

An Appraisal of Practice Teaching Through the Perspective of Head Teachers from Cooperating Schools

 Lal Bahadur Rana

Abstract

Since the establishment of the then 'College of Education' in 1956 with a view to preparing teachers required for the nation, the students who get their any degrees in education from Tribhuvan University undergo the process of practice teaching. However, its stakeholders have not taken it as seriously as they should have taken it, which is why, it has been rather ritualistic and its quality is under scrutiny. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how practice teaching can be revamped through the perspective of the head teachers from cooperating schools. To this end, the head teachers of Surkhet Valley were invited to participate in an interaction program organized by Surkhet Campus (Education). In this discussion, majority of them maintained that both host campus and cooperating schools should take joint initiatives to provide prospective teachers, trainers, and teacher educators with enough opportunities for consolidating theoretically learned ideas and strategies through experimentation.

Key words: Practice teaching, microteaching, student teachers, observation, revamping.

Introduction

Practice teaching is a type of teaching usually done at the end of a pre-service or in-service teacher training programs by the students or trainee teachers in order to consolidate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they have learned during the course or training period. A variety of terms can be used to refer to practice teaching, including practicum, field experience, apprenticeship, practical experience, and internship (Gebhard, 2009). However, he maintains that student teachers' experiences in these different types of practicum may vary considerably in intensity and level of responsibility. For example, during the internship, the student teacher might be an assistant, but in a practice teaching, he or she might carry a full teaching load. Richards, Plat and Platt (1999) mention that practice teaching is a period of time during which student teachers are provided with the opportunities to gain real teaching experience by teaching the course to be handled by the teachers of a school and apply the information and skills they have studied in their teacher education program.

Practice teaching has been divided into two phases: microteaching (on campus teaching) and school/college (off campus) teaching. The former refers to the scaled down teaching in which usually student teachers teach their own colleagues assuming that they are the students of a certain levels; whereas the latter refers to the full-fledged teaching in which the student teachers teach the students of cooperating schools.

Wallace (2010) defines microteaching as "one of range of techniques for developing experiential knowledge of professional action in a controlled progressive way" (p. 87). It is a training context in which a teacher's situation is reduced in scope or simplified in some systematic ways. Like the people of other professions such as medicine and engineering, teachers should also be provided with safe opportunities for experimentations so that they can build up experimental knowledge. It is an example of such an opportunity. A typical microteaching includes teaching short lessons exemplifying a certain skill or aspect.

Microteaching is extended for a two-week-period during which each student has to present at least

three lessons. At first, students prepare their plans and submit them to their supervisors who are responsible for observing them. Having obtained the feedbacks from the supervisors, students reshape their plans and then present in front of their colleagues turn by turn. Here, their colleagues do not only play the role of participants, but also of feedback providers and evaluators. Immediately after they finish their presentations, they need to write reflections on their presentations. Once they have finished writing reflections, both supervisors and the students who have played the role of pupils give them feedbacks. Based on their feedbacks, they have to improvise their next lessons.

School teaching is of six weeks for B. Ed. and three to four weeks for M. Ed. During the time, student teachers are supposed to go to the schools assigned to them and conduct classes regularly. As a rule, each student teacher should teach one class a day. In addition to this, he or she has to undertake other tasks such as observing peers, writing school reports and carrying out a case study of a student.

Statement of the Problem

In pre-service teacher training, students should not only be provided with the opportunities to gain theoretical knowledge, but also the opportunities of the practical skills that are essential for their careers. Regarding to this, Wallace (2010) maintains that both experiential and received knowledge are complementary to each other. Students obtain theoretical knowledge through studying and attending classes at campus; and experiential knowledge from the practice teaching they undertake in the last year of their course. Thus, practice teaching is the opportunity for experimenting and obtaining experiential knowledge.

Despite its importance, the stakeholders do not seem to have taken it as seriously as they should have done it. For example, the host campuses seem to be administrative rather than academic in this

regard. They send their student teachers in schools without preparing them how teaching should be done. They send internal observers to observe student teachers' sessions and provide necessary feedbacks for the improvement of their sessions. There are rumors that internal observers just check their student teachers' lesson plans without entering into the classroom that they are supposed to do. They do not think of mentoring their students. Students, on the other hand, think that practice teaching is just a ritual to be performed; rather than a process through which skilled teacher or teacher educators are produced.

Likewise, the head teachers and other teachers of the cooperating schools also have the similar attitudes towards practice teaching. They tend to think that if they could manage the student teachers their duties are over. The subject-teachers feel sigh of relief, for they do not have to teach for a couple of weeks. They even sign at the bottom of student teachers' lesson plans without reading them. All this information presents the very grim facets of practice teaching.

By neglecting practice teaching, education campuses are producing inefficient future teachers. Therefore, such teachers will certainly produce the students similar to them when they become teachers. If they do not develop their skills and abilities after they begin to teach, they will be destroying many generations. Considering its repercussions in the future education of Nepal, challenges related to practice teaching must be addressed in time.

Significance of the Study

As mentioned in the statement of the problem section, the importance of practice teaching in the field of teacher education can hardly be exaggerated as it is one of the safest ways of equipping learners with the experiential knowledge required for their professional development. Its implication is that the more practice teaching is rigorous, the more skillful teachers can be produced.

This research can be significant for three reasons. First, as it is directly related to the improvement of quality practice teaching, education campuses can have insights into the nature of the challenges they have been facing over a long period.

Second, since the participants raised some of the issues on how the dearth of teachers in secondary and higher secondary levels can be resolved by employing student teachers in the rural areas of Nepal, the policy makers can review and rethink over the issue and can change their policies in line with the findings of the research.

Third, this can be a good resource for those who would like to undertake their researches in the same or similar field of teacher training and teacher development.

Literature Review

A number of researches related to practice teaching have already been undertaken. However, few of them that are relevant in terms of the context and topic in question are reviewed here.

Khatri (2012) carried out a survey study on 'Attitudes of student-teachers towards practice teaching program' gathering data from 90 students teaches of five constituent campuses: Dhankuta Multiple Campus, Mahendra Ratna Campus, Prithivi Narayan Campus, Surkhet Campus (Education) and Dandauldhura Campus with a view to finding out the respondents' attitudes towards practice teaching. The major specific objectives of the study were to find out whether student teachers find practice teaching useful and investigate their attitudes towards the behavior of students and teaching staff of the host schools during the program. Unlike the rumors such as 'practice teaching is just for formality', 'it is all useless', etc. He found that majority of the students i.e. 72.38% student teachers had positive attitudes towards practice teaching. Similarly, another finding of his study was that both the teachers and students of host schools had positive attitudes towards the student teachers. He also found that the teachers of the cooperating schools provided

them with constructive feedback on their teaching and learning activities in the classroom and the teachers of the host schools were not found to have commented student teachers stating that the they taught slow as they were incompetent and inexperienced.

Similarly, Gautam (2010) discusses various issues and challenges related to practice teaching under the Faculty of Education at Tribhuvan University. He presents faculties' and students' perspectives on practice teaching.

The faculties brought the following issues and challenges:

1. The student teachers have weak language proficiency and therefore could not teach English in schools properly.
2. Student teachers did not know how to prepare lesson plans: maybe, this is because they were not taught how to do it in the campus or they did not pay attention.
3. The faculty members confessed that the internal supervisors were not honest in supervision. This shows the lack of sincerity on the part of the teachers.
4. Lack of uniformity among the internal supervisors was a major issue. They say that the supervisors did not give uniform instruction/suggestions to the student teachers, which created several problems.
5. Student teachers did not take teaching practice seriously and they took it as a formality and they had a tendency of giving undue pressure to the teachers for giving more marks in their external supervision.
6. Halo effect in the evaluation was also mentioned. The students felt that obtaining marks in teaching practice is a mercy of the internal and external supervisors.

The students brought the following issues and challenges in the forefront:

1. Teaching practice had been used not as a learning experience but as a formality

2. Many students said that the internal supervisors did not supervise properly; they just sat in the class and disappeared after few minutes without giving any comments or feedback.
3. The internal supervisors just criticized what went wrong; they rarely encouraged how the students could build on their strengths.
4. School head-teachers/teachers did not treat the student teachers as they were practicing teachers but they behaved them as if they came to schools just to pass their time.
5. Lack of good coordination between the schools and campuses made it difficult to handle the situation easily.
6. Schools were not very much cooperative to the student teachers.
7. They also accepted that there was a great deal of carelessness among the student teachers.
8. Another serious problem they pointed out was that the internal supervisors were biased.

Methodology

This section deals with participants, tools for data collection, data collection procedure and analysis of the collected data.

Participants: As stated above, the participants were 30 head teachers who would manage classes for student teachers deputed to their schools.

Instrument: Opinionnaire was the instrument for data elicitation tool.

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The respondents were asked to give their views on how practice teaching can be further improved so that the campus can help student teachers equip with the required skills and attitudes that are essential for them to be teachers or teacher trainers. Among thirty participants, eight of them expressed their opinions on different issues and aspects of practice teaching. The head of department of the department of practice teaching himself moderated the interaction program. The researcher himself kept on putting down what

the respondents said. Finally, the data collected in this way were analyzed descriptively.

Results

This part deals with the presentation of the data collected from the interaction program.

The participant **A** says that the number student in the letter the campus sends do not match with the actual number of students who actually go to school for practice teaching. Furthermore, he vehemently criticized that both internal and external supervisors observe student teachers' classes on a bus; not in the classroom. Further, he also remarked that the student teachers do not possess the essential skills of teaching and learning. For example, he said that students were not able to prepare relevant materials for teaching lessons. He suggested that the state should bring about changes in the policy of pre-service teacher trainings.

Likewise, the respondent **B** agreeing with the mismatch between the actual number of students who go to schools for their practice teachings and the number that the letter sent to school says, he further points out the following points:

1. Student teachers do not wear the kind of dresses that give them professional look.
2. Those who have jobs request the head teachers to mark them presence even if they remain absent in teaching.
3. The campus has sold practice teaching handbook, which has curtailed the creativity of learners, because if they like to prepare their lesson plans in details the handbook does not have sufficient space.
4. The student teachers should be within school premises from ten to four like other regular teachers of a school so that internal supervisors can observe their classes and give constructive feedbacks.
5. The general trend is that external examiners observe classes disturbing the regular classes of a school. They should examine the student teachers as per the routine specified.
6. The student teachers should be informed what they are supposed to do when they are in

practice teaching.

7. A provision should be made that head teachers should be one of the signatories in the school report that the student teachers of bachelor's level are supposed to prepare as one of the tasks of practice teaching.
8. Casting doubts on the evaluation system, he says, "How come irregular student teachers score higher scores than those of the ones who are very regular and dutiful?"

Similarly, the participant **D**, the founder principal of a private school, mentioned that the student teachers sent in the private schools would run away finding some ways to escape. She thinks that it is due to the lack of confidence on the part of the student teachers. Therefore, she opined that student teachers should be sent to private schools considering their levels and capabilities.

On the other hand, the participant **E**, who is also the founder principal of a private school, presented other perspective of practice teaching. He mentioned that many student teachers deputed by the campus in private schools do not like to continue their practice teaching in those schools, as they need to use English as a medium of instruction. Because of this particular reason, as he claimed, many student teachers do not desire to go to his school for practice teaching. Those who dare to go there also ask if they really have to teach in English medium. As they lack proficiency over the English language, they like to shift to public schools making some kinds of excuses. In such cases, he would suggest that they should take permissions from the concerned authorities of campus.

Unlike the above-mentioned respondents, the respondent **F** expressed his ideas very positively. He said that the provision of sending student teachers in schools for helping them practice what they have learned theoretically into real classrooms would remind their teachers of their own teaching experience, which would rejuvenate them. He suggested that we should change the policy of the pre-service teacher trainings. He speculated

that the dearth of competent in secondary and higher secondary schools could be easily resolved if the student teachers were to be employed like real teachers for a couple of months. In doing so, he mentioned, that the government or campus should provide subsistence allowance to them. In additional to these things, he mentioned that four-year B.Ed. program to be implemented in the near future should have the provision of one-year internship.

Similarly, the respondent **G**, like other respondents raised the issue of assigning marks to the student teachers. He claimed that the teachers were biased in evaluating student teachers, which resulted irregular students obtaining better marks than those of the regular ones. He also expressed his problem of assigning only one class for four student teachers.

In the similar vein, the respondent **H** viewed that education campus should focus on practical aspect so that the students would be sound in both theory and practice. He reported that he had found teachers being very unsuccessful not because of their competence, but because of the lack of their practical knowledge. Furthermore, he signaled the deterioration in the quality of education imparted by the campus as he claimed that many student teachers sent in the school for practice teaching did not know how to prepare their lesson plans and teaching materials.

Discussion

From the participants' ideas, it can be inferred that practice teaching has been a ritualistic task to be performed by the student teachers; rather than a process of providing them with practical knowledge that can be very instrumental in shaping their professional careers. For this, there might be a number of complex set of interrelated factors. For example, one of the respondents mentioned that external supervision had been done without going to the classroom in which a particular student teacher had been assigned to teach by the

head teacher of a school. They might have dared to take such ill-attempts because of the negligence of regulatory bodies such as campus administration, Dean's office, etc.

The number of student teachers seems to be another cause for the deteriorations of quality practice teaching, because not all the students are fortunate enough to get single class. For example, one of the respondents maintained that he had assigned one class for four student teachers. That means they were asked to perform group teaching. Due to the lack of peer or group teaching ideas, students do not go to school everyday. Even if they go to school, one of them goes to take sessions; and the rest of them rest in the office. Thus, they have one class once in four or five days.

The head teachers of the private schools do not seem to have been convinced that student teachers sent to their schools teach their students due to the lack of proficiency over the English language. Among three such respondents, one suggested the campus that the latter should think of students' competence and English language proficiency before sending student teachers to their schools. In the similar fashion, another participant of such type informed the campus that students teachers sent to his schools would like to go to public schools. His assumption is that they cannot teach his students as they lack both language proficiency, and the mastery over the subject matter to be delivered to his students.

The desire to change the policy of pre-service teacher education was also found among the participants. The participants assumed that they could solve the dearth of skilled teachers needed for many secondary and higher secondary levels of Nepal if all the student teachers are mandatorily asked to teach for a certain period of time for which the government should provide subsistence allowance to them.

Assigning marks to student teacher was also questioned. It is true to some extent as it all depends upon the subjective judgment of internal

as well as external supervisors. There are not fixed criteria or rubrics as such against which all the student teachers are evaluated.

The stakeholders of practice teaching do not seem to have taken it as a procedure for mentoring the prospective teachers. No participants seem to have asked the subject teachers observe the student teachers' teaching and provide them with feedbacks everyday. They tend to take practice teaching through the administrative perspective only.

Implications

The discussion has a number of implications that can be very useful for systematizing practice teaching to be undertaken by the students of B. Ed. and M. Ed. Some major implications are discussed below.

Firstly, the campus should have a clear record of how many students are carrying practice teaching in an academic session. Such information may be very useful for sending students in a school. If cooperating schools cannot manage classes for them, the campus administration should try to find out some alternatives as well. For example, it can be conducted in two or three phases considering whether it is viable for both the stakeholders: cooperating schools and campus. It is because schools may find their classes being disturbed when the campus keeps on sending students.

Secondly, internal supervisors should not only check students' lesson plans, but also go to classrooms and observe full classes and they should provide developmental feedbacks to their students in the light of their observation. Similarly, external and internal observers should follow the same trend in the final observation as well. Furthermore, the regulatory bodies of the Faculty of Education or campus should strictly follow or make other follow the systems specified for practice teaching.

Thirdly, student teachers should be evaluated preparing specific rubrics so that student teachers know the criteria against which they are going to be evaluated. This provision can certainly make evaluation valid and

reliable. In addition to this, the student teachers also know how many marks they deserve.

Fourthly, considering the context, the concerned authorities should formulate rules and regulations involving the stakeholders and then implement those rules and regulations effectively.

Fifthly, for increasing external validity, the campus should assure the quality education bringing about changes in teaching and learning activities in the classroom. Markee (1997) says that the most important aspect of classroom innovation is the pedagogical aspect. Therefore, for ensuring quality, we must change the process of teaching and learning activities to be done in our classrooms. Although we use more or less the same material resources as used by the students and teachers of reputed universities, our students do not have confidence and capabilities like the ones from other reputed universities mainly because of the process we follow. Taking initiatives towards this direction will certainly increase the demand of our graduates.

Sixthly, some issues related to policy of practice teaching have been raised. Therefore, it will be wise to hold discussions on how those issues can be addressed, for example, providing daily subsistence allowance for the student teachers and employing them for an academic session or for six months.

Lastly, both campus and cooperating schools should take joint initiatives for enhancing the quality of student teachers and should take teaching practice as a means of mentoring to prospective teachers and equipping student teachers with theoretical and experiential knowledge of teaching and learning. In order to do this, these institutions should always maintain a mutual symbiotic relationship in order to equip student teachers with theoretical and experiential knowledge of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Practice teaching is an essential part of pre-service teacher education, because it is one of the major ways of acquainting learners with real teaching

experience. Due to the large number of students participating in practice teaching, host campus and cooperating schools have some challenges in managing classes and maintaining records. Similarly, lacks of proper mentoring and monitoring have further compounded the problems. Therefore, it has become administrative rather than academic. Despite all these challenges, the stakeholders seem to have been fully committed to take initiatives in order to enhance its quality.

About the author

Mr. Rana is Lecturer of TU at Surkhet Camps (Education). He is the Head of the Department of English Education (M. Ed. Level), of the campus and central member of NELTA. He is interested in critical thinking, critical pedagogy, and SLA. He has published articles in different Journals and authored textbooks and teachers' manual for campus level.

References

- Gautam, G. R. (2010). Practice/Student Teaching in I. ED. and B. ED.: A learning experience or a meaningless ritual? *NELTA Choutari*, Retrieved on December 13, 2013 from <http://neltachoutari.wordpress.com/2010/09/04/practice-teaching-a-reflection/>
- Gebhard, J. G. (2009). The practicum. In A. Burns & J.C. Richards (Eds.), *Second language teacher education* (pp. 250-255). New Delhi: Cambridge University Press
- Khatri, R. (2012). *Attitudes of student-teachers towards practice teaching program*. An unpublished mini research report submitted to the Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University, Nepal
- Markee, N. (1997). *Managing curricular innovation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., Platt J. & Platt H. (1999). *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics*. London: Longman
- Wallace, M. J. (2010). *Training foreign language teachers: A reflective approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.