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**PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE IN TEACHER TRAINING:
A PRELIMINARY AND QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPROVED
NIE-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP MODEL IN SINGAPORE**

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Abstract: There has been a constant debate between theory and practice linkages in teacher training. In some cases this has taken on a political dimension in public debate about declining standards of teacher training (e.g., in the UK, Lawler, 1990). In light of this need and the recognition of the limitations that training institutes and teacher educators have in providing sound practical experience to trainee teachers, the National Institute of Education (NIE) embarked on an improved Partnership Model with schools which gives greater ownership of the practical training to schools. Being a new model, its implementation needs close monitoring so that interventions could be made to improve the understanding of the model by all concerned, and its operation, particularly in schools. This model was *de facto* implemented when the PGDE Special January 99 intake underwent their seven-week school experience prior to coming to NIE for full time courses. Since then the July 1998 and the January 1999 PGDE intakes have undergone practicum under this model in March and July 99 respectively. Feedback regarding its implementation were obtained via interviews from principals, School Co-ordinating Mentors, and trainee teachers of selected schools. The NIE supervision co-ordinators also provided oral and written feedback. This paper describes the rationale and context within which the new model was proposed and implemented. It also provides a qualitative and preliminary assessment of the extent to which the objectives of the new model have or are being met, what problems were encountered and how these were resolved.

Introduction: Models of Partnership

One of the many shortcomings in teacher education and teacher preparation is in the area of residencies or clinical training in schools. The nature and form of the residencies has consumed much attention in on-going debates in teacher training in many countries.

Furlong et al (1995) showed that in England and Wales the majority of teacher education courses were based on the principle of 'integration' rather than partnership. This model means the integration of student's training experience in the Higher Education Institute (HEI) with the world of the school. The shortcomings of the integration model were evident in the more dominant role of the tutor in teaching of teacher trainees, supervision, planning and marking of school-based assignments undertaken by teacher trainees and assessments of teaching practice with minimal formal inputs from school teachers in the planning and provision of training, if any role at all in teaching practice, it was very much an advisory one (Whiting, et al, 1996). The partnership model was recommended in the government circulars of 1992 and 1993 where teacher education courses should be planned and run on the basis of a partnership between HEI and schools¹.

¹ Circular 9/92 states: 'The government expects that partner schools and HEIs will exercise a joint responsibility for the planning and management of courses and the selection, training and assessment of students. The balance of responsibilities will vary. Schools will have a leading responsibility for training students to teach their specialist subjects, to assess pupils and to manage classes; and for supervising students and assessing their competence in these respects. HEIs will be responsible for ensuring that courses meet the requirements for academic validation, presenting courses for accreditation, awarding qualifications to successful students and arranging student placements in more than one school.' (DFE 1992: para 14)

Institution-school partnership in teacher education and training has been practised in many countries for sometime, although the strength of this partnership varies. In a sense, this partnership can have a range of experiences as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Models of Institution-school partnership

High	HEI-based Schemes	HEI-Led Partnership	
H E I		Collaborative Partnership	
Low			School-based Schemes
	Low		High

While the figure conveys the extent to which each party plays its role in the partnership training of teacher trainees, in a way that model is a crude representation of the reality, and in practice, the following may be more representative of what is happening:

- Institution determines much of the training while schools act as receiving stations or laboratories for practicum, hence higher role for institutions but lower role of schools.
- Very rarely one sees a situation where schools take on the main role while institutions the secondary position for obvious reasons that such a situation is untenable.
- The equal partnership model seems to be the desired and desirable model where the role of each is complementary. But the equal partnership model can also degenerate to the co-operative model rather than the collaborative one.
- But the ideal will be one of a symbiotic and synergistic relationship between the two parties, where (c) should not be the ultimate aim. It is in this last category where both parties are comfortable with their role and responsibilities and sense of ownership which the partnership model should ultimately work towards.

The NIE-School Partnership Model: Rationale and Description

The National Institute of Education (NIE) is the sole teacher training institute in Singapore. Since its inception it has worked on the model in which “a” was the predominant practice until January 1999 when the new partnership model was introduced. In the previous scheme, batches of trainee teachers were sent by NIE to schools for their practicum, and schools were expected to provide co-operating teachers (CTs) to help and guide the trainee teachers sent to them. While the role of the CTs was recognised as important, the role of the NIE supervisors was seen as crucial and prominent. Hence, supervisors appointed because they were curriculum specialists in the subject areas that their supervisees specialised in or were teaching in schools, had to make at least three lesson observation visits per supervisee. Although assessments from CTs and the endorsement of principals constituted valuable inputs into the overall grading of the trainee teacher’s practicum assessment, the supervisors judgement which was regarded as being more objective, had the greatest bearing on the final outcome of the trainee teacher’s performance in the practicum.

Up until 1998, using the previous partnership scheme, NIE had been able to bring her trainee teachers up to the basic level of competency expected of a beginning teacher. However, as schools

evolve, there became a need to promote a closer working relationship between NIE, MOE and the schools to ensure that teacher training, especially in initial teacher preparation is in step with the changes in the rest of the education system. The training received by our trainee teachers must be practical and realistic and that will prepare them well for the situations they are likely to face in school. In view of this challenge as well as what research in teacher education tells us, that the practical, experiential knowledge that skilled teachers possess is a valuable element that deserves to be more widely used in teacher preparation (Cameron-Jones, 1997), NIE felt that a more robust model of teacher preparation needed to be conceptualised. In 1999, the Practicum Partnership Model was developed. The concept of partnership in this model rests upon the understanding of the complimentary strengths of NIE (the provider of theoretical knowledge) and the schools (the provider of practical knowledge) and how these can be fruitfully joined for the benefit of the trainee teacher. At NIE, the trainee teachers are provided the theoretical knowledge and principles that underpin the practices, however learning to teach and to manage the classroom is best learnt in school under the guidance of experienced teachers.

With the implementation of the Partnership Model specifically for the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme, the role of the schools has been extended to accept a greater responsibility for teacher preparation and induction via mentoring, while the NIE has had to redefine the role of its staff to best serve the model. A School Co-ordinating Mentor (SCM) (who could be the vice-principal, a Head of Department or Senior Teacher) is appointed for each school to assist the principal in coordinating the in-school Practicum and the trainee teacher mentoring scheme. The SCM oversees the work of all the cooperating teachers and the trainee teachers and ensures that standards within the school is consistent. His/her counterpart at NIE is the NIE Supervision Coordinator (NSC) who supervises all the trainee teachers in a particular school, irrespective of subject specialisation (with the exception of Mother Tongue and PE). In the past, the school would have to liaise with several NIE supervisors, one for each curriculum area. With the new system, the school, represented by the SCM, need only liaise with one person at NIE, that is, the NSC. This facilitates a more efficient working relationship between the school and NIE. Hence, the role of the NIE staff has changed to one of quality assurance, making sure that standards across schools are equivalent. The assessment of the curriculum knowledge of a trainee teacher is now under the charge of the cooperating teacher, since the NSC may not be specialised in that curriculum area. With a reduction in supervisory role of the NSC, he/she makes only one to two lesson observations for each trainee teacher under his/her charge. At the end of each Practicum, the school principal will chair a Practicum Assessment Panel comprising the SCM, NSC and possibly the main cooperating teachers of each trainee teacher, to discuss the final award of grades to the trainee teachers in the school. Thus the final grading of each trainee teacher is jointly decided by the school and NIE.

To facilitate the Partnership Model further, PGDE trainee teachers are now posted for their Practicum by the MOE to schools which are most likely to keep them when they complete their practicum. Previously, NIE took care of the Practicum posting of the trainee teachers and helping schools to fill vacancies was not the criteria used. The rationale for posting trainee teachers to schools where they are most likely to remain after graduation is to give schools a sense of ownership and incentive in training and developing the trainee teachers posted to them.

The introduction of this partnership model arose also because the MOE, in a situation of acute teacher shortage perceived the notion that many graduates and mid-career employees within the private sector who have lost their jobs would opt for teaching during the 1997/98 economic downturn. In order to capture this group of possible candidates for the teaching profession, MOE requested that NIE ran two special additional PGDE intakes in January 1999 and January 2000 on top of the regular July PGDE intake. If NIE were to cope with these pressures, and at the same time

maintain standards in the teachers we produce, a new model of teacher training would have to be adopted. It was precisely in such a demanding situation that the partnership model for practicum training was mooted and implemented. It can be said that with MOE's backing, schools have rallied to this cause and this model has now completed one year of implementation. It would not be far fetched to say that the partnership model is not confined to two parties (NIE and Schools) but MOE as well, for which one can safely say that this model is unique to Singapore.

Objectives

The objectives of the new Partnership Model are to:

- better prepare the trainee teachers to take on the challenges of the 'real' classroom by involving schools much more in teacher training and preparation,
- strike a better balance between the theoretical knowledge and the practitioner knowledge received by the trainee teacher,
- enable NIE to train more trainee teachers to meet the demands of teacher shortage as projected by the MOE, without compromising on standards, in spite of staff and facility constraints.

Method

The Partnership Model was implemented for the practicum of the PGDE (Jan 1999) cohort for their 7-week School Experience and 8-week Practicum block, as well as the PGDE (July 1998) cohort for their 9-week Practicum block. The duration of the whole programme for each cohort is 2 semesters (equivalent to one calendar year).

The January 1999 cohort underwent a one week Teacher Preparatory Programme which provided them basic lesson planning and delivery and classroom management skills before they went out for the 7-week School Experience. The School Experience was divided into 3 phases - 2 weeks of observation of CTs' teaching, 2 weeks of co-teaching with the CTs, and 3 weeks of independent teaching monitored by the CTs. After the 7 weeks, they returned to NIE for full-time lectures for a period of 14 weeks. Following that, they returned to the same schools for 8 weeks of Practicum before completing the rest of their coursework at NIE for the remaining 10 weeks.

In the case of the July 1998 intake, the trainee teachers underwent 23 weeks of coursework at NIE interspersed with a one week School Experience in schools which comprised mainly lesson observations and data gathering, with minimal classroom teaching. At the end of their coursework, the trainee teachers were sent out to schools for their 9-week Practicum.

As a preliminary assessment of the model, 8 schools (4 primary and 4 secondary) were selected to provide feedback. The school principals and the SCMs were interviewed to find out what those at the administrative level felt about the Partnership Model in general, and specifically whether they saw any differences in quality between trainee teachers from the Jan cohort and those from the July cohort. The trainee teachers from both cohorts (24 from Jan 99 and 27 from July 98) who were attached to these 8 schools were also interviewed to find out how they coped, what kinds of support they were provided by their schools, and whether they felt NIE had prepared them adequately for school teaching. In addition, NSCs were also asked to complete a simple electronic survey, listing down what they were happy/unhappy about regarding the Partnership Model, and to provide suggestions for improvement.

Results

The interview data from the school principals, SCMs and trainee teachers and the survey data from the NSCs were collated and summarised in the following sections.

School principals and SCMs

Small group interviews with the school principals and SCMs of four primary and four secondary schools were conducted to find out what those at the administrative level felt about the way the School Experience for the Jan 99 intake was implemented. Overall, they felt that the trainee teachers (TTs) were not ready to take on their teaching role and that they should have been given a longer period of training during the Teacher Preparatory Programme before being sent to the schools. As a result of insufficient training, their CTs had to 'handhold' the TTs throughout most of the School Experience and hence had to assume an unexpectedly higher level of responsibility and workload. However, they were generally pleased with the TTs' positive work attitude and willingness to learn. The SCMs also provided some feedback regarding their role. Generally they did not have any difficulties conducting the school induction for the TTs and overseeing the work of the CTs and TTs. In fact many of them were already doing the job without the formal title for years! Most of them checked on TTs' progress via informal chit-chats with the CTs and TTs, while some held regular weekly meetings with the TTs in their schools.

However, when the Jan 99 trainee teachers returned to the schools for the 8-week Practicum after completing most their coursework at NIE, the school principals and SCMs found them much more confident and ready to take on their teaching duties. They were as ready as their counterparts from the July 98 batch who underwent their Practicum only after completing their coursework at NIE (this batch did not have the extended School Experience which the Jan batch had). This finding indicates that the NIE training course is successful in preparing TTs to take on their roles as beginning teachers in the classroom. Overall, the school principals and SCMs also found that both cohorts of TTs had positive work attitudes and willingness to learn. (NOTE: MOE has independently checked with some schools and their findings concurred with ours)

Trainee teachers

The trainee teachers from the Jan 99 cohort were asked about their level of preparedness in the School Experience. They said that the lesson planning skills learnt during the Teacher Preparatory Programme were very useful. They learnt some of the rudiments from the one week programme but found it insufficient. Most of the lesson planning skills were learnt from their CTs. The TTs also reported that they found the observations of their CTs' lessons very useful in picking up classroom management and teaching skills. With regard to stressful experiences, the TTs interviewed said that they did feel rather stressed because their CTs were asked to sit in all the lessons that they taught, whether they were being assessed or not. On the other hand, they were grateful to their CTs for their help and guidance throughout the School Experience period.

For the Practicum, both the Jan 99 and July 98 groups found lesson planning very time consuming and stressful. However, they agreed that writing detailed lesson plans helped them to think through their teaching strategies and classroom procedures more systematically. Classroom management was also another area of concern among the TTs. They did find the classroom management module of some help, especially in the areas of setting expectations, rules and routines, group management techniques, different models of classroom management. Several were able to apply some of the principles they learnt from their course in their classrooms.

When asked whether they found NIE courses adequate in preparing them for the 'real' classroom, both the primary and secondary TTs were appreciative of what they had learnt from their courses at NIE. Most of them agreed that although the classroom management module was basic and did not teach them how to deal with specific misbehaviours/situations, the principles learnt were useful in tackling the majority of day-to-day classroom problems. However, for dealing with specific problems [e.g., Normal (Tech) classes], they felt somewhat inapt and wished that NIE could have prepared them better. All of them also said that their curriculum studies modules were especially useful in getting them started in their classroom teaching. The primary TTs in particular, found their English Language and Mathematics curriculum studies modules very useful and easily translated for classroom use.

NSCs

Some NIE Supervision Coordinators (NSCs) reported that they were happy with the Partnership Model because of the shared responsibility of training teachers, especially with the new role of the SCM, making it easier to work with schools. They also mentioned closer rapport and better communication with the school administrators. Although some NSCs mentioned that they enjoyed having a lighter workload, they were unhappy with having to observe the TTs teaching in the classroom only once. They felt that this may not have been totally fair to the TTs, especially when assessment of the Practicum is mainly in the hands of the CTs who may not have been professional or sufficiently experienced. There was also some unhappiness about the three-point grading system of distinction, pass and fail. The wide range in the pass category does not differentiate between a high pass and a borderline 'fail'. Many of them suggested having another category of "pass with credit" to differentiate TTs who are above average but not deserving a distinction.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the preliminary evaluation results reported in this paper, it was clear that the Partnership Model used in the practicum has been successfully implemented and was able to achieve the objectives stated, i.e.,

- to better prepare the trainee teachers to take on the challenges of the 'real' classroom by involving schools much more in teacher training and preparation,
- to strike a better balance between the theoretical knowledge and the practitioner knowledge received by the trainee teacher,
- to enable NIE to train more trainee teachers to meet the demands of teacher shortage as projected by the MOE, without compromising on standards, in spite of staff and facility constraints.

Both the schools and the trainee teachers involved in the feedback felt that the theoretical knowledge provided by NIE was adequate in preparing the TTs for the challenges of a beginning teacher. The trainee teachers were appreciative of the vast amount of practical experience that they were able to learn from their CTs. Although the schools felt that they had to take on a greater responsibility and workload in inducting and training the trainee teachers, they took on the challenge and were generally pleased with their accomplishment which was made easier by the TTs' positive work attitude and willingness to learn. From the viewpoint of the school, they saw no significant differences in quality between trainee teachers from the Jan cohort and those from the July cohort, implying that NIE has been able to succeed training an extra batch of trainee teachers without comprising on standards.

The results were further substantiated by the observations made by the external examiner of the PGDE programme when he visited in August 1999 to look particularly at the January 1999 cohort, to comment on their progress in relation to the normal July cohort and to make recommendations on future development of the programme. He was impressed with the fact that NIE, MOE and the schools had set the new partnership system in place in a relatively short period of time, and was pleased to note that Singapore was setting a fine example in integrating schools more into the initial teacher training process, a practice which is now gaining recognition and strength, internationally.

He went out to schools to observe a range of PGDE trainee teachers teaching. He found them thoroughly prepared, and was able to see the new partnership system working. In his opinion, the schools were clear about their responsibilities, and the staff, particularly the SCMs and CTs displayed very positive attitudes towards NIE. He also felt that the triangulation of judgements between SCM, CTs and NIE supervisors was producing sound judgements across all grades of the programme.

The NIE practicum consultant who visited in September 1999 also reported that working together, NIE staff and their colleagues in the partner schools (i.e., SCMs and CTs) have succeeded in bringing about the change in approach to the practicum. She acknowledged that what had been done was a major achievement, both in conceptual and practical terms, because she was not aware of any other country in which a development in partnership had been attempted with such a pace, to such high operational standards and with such large numbers of trainee teachers.

Although the Partnership Model has been implemented successfully, there were some areas of concern which surfaced. They are:

- the level of competency with which the school personnel, in particular the SCMs and the CTs mentored the trainee teachers and assessed them in their teaching performance,
- the fairness of the 3-point grading system used (DISTINCTION, PASS, FAIL),
- the common understanding of issues in educational quality between schools and NIE, so that when such issues surfaced during practicum, e.g., in connection with the moderation of possible DISTINCTION or FAIL cases, they could be handled in a proper manner,
- the recognition of the greater responsibility in teacher training shouldered by the SCMs and the CTs.

These problems have been discussed and some possible solutions have been recommended. The level of competency of SCMs and CTs can be upgraded by ensuring appropriate and timely training for them. Currently mentoring courses are being mounted to meet this training need. In line with this is to look into accrediting such training in a formal way - maybe as a means towards some higher qualification. In fact both the external examiner and the practicum consultant strongly recommended that in order to retain and strengthen the partnership principle and to further develop the role of the SCMs and CTs was to provide appropriate training, and look into accreditation recognition for their work, maybe leading to some formal qualification. Besides that, the possibility of reward, timetable offloading, career grading, or promotion for accomplished CTs and SCMs is also being considered.

With regard to establishing a common understanding of issues in educational quality between schools and NIE, more dialogues and seminars should be held between parties concerned to formulate guiding principles for all to observe. In fact, when the practicum consultant visited, she conducted similar seminars on the topic of quality assurance for NIE staff and SCMs.

As far as the grading system is concerned, it was reduced from a 5-point scale to a 3-point one so as to minimise the potential for error, invalidity, unreliability and variability of grades because of the large number of school-based partners involved in assessment. Feedback obtained from the schools and NIE suggested that an additional 'Pass with Credit' grade be included in the grading system as to recognise those who are better than a PASS grade but not good enough to be awarded a DISTINCTION. However, it was decided that it would not be wise to expand the 3-point grading system considering the possible problems that can arise. Instead, a CREDIT grade is currently being considered as a replacement of the DISTINCTION grade so as to increase the pool of trainee teachers who would be given recognition for their above-average performance.

This paper has attempted to describe the rationale and context within which the new Partnership Model was proposed and implemented. To a large extent, the model has been implemented successfully. Although some teething problems were encountered, they were not insurmountable, and recommendations for remedying them and improving and strengthening the model have been put into place for the next round of implementation. Continual formative evaluation of the system on a larger scale will be conducted to gather more information for its future improvement.

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