THE PRACTICUM IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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In-house Seminar on
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The Practicum In Teacher Education

[A summary of points made at the In-House Seminar on Teaching Practice Assessment and the APT Form held on 21 September 1991]

The purpose of this in-house seminar is to take another look at the APT form we are using now. But before we examine the APT form more closely, we need to know how it is used. Dr Leslie Sharpe will give us some insights based on data that he has painstakingly collected.

My task is to provide a backdrop to this morning's discussion - a kind of perspective.

There has always been an interest in the function and organisation of those aspects of teacher education which deal with the practicum. The term 'practicum' (which we started to use only in 1986) refers to all those activities which involve student teachers in practice-based situations or in observing or helping teachers. It includes class teaching experiences in a school setting, micro-teaching experiences on campus and interactions with pupils and staff colleagues. As a component of a teacher education programme, the practicum has been highly rated by student teachers - it has become a special strength of our own training programme.

What Are the Purposes of a Practicum?

The purposes are identified below.

- To develop greater understanding of children through closer contact with them.
- To develop knowledge and understanding of the school curriculum.
- To experience success in teaching situations and so acquire confidence.
- To develop effective teaching skills and strategies.
- To develop the ability to plan and organise for teaching.
- To develop a capacity for self-evaluation.
- To develop qualities of adaptability and sensitivity to the school situation.
- To develop the ability to reflect on and learn from the school experience.
CHANGES IN THE PRACTICUM

From our experience the practicum as we know it here has moved from an unstructured apprenticeship to one that is more structured. In other words, an increase in sophistication of the meaning of the practicum seems obvious. In the 1950s and 1960s in Singapore, teaching practice was a very casual form of apprenticeship aimed at providing on-the-job skills. The part-time training model provided for complete immersion in classrooms: newly recruited teachers were thrown into the deep end of the pool and they somehow survived with the help of the master teacher. In the 1970s, I recall, considerable attention was paid to the organisation of teaching practice particularly, in an attempt to link theory and practice. Educational Studies, and not teaching practice, then served as the central component in the training model.

The early 1980s saw the practicum as having a central place in a pre-service teacher education programme. It was in 1986 that the concept of the practicum curriculum was formalised - it represented a set of practicum experiences involving the development of teacher roles in the classroom. It was the first time that attention was drawn to the content of the practicum. It was in that context that the APT form was developed.

Over the same period, I have seen many changes to the practicum. There are 3 possible levels of change: (a) organisational (e.g. its length, location), (b) curricular (substance of experience - knowledge, skills & dispositions students are supposed to learn), (c) structural (resources supplied to support the practicum and the contextual conditions in which it exists).

So far, the changes have been mainly organisational and structural. Not enough has been done to focus on the curriculum in the practicum. In other words, what kinds of knowledge and skills are being learnt in the practicum, and how they are learnt.

Assessment of the Practicum

The assessment of the practicum is a long-standing issue. There are two aspects to it: the potential conflict in supervisors of the dual role of counselling and assessment. The assessment role tends to dominate.

The other aspect would be the criteria to be used for grading a student’s classroom performance. I notice that there are 2 extreme positions. One position takes the objectives of the practicum as they are, and decides to what extent the student teacher has fulfilled the objectives. In other words, how far has the student teacher moved from point X to point Y.

The other position is to have at the back of your mind an
ideal experienced teacher, and then match the student teachers' classroom performance against that of an ideal teacher.

Despite the fact that not all supervisors agree on the criteria to be used, there is a remarkable degree of agreement concerning distinction and failure cases.

One way of ensuring a certain degree of reliability in the assessment of teaching performance is to have, as we did, a form with a number of categories. We have been using the APT form with little modification on the over the last five years.

The APT form has been conceptualised on the basis of five major roles taken by a teacher in classroom teaching. There is also provision for the rating of teaching competencies and teacher characteristics. There is also space for general comments. All in all, the APT form is a rational, pragmatic instrument tapping the general skills of classroom performance. As I see it, the content of the APT form is influenced by the applied science perspective in which conceptions of the teacher's role are largely influenced by what can be observed.

We are unlikely to find an ideal instrument for our purposes, but we should try to fine-tune what we have, which is primarily the purpose of this in-house seminar. Of course, I recognise the tremendous difficulty of devising an instrument that can be applied across all subject areas.

From feedback received from the ground and from the comments of external examiners who visited us, there appears to be some expressed desire to make some minor changes to the APT form. For instance, it has been asked whether the APT form, in focussing on general skills, has failed to give recognition to other areas of importance that one would like to look at in teaching.

In ending my introductory remarks, let me play the devil's advocate and ask a number of questions of the APT form such as:

1. In accepting roles and tasks as the essential basis of a practicum curriculum, have we unwittingly neglected other substantial areas?

2. Is teaching to be defined as performance observable in the classroom only or is it to include responsibilities and interaction outside the immediacy of the classroom?

3. If the reflective teacher is the model we are aiming at, shouldn't the ability to reflect be an important skill not necessarily of teaching but as part of professional development?

4. Need the formative assessment form and the summative assessment form be identical?

5. Is the domain of the school adequately addressed in the APT form?