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45 MINUTES WITHIN THE FOUR WALLS OF A CLASSROOM: PROBLEMS AND CONCERNS OF STUDENT TEACHERS DURING THEIR PRACTICUM

Abstract: Student practicum is an important part of teacher preparatory program. It is speculated that pre-service teachers who manage to complete their practicum with a sense of accomplishment and success are more likely to choose teaching as their ultimate career. However, before trainee teachers turn into fully-fledged, certified teachers, they need to work through the numerous challenges that student teaching poses on them. The literature adduced in the present paper points to a number of concerns that trainee teachers struggle with. First and foremost, they strongly complain about pupils' misbehaviour and lack of motivation. Other stated problems include trainee teachers' ineffective time and classroom management and feeling of anxiety that accompanies them throughout the whole period of practicum. In the present study we investigated the problems and worries of 108 student teachers majoring in English at the University of Silesia. The findings are congruous with the existing research in that pre-service teachers mostly struggle with pupils' misbehaviour, time management, stress and feeling of anxiety. This emotional strain is caused by a number of factors: lack of confidence in one's teaching skills, inability to introduce order and discipline, demotivated learners, being observed by a supervising teacher and conducting their first lesson.

Keywords: teacher education, student teaching, classroom management.

Introduction

Student practicum¹ is an important part of teacher education as it provides trainee teachers² with a foretaste of what teaching constitutes. It is a growth-producing and

¹ An obligatory component of teacher training programs in which students are required to spend time in the school classroom (both observing and conducting classes) is referred throughout this paper as 'student practicum', 'student teaching' and 'teaching practice'.

² Trainee teachers are also referred to in the present paper as 'student teachers' and 'pre-service teachers'.

eye-opening experience that frequently becomes a valid indicator of whether or not one embarks upon the teaching career. The benefits that students draw from their practice are manifold. Oral (2012:2913) observes that student teaching provides aspiring teachers with professional competence and helps them decrease their anxiety concerning behaviour and teaching management. Furthermore, student teaching successfully verifies pre-service teachers' conceptions about the nature of teaching and the nature of teacher-pupil relationship. The situations that student teachers are exposed to during the pre-service level exert powerful impact on students' professional development (Gabryś-Barker 2010:32). Classroom experience provides pre-service teachers with an opportunity to modify their self-perceptions about teaching. Positive experience is likely to inspire and give wings. In the same vein, an accumulation of negative experience may effectively discourage them from pursuing teacher career. It has to be noted, however, that student practicum, as crucial as it is, does not provide students with a full teacher experience for at least two reasons. Firstly, in the course of the practice professionals-to-be are supervised by a teacher-mentor, who offers guidance, advice and emotional support. Secondly, during their practicum trainee teachers do not feel fully responsible for the quality of teaching as most of the decisions concerning content of their classes are taken by the regular teacher (Szymańska 2010:41). On the other hand, one may argue that the presence of the mentor and the lack of ability to take decisions do not ease trainee teachers into their new environment but rather contribute to their stress and anxiety. If this is so, these two factors come alongside a considerable number of other problems and concerns that pre-service teachers stumble upon in the course of their practicum. In the present paper concerns of aspiring teachers are discussed and results of our small-scale study are presented.

Problems and concerns of student teachers

Student teachers tend to have high expectations of their own classroom performance and get easily discouraged when faced with initial difficulties (Murray-Harvey *et al.* 2000:25). Inspired by their teacher preparation program, they are willing to experiment with less conventional teaching techniques and introduce changes and novelties that are meant to sweep the pupils off their feet and win their hearts. Student teachers tend to have idealistic views on teaching. They hold memories of their own teachers and wish to avoid their mistakes or, conversely, they wish to follow their example. Gabryś-Barker (2010:34) discusses the term 'disequilibrium' or 'destabilization', which is a conflict between the kind of teacher a trainee wants to be and the school reality, which imposes certain roles on him/her. Real classroom experience is often different from what pre-service teachers have imagined. That student teachers may have false expectations of the profession is also observed by Stokking *et al.* (2003:330). Students frequently form

their views of teaching based on their own school experiences in their childhood and adolescence. However, the reality of teaching is significantly different when seen from the teacher's perspective. Regrettably, student teachers' genuine intentions to inspire the youth are often jeopardised by very mundane problems, most commonly lack of discipline and misbehaviour in the classroom.

Classroom management is *the most common concern cited by pre-service, beginning and experienced teachers as well as being the focus of media reports, professional literature and school staff room conversations* (McCormack 1997:102). As reported by Merç (2003:214), student teachers' problems with classroom management and pupils' misbehaviour result from the fact that pupils do not treat them as 'real' teachers. Worryingly, this attitude displayed by pupils is also reflected in their lack of motivation to participate in the lessons conducted by trainee teachers. Trainee teachers are reported to attempt to build authority with their students either by being authoritarian and domineering or by being overwhelmingly friendly (Gabryś-Barker 2010:39). Regrettably, both strategies are counterproductive. Pre-service teachers' autocratic behaviour is frequently subverted by students' increased misbehaviour as they do not feel threatened by a teacher who is in charge only temporarily. Those student teachers who, on the other hand, try to build authority by being too friendly are in danger of being perceived as neither friends nor authority.

This excessive friendliness on the part of pre-service teachers can also be an indicator of another potentially problematic area. According to Kanno *et al.* (2011:247), student teachers find it difficult to recognise themselves as teachers and instead tend to identify with their students. This situation is more likely to occur when trainees conduct their practicum in an educational institution of higher level, e.g. senior high school, where the age difference between pre-service teachers and their students is negligible. Trainee teachers perceive students as friends and refuse to correct their mistakes or provide with critical feedback.

In a research project by Poulou (2007), a group of trainee teachers were asked to express their feelings and concerns about their teaching practice. The participants of the study were instructed to run a journal throughout the period of their practicum. The study yields interesting observations, e.g. students confess that teaching practice has challenged their expectations of what teaching is. This sentiment is manifested in the following quotation by one of the respondents:

I realised that the teaching profession is not as easy as I first thought. The teacher's role is significant in the development of the pupils' personality. Not only does it provide a model of behaviour for children, but in a few cases, it balances the parents' inadequate model.

This reflection illustrates how beneficial practicum is as it provides professionals-to-be with real food for thought. For many students the teaching practice has become an eye-opening experience.

A study conducted by Merç (2003:208) among trainee teachers in Turkey has signalled that during their teaching practice the participants have struggled mainly with the feeling of anxiety, time and classroom management and their pupils' lack of motivation. The respondents' level of anxiety was especially high in a number of situations, most often before delivering a lesson, throughout their first lesson and when observed by expert teachers. Some of the respondents confess they experienced anxiety because they generally felt incompetent as teachers. The same sentiment is expressed by student teachers in a study by Thornton *et al.* (2002:38) who confess they do not believe they can do their job well. This may signal that the informants have entered their practicum inadequately prepared either linguistically or methodologically.

Another problematic area mentioned in the study by Merç (2003:209) is time management. Pacing the lesson proved difficult for pre-service teachers, who reported emotional discomfort with unexpected delays that prevented them from following the lesson plan. Ineffective time management is attributable to trainees' strong attachment to the original plan of a lesson. This failure to run a class according to the plan impinges on teachers' self-confidence and leads to frustration as they see their efforts come to waste. However, as pre-service teachers grow in experience and expertise, they learn to accept changes and become more spontaneous.

Merç (2003:216) also observes that most of the stated problems experienced by aspiring teachers decrease in frequency with the passage of time. Student teachers in a study by Cabaroğlu (2012:124) confess that their confidence and sense of self-efficacy have increased towards the end of their teaching practice. Oral (2012:2911) reports that student teaching equips trainee teachers with abilities to successfully manage teaching, which makes them feel more self-assured.

Still, some of the problems do not show any improvement throughout the practicum. For instance, the feeling of anxiety and classroom management problems are more likely to persevere throughout the whole period of teaching practice. Furthermore, it has to be noticed that not all changes in pre-service teachers' classroom performance seem to be positive. A case study by Kanno *et al.* (2011:248) reports that student teachers' initial enthusiasm and genuine excitement about their students become replaced by *growing disengagement and a more business-like attitude toward their jobs*.

Summarily, student teaching is an important part of teacher education as it constitutes a crucial factor motivating students to become teachers. Student teachers recognise their practicum as a valuable experience, but also as the most stressful part of the teacher education program (MacDonald 1992:50). The most common problems experienced by pre-service teachers discussed in the present paper are connected with pupils' misbehaviour, poor time and classroom management, students' initial lack of identification with the teaching profession and general feeling of anxiety that accompanies student teachers throughout the whole period of practicum. It is speculated that at least some of these problems are related to prospective teachers' high expectations of their classroom performance, which makes them vulnerable to even negligible stumbles.

Methodology

Having in mind all the difficulties and obstacles pre-service teachers struggle with during the initial phases of their professional experience, a small-scale study was designed. It aimed to explore problems, non-achievements and students' perceptions connected with their first experiences in the teaching profession. In this research, a qualitative method was used which was a survey composed of fourteen open-ended questions. The survey was divided into two sections. The first one referred to the teaching practice being part of university teacher education program; the second part explored general aspects connected with the teaching profession. For the sake of the present paper, the former part of the questionnaire was analysed in detail.

Study participants

108 Polish university students took part in the study. This number denotes 97 female participants and 11 male participants. There were 4 respondents who did not mark their gender. All the informants were post-graduate students in the 4th and 5th year of teacher education program at the Institute of English, University of Silesia, Poland. 44 subjects completed their qualifications part time and 61 respondents studied full time. Receiving a degree authorises them to exercise the profession of a teacher at all levels of education. As part of their teacher education, pre-service teachers complete a large number of TEFL courses, such as: pedagogy, didactics, applied linguistics, psychology, to name but a few. Apart from theoretical classes, they spend numerous hours in the classroom: first – observing lessons and then becoming active teachers. At the point of conducting the survey, the trainees acknowledged to have observed on average 65 hours of classes and to have conducted on average 95 hours of classes. 76 study participants declared that they already worked as teachers at the time the questionnaire was administered. 31 of them conducted private classes, 17 worked at a public school, 44 – at a private language school. There were 29 respondents who stated that they did not have any other professional experience except for the teaching practicum at that period.

Results

The research was conducted in the first two months of the winter semester in 2013. Discussion will be organized according to the questions posed in the survey.

Question no. 1: What caused you most problems/worries?

Here, we aimed at investigating the most problematic elements of practicum prospective teachers encountered at the beginning of their professional work. The two most frequently indicated issues were the ones stressed by McCormack (1997:102) and Merç (2003:209) which were: lack of discipline among learners and time management. The former issue was indicated by 68 study participants, which constitutes 63% of all the responses. The latter one was defined as problematic by 19% of trainee teachers.

Here is an exemplary unedited comment on the disruptive behaviour:

The discipline in classroom was the biggest problem for me during my practice. Very often learners treat me like a colleague rather than teacher. It was so because I was slightly older. When I was supposed to make grammar lesson in Junior High School they were laughing that I made so simple theory that was obvious for them – but my supervisor asked me to do that.

Except for proving that discipline problem is a serious factor which disrupts the course of a lesson, the above examples also show how significantly pupils' behaviour is influenced by teacher's age, which in some cases may lead to shortening the distance and decrease in credibility on the learners' part. They may refuse to treat prospective teachers as professionals and building authority in such circumstances becomes a serious challenge, which was noticed by Gabryś-Barker (2010:39).

Time management was the second most frequently indicated difficulty prospective teachers needed to address. This ability posed a problem to every fifth respondent. Students did not know how many activities to prepare to fill up forty-five minutes of a lesson and how to administer every exercise to ensure a proper pace during the classes:

I had problems with proper timing (sometimes there was too much time left and sometimes I didn't manage to do everything I wanted to do).

The amount and complexity of paperwork was also found to be an overwhelming task for the trainee teachers. They were not sure how to complete school documents properly because, regrettably, their supervising teachers did not provide them with any instruction on how to fill in the register. Additionally, trainee teachers felt burdened by the number of documents (observation sheets, lesson plans and lesson conspects) they were obliged to submit for the university, which, in their view, diminished the positive aspects of performing the work of a teacher. Such an impression was shared by 15% of the respondents:

The biggest worry of all was definitely red tape. There is definitely too much paper work to do, too many forms to fill, which take away the joy of teaching. Every lesson means about 10 sheets of paper.

The fourth problematic area indicated by 13% of the research subjects was stress connected with the task of conducting a lesson. The feeling of emotional strain was caused by several factors: anxiety of not being adequately prepared for their job, inability to introduce order and discipline among learners, being observed by a supervising teacher, necessity of increasing pupils' motivation and conducting the first lesson in their practicum. These issues are manifested in the following quotations:

I wasn't sure if my knowledge about English is sufficient. I was afraid that learners may be unwilling to cooperate. The feeling of being observed and assessed for everything that you do as a teacher is also stressful.

Question no. 2: Did you experience anything you could qualify as a failure?

Although the study participants identified numerous problems and non-achievements they encountered during their practicum, 44% claimed that they had not experienced any failure. Out of the remaining part – 10% held a view that an inability of making students more active or improving their attitude had been an element they consider as a failure.

Furthermore, informants indicated they had a problem with preparation of a lesson plan in terms of timing. 30% of study subjects shared the same impression. In most cases the number of activities arranged for a particular class was too large and, therefore, impossible to realize. The third issue that students struggled with was maintaining discipline. However, although misbehaviour was reported as problematic by 63% of the subjects, only 8% defined their inability to cope with this problem as a failure.

Question no. 3: Did you feel adequately prepared for your practicum?

The study subjects faced numerous worries while delivering their first lessons at schools. In spite of the obstacles, 74% of respondents confirmed that they felt linguistically prepared for their practicum. 66% of subjects expressed the same attitude in reference to methodological preparation. The fact of being methodologically unprepared was justified by some of the students in the following way:

In the first year of practice I didn't feel methodologically prepared, linguistically – yes. I felt more prepared in the second year but most of the knowledge I acquired during my work, in practice – my lectures provided me with almost nothing.

Question no. 4: Did you feel as a fully-fledged teacher?

Looking at responses to question no. 4, it can be concluded that 26% of the informants felt linguistically unprepared for their practicum and 34% of the students held a similar view when it comes to methodological preparation. Some of the subjects expressed disillusionment connected with the discrepancy between theoretical knowledge they had acquired at university and practice they had faced standing in front of schoolchildren. Other respondents complained about lack of serious treatment on the part of the learners which had been caused by small age difference and inexperience of trainee teachers. Did these factors allow students to perceive themselves as fully-fledged teachers? It turns out that exactly half of the study participants answered that they did not have that impression. 6% claimed to share it partly; whereas, the rest of the students (44%) indicated that they felt as skilled teachers.

Question no. 5: Did your practicum change your perceptions of the teaching profession?

As it has already been stated, the time of student practice may lead to 'disequilibrium' which denotes the clash between school reality and expectations that prospective teachers hold before they embark on the path of professional career (Gabryś-Barker 2010:34). Such tendency has also been observed in our research in which 53% of participants admitted that their experience at school differed from the image they had built earlier:

Yes, it made me more aware how hard it is. I considered myself a well-prepared, open-minded teacher willing to pass on the knowledge, but reality showed me that there is still a long way ahead of me.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this study are congruous with other research exemplified in the first part of the paper. Supporting the existing literature, the study has confirmed that trainee teachers face numerous obstacles at the point of embarking upon the professional career. The most commonly cited problem was pupils' misbehaviour and lack of discipline. Moreover, trainee teachers consider it problematic to prepare reliable lesson plans that would lead them smoothly through 45 minutes of a class. For this reason, they are unable to introduce a proper pace of work and follow the plan they had arranged which is a source of considerable frustration. Constant stress evoked by learners' misbehaviour, their lack of motivation, conducting the first lesson and being observed by a supervising teacher are further obstacles pointed at in our study. The research conducted by the present authors shows that the subjects perceive the necessity to complete

official school documents as an overwhelming task as they are unsure of how to do it properly. Such an obstacle may be caused by the lack of proper assistance on the part of a supervising teacher. Moreover, the amount of paperwork connected with preparing detailed conspects of lessons proved to be a burdensome task which decreased the positive aspects of the practicum.

However, our research has shown that in spite of indicating learners' misbehaviour as a main problematic area, there is a low percentage of respondents who perceive their inability of dealing with discipline as a failure. What is more, there is a significant group of subjects who believe that they had not experienced any failure at the time of their practicum although they claim to have encountered numerous problems. This may indicate that obstacles they stumble upon are perceived as difficulties they are able to deal with effectively. It has also been stated in the relevant literature that the first school experience evokes the feeling of destabilization. Our study has shown that half of respondents shared this impression. The remaining part of the subjects claimed to have been aware of the school reality before they entered the classroom for the first time. Such an awareness gives a chance of avoiding disillusionment connected with negative events and allows for better attitude and mental preparation to face the problems.

Numerous TEFL courses the study participants attended at university provided the students with the confidence of being adequately prepared for their practicum. Our study shows that such an attitude was shared by over two thirds of the respondents who claimed to have acquired sufficient linguistic and methodological knowledge which allowed them to enter upon the professional path with success. Moreover, having spent on average 95 hours in classrooms acting as a teacher gave almost half of the subjects the feeling of being fully-fledged professionals which definitely strengthens their self-confidence at the beginning of their career.

Concluding, the experience of student teaching equips trainees with knowledge they will base upon if they decide to remain in the profession. It gives them awareness of what areas need further improvement and what skills have already been mastered. Yet, it is speculated that experience gained during the practicum would bring fewer problems if students received more assistance from their supervising teachers.

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