

TESL TRAINEE TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES DURING PRACTICUM

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Abstract

The teaching practice facilitates the introduction of aspiring trainee teachers to the teaching profession, which eventually directs their professional advancement. This study examines and clarifies the experience future teachers have during their teaching practicum. The study sample consisted of TESL trainee teachers who had completed their four months of teaching practicum. A qualitative research design is implemented and an in-depth interview served as the source of data collection. A sample of 33 TESL trainee teachers were interviewed and the thematic analysis of the data are discussed in the findings. Based on the findings, three themes that arose and best explained the codes from the respondents' responses were classroom teaching, the trainee teachers' personal adjustments, and classroom management. The results demonstrated that the TESL trainee teachers had a fairly positive experience during their teaching practicum. Their responses contained several contradictions, notably with regard to their expectations of the key distinctions between real-world teaching and microteaching, as well as their time management in the classroom. Interpersonal to educational problems were some of the challenges and experiences encountered.

Keywords: TESL trainee teacher, classroom teaching, challenges, teaching practicum.

INTRODUCTION

All programmes for the preparation of teachers revolve around the practicum or teaching practice. During this practicum period, trainee teachers are overseen as they carry out their teaching duties in classrooms or other educational settings. Particularly among student teachers who are considering a career in education, the practicum is a significant and highly appreciated component of teacher training. The practicum is a vital part in becoming a teacher and is highly valued by those who want to pursue a career in teaching. Smith & Lev-Ari study's (as cited in Nair, 2017) stated that it contributes significantly to connecting "theory and practice" and offers aspiring teachers a space in which to improve their own teaching abilities. Although the practicum's goals can vary, its core goal is to help teachers learn and deepen their understanding of academic and professional subjects. Wright study's (as cited in Nair, 2017) argues for the need to bridge theory (content knowledge) and practice (teaching) which is much neglected in the education field. The practicum programme allows students to gain practical teaching experience while also developing other important skills including self-awareness, empathy, and interpersonal skills.

Recent studies in the field of education show that teachers' knowledge and skills in the classroom have a big impact on how well pupils learn (Broad, Evans, & Gaskell, 2008). According to research that suggests that teaching has become more complex, a highly skilled teacher must be able to use various techniques for a variety of purposes, integrate and incorporate various types of knowledge, develop a sophisticated pedagogical repertoire, and adapt to the diversity of learners in the classroom (Broad & Evans, 2006). In Malaysia, most higher education institutions will collaborate with schools to enable the trainee teachers to undergo their teaching practicum. Local teacher training programmes should develop future educators of high enough calibre to meet the demands of the country in raising school children's operational English language competence. To achieve this, lecturers in teacher preparation programmes must ensure that their trainee teachers are competent in managing a second language classroom, especially in the classroom of the twenty-first century. It is clear that the practicum requires trainee teachers to commit to their careers, and that in order to fully immerse themselves in the educational system, they must have a high level of emotional investment. Challenges and barriers are unavoidable as they put what they have learnt in theory into reality.

To date, little is known about the interactions between a trainee teacher and other people in or outside of the classroom, and if a trainee teacher performs poorly during teaching practicum, one of the possible causes could be a lack of helpful advice from the supervisors or co-supervising teachers. Even if counsel is given, its validity is being called into question. Additionally, these trainee teachers encounter a variety of obstacles and conflicts as they adjust to their new roles as teachers in a real school setting. Since more than ten years ago, the requirement for producing outstanding teachers has been a major worry, and this is considered as crucial to forming the nation's future generation. To foster lifelong learners, it is deemed vital in the Malaysian setting to produce devoted and capable teachers. In teacher training institutions, the best ways to achieve the nation's goals are pushed in a variety of ways. They include giving the trainee teachers the right pedagogy and instructional techniques to apply in actual classroom settings, supported by theories. This can be observed in teacher-training programmes where students spend three-quarters of their time attending lectures rather than really practicing teaching in actual classrooms.

One strategy to close this gap is through teaching practicum, which is an essential experience for aspiring trainee teachers and should be highlighted (Shulman, 1987; Smith & Lev Ari, 2005; Schön, 1989). Various research has been conducted looking into various aspects of teaching practice. Studies on the level of stress among trainee teachers (McDonald, 1993; D'Rozario & Wong, 1996), teachers' worries (Christou, Eliophotou-Menon & Philippou, 2004), the function of cooperating teachers and supervisors (Morton, Vesco, Williams & Awender, 1997), and trainee teachers' worries are a few of them (Swennen, Jorg & Korthagen, 2004).

Concerns experienced by trainee teachers during practicum have recently come to light as an essential topic that educators and trainee teachers should consider. This is considered vital since, despite their experiences with microteaching at teacher training institutions, trainee teachers do not have access to practical classroom teaching. Although micro-teaching is useful for trainee teachers to hone their instructional techniques in a controlled environment, it is claimed to give learners "a false confidence" because it is difficult to recreate the conditions of a real classroom. This frequently causes trainee teachers to experience a variety of issues integrating into the school culture and challenges carrying out practical lessons in the classroom. In order to determine whether or not these trainee teachers would be successful in teaching English language classes, it is essential to gather information on their initial practicum phase experiences. The fact that this study will be focusing on trainee teachers means that the results are constrained by the instrument used to gather data. The reliable data and information of the study were acquired from a variety of sources, and are crucial for identifying reforms in the education sector that will be advantageous to all stakeholders.

This study focuses on finding out the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers' experiences and challenges in classroom teaching during teaching practicum. The objectives of this research are to investigate the experiences of the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers in classroom teaching during teaching practicum, and to identify the challenges that the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers face in classroom teaching during teaching practicum. The questions of this research are as follows:

1. What are the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers' experiences in classroom teaching during teaching practicum?
2. What are the challenges that the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers face in classroom teaching during teaching practicum?

This study is significant for future TESL trainee teachers to prepare themselves for what should be expected during practicum practices as well as discovering ways in coping with all the challenges that they have to go through during practicum practices. Even though students have been drilled with methods and ways to conduct the lesson, micro teaching and methodology classes emphasize the conventional teaching, it definitely does not prepare the future trainee teachers with the same experience and challenges that actually happen in a real classroom setting. Hence, it is necessary to address the importance of conducting this research so that future trainee teachers can be well-prepared to face the challenges as well as enjoying the experience that comes along while doing their practicum practice. This study is useful and significant as it will help the Ministry of Education, universities administrators, and educators on developing and making proper

improvements for a better experience in practicum practices, especially for trainee teachers. The study also offers insight into trainee teachers' experiences of doing practicum practice and provide beneficial suggestions for the faculty and future trainee teachers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The most crucial component of a teacher's preparation programme could be the practicum. The common consensus is that trainee teachers can pick up knowledge by seeing an experienced teacher work in the classroom. The teaching practicum experiences that trainee teachers undertook are related to their courses and essential to their professional development as educators. Making crucial links between theory and practise is another opportunity offered by the teaching practicum. Students are given the chance to take on the duties of an experienced teacher by being given an extended field experience (Ewart & Straw, 2005). Through the process of "sense-making," trainee teachers develop their own interpretation of how to teach in the actual world. This is because conceptual knowledge or theory only has real value when it is applied to the teachers' own teaching methods (K. E. Johnson, 1996). The practicum is particularly important in teacher preparation programmes since it is the first and likely the only course that offers significant opportunities for sense-making in actual teaching environments (Ishihara, 2005).

The worst dread for aspiring teachers may be having to go to the practicum. Even the practicum itself could be challenging. It is vital to comprehend what exactly regarding practicum terrifies trainee teachers. When trainee teachers are assigned to schools for their teaching practice, they frequently struggle to adjust to their new surroundings. The issues are considered as the difficulties the trainee teachers had to overcome in order to complete their teaching practicum. The researcher would like to mention the difficulties faced by inexperienced teachers when discussing the difficulties. This is due to the perception that trainee teachers are brand-new to their field. Some of the problems that trainee teachers face have been researched in the literature on language teacher education.

In Ishihara (2005), Brinton and Holten (1989) report recurrent themes that appeared in the reflective journals written by new native and non-native English-speaking teachers during the practicum, and they demonstrate that the majority of them dealt with pedagogical issues like curriculum and methodology, teaching techniques, materials, and student population. There are several additional difficulties that many non-native English-speaking international trainee teachers have identified, in addition to these largely instructional problems experienced by trainee teachers in the practicum (Ishihara 2005). According to Ishihara (2005), there are other issues that come up when teaching in the practicum, including English competency, self-esteem, and cultural familiarity with the subject topic. When Kabilan and Izzaham (2008) performed research on English language teachers in Malaysia, they discovered that the mixed-ability of the students and the usage of mother tongue in English language lessons were two of the biggest obstacles.

These researchers also discovered that many practicum students lacked the professional reflection and self-evaluation skills necessary to fully benefit from their practicum experience. Some universities have been successful in providing new teachers with suitable preparation for the twenty-first century. The fusion of theory and practice has been hampered by this issue. Ultimately, by involving students in their classrooms, language teachers give their pupils the opportunity to

learn through experience.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study makes use of Fuller and Brown concerns-based paradigm (1975). This paradigm builds on Fuller's earlier work (1969). Also, it highlights the four stages of development Ryan (1986) suggested trainee teachers go through. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study.

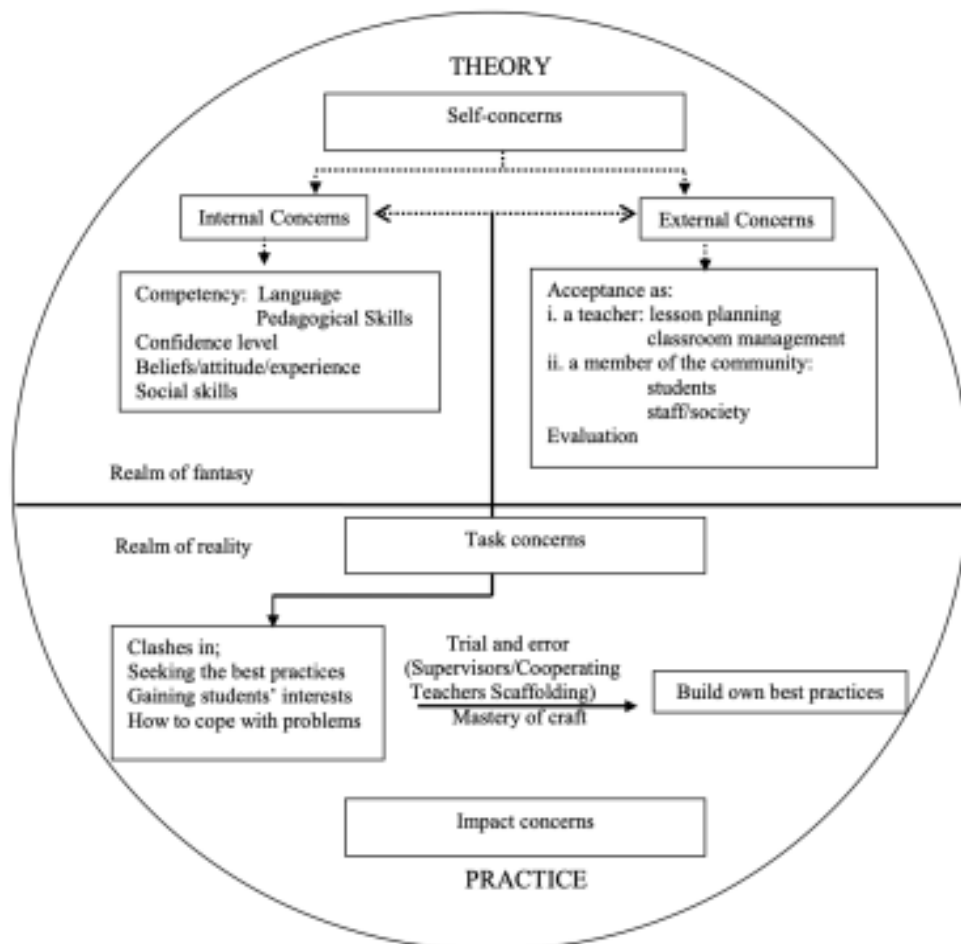


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
 Nair, P. & Ghanugara, S. (2017). *The English Teacher*, 46(3), 142 - 159.

The self-concerns stage is the first stage as described by Fuller (1969). The knowledge they have acquired and how it is used in the real classroom are the main concerns for trainee teachers at this stage. In addition to the pedagogical knowledge, they have learned throughout their training, trainee teachers bring their own perspectives and beliefs about what teaching is and how it should be. The concerns from the outside can have to do with the types of students they will meet during their practicum, the format of lesson planning, or strategies in managing the whole classroom.

Also, they have their own opinions about how to interact with the school employees. These issues lie within the fantasy stage, according to Ryan (1986), because trainee teachers can only speculate about the nature of a classroom based on their prior experiences. However, the researchers only utilizes the first stage of this framework. The reason for this particular circumstance is this study focuses on the experiences and challenges faced by trainee teachers in classroom teaching in which it will help to answer the researchers' research questions. Hence, the utilization of the first stage of the framework.

METHODS

A modified qualitative research design was used to collect qualitative responses. Creswell (1998) asserts that qualitative research is regarded as a complex process because it requires extensive time commitment, the collection of words and occasionally images, a focus on participant perspectives while inductively analyzing data, and the use of persuasive and expressive language when documenting the process. A researcher can construct a sophisticated, comprehensive picture using a qualitative design, analyzed words, individual informant opinions, and a study carried out in its natural environment.

The sample for this study was chosen using a purposive sampling method. The sample used in this study consisted of aspiring trainee teachers who had just finished their teaching practicum. The participants were 33 TESL trainee teachers enrolled in the Diploma TESL program. The participants were selected purposefully among undergraduates to suit the research. Merriam (2001) agreed that purposive sampling is an excellent way to choose participants because the participants have the ability to provide information to the extent that there will be no redundant information.

A method of gathering data called an interview involves the researchers posing questions to participants and listening for their responses. The researchers have chosen to employ semi-structured interviews for this study. Semi-structured interviews focus on specific themes while conversing about predetermined topics. They are typically the best source of knowledge for comprehending people's motivations, attitudes, and viewpoints, as well as the impacts of particular events or policies on their lives.

Furthermore, they might provide significant information that the researcher hadn't anticipated. This instrument is intended to respond to Research Questions 1 and 2. To learn more about the experiences of 5 trainee teachers during the teaching practicum, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Throughout the interview, their beliefs, presumptions, and expectations were also discussed in relation to the challenges of teaching practicum. (Please refer to Appendix 1 for the list of questions)

Semi-structured interviews with the trainee teachers served as the method for gathering the study's data. Focus groups served as the interviewing format for the trainee teachers. In addition to certain hints regarding the elements of the teaching practicum, open-ended questions concerning the experiences of trainee teachers were also posed during these interviews. Interviews were done one-on-one with each trainee teacher, and during the interviews, questions pertaining to their needs as trainee teachers, their obstacles, and their expectations between real-life teaching and micro teaching were posed. All of the interviews, which lasted around 20 minutes total, were conducted

in English. The interviews with the participants were recorded with their full consent. Following that, the transcription of the data was made by the researcher. The researcher requested that each participant check and accept the transcripts in order to assure the reliability and accuracy. In the qualitative analysis method proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), transcribed data were coded according to patterns. The coding was done using Rainbow Spreadsheet which helped the researcher in categorizing the transcribed data into themes and patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

RQ 1: What are the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers' experiences in classroom teaching during teaching practicum?

Classroom management

It could be gathered that the TESL trainee teachers agreed that micro teaching and real-life teaching are two different things based on the aspect of classroom management. It is mentioned that in microteaching, the audience did not consist of the real students from the secondary schools which led to them behaving well, acting and responding well to all instructions without issue due to the fact that their own friends are conducting the microteaching. However, in real-life teaching, there were various factors that may affect the lesson which were lacking in a microteaching session. From the data, a number of trainee teachers reported that they experienced unexpected situations that happened during their teaching experience. The excerpt of one of the TESL trainee teachers' experience is as below:

“Okay, talking about unexpected situations, during my diploma, I had an experience where during my teaching, during that time, I was having 34 students, for year 3 if I’m not mistaken. Of course when it comes to teaching, we have to focus on all students, but then again we have to know that some students need more attention compared to the normal students.”

“They are not attention seekers, but they just need more attention, so there was a boy who came to me, and said to me “Teacher look at me, I am already done” and that time I was looking at the other students, and then that boy grabbed my hand unexpectedly. I was shocked. A student came to me and grabbed me. I just sat and said “Students, relax. We’re going to check the answers and we’re going to have a game”. So, when talking about games, students love the game and they will listen well, so that’s how I handled the students.”

The TESL trainee teachers should always be ready for every unexpected situation that will be happening in the future, particularly in the aspect of their mental and physical readiness. The same trainee teacher also mentioned how she is capable of handling unexpected situations by shifting their attention to something interesting, for example, in the post-stage, where students love to play games. This research will be a guide to the present TESL trainee teachers in handling any unexpected situations and challenges, things to avoid during teaching and a manual to help them in providing the best preparation before entering school as a trainee teacher.

RQ 2: What are the challenges that the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) trainee teachers face in classroom teaching during teaching practicum?

Classroom teaching

After analyzing classroom teaching, in general, all trainee teachers faced almost similar challenges and difficulties in school. Overall, all participants gave positive feedback about the difficulties and challenges in school under the theme of classroom teaching. However, the trainee teachers expressed their concern over the necessity of using English as the medium of instruction in the classroom.

“Yes, I did. It is because most of my students were Chinese, so to be honest, their first language is Chinese and my first language is Tamil, and I didn’t know any Chinese words to explain the instructions. I can’t even explain it in Malay. When it comes to language, they have a very low level of proficiency, so it’s really hard for me to explain. That was the major difficulty that I faced.”

Another trainee teacher indicated:

“I did teach students from rural areas, and it was difficult for them to understand. For me, I can give instructions, I can do very well but for them to understand me, it was hard since they came from a rural area. They don’t use English very much and they don’t even think English is something important, so I had some sort of a language barrier but I always code-switch.”

Based on these responses, it was obvious on the worrying issue of the necessity of using English as a medium of instruction, particularly when communicating with the students from diverse proficiencies, needs, educational backgrounds as well as their geographical areas such as either from the rural or urban schools. However, despite the concerns of these trainee teachers, one of them mentioned how she implemented an approach of not using any jargons or complicated words when giving instructions.

“I had no difficulties using English as my medium of instruction because my target students were standard 4 students. They have the proficiency and they could understand what I tell them to do, since I’m doing direct and simple teaching, I didn’t use any jargon or complicated words that are suitable to their level to cater to their needs.”

Even though it is mentioned that her student of standard 4 has the proficiency of understanding

instruction well, her approach of only using short and simple instruction should be adapted in all teaching despite the student's level of proficiency, different background and first language. On the other hand, 4 out of 5 trainee teachers agreed that their lesson always takes longer than planned. As mentioned by one of the teacher trainees, sometimes he can't be able to complete the activity part because the lesson delivery part took longer.

"Yes, I did manage the time sufficiently, but somehow my activity took longer. I wouldn't be able to complete my activity part because my lesson usually took a longer period. It didn't suit the ratio for the lesson as well as the activity. So when it comes to the activity part, some classes I manage to finish according to the time, but some, I don't."

This shows how students need more time in learning and that the trainee teachers had to spend more time in the lesson delivery stage rather than the post-stage. But 1 out of 5 trainee teachers that do not have any issue with taking longer time than planned mentioned an approach that she used while in school.

"I think yes, because I usually tackle the most challenging activity first instead of the normal one, and I always set a time limit so that I won't go beyond it."

Seeing how one trainee teacher overcame this issue by tackling the most challenging activity first without disobeying the steps in lesson planning, should be taken as an example for other trainee teachers. Not only that but she also mentioned how she set a time limit so that she won't go beyond it. It sounds simple and easy but not everyone is able to be disciplined on their own. So, to solve this issue, trainee teachers must be able to be creative in designing a lesson with a sufficient amount of time and always be alert to the time going on.

"Talking about the difficulties in deciding teaching methodology, as for me, personally, I think I don't have difficulties during my intern and also my part time job, talking about the difficulties, when you know your strength and weakness of your student, then it will not occur during your lesson, because every student have mixed abilities, some have kinaesthetic, visualities, listening skills, so when it comes to teaching, you have to know. As a teacher, you have to know what will be the interesting topic and how to catch the students' attention."

In addition, the trainee teachers generally give positive feedback in being able to use methodology and strategies in teaching and also being able to adjust activities according to the student's level, as mentioned by one of the teacher trainees.

Trainee teachers' Personal Adjustments

It is well known that among their other duties, school administrators, and in particular the principal, must formally greet and introduce teacher trainees to the entire school as well as foster a friendly culture (Fish, 1989). This is basically a key to making the trainee teachers feel less pressured and able to teach comfortably. From the data, in terms of trainee teachers' personal adjustments, all of the trainee teachers agree that micro teaching is different from real-life teaching, are able to link theory and practice in teaching aids and have no issue regarding the lack of resources for teaching. However, it is shown that some trainee teachers are having issues with

students throwing tantrums during lessons.

“Yes, there were so many things that unexpectedly happened during the lesson. Sometimes the students threw tantrums because they just wanted to play. They didn’t think that this was something important for them, so what I did was I tried to ask them why they were behaving like that and try to minimize the problems, rather than solving it properly. I just ask them, okay, since we are learning, so if you learn well, I will reward you with something, and it happens if we reward students well, they will behave themselves.”

It is crucial for trainee teachers to have a healthy school environment, for them to be able to react well whenever students throw tantrums, instead of being emotional and pressured over them throwing tantrums. Also, trainee teachers must be able to be confident whenever they teach to ensure the students are engaging and interested throughout the lesson. The data shows that all of the trainee teachers shared that they are able to maintain self-confidence during teaching in the classroom and are able to produce loud and clear voice projections in the classroom.

“Since I was the teacher, I need to have confidence when I teach students. We, teachers, are educators, which means we are considered as the front liners. We need to understand what is the context that we are going to teach in the classroom. So in teaching the syllabus, the lesson, we are preoccupied with what we are going to teach in the classroom.”

Another trainee teacher also reported,

“Talking about confidence, yes, I’m very confident. The reason for that is because I think whenever I teach, I feel confident.”

In addition, these are good examples of how a comfortable environment affects the teacher trainees’ personal adjustments. Trainee teachers who are able to work in non-threaten surroundings will be great teachers who will provide the best quality of education in future, so we should take care of them. Table 1 provided the general view of the experiences and challenges faced by the trainee teachers.

Table 1: The general view of the experiences and challenges faced by the trainee teachers

	Amiera	Putri	Tasha	Shahrul	Adib
Classroom teaching					
Able to use methodology and strategies in teaching					
Using drilling techniques in teaching					
Lesson take longer than planned					
Having issue in preparing appropriate teaching materials					
Able to adjust activities according to student's level					
Using code-switch in giving instructions to student					
Having to repeat instructions more than once					
Having difficulties in using English as a medium of instruction					
Having to speak in mother tongue to student					
Students able to understand instructions without problem					
Trainee teachers' personal adjustments					
Able to maintain self-confidence during teaching in classroom					
Able to produce loud and clear voice projection in classroom					
Students throwing tantrums during lesson					
Feel nervous during first 2 weeks of teaching					
Agree that microteaching are different than real life teaching					
Able to link theory and practice in teaching aids					
Have no issue with lack of resources for teaching					
Able to create new educational materials					
Received sufficient resources and materials from school					
Make use of theories during teaching					
Classroom management					
Unexpected situation happened during teaching					
Lesson being delayed because of unavoidable circumstances					
Able to use the time sufficiently for planned lesson in class					
Not enough time to preapre lesson					
Able to handle unexpected situation					

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reduce the anxiety that practicum students have as they walk into the classroom to learn "how" and "what" to teach, teacher educators must acknowledge the difficulties of trainee teachers and have them handled. Managing students' behaviour and discipline as well as certain parts of classroom management are major concerns shared by all trainee teachers. The school orientation programme for trainee teachers includes conversations and observations of behavioural problems, but it doesn't seem like the trainee teachers are able to use their expertise to come up with solutions. As a result, focus should be given to these more. Classes that are poorly managed typically result in issues with student behaviour and can prevent the use of efficient instructional strategies. Meanwhile schools can also play a part by assisting trainee teachers in running their classrooms and handling disciplinary concerns.

Becoming a teacher and learning to teach at the same time is a difficult transition, therefore changes should be anticipated. It is important to consider the mental health of trainee teachers since it could affect whether or not they are successful in their careers as teachers. For trainee teachers, some kind of support system should be established to relieve their worries and anxieties. In order to offer trainee teachers more time to get acquainted with school routines, work with experienced teachers, and observe them in action, school placement time should be extended rather than being a 2 months practicum, as it is currently done in the university. Dealing with obstacles like difficulty choosing and deploying teaching strategies and methods is a necessary part of achieving successful teaching in order to achieve great learning results. There isn't a single, obvious approach in the teacher's professional paradigm for the act of teaching, particular attention could be given to exposing trainee teachers in teaching institutions to a variety of teaching methods and how these methods can be used effectively and be implemented. Assignments ought to expose aspiring trainee teachers to common issues and difficulties in the classroom. If trainee teachers were provided a structured means to reflect on what they had learned during practicum, they would have the chance to improve their reflective skills and take charge of their own professional development.

It is essential to teach ways for controlling and preventing these problems and to have this information integrated into education courses, instead of only identifying and classifying the problems that trainee teachers face. It is necessary to figure out how to combine the theoretical ideas learnt in college with the actual conditions of the classroom in order to assist trainee teachers in going through the practicum experience. The surroundings and circumstances seen in schools must be more current in education courses. It's crucial to have a systematic process for trainee teachers to evaluate the curriculum on a regular basis and make sure that any issue areas are covered.

However, there seems to be some merit to the claim that allowing trainee teachers to reflect on their own experiences will foster the discipline and critical thinking abilities required for the challenges that await them once they become teachers. An extensive investigation as well as a potentially wider qualitative study based on interviews and observations in terms of classroom may be carried out to ascertain the strategies used by trainee teachers to deal with their concerns. The utilization of documented techniques as training tools by teacher educators, in-service teachers in schools, and future trainee teachers during practicum could all be beneficial. The researchers contend that any new information will not only deepen our comprehension but also aid trainee teachers, improve their learning opportunities, and prepare the road for their future success.

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