that need to be adopted by the two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum. The participant of this study were 117 student teachers, 30 school mentors, 57 master teachers, and 5 university academics representing two universities. The data collected using questionnaires, interviews, and teaching practice records were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Findings revealed that the pedagogical knowledge and guidance provided by the universities, the collaborative atmosphere of the schools, the effective role of school mentors and master teachers, and the motivation and commitment of student teachers strongly affect the effectiveness of the teaching practice component. The establishment of a strong collaborative school-university partnership, creating a professional body of school mentors and master teachers with continuous training provisions, and improving the commitment to educational research on teaching practicum were identified as the most effective and enacting changes that need to be adopted by the two universities to cater the professional development of teachers. Overall, a new framework was developed with an innovative avenue to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum.

Keywords: - Professional Development, Pedagogical Innovations, Teaching Practicum, Professional Competencies

Introduction

The practicum constitutes an integral part of many professional courses or programs in higher education and is manifest in several different forms depending on the discipline: field experience, cooperative education, sandwich programs, internships, clerkships, clinical practicum, and the like (Ryan et al., 1996). The teaching practicum provides student teachers with authentic and hands-on experience for teaching in classrooms and it provides student teachers with opportunities to apply their knowledge about children's development as well as curriculum content. According to the international teacher education literature, the practicum appears time and again as a key component of initial teacher education programmes. It means practicum has become a necessity in the teacher education programme. The teaching practicum provides an avenue to develop student teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitude to build their professional capacities.

The Faculty of Education, University of Colombo, and the Faculty of Education, OUSL are offering the Postgraduate Diploma in Education in response to the dire need in the system for teachers who are proficient to teach the local curriculum in all three mediums (Sinhala, Tamil, and English). These academic programmes are designed to promote the professional development of graduate teachers, teacher educators, principals of schools, and others in the field of education. The curriculum of the PGDE of the two universities is structured to achieve the objectives of the programme. It is planned to provide student teachers with opportunities to enhance their pedagogical knowledge required to become effective teachers. Organizing professional development workshops is a characteristic feature of both PGDE programme offered by two universities and those workshops provide opportunities to enhance the teacher competencies of writing educational objectives, planning lessons, preparing teaching-learning aids, classroom management, etc. Teaching practice is the practical component of the PGDE programmes. During the period of teaching practice, each student-teacher is affiliated with a school for ten weeks. A mentor is appointed from each school to facilitate teaching practice and student teachers plan and organize their lessons with the guidance of mentors (Only OUSL). A Master teacher is appointed from each school to evaluate teaching practice (Both universities).

A dissertation (University of Colombo) or school-based project (OUSL) is a compulsory component of the teaching practicum, and it is expected from students to identify a problem in the field of education and to do a study or complete a project. Students are assigned to small groups and a lecturer is responsible for each group to guide students to complete their dissertations (University of Colombo). The Master teacher is assigned to facilitate students to complete

the school-based project (OUSL). This paper reports the study conducted to explore how and in which ways the teaching practicum can be improved with innovative strategies to cater to the professional development of student teachers.

Review of Literature

Preparing the ground for student teachers to become a member of the teaching community within a given context and assisting them to develop their pedagogical content knowledge have been suggested to be a kernel of teacher education programs (Aghabarari et al., 2020). Hence, being a part of a real teaching experience, transforming theoretical knowledge into practice, observing and learning from other teachers, developing lesson plans and teaching materials, and acquiring classroom management skills are among some of the opportunities practicum courses provide student teachers with (Crandall, 2000; Wright, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2012).

In addition, practicum courses would have a great influence on student teachers' attitudes towards and perceptions of the teaching profession (Atay, 2007) and how they imagine themselves in the profession. In this sense, integrating the right type of practicum into teacher education programs demands fundamental shifts in theoretical bases and practical approaches to teacher education pedagogy. Hence, teacher education porgrammes need to provide an innovative pedagogical framework to support student teachers to develop their professional competencies, as mentioned by Ferrier-Kerr (2009), the practicum transforms a prospective teacher into a teacher and thus is a stressful experience for student teachers due to the gaps that exist between beliefs they developed during attending university courses and what is taking place at schools regardless of the formulated theories.

Identification of factors that affected the effectiveness of the teaching practice component is essential. According to Spiteri et al., 2020) four influencing factors were identified: teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills, which are also influenced by and influence the school culture. Hence teacher education programme needs to sufficiently develop and provide the proper and innovative pedagogical framework to support student teachers to develop those skills.

According to Gault et al (2010), academic internships are a bridge to link theory and practice by taking part in supervised and scheduled work. These internship programs not only improve students' personal skills but also polish their professional growth and experience. Innovative school-university partnerships are vital to promoting the success of teaching practicum.

Various models and frameworks that have been presented in relation to the effectiveness of teaching practicum provide some useful insights. for instance, The Ministry of Education in New Zealand in 2013 provided funding for universities to develop and implement initial teacher education programmes with innovative school-university partnerships to promote the success of graduates. They have identified three models (Model-A, B, and C) of effective school-university partnership. Model A represents the traditional practicum partnership whereas models "B" and "C" look at partnership as a professional learning community. School and university staff members valued working together as professional development for all partners, as a potential avenue for joint research, and as a platform to enhance student teachers' preparedness for their first classroom (Bernay *et al.*,2020).

Looking at the relationship between mentor teachers and student teachers during teaching practicum to unpack how mentoring and mentor teachers' practices and mentoring approaches can motivate student teachers to continue as a teacher has also been identified as an important factor to improve the quality of practicum. Accordingly, this study focused on identifying strategies and innovative methods that need to be adopted by the two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum.

Conceptual Framework

The Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme is developed based on the conceptualization of a holistic approach to teacher education. It was identified as a professional development programme in the teacher education context. It presents the argument that teacher education is grounded in the practice that it seeks to foster the professional development of teachers to improve the quality of education– the conceptual framework for teacher education describes the discipline's intellectual philosophy and institutional standards. (See Figure 1)
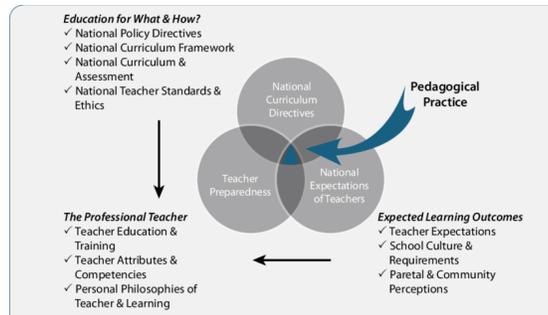
Fig. 1: A holistic view of teacher education
*Attribution:*https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279456037_Pedagogical_Practices_in_Indonesia/download

Teaching practicum has been identified as a component of the PGDE programme. The conceptual framework reflects the teacher education program's vision and mission and provides direction for programs, courses, teaching, outcomes, responsibility and accountability, leadership, etc. and it reflects values, skills, and knowledge. Based on many conceptual frameworks available in the literature, the following specific conceptual framework was developed and adopted for the current study. (See Figure 2)
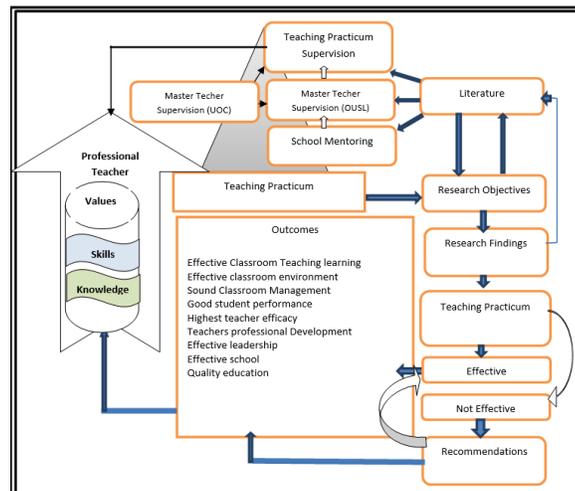

Fig. 2: Conceptual Framework

Accordingly, the pedagogical practice as a social practice is the core. It is the outcome or the destination of teacher education. Teaching practicum is the pedagogic intervention that drives fostering the professional development of student teachers. In this context, offering a value-based teaching practicum is very important to cater to the professional development of student teachers. The current study was planned and implemented, grounded on the above conceptual framework.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a survey research design, A survey has several characteristics and several claimed attractions: typically, it is used to scan a wide field of issues, populations, programmes. In order to measure or describe any generalized features, it is useful (Morison,1993:38-40). Surveys are useful for gathering factual information, data on attitude and preferences, beliefs and predictions, behavior and experiences-both past and present (Weisberg etal.1996).

Within the survey research design, the researcher engaged in a systematic process of activities. It comprised the revision of the existing situation of both PGDE programmes offered by two universities, identifying factors that affected the

effectiveness of the teaching practicum, and introducing an innovative framework and mechanism to improve the quality of teaching practicum to cater to the professional development of teachers.

In the context of this study, the survey research design provided an appropriate and useful methodological framework, to review the effectiveness of pedagogical innovations adopted by each university to upgrade and promote the professional competencies of student teachers through their teaching practicum under the PGDE programme.

Aim and Objectives

In line with the main aim of the study, to upgrade the professional competencies of student teachers through pedagogical innovations, the following specific objectives were formulated:
1. To identify factors affecting the effectiveness of the teaching practicum.
2. To introduce strategies and innovative methods that need to be adopted by the two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum.

Participants

Participants were randomly selected from among the student teachers of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme of the Faculty of Education, OUSL, and Faculty of Education, University of Colombo. Master teachers, School Mentors, and university academics were also randomly selected considering the following factors:
- Representing different mediums of instruction (Sinhala/Tamil/English)
- Representing male/female participants

Selected participants were 117 student teachers, 30 school mentors, 57 master teachers, and 5 university academics. Table 1 indicates the participants' distribution.

Table 1- Distribution of Participants

Institute	Student Teachers (N)	School Mentors (N)	Master Teachers (N)	University Academics(N)
OUSL	60	30	30	03
University of Colombo	57	-	27	02
Total	117	30	57	05

Collection and Analysis of data

A wide-ranging approach was used to collect the data throughout the process, using multiple data-gathering strategies. These comprised questionnaire surveys, semi-structured interviews, documentary records., Quantitative methods such as descriptive statistics and qualitative methods such as content analysis were used to analyze the data.

Findings and Discussion

Factors affected the effectiveness of the teaching practice component
Student Teachers' Perceptions of factors that affected the **effectiveness of teaching practicum**

The majority of student teachers (in both universities) expressed that the following factors affected the effectiveness of teaching practicum to a large extent (see Table 2).

Table 2: Teachers' Responses on the factors affected to the effectiveness of teaching practicum

To what extent do you think the following factors affected the effectiveness of teaching practicum?	Rating Scale OUSL			Rating Scale University of Colombo		
	To a large extent	Somewhat	Poor	To a large extent	Somewhat	Poor
1. Pedagogical knowledge and guidance provided by the university in relation to the teaching practicum	87%	13%	-	77%	23%	-
2. Collaborative atmosphere of the school	83%	11%	6%	73%	20%	7%
3. Efficacy of Mentors' role	73%	18%	9%	-	-	-
4. Efficacy of Master Teachers' role	57%	19%	24%	60%	27%	13%
5. Commitment and motivation of student teachers in teaching practicum	68%	21%	11%	70%	18%	12%

The majority of student teachers (More than 77%) in both universities expressed that the pedagogical knowledge and guidance provided by the university in relation to the teaching practicum affected the effectiveness of the teaching practicum to a large extent. The collaborative atmosphere of the school, Efficacy of the School Mentor also affected the effectiveness of the teaching practicum to a large extent. Commitment and motivation of student teachers in teaching practicum were also identified as important factors that affected the effectiveness of the teaching practicum.

Student Teachers Perceptions on collaborative school atmosphere to facilitate effective teaching practicum

The collaborative atmosphere of the school is very important to facilitate student teachers to achieve their expectations and get maximum benefits from the teaching practicum to cater to their professional development. The collaborative atmosphere of the school is consisting of several characteristics. The majority of student teachers (in both universities) expressed that the following characteristics of the collaborative school atmosphere affected the effectiveness of teaching practicum to a large extent (see Table 3).

Table 3: *Student Teachers' Perceptions of collaborative school atmosphere*

To what extent do you think the following characteristics of the collaborative school atmosphere affected the effectiveness of teaching practicum?	Rating Scale OUSL			Rating Scale University of Colombo		
	To a large extent	Somewhat	Poor	To a large extent	Somewhat	Poor
1. Support and motivation of school principal	93%	7%	-	89%	11%	-
2. The ability to take relevant timetables and relevant classes to involve in teaching practicum	87%	9%	4%	82%	12%	6%
3. Availability of sufficient physical resources in the school	89%	11%	-	87%	13%	-
4. Availability of a sound classroom environment in the school	73%	17%	10%	68%	19%	13%

Support and motivation of the school principal, the ability to take relevant timetables and relevant classes to involve in a teaching practicum, availability of sufficient physical resources in the school, and availability of a sound classroom environment in the school were identified as the most important characteristics of the collaborative school atmosphere affected the effectiveness of teaching practicum. According to the student teachers, the support of the school principal is one of the vital factors to completing the teaching practicum component of the PGDE programme successfully. The majority of student teachers (in both universities) expressed the level of support received by the principal for their teaching practicum. (See Table 4).

Table 4: Student Teachers' responses to the support of the school principal to complete the teaching practicum (OUSL)

Criteria	University									
	Open University (N=60)									
	SA		A		SWA		DA		$\bar{x}$	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1. Principal motivated me to complete teaching practicum	28	46.7	15	25.0	08	13.3	04	6.7	1.78	.956
2. Principal shared his/her experience in relation to the T-L process with me	15	25.0	23	38.3	08	13.3	04	6.7	2.20	1.02
3. Principal provided me with relevant timetable and classes based on my requirements	38	63.3	10	16.7	04	6.7	03	5.0	1.49	.858
4. Principal provided me necessary quality inputs	28	46.7	18	30.0	05	8.3	03	5.0	1.69	.865
5. Necessary support was given to the master teacher	40	66.7	12	20.0	01	1.7	02	3.3	1.36	.704
6. Necessary support was given to the school mentor	34	56.7	13	21.7	07	11.7	01	1.7	1.55	.789
7. Principal supported me to complete my school-based project/ dissertation	21	35.0	32	53.3	02	3.3	-	-	1.65	.552

Table 5: Student Teachers' responses on the support of the school principal to complete the teaching practicum (University of Colombo)

Criteria	University									
	University of Colombo (N=57)									
	SA		A		SWA		DA		$\bar{x}$	SD
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
1. Principal motivated me to complete teaching practicum	16	28.1	24	42.1	09	15.8	04	7.0	2.02	.888
2. Principal shared his/her experience in relation to the T-L process with me	07	12.3	15	26.3	02	3.5	29	50.9	3.00	1.177
3. Principal provided me with relevant timetable and classes based on my requirements	44	77.2	04	7.0	03	5.3	02	3.5	1.30	.749
4. Principal provided me necessary quality inputs	15	26.3	23	40.4	06	10.5	09	15.8	2.17	1.033
5. Necessary support was given to the master teacher	37	64.9	09	15.8	05	8.8	02	3.5	1.47	.823
6. Necessary support was given to the school mentor	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
7. Principal supported me to complete my school-based project/ dissertation	13	22.8	25	43.9	06	10.5	04	7.0	2.20	.0863

SA-Strongly agree, A-Agree, **SWA- Somewhat Agree, DA-Disagree, NA-Not Applicable**

The support of the school principal to complete the teaching practicum is very important to a student-teacher. According to Tables, 4 and 5 student-teachers expressed their level of agreement on the support of the school principal to complete the teaching practicum. Overall, it was identified that a considerable amount of student teachers were not satisfied with the support received by the school to succeed in their teaching practicum and therefore it was identified the following strategies need to be adopted by two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum.

Strategies and innovative methods that need to be adopted by the two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum.

- Building a strong collaborative school-university partnership
- Creating a professional body of school mentors
- Creating a professional body of master teachers
- Provide continuous training provisions for school mentors and master teachers
- Improving the commitment to educational research on teaching practicum
- Dissemination of research findings with relevant stakeholders

Based on the interviews conducted by different stakeholders (Master teachers, University academics) above strategies were identified as the most effective and enacting changes that need to be adopted by the two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum and cater to the professional development of student teachers. Based on those strategies, a new framework was developed (see figure 3)
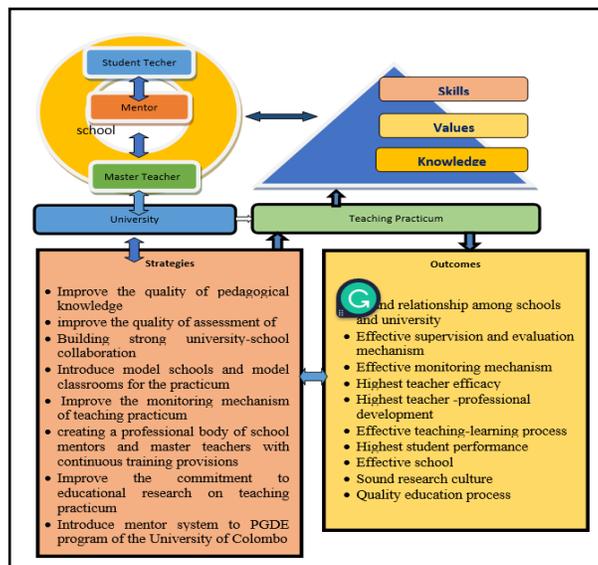

Fig.3: New Conceptual Framework

According to the new conceptual framework (Figure 3), It was identified that the building of strong collaboration is very important to achieve the objectives of teaching practicum.

Concluding and Remarks

The teaching practicum is the most important component of the f PGDE programme of both universities. The main objective of teaching practicum is to build the professional capacities of student teachers to improve the students' achievement in the school. In this study, several strategies were identified as the most effective and enacting changes that need to be adopted by the two universities to increase the effectiveness of teaching practicum and cater to the professional development of student teachers. Accordingly, the teaching practicum of any teacher education programme

should be developed with a scientific approach and need to consider a holistic framework to support the professional development of teachers. Overall, if both universities adopt the suggested strategies will enable them to improve the quality of the teaching practicum component and overall the quality of their PGDE programmes.

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