BECOMING A TEACHER: CHALLENGES FACED DURING PRACTICUM TO FOSTER ESSENTIAL SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

New knowledge-based economy has originated the necessity to develop new set of skills and experiences to meet the contemporary agenda of globalization. Therefore, moving out of classroom may provide opportunities to acquire new teaching ideas and materials and to hone professional skills. For such practicum a major component of teacher education programs, becomes crucial for Pre-service Teachers (PSTs). However, little is known about current practicum in teacher education program in Bangladesh. This study aims to explore if current practicum program is preparing PSTs with necessary skills or what challenges participants face in such process. Nine PSTs participated in this study and analyzed data indicates that participants were enthusiastic to foster critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills despite of several challenges. Interested stakeholders could benefit from such findings and could contribute by mitigating challenges for professional development activities of PSTs.

Keywords: Practicum; Pre-service Teachers; Skills and Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Recent emergence of knowledge-based economy has posed challenge on the dispensers of knowledge role of teachers. This challenge necessitates a rethinking of many current practices and additional efforts to cope with the new role. One way could be moved out of the classroom into a workplace, so teachers can develop a new set of skills and experiences to meet the contemporary agenda of globalization. Learning opportunities from real life is the indispensable method for shaping and maintaining high-quality teachers. In this way, practicum, a major component of teacher education programs, becomes crucial for Pre-service Teachers (PSTs). Literature highlights the importance of practicum in developing PSTs abilities as it creates a pathway from theory to practice in becoming a participating member of a teaching-society [1]. Moreover, it helps to understand professional roles, construct useful knowledge for theory building, get insight to look at the teaching world from multiple perspectives, helps to reach learners with diverse backgrounds, constitute valuable learning experiences and enhance efficacy. Ljungdahl [2] affirms that ‘practicum focuses on the teaching experience in a culture that is different from the
teachers own, exploring the effect of broadening their outlook and making them more confident of their future abilities both at home and abroad’. PSTs can team up to explore a variety of other professional activities, and interact with a teacher family of different culture in a school community with its counterpart of direct teaching experience. Such opportunities result cultural immersion, acquire new teaching ideas and materials, hone professional skills, establish solid links with teachers, students and community members to enhance future professional career opportunities [3].

For this, teacher education program has strong responsibility to prepare future students with sufficient skills. The apex institution in the field of education, Institute of Education & Research (IER), University of Dhaka, Bangladesh offers teaching program that provides opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge on pedagogies in the actual classroom settings and gain practical experience. Practicum teaching is such a culminating experience of the first-degree program in Education provided only at IER. Here, PSTs intensively learn multitude of ideas, teaching approaches and techniques along with content knowledge. Then they learn art of teaching in Teaching Courses and go through Microteaching and Simulation to develop professional skills. Next, during practicum, PSTs are exposed to school level where they encounter students for the first time and get numerous opportunities to demonstrate pedagogy in actual classroom and participate in academic activities including teaching two subjects, observation of others lessons, organizing co-curricular activities, developing and administering tests, scoring answer scripts, statistical treatment and interpretation of test results and performing other responsibilities as assigned by the schools. However, literature is not abundant in the context of Bangladesh and little is known if current practicum program at IER prepares PST with necessary skills or what challenges teachers face during practicum. Therefore, the aim of the study is to understand the challenges PSTs face during practicum to foster skills. Four essential skills namely critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication were considered to address the aim.

METHOD

Research background and setting

This research was a qualitative study that investigated the experiences of PSTs in terms of their skill development and the challenges during practicum.

Participants

Practicum activity was the part of degree completion at IER and all PSTs who enrolled in the 2014-2015 academic year were required to stay at the allocated
school for one full semester. During the practicum, each group of nine PSTs were supervised by assigned supervisor from IER. Therefore, nine PSTs who were supervised by the researcher participated in this study. Among them five participants were from physical science stream and rest of them were from biological science stream. Three were male and six were female participants.

Data collection

It started in the January and ended in the June, 2018. The participants involved were placed in a non-government school in Dhaka. During the practicum, the participants conducted secondary science classes. With prior permission of the authority three science classes were allowed to participants per week. Like the regular teacher working at the school, participants were also given opportunity to organize and arrange extra-curricular activities like club activities and science fair. For overall observation, researcher was assigned form Institute of Education and Research (IER). Participants noted their day to day experience on their Reflective Journals (RJs) and submitted it at the end of course which acted as first and main source of data. Second source of data was collected from interview that focused on experiences and challenges of participants during practicum. Here, procedure of writing RJ was adopted from Kabilan [4]. Prior to practicum, a discussion session was arranged at IER to let participants understand the whole procedure. This session covered several issues including the purpose of the research and participants’ role in this regard. For their further understanding, one handout was also provided. During the session, participants were basically informed to focus on their teaching and learning along with a thoughtful consideration of their students learning [5]. Such practices may be adequately satisfactory for signifying their ‘ability to evaluate their practice, to understand their students as learners and to become strong, purposeful, teachers who think about teaching in ways that reflect the complexity and intellectual and emotional challenges of the work’ [5].

Participants were asked to make maximum number of entries on any relevant issues for skill development and challenges or they perceive important for professional development and their requirement as a future science teacher. Participants were requested to consider the (i) elements and process of teaching and learning (ii) engagement and communication among students and with teachers; (iii) implementation of pedagogical knowledge and skills; and (iv) psychological and emotional factors, including self-efficacy. Following the instructions from the session, participants practiced writing RJs to facilitate their reflective processes and documenting ‘their experiences of professional journey practicum’ [6]. To support data from the RJs, an interview was conducted with each participant to make an immediate scrutiny on reactions and expressions of participants especially in regard to their confidence.
Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze data. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) comprised of repeated reading and making note, assigning data to themes, defining relationship and clustering the themes [7]. Such procedure confirmed the accuracy, reliability and trustworthiness of the information obtained from the RJs and interviews. A coding system was used to single out the participants (e.g., S1 refers to the first participant, S2 refers to the second participant and so on), Reflective Journal (RJ) and Interviews (In). For citation, material code and participants code were used together (e.g. RJS1-reflective journal of participant one, InS5-Interview with fifth participant).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study aimed to explore whether practicum develops any skill or what might be the possible challenges during practicum. That is, if practicum has contributed in developing skills or what are the challenges during that process. From the content analysis of developed materials and interview, four following themes emerged presented in the Table I and described in the following sections.

| Emerged Themes     | Criterion                                                                 |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Critical thinking  | Findings indicate that through practice teaching, pre-service teachers have developed the characteristics of ‘reasoning’, ‘justifying’, ‘making inferences’. |
| Creativity         | Findings indicate that through practice teaching pre-service teachers have developed the characteristics of ‘searching for alternate plans and materials’, ‘explaining same things from different point of view’ and ‘drawing connections and see relationships’. |
| Collaboration      | Findings indicate that through practice teaching pre-service teachers have developed the criteria of ‘working in group’ and ‘accepting diverse opinions’. |
| Communication      | Findings indicate that through practice teaching pre-service teachers have become aware of ‘interactivity’, ‘gesture’, ‘verbal presentation’, ‘sharing’. |

Critical thinking

Data reveals that initial experiences of PSTs were challenging to cope with the new environment, select appropriate pedagogy and understand uncertain students’ nature to meet their expectations. However, once PSTs became familiar, the next task was to deal with the big classroom size:

_There were lots of students with less accommodation so I cannot choose role play or peer work. Always I have to go with discussion, large group work. Scope was limited to provide oral or written feedback after thinking critically. Once I took my students out of class to follow-up inquiry method but the authority discouraged me to do so (InS4)._
Moreover, short duration of class time was another crucial issue to foster students critical thinking ability. One participant opined that, ‘curriculum and course book contain acceptable number of tasks for critical thinking skills but completing those within class time is difficult’ (InS8). Despite these challenges, participants asked students ‘to formulate designs, conclusions, stories, assumptions in classes’ to ‘apply prior knowledge to new situations’. They ‘asked students to judge accuracy, adequacy, clarity, credibility, validity, worth and students reflected their own thought process and responded orally and in written form’ (RJS1). Other participant shared experiences where students were distinguishing between facts and opinions and between relevant and irrelevant evidences. However, as the semester ended, participants agreed that ‘students were recognizing insufficient evidence, making inferences and clarifying and justifying their responses. This developed their critical thinking and mine too.’ (InS5).

Creativity

Data indicates that participants were aware of creativity. One participant mentioned

‘During class, many ideas raised in my mind. To develop a new idea, I thought of feasibility. When I found more positive sides of my plan than negative one then I tried to implement the idea in the class. I tried over and over not in one class, but in different classes. While practicing more and more in different classes, I noticed the impact and complications. Finally, I revised the idea to achieve maximum learning outcomes’ (InS3).

Another participant uttered his efforts to use alternative approaches and modified ideas to reflect critically on actions and outcomes- ‘I reviewed progress and provided feedback, criticized constructively’ (RJS3). One mentioned

‘as science teacher I had to teach all the subjects of science in school. But being a student from biological science, teaching physics in innovative way was challenging. I had to ask my other fellow what idea would work. Sometimes had to consult with the teachers of the schools and my supervisor to come up with new ideas’ (InS7).

Other participant ‘looked for opportunities in home or outside which can be helpful as teaching aids or explanation to students’ (RJS6). Participants allowed ‘questioning and provided open ended activities’ so that students can explain same things from different viewpoints and make connections and see relationships whereas ‘other found no scope at all’ (InS2). ‘I was stuck in application process for technical defaults’ (RJS1) participant mentioned. They continued situation was not flexible for all the time. ‘Whatever the idea I came up with did not work. There were lots of problems like number of students, students not co-operating, different levels of understanding of the students’ (InS7). Most importantly pressures to complete syllabus hampered their creativity. Such arguments revealed that fostering creativity was another daunting task for the percipients.
Collaboration

Participants were aware that students learn better while learning together to solve real world problems. One participant noted:

‘In classroom, when students find their experiences and knowledge are related to content and valued, they become motivated to learn, and they are more likely to make important connections between learning’ (RJS2).

Consequently, participants provided opportunities for group activities, assigned students to explore different interests and encouraged to assess own learning. This is how they developed collaboration between PSTs and students and among students. To facilitate group interaction, participants needed to teach how to ‘participate in open discussions’, ‘engage in critical and creative thinking’ and ‘accept diverse opinions’. To support the development and growth of collaboration skill, participants believed that, in group activities, ‘students feel easy to express doubts, feelings of accomplishment, continue questioning. In such ways, sense of cooperation was fostered’ (RJS6).

One participant encouraged students ‘to use own knowledge and share it with peers, behave each other with respect, and focus on their levels of understanding’ (RJS2). Participants involved students in questioning each other which allowed self-assessment for the participants also. In addition, participants ‘monitored and checked the progress of students toward learning outcomes’ (RJS3). Participant mentioned they cooperated among themselves in the same way. ‘If we expect students to collaborate, teachers should do the same’ (RJS6). However, participant ‘often suffered difficulty in helping students to construct meaning, while linking the new information to the prior knowledge of students’ (InS3). Moreover, they were compelled to complete the syllabus (InS2) and felt the authority was not always co-operative to allow collaborative tasks (InS5).

Communication

Participants reported their experiences of teaching have helped in boosting communication skill. One participant wrote: ‘I used to ask random but topic relevant questions and student responded’. This has improved my communication’ (RJS4). Indeed ‘students always have different kinds of taste and preferences’ (RJS2), communication skill helped them to create students’ enthusiasm and interest. Prior experience of ‘story telling’ and use of sense of humor also kept the students active and attentive. Good command over oral language assisted them to remove any fear and inhibitions to guide a student towards a subject. PSTs also mentioned the use of body language along with appropriate volume, tone and rhythm of their voice which made the classroom ‘more interactive and interesting for the students’. To understand the needs of students and to communicate openly, participants provided ‘question answering session’. One participant ‘asked
question to understand the actual condition of the students and gave enough space for students to ask more and more question’ (RJS8). Participants mentioned their experiences of ‘cultivating a dialogue rather than a monologue’. According to one participant to ‘solve any kind of problems in the classroom, it is always wise to hear the opinions of the students also’ (RJS3). For this they divided the classroom into small teams and asked them to solve different problems or complete assignments. This practice increased not only the interaction among the students but also among the participants and students. However, ‘students receive the same message but interpret it differently’ (InS1), therefore, the main challenge was ‘maintaining attention of all students during the whole process’ (InS4).

CONCLUSIONS

This study’s aim is to explore if the current practicum program is preparing PSTs with necessary skills or what challenges they face in such process. Nine PSTs participated in this study and analyzed data indicates that despite of several challenges, participants were enthusiastic to foster critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication skills as during practicum, pre-service teachers get the opportunity to be in educational institutions, engage with the learners and interact with teachers. Acquisition of such skills by PSTs have made practicum an essential component of teacher education programs [8] as it provides opportunities to learn from real life exposure [1]. Such exposure helps pre-service teachers to develop a community of practice to facilitate their future professional lives [3]. Interested stakeholders could benefit from such findings. Implications of this study informs how individuals can be prepared as skilled and competent to be critical thinkers with an analytical mind to think and work independently through practicum. Findings of this study open up the windows to explore what more skills can be developed during practicum and associated challenges. Regarding the challenges, OECD [9] argues, ‘no matter how good pre-service training for teachers is, it cannot be expected to prepare teachers for all the challenges they will face throughout their careers’. Enhanced confidence in teaching, improved content knowledge, language skills and teaching skills and sharing of different ideas and philosophies, are the other kinds of professional development that can be experienced during the practicum [4, 10, 11, 12, 13]. Evidence from the study recommends the stakeholders to rethink about the challenges. Once, if the challenges are mitigated then the chances of achieving these qualities may also rise. The world is moving faster than anticipated and demand of essential skills are increasingly escalating, therefore, despite challenges PSTs are expected to response positively to become a teacher.
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