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Student teachers' expectation from cooperating teachers during practicum.

Lourdusamy Aputhasamy

The Practicum is viewed as the most useful component of the teacher education programme by student teachers. They believe the practical experience of observing expert teachers, receiving feedback, and practicing strategies are the most important factors in their professional growth (Tisher, 1990). To help in the process of translating what they have learned in the teacher education programme into practice, teacher education institutions are now involving practitioners in the schools who are at the ground level to help in teacher education through utilization of cooperating teachers.

Until January 1999 the National Institute of Education (NIE) used the 'integrative' model in its relation with the schools as partners in the teacher education. In this model the NIE supervisors played the major role in mentoring and supervising the student teachers. With the introduction of a number of initiatives in schools by the Ministry of Education (MOE) it became necessary to promote a closer working relationship between NIE, MOE and the schools. Because it was deemed necessary that the initial teacher preparation was in step with the changes in the rest of the system. In 1999 the NIE-School Partnership model was developed. The concept of partnership in this model as explained by Wong & Goh (2002, p. 200) "rests upon the understanding of the complementary strength 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 teachers." The role of NIE in this model is to provide theoretical knowledge and principles underpinning practices to the student teachers, however learning to teach and manage the classroom are to be learned under the guidance and tutelage of experienced teachers in the school.

With the implementation of this partnership model the schools had to accept a greater responsibility for teacher preparation. The cooperating teachers (CTs) do most of the supervision and mentoring of student teachers during the Practicum. The student teachers rely now on their cooperating teachers to guide them and help them develop the teaching and managing skills. Each student teacher is assigned two or more cooperating teachers to help him/her. Generally, these teachers are experienced teacher in the subjects the student teacher is learning to teach. The university supervisors make only one or two lesson observations. The final grade for each student teacher is jointly decided by the school and NIE.

In the study carried out by Wong and Goh (2002) a concern that surfaced about CTs was the level of competencies with which the CTs mentored and assessed the student teachers. Training to upgrade the mentoring skills was recommended. It would be of great help to the CTs and to training providers for the CTs if they are aware of the areas in which student teachers expect help of them. The knowledge can prepare

them with the necessary skills and strategies to mentor and guide the student teachers during the Practicum. This study explored the expectations of the student teachers from their CTs when they go out to schools for the Practicum.

Research Procedure

This study was carried out with a group of student teachers from the 2002-2003 cohort of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programme. The student teachers had completed the on-campus courses and were getting ready for the practicum. Through an open ended questionnaire a group of student teachers (N= 72) were asked to list the areas in which that they would like to get help from CTs when they go out for their Practicum. Their responses were tabulated and analysed. The twenty most common areas of concerns were selected to develop a survey questionnaire to find out the importance of these selected areas.

The questionnaire was administered to student teachers in four tutorial classes during the last tutorial before they went out for the Practicum in February 2003. The student teachers were required to indicate the degree of importance of each area to them on a three point scale. In the final count 107 usable sets of data were collected. The data was analysed using the SPSS: PC software. Descriptive statistics were used to identify the areas of help considered important by the student teachers.

Results and Discussion

Out of the twenty areas identified through the open survey the eight areas considered most important by more than 80% of the student teachers are:

- Suggest ways to improve my teaching skills based on my performance in class (88.8%)
- Providing constructive criticism and fair evaluation (87.9%)
- Provide guidance as to how I can effectively teach the content of the subject (85.0%)
- Teach me techniques to handle difficult students in the class (84.9%)
- Provide opportunity for me to observe experienced teachers teaching (82.2%)
- Show me effective ways of managing different types of classrooms (82.2%).
- Share teaching materials/resources that are related to the teaching of the subjects (80.4%)
- Provide a profile of the classes I am going to teach (80.4%)

These are areas related to evaluation, teaching the subject and classroom management: The high value given to evaluation shows that the student teachers are concerned of their final grades as well as wanting to improve the skill in teaching and managing the class. These are in fact areas which are practical in nature and can be best experienced at the school setting. The practitioners at the ground level are the best mentors and guides to provide help in these areas.

The next set of areas considered important by more than 70% of the student teachers is:

Introduce me to the general structure of the school system and culture (78.5%)

Give me independence to try out new innovative teaching approaches (71.0%)

Provide me information on the various types of resources available for teaching subjects (72.9%)

Let me know the rules and procedures to function effectively in the school (70.1%)

Introduce me to teachers teaching the same subjects to get support and help (70.1%)

Show ways to gain students attention and motivate them to learn (70.1%)

This group of 6 areas of help relates to getting information to function effectively in the school system. These are also areas where the practitioners are the best source of information to the student teacher to integrate into the school culture and function effectively in the school.

The areas listed below were considered important by less than 70% of the student teachers.

Show me ways to make lessons interesting for different ability classes (64.5%)

Show me how to determine the pace of the lesson for different ability classes (65.4%)

Provide encouragement and support when lessons do not work out well (65.4%)

Show me how to build rapport with the students so as to gain their trust and cooperation (66.4%)

Help in the planning of the lessons in the initial stage of teaching practice (56.6%)

Three of these refers to the techniques of teaching. Perhaps, lower level of importance is given to them because these issues have been covered in the on-campus courses where techniques of motivations, catering for individual differences, pacing of lesson, time management and other

issues related to teaching are discussed at length.

Conclusion

The help considered important may be categorized into four broad areas of concern: teaching the curriculum subjects, classroom management, information to function well in the school environment and evaluation of their teaching and feedback. CTs as ground teacher educators need to be aware of student teacher's expectation. McIntyre, Byrd and Foxx (1996) in reviewing the roles of cooperating teachers came to the conclusion that cooperating teachers can greatly influence the student teacher's teaching context and also their behaviour and beliefs in both a positive and negative term. Two important aspects stood out regarding the cooperating teacher's role: the behaviours they exhibit or model and the process and content of feedback they provide to the student teachers. The most effective teachers provide clear specific feedback to their student teachers, provide rationales for suggestions given and exhibit self reflection.

The finding in this study may be of help to formulate discussion forums to develop mentoring and supervisory skills of CTs and also make them aware of the types of information and help the student teachers desire.

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