

## THE 'PHASE' VALUE OF PRACTICUM PHASES 2 and 3

### *Nilai Fasa Praktikum 2 dan 3*

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### ABSTRACT

*The practicum is a core component in teacher education programme as it enables student teachers to acquire beginning teaching competencies. This field experience is integral in student teachers engaging in their own learning through personal inquiry and reflection. This paper examines six student teachers' perceptions about their phases 2 and 3 practicum and investigates the extent in which these phases have equipped them with the knowledge and skills for their teaching profession. The results of the study indicated that student teachers learned about developing relationships in the school community, time management with regards to juggling practicum and assignments, insights about their young learners and a humbling discovery of themselves as novices. They attributed factors such as the pre-practicum workshop, support by supervisors, cooperating teachers, seniors, peers and previous practicum experiences which are inherent in Phases 2 and 3 practicum as instrumental in their learning process. Practical suggestions to improve the practicum programme are offered.*

Keywords: Practicum phases, learning, personal inquiry, reflection,

### ABSTRAK

*Amalan Praktikum di Institut Pendidikan Guru (IPG) merupakan satu komponen yang sangat penting dalam program latihan perguruan bagi menghasilkan seorang guru yang bertauliah. Latihan Praktikum ini menyediakan peluang bagi siswa guru mempraktikkan segala pengetahuan dan latihan pengajaran dan pembelajaran untuk melahirkan siswa guru yang berkualitii, berpengetahuan luas dan berkecakapan dengan mengamalkan prinsip-prinsip keguruan selaras dengan Falsafah Pendidikan Kebangsaan (PFK) dan Falsafah Pendidikan Guru (PFG). Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji keberkesanan fasa-fasa latihan Praktikum Fasa 2 (dua bulan) dan Praktikum Fasa 3 (tiga bulan). Keputusan analisis deskriptif menunjukkan berlaku perubahan positif perkembangan Identiti Profesional Guru yang mempunyai hubungan langsung dengan tempoh masa latihan praktikum. Semakin lama masa guru pelatih menjalani latihan praktikum, maka semakin stabil perkembangan Identiti Profesional Guru dalam diri mereka. Beberapa cadangan dikemukakan.*

Kata kunci: Fasa praktikum, pembelajaran, inkuiri sendiri, renung /imbas kembali.

## INTRODUCTION

Practicum is a component in the teacher education programme offered by Institute of Teacher Education Malaysia (IPGM). This component is made up of three phases and “it aims to provide student teachers with the opportunity to observe and evaluate teaching-learning practices” (Buku Panduan PISMP, 2012). Incorporating teaching practice into three phases suggests the importance of on-the-job training in providing a “supported entry into the profession” (Ulvik & Smith 2011, p 521). The practicum is a developmental cycle as the duration for each phase increases. Practicum phase 1, a 4-week teaching practice introduces student teachers to the initial context of the teaching profession where through observation they begin to connect knowledge, theories and skills learned in the real classroom environment “through guidance and collaboration with cooperating teachers, lecturers and peers in a variety of situations” (Buku Panduan PISMP, 2012). It is in this phase that student teachers may begin to realise how prepared or ill-prepared they are for classroom responsibilities and thus make necessary adjustments to fill the gaps. Practicum phase 2, being a continuity of phase 1, is conducted in eight weeks and provides student teachers with more time to put into practice knowledge, hone teaching skills and further develop teacher values through the guidance and collaboration of related parties. The experience gained in practicum phase 1 will assist them in their continuous learning of pedagogical content knowledge, the requisite skills and facilitate execution of other school related tasks. Practicum Phase 3, a 12-week stint of teaching practice is an integral part of Year 4 Bachelor in Teaching (TESL) programme. As the duration of phase 3 practicum is the longest, student teachers are “to consolidate teaching and learning skills based on the teaching learning theories they have learnt in the institute in a variety of situations” (Buku Panduan PISMP, 2012). This gives them significant opportunity to further acquire and master the knowledge and skills required to become effective teachers in a diverse and changing environment as globalisation and technological advancement shape learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Renwick, 1992).

Phases 2 and 3 of the practicum demonstrate elements of experiential learning in which the phases of experiencing (doing), reflecting and applying are present (Proudman, 1995). It is an experience which requires partnership between the student teachers, the school community which provides the educational work experience opportunity and the institution which prepares the student teachers for the profession. Student teachers engaged in direct experience and focused reflection to develop knowledge, skills and values and the process should chart their progress in learning to become a teacher, as they juggle between having to teach and learning to teach. Fairbanks, Fredman and Kahn (2000, p 111) note that learning to teach, like teaching itself, “is neither simple nor explicit”. So, what do student teachers’ actually learn during practicum? Have phases 2 and 3 equipped them with the knowledge and skills for their teaching profession and if so, how do the phases accomplish all these? Or do they actually view each phase as a “one-off” separate entity as they are usually placed in different schools in each phase? Answers to these questions may provide insights into how student teachers learn to become teachers.

### *Objectives of the Study*

This study was conducted to investigate the phase value of the practicum phases that student teachers gained by examining the following at the end of the school attachments:

1. the different learning experiences in phase 2 and phase 3 of the practicum
2. the contributing factors of the learning experiences
3. readiness for the teaching profession

### *Research questions*

To fulfil the objectives above, the following questions will be addressed:

1. What are the different learning experiences of the student teachers in phase 2 and phase 3 practicum?
2. What are the factors contributing to the learning experiences of the student teachers in phase 2 and phase 3 practicum?

3. To what extent do the phase 2 and phase 3 practicum contribute to student teachers' readiness for the teaching profession?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Participants***

The participants for this study were six semester 7 female student teachers from the third cohort (Jan 2013 Intake) of Bachelor in Teaching (TESL) programme in a teacher education institution in Kuala Lumpur. Purposive sampling procedure based on specific criteria was used to select the participants. They represented a range of personal experiences and their student teaching placements were varied. One of them is a Chinese, two are Malays and three are Indians. They were referred to as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 and P6 in the discussion of the data.

### ***Instrument***

A semi-structured interview was conducted individually with the six participants. The 3 researchers worked in pairs to interview two participants each. While one researcher posed the questions, the other helped to jot down the participants' responses. The questions examined various aspects of the student teachers' practicum related experiences in local primary schools for 8 weeks and 12 weeks respectively – their learning experiences in the phase 2 and phase 3 practicum, factors which contributed to the differences, areas for improvement and preparedness for the teaching profession. The interview technique was employed because it facilitated in-depth information gathering, free responses and flexibility that could not be obtained by other methods and provided rich data to explain the phenomena under study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Semi-structured interview typically comprises several researcher's 'base' questions and also the option of following up a given response with alternative, optional questions (Mertler, 2014). The interview data were subsequently analysed to address the research questions. Besides the semi-structured interview, more qualitative data were elicited from the six participants' reflective essay which focused on phase 2 and phase 3 practicum. This source of information was useful in detailing the concerns and opinions regarding the questions posed in the semi-structured interview as the participants reflected on the similarities and differences between the phase 2 and phase 3 practicum, their perceived strengths and areas to improve on. This reflective essay was thus invaluable in enriching the research report as it served as triangulation with data obtained from the semi-structured interview, thus validating the research findings and the conclusions.

### ***Data Analysis***

The semi-structured interview yielded responses which were analysed for emerging themes. The rich data collected were cross-checked with the contents of the reflective essay. Participants' free writing in their reflective essay about the phase 2 and phase 3 practicum, their greatest strength by the end of practicum and the areas which they would like to work on, were analysed qualitatively for emerging themes.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The purpose of the research was to examine participants' perceptions about their phases 2 and 3 practicum and investigate the extent in which these phases have equipped them with the knowledge and skills for their teaching profession. Discussion of the data collected is presented according to the three research questions below.

**Research Question 1: What are the different learning experiences of the student teachers in phase 2 and phase 3 practicum?**

Data gathered from the semi-structured interview and reflective essay were discussed according to their emerging themes. The first question in the semi-structured interview was about what the participants learned in phase 3 practicum. Their responses revolved around relationships, time management, insights gained and outside classroom tasks. The semi-structured interview and reflective essay revealed information about relationship with the school, teachers and pupils. Four of the six participants acknowledged the importance of establishing a good rapport with the school staff and pupils. Tan (2008) in his study discovered the importance of establishing good rapport with the people in school in getting a warm welcome and ensuring a positive learning experience. In the interview, P1 opined that it was essential to build a good relationship from the beginning of the practicum so that activities could be carried out smoothly and her practicum would turn out well. She realised that the success of activities carried out would also depend on her relationship with the teachers. Consequently, school teachers did not hesitate to offer their assistance to her. She reiterated this in her reflective essay where she stated that the teachers cooperated by allowing her to take out her pupils cum research respondents, to carry out her Action Research intervention. In line with this was P5's revelation in her reflective essay and interview. She claimed that it was important to establish a good relationship with school teachers so that the work environment was more conducive and less stressful. The teachers would then be more helpful and willing to give assistance easily. P5 asserted that the school teachers were always obliging towards the student teachers and helped as well as guided them readily. For example, there was only one multimedia room in the school; yet she was never rejected when she wanted to use it. P5 also believed that she had succeeded in establishing a good rapport with her pupils. This proved to be beneficial because the understanding that coexisted between them ensured her pupils' cooperation and willingness to perform the tasks she set. It was commendable to note that her pupils would responsibly complete their work even though they made a lot of noise during group activities. P2 felt that she learnt how to deal better with young learners especially Year 5 children. She learned from phase 2 that there is a place for kindness and this, she decided to practise in phase 3. She said her relationship with her pupils made a difference to her responses from them. P2 felt that the school she was placed in for phase 3 posed a challenge for her. Not all the teachers were friendly unlike the teachers in the school she was in for phase 2. She attributed this to the fact that they were placed at the back of the teachers' room and so had little access to the other teachers. P2 found that she took a longer time to 'warm up' to the teachers in her school but when that happened, she was able to integrate into the school culture. She however reiterated in her reflective essay that establishing a relationship with teachers and pupils was extremely pivotal. P3 felt like an outsider in school for 3 months and she attributed this experience to the distanced relationship with the teachers and the 'spur-of-the-moment' activities which took a toll on her already prepared plans.

P1, P5 and P6 emphasised that they learnt to manage time during phase 3 practicum due to the demands of their semester 7 curriculum. P1 claimed that she had to juggle her time working on her major and minor assignments, Action Research proposal and completing school tasks. Phase 2 of the Practicum only dealt with the major subject while Phase 3 covered both the major and minor. She confessed that the heavy workload of teaching plus the many assignments they had to cover had expediated her learning to manage her time reasonably well. Her resilience can be conceived as a personal attribute, which results from the interaction between psychological, behavioural and cognitive aspects of functioning as well as emotional regulation (Day et al., 2007). It was not easy but she said she had no choice. P5 elaborated that she did not mind the heavy work load because she liked the school and even learnt to handle non-academic work as well. P5 was excited that she learnt to use the traffic light colour cards and hand signals to manage her class effectively without having to raise her voice. P6 explained that she learnt to be more realistic in planning her lessons by taking into consideration the time for assembly and recess.

P1 and P2 noted some insights they gained about learners and themselves. P1 concluded that rules were not suitable to be used in year 1 classes unlike year 3 because the former pupils are too

young to understand the purpose of obeying rules and regulations. She also realised that teachers need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to handle disruptive behaviour. She also mentioned that her style of writing reflections actually developed from phase 1 to phase 3. In Phase 1, the reflections were merely narratives. In phase 2, her reflections were a mix of narratives and some indepth analysis of situations. However, in phase 3, her reflections were exactly that – reflections on her strengths and weaknesses. This was the phase where she learnt most from experience. The respondents' experiences are reflected in Darling-Hammond's assertion that teacher candidates should be given experiences to help them develop applied links between planning and the use of evidence in teaching learning and that this should be developed under the guidance of expert teachers (in Ure, 2010, p 463).

P2 understood that pupils would '*appreciate a teacher more if she is nice and care*'. So she became more approachable and would not hesitate to crack jokes and laugh with her pupils besides listening to their stories. In response to semi-structured interview question no. 1, P6 said that she learnt to use different teaching methods successfully unlike the same old ways in phase 1 and phase 2 practicum. In addition, she had a good supervisor who guided her closely. Another noteworthy insight was P4's ability to write critical reflections incorporating the higher order thinking skills (HOTS) elements. She was able to cater to low proficiency pupils and she emphasised that teaching aids are not as important as the teacher herself because she could dramatise in class to attract her pupils' attention, sustain their interest and illustrate the meaning of words. P5 also reflected that it was enjoyable to teach proficient pupils in the second class as she could conduct successful interactive lessons which challenged their critical thinking ability. P5 was in good spirits in phase 3 because she had a group of pupils with better proficiency and were active during lessons. These factors pushed her to teach better as she found the pupils motivated and the class enjoyable.

P1 mentioned that she was sent to a different school in phase 3. The class size was smaller and she also taught a higher standard. Owing to this, class management was much easier because the pupils were older and understood the meaning of discipline and the consequences of indiscipline. She added that it was also easier to write lesson plans in phase 3 because the pre-practicum workshop had provided a good guide on how to go about preparing lesson plans for the different skills. She also agreed with P2 that there was an overload of assignments and that the AR had taken a toll on her. At times, she was confused over which was more important – the practicum or the AR assignment. P1 felt that the class size and the level of pupils in phase 2 had affected her teaching. She felt that it was a great challenge teaching Year 1 pupils because '*the pupils were too young to really understand the concept of classroom rules*'. She noted the difference in phase 3 for she taught a smaller class and a higher level, Year 5. She found that '*the classroom rules I implemented towards the student work more efficient compared to the practicum 2*'. P2 had a different scenario from P1. In phase 3, the class size was larger than in phase 2. She found difficulty in obtaining appropriate venues for her to conduct her group activities for the class was too cramped. She also said that her relationship with the teachers in phase 3 was not as warm as that in phase 2. She also felt bullied in that she was given more relief periods than she should have and that increased her workload. However, she also mentioned that things were quite '*okay with the teachers at the end*'. This was also brought up in her reflective essay.

While much learning took place in the classroom context, the participants also revealed lessons learnt outside the classroom. P6 explained that the phase 3 practicum was a longer attachment which enabled her to be engaged in more school projects like the school assembly and extra-mural activities. Consequently, she has learnt to be better prepared for any tasks although she detested last minute notifications.

In addition to the overall learning experiences gained, the participants reflected on their greatest strengths by the end of practicum 3 and this related directly to the semi-structured interview about the factors which they thought could have contributed to the different learning experiences. P1 felt that her greatest strength by the end of Phase 3 was building a good relationship and rapport with the teachers and the school administrators. She '*learnt that what you give, you will get back*'. She

reiterated the fact that the teachers were ready to offer a helping hand in return for the help that she had given them.

P3 felt that her greatest strength was being aware of the type of teacher she was. She realised that kindness paid off because her pupils expressed their appreciation to her for being very approachable. She was proud to admit that she was very organised and did not procrastinate at all. She was able to keep track of things and did not rush to submit things at the end of the practicum.

P6 thought that her greatest strength lay in planning a realistic lesson in which the activity was logical and manageable within the stipulated time. In employing the joint construction method whereby her pupils gave ideas and wrote the sentences on the board before copying from the board and adding an ending paragraph of their own, her pupils could finish the essay within the given time. Consequently, she was able to provide prompt feedback to her pupils. P6 had evidently learnt to be more logical and realistic in terms of planning a lesson in phase 3 practicum as compared to phase 2 practicum.

P5's reflective essay revealed that her greatest strength was her ability to deal with high proficient pupils. She realised that it was essential to *plan challenging activities* which required pupils to *think critically*. Besides, her good rapport with her pupils had ensured satisfactory completion of the tasks set. She also believed that she had enforced extensive use of English among her pupils in her presence.

It is evident that the findings have shown the benefits gained from phase 2 and phase 3 practicum in different ways and the hands-on experience facilitated the teacher qualities required of them. It is interesting to note that these semester 7 participants were able to identify the differences between the two phases. All the student teachers agreed that the 12 week duration in phase 3 practicum also gave them more time to learn to teach compared to phase 2 as they tried out ideas and worked on improving practices. They noted that the longer duration also enabled them to explore the school culture in a meaningful way compared to phase 2. They learned what are expected of them as future teachers, the values adopted by the school and the attitude required in the school context as all these impact how the school operates (Fullan, 2007).

***Research question 2: What are the factors contributing to the learning experiences of the student teachers in phase 2 and phase 3 practicum?***

Three main factors which emerged from the interview to account for the student teachers' greatest strengths included the pre-practicum workshop; support by supervisors, cooperating teachers, seniors, peers and previous practicum experiences. P3, P4, P5 and P6 perceived that the support given by the teachers, supervisor, seniors and peers had impacted their learning. P3 thought that the immediate feedback of her supervisor had helped her to set things in the right perspective. The high expectations of P4's supervisor had spurred her on to do well in her practicum. P5 found the teachers helpful; they showed concern and gave suggestions as well as information about the pupils, thus easing class management. She elaborated that her phase 3 practicum was smooth sailing as she approached the school with a positive attitude based on the positive feedback given by her peers who were attached there in phase 2 practicum. Besides, she had heeded her seniors' feedback and advice about coping strategies during teaching practices. P5 elaborated that she benefitted from her supervisor's input on writing explicit lesson objectives. P6's practicum supervisor was informative, focussed and addressed her practicum needs. Her cooperating teacher was also instrumental in her development. P6's responses concur well with Darling-Hammond's call for all teacher candidates to have opportunities with teachers over extended periods of time to gain knowledge of students and the curriculum, and to develop deep professional understandings about the goals and purposes of classroom activities (in Ure, 2010, p 463). P6 also claimed that, the pre-practicum workshop conducted before the practicum had helped her particularly in giving effective instructions and implementing satisfactory writing lessons. P2 and P5 concurred that the pre-practicum workshop had been helpful. P5 stated that it had been particularly helpful in standardising lesson plans for her practicum. P6 also pointed out that her

experience in practicum phase 1 and 2 had prepared her better for phase 3 practicum. Another contributing factor towards student teachers' development was the experience gained from phase 2 practicum. P2, P4, P5 and P6 testified to that. P2 claimed that she was better prepared for phase 3 practicum because of her phase 1 and phase 2 school attachment experience

In relation to another question posed in the semi structured interview on what else the participants wanted to learn, it was interesting to note that there were varied responses. P1 said she wanted to develop her teaching skills and improve her fluency and proficiency. She also added that she was particularly interested in knowing how to handle group work effectively so that there would not be any 'passengers' among pupils. Besides that, she was also keen on knowing how to conduct a gallery walk to optimise learning. In her reflection, P1 felt very strongly that she needed to brush up on her time management skills. She was of the view that an efficient teacher should have good time management to ensure that all work is done during the allocated time given. P2 also opined that she needed to hone her classroom management skills especially with Year 1 pupils. She was also interested in wanting to learn how to develop creative teaching aids for she felt that word cards were too 'normal'.

P3 expressed her desire to conduct effective LINUS classes. P4 was apparently satisfied with the programme for she viewed that she had '*already got the whole package*'. P5 and P6 expressed similar sentiments about wanting to learn to conduct lessons and perform tasks outside the classroom context. P5 mentioned that she wanted to have variations of classroom teaching. P6 thought that it was important to learn to conduct assemblies and wanted to have more input on this

***Research question 3 : To what extent do the phase 2 and phase 3 practicum contribute to the student teachers' readiness for the teaching profession?***

The final question posed in the semi-structured interview was whether they were ready for the teaching profession. All 6 participants said they were ready but to different extents. P1 was of the opinion that she was partially ready for the teaching profession. She said she was ready in terms of being able to adapt to the school environment and forging relationships with the pupils and the school. This feeling of being ready is important to P1's ability to execute a behavior to engage in the tasks and perform in a successful way as she finds her confidence and competence (Bandura, 1993; Giallo and Little, 2003). She was also ready in terms of lesson planning because of online resources. However, she was a little concerned with time management. She expressed fear in coping with the workload once she got married. Brunetti (2006) suggests that a major factor in workload stress is the problematic nature of time and time shortage. This is especially true as there are a variety of factors which interfere with the time that is intended for teaching such as discipline problems, interruptions, extracurricular activities and excessive paperwork. This in turn can increase workload stress (Castro et al., 2010).

P2 was strongly confident that she was ready for the teaching profession as she said that her '*passion has been kindled*'. She realised that pupils liked the teacher better if they learnt something from the teacher. She was also optimistic that one could improve over time. P2's self-efficacy for teaching was quietly confident, but she anticipated further and on-going learning upon employment as a teacher (Dawn A. Naylor, Glenda Campbell-Evans, Camel Maloney 2015). However, she also voiced her concern over Year 1 pupils whom she found to be hyperactive, thus she hoped to have better classroom management skills with this particular level of pupils. Classroom management is an important concern of every teacher, experienced or novice. Mau (1997) in a study on concerns of student teachers in an institution in Singapore noted that maintaining appropriate class control, challenging unmotivated students, and meeting the needs of different kinds of students were their major concerns. Thus this is a challenge which must be addressed by teacher education to better prepare student teachers for the realities in the classroom.

P3 said she was ready but she needed to hone her filing skills and be more organised. P4 mentioned that she was ready and liked '*the idea of being animated in class*'. P5 was confident that

she was ‘*about 90% ready*’. She acknowledged the fact that Phase 3 had actually helped her tremendously and she had learnt from the teachers, pupils and the school administrators. She shared the school’s practice of ‘whatsapping’ the parents about their child’s misbehaviour and felt that this was a very good and effective practice of getting them involved in the school community. P6 was frank in saying that she was ready in terms of school culture and expectations such as lesson plan preparation and conducting school assemblies. However, she was honest enough to admit that she was not fully ready as there was still a lot to learn, especially in managing hyperactive pupils.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is evident that Phases 2 and 3 of the practicum have helped these student teachers to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. It is also clear that many student teachers have actually ‘found’ themselves and feel that they are ready for the teaching profession, at least to a certain extent. Yet, there are still areas of concern and these should be addressed to ensure that the practicum experience is a learning experience, possibly of trials and tribulations, but with light at the end of the tunnel.

We therefore put forth a few recommendations. The first suggestion is to restructure phase 3 of the practicum. This was mentioned in *Student Teachers’ Perspectives on Phase 2 Practicum Experience* (Kim et al, 2016) and we would like to urge its realisation. A one-week pre-practicum workshop kickstarts the Practicum to address perennial issues of concern in particular, time management skills and classroom management skills. This is followed by a 4-week supervision stint cum formative assessment. After this, student teachers return to the institution for a mid-practicum reflection and to trouble shoot as well as discuss possible solutions and strategies. Then they continue their school attachment for another 8 weeks with summative assessment.

We also felt that the old practice of having a briefing-cum-workshop with school teachers, supervisors and student teachers should be revived. The workshop should look into how the supervisors and cooperating teachers write the practicum reports focussing on appropriate comments which could facilitate student teachers’ professional development. At the moment, there is a tendency for many cooperating teachers to either circle the appropriate numbers on the form or write comments like ‘Good’, ‘Satisfactory’, without actually giving constructive comments. This workshop could actually see supervisors and cooperating teachers working in tandem for the betterment of student teachers.

Another recommendation is that the post practicum debriefing be fully documented and uploaded on the portal for the college community to access. This should include the strengths and shortcomings of the practicum and would prove to be a useful and powerful resource for professional development, for lecturers and students alike. In fact, a comprehensive session on the above could also be carried out at one of the Staff Development Courses (LKS).

One of the grouses articulated by the participants was that the workload was made too heavy for them because of the Action Research proposal. Perhaps it is also time to re-think about revamping the curriculum. The practicum is a time for student teachers to link theory to practice and work collaboratively with their supervisors, school teachers and school administrators. The unnecessary yoke on their shoulders would deprive them of optimising the time to hone their skills and knowledge. The Practicum experience is in a way the crescendo of the degree programme. Student teachers are made aware of the realities of the classroom and need to link theory to practice. It is therefore crucial that they are given the opportunity to avail themselves of the time needed to improve their professional practice. The self-examination and reflections noted by the student teachers during phase 2 and 3 practicum are episodes where they clarified their thoughts, gained insights and deepened their understanding of the knowledge and skills they received. It is imperative that the respective stakeholders reflect on the student teachers’ experiences to further improve the practicum programme towards quality teacher education.



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