Bridging Theory-Practice Gap: Connecting Feedback with Teaching Practicum

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ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

Incorporating theory into practice is not a simple but rather a dialectical and complex process of observing, scaffolding, reflecting, and coordinating prospective teachers (PT) at teaching practicum. It has been observed that interaction in the form of academic feedback between cooperative teachers (CT) and PTs is poor. The study explores the perception of CTs, PTs and UTs (University teachers) about feedback practices to bridge the theory-practice gap during teaching practicum in the preservice teacher education program (PTEP). It is an exploratory investigation applying the survey method and semi-structured interview to collect data from PTs, CTs, and UTs to answer the investigation inquiries about the role of feedback practices in bridging the theory-practice gap. Findings reveal that CTs are working as mentors without professional training, recognition of their contributions, and professional incentives and contradictory findings by the PTs and CTs about the in-time, targeted, supportive oral-written feedback at teaching practicum.

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1. Introduction

The quality of Preservice Teacher Education Programs has been recognized as an important factor in determining the quality of the overall education system. Effective Preservice Teacher Education Programs (PTEP) are essential for the lifelong learning of PT (students who are enrolled in PTEP) and also for the success of school education (OECD, 2009). PT combines of theory and practice managed by the Teacher Education Institutions and Cooperative Schools (those schools in which PTs go for teaching practicum). PTs need support from School and University partners during teaching practicum to develop understanding, dispositions, and skills about the art and science of teaching (Stephens & Boldt, 2004; Al Sohbani, 2012). UT (university faculty
members who supervise teaching practicum) and cooperative teachers (CT) (school teachers who supervise prospective teachers in school during practicum) provide a guideline for professional development in the delivery and practice of theoretical knowledge of teaching during teaching practicum. Moreover, Higher Education Commission of Pakistan has developed Guides for teaching practicum for the Pre-service 4 Years B. Ed (Hons) program that also identifies the significance of feedback for preparing teachers to conduct teaching-learning successfully. Effective feedback from UTs and CTs enables the PTs to learn how to blend theory into practice (Soares & Oliven, 2002) but studies conducted about the PTEP in Pakistan identify the theory-practice gap in a different dimension of learning to teach; and this gap is also enhanced because of poor, delayed, and threat driven feedback practices (Samina, Behlol, Shah, Fox, Davis & Pedder, 2017; Masood & Behlol, 2017).

PTs, CTs, and UTs are required to perform in collaborative and cooperative learning cycles with the support of lucid, concrete, effective feedback for learning and application of innovative pedagogical practices in teaching practicum (Fletcher, & Banthia, 2000). PTs need to learn how to react against criticism, follow advancement against past targets, and the desire for input and appraisal of common targets that require correspondence and supportive feedback channels. Contrary to this, communication feedback channels are non-functional and follow authority-driven mode of one-way communication without supporting constructive habit formation in teaching practicum (Lee, Theoharis, Fitzpatrick and Kim, 2006). To sum up, the feedback mechanism is authoritative, based on fault-finding and accountability-grade driven basis that is least effective for the preparation of PTs in PTEP (Samina et al., 2017; Masood & Behlol, 2018) during teaching practicum in PTEPs.

Pelligrino, Chudowsky, and Glaser (2001) deduced that PTs need continuous feedback for their expert advancement in lesson planning, practicing teaching strategies, and managing classroom activities. Viable feedback enables them to comprehend the instruction process and improve teaching practices by discussing and reflecting on the executed lesson in school settings (Jarvis et al., 2001). Continuous feedback also empowers PTs to identify their strengths and shortcomings. It is observed that the feedback provided in PTEP in Pakistan is by and large instructional or forced instead of interactive and dialogic interaction (Masood & Behlol, 2021). Collaborative feedback may help to develop teaching style and philosophy and vision of effective teaching (Feiman- Nemser, 2001).

Incorporating theory into practice is not a simple but rather a dialectical and complex process (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007). The aims of teaching practicum are to jointly develop innovative pedagogical practices that enable PTs to establish relationships with UTs and CTs, and resolve learning problems and challenges collaboratively (Hussein, 2011). During teaching practicum, School-University partnership increases the degrees of commitment by introducing and practicing innovative pedagogical techniques (Galloway & Edwards, 2014), that help to integrate theory-practice gap. Feedback related to practicum is a 'helping' action and it is intended to encourage learning and create them expertly dependent on a built-up shared relationship, administered by transparency and trust.

It has been observed that the majority of teacher education graduates are not able to apply learned pedagogical skills in the classroom due to academic, psychological, and mentoring factors in Pakistan (Masood & Behlol, 2016). UT has to provide Feedback to the whole group consisting of 40-60 PTs along with the full workload of the semester teaching, three to four courses of 3 credit hours. Observing the teaching practice of every PT’s and provide him/her feedback during the practicum is not possible within the given situation due to workload and time constraints. Consequently, the UTs are not able to
provide in time-specific feedback to all the PTs. The CTs working with the PTs in teaching practicum are neither trained to perform the job nor are their contributions recognized at the departmental level. Moreover, only one UT is not trained and possess the the educational competence to manage, observe, and evaluate lessons in all subjects (languages, mathematics, physics, chemistry, social study, Islamiyat). Consequently, dialogue and discussion between CT and PT, and also amongst the PTs that may promote critical thinking and reflection have been sacrificed. Therefore, this investigation is an endeavor to study the nature and process of feedback for PTs by the UTs and CTs that may provide insight to professionals about the importance and role of continuous feedback for bridging the theory-practice gap in PTEP. The findings of the present investigation may guide PTs, UTs, and Teacher Educators to enhance the quality of school-based practicum for bridging theory-practice gap.

2. Theoretical Lens and Conceptual Framework

Several theories in different contexts provide a theoretical underpinning for learning how to teach. Teaching practicum is basically a process of learning how to facilitate PTs to learn how to teach in real classroom setting. Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) Socio-Cultural Theory of cognitive development provides the theoretical underpinning to the Feedback process during teaching practicum. By scaffolding, CTs assist PTs to get command in teaching activities individually and provide feedback on teaching activities that seem difficult for PTs to achieve or if they are behind in their knowledge and capabilities. CTs are required to mentor PTs in the application of the theory into practice, that are suitable for PT's’ learning abilities or in their “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky 1978). Both constructivist and socio-constructivist theories will be used as a theoretical lens for the current study. During teaching practicum CTs observe PTs and provide feedback on different aspects of teaching. PTs reflect to improve their teaching practice; this circle provides a way to bridge theory-practice gap.

3. Methodology

This study is an exploratory-descriptive investigation of PT's Feedback practices provided by the CTs and UTs in teaching practicum to bridge the theory-practice gap and the difficulties they experience with practicum. A survey and semi-structured interview techniques were used to gather information from PTs and CTs to answer the questions about the outcomes of the practicum. Data was
gathered through a five-point Lickert Scale and semi-structured interviews with six UTs to get in-depth views about the problem under study.

There were three types of participants in the study: Cooperative Teachers, Prospective Teachers, and University Tutors. In selecting the study participants, the researcher applied purposive and criterion sampling techniques. Teacher education institutions in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, which offer B.Ed. (Hons) program was selected using purposive sampling. The sole selection criteria were the selection of those PTs who completed teaching practicum at least two or three times. 98PTs, 30 CTs, and 15 UTs participated in the study.

The research instrument developed by Smith (2010) was adapted, to collect data from PTs. The instruments' internal consistency was tested through Cronbach's Alpha (a). Reliability statistics for PTs with total number of eighteen (related to feedback) was 0.89 which identified a high level of consistency. Gay suggested that the value of Alpha i.e. .75 was acceptable and more than .80 of it is highly significant (Gay, 2000).

Both types of data (quantitative and qualitative) were collected by the research team after getting permission from the respective institutions. The researcher obtained permission from the departmental heads of the universities and schools to administer the Likert scale. The researcher also briefed them about the basic objectives and research questions of the study. They were also ensured that data would be used only for research purposes. Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating percentages, mean, and standard deviation through SPSS.

After quantitative analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain the responses from university tutors who supervised and guided the selected prospective teachers. Thematic analysis was carried out by open coding, axial coding, analytical coding, and selective coding in qualitative analysis. After thematic analysis, all responses relevant to the study were written and explained. Quantitative data were analyzed by using SPSS.

4. Findings

Survey data explains the views of PTs about how do the CTs provide them feedback in teaching practicum to improve their teaching for bridging theory-practice gap.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Summary of factor Statistics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cooperative teachers</td>
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<td>Feedback</td>
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<tr>
<td>Item Means</td>
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Table 1 uncovers that the Mean from CTs was greater than 3 which supported the statements. On the other hand, the mean calculated from PTs’ responses was less than 3 which did not support the statements in feedback.

Chart 1: Perceptions of PTs and CTs on the nature and significance of feedback
Chart. 2: Views of Prospective teachers on the feedback practices of Cooperative teachers

3: CTs’ views about the response of PTs on the provided feedback practice

The key findings of the perceptions of CTs and PTs regarding the significance, quality, and support
of Feedback in bridging theory-practice gap of chart 1 are:

1. CTs and PTs agreed to the statement that feedback helps to bridge the theory-practice gap during teaching practicum. 67 percent of PTs and 62 percent CTs agreed to the statement.
2. Effective feedback practices on teaching practicum may support lesson planning, selection of teaching strategies, class management, personal attributes, and language proficiency. 62 percent PTs and 67 percent CTs agreed to the statement.
3. Written feedback is more effective and helpful to bridge the theory-practice gap. 67 percent PTs and 60 percent CTs agreed to the statement.
4. Feedback is required to be consistent with what is taught in the universities during coursework. 68 percent PTs and 73 percent CTs agreed to the statement.

The key findings of the chart 2 regarding the Feedback practices of CTs in the light of the views of PTs about the nature, significance, quality, and support of Feedback practices for bridging the gap between theory and practice are:

1. Quality and effectiveness of CTs Feedback during teaching practicum was not according to the expectation of PTs. 59 percent disagreed with the statement that feedback provided by CTs was up to the required standards and needs of PTs.
2. Only 44 percent agreed that peer feedback during teaching practicum help in learning teaching skills. 35 percent disagreed with the statement and 25 percent tick ‘uncertain’.
3. 67 percent of PTs viewed that CTs did not provide written Feedback on lessons in teaching practicum. Only 14 percent agreed to the statement.
4. 70 percent of PTs viewed that CTs did not provide oral feedback on lessons in teaching practicum. Only 19 percent agreed to the statement.
5. 73 percent of PTs viewed that CTs did not behave politely/positive behavior while providing Feedback to them.
6. 70 percent of PTs viewed that CTs Feedback did not support to learn the skills of teaching in teaching practicum.

The key findings of the chart 3 about the views of CTs regarding the response of PTs on the given Feedback that may support learning in teaching practicum and also help to bridge the gap between theory and practices are:

1. 61 percent of CTs viewed that they provide comprehensive written and oral feedback to PTs on their performance during teaching practicum to bridge the theory-practice gap.
2. 71 percent of CTs viewed that instant feedback is effective and more useful than delayed feedback to enhance the teaching skills of PTs.
3. 48 percent of CTs viewed that given feedback on the lesson is easily understandable for PTs to learn and or practice. While 52 percent CTs disagreed with the statement.
4. 53 percent of CTs viewed that PT’s did not utilize provided feedback in teaching practicum to improve their teaching skills.
5. 34 percent of CTs viewed that PTs reflect over the given feedback to bridge theory-practice gap.

5. Qualitative findings

Table 2. Themes and subthemes of qualitative data
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<tr>
<th>S.N</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Written feedback, Oral feedback, Delayed feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Theory practice gap</td>
<td>Teaching strategies, Classroom management, Lesson planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Daily reflection, Reflect on feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Positive behavior</td>
<td>Expectations, Teaching practices, Lack of experience</td>
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</table>

Four themes were derived from qualitative data and several subthemes emerged from the conversation of CTs too. The majority of the CTs says that feedback is important for learning to teach, written and oral feedback should be given in-time to PTs during teaching practicum. There were several sub-themes emerged from the open coding of interviews. The UTs mentioned that positive feedback must be in place. They indicated that they used Performa and checklists, provided by the university administration, for written and oral feedback during the observation of PTs. Participant E said:

"There is a formal system for assessing prospective teachers. The institution provided us with Performa and checklist, which included all elements for daily observation. Through them, we provided oral and written feedback."

The majority of the UTs mentioned the significance of feedback to bridge the theory-practice gap in teaching practicum. The PTs and CTs acknowledged their learning from diverse viewpoints and observations using the collective lesson planning cycle. They honed on the major ideas of a lesson through this process and emphasized student thought. University tutors mentioned that all PTs are required to demonstrate their ability to overtake national benchmark competencies i.e., the Standard for Initial Teacher Education.

However, the ongoing formative feedback by the CTs and the UTs has a greater role to play than in the past. There is only one summative assessment (per placement) that would be mutually agreed upon by the cooperative teacher and the university mentor. This process represents a major step forward for both parties, especially for the PTs, because they have obtained a consistent account of their success and capabilities than has often been the case. “Most of the participants depict that quality of feedback also matters; feedback must be on practical aspects, as participant C said:

"Unfortunately, feedback is more theoretical; we have feedback on lesson planning, designing activities but not on the delivery of the lesson during the classroom. As UTs observe PTs just for ten minutes to provide feedback, then how is it possible to touch all aspects of the lesson to provide feedback?"

CTs suggested that feedback on teaching strategies, classroom management, and lesson planning helps to bridge theory-practice gap. Reflection is the theme that frequently repeated by CTs, they said that PTs should reflect to improve their practices. CTs mentioned that they don’t have any experience related to practicum supervision, so it should be provided for positive output. There are some points suggested by UTs for better performance:

- Feedback should be understandable for PTs
- Feedback should be focused and specific topics
• Feedback should be provided in time for the immediate improvement
• Feedback should be balanced to appreciate strengthens and problem areas
• Feedback should be Non-judgmental
• Feedback should be forward-looking and self-regulatory

6. Discussion

The current study provides insight into the feedback practices of CTs and UTs to PTs for learning teaching skills that may help to bridge the gap between theory and practice during teaching practicum. All the stakeholders accept the importance of feedback to enhance teaching skills for bridging the theory-practice gap at teaching practicum. This finding is relevant to the Dewy theory of experiential learning that states learning is the active interaction of the individual in a specific context. It is an individualized, learner-centered, action-oriented, and context-based phenomenon. However, the feedback practices of the CTs differed across the institutions. Moreover, UTs and CTs are not in a position to provide time and targeted feedback to all the participants due to time constraints and the number of PTs assigned to them. CTs are not specialists in teaching different subjects but they have been asked to provide feedback across the subjects that have not been justified on any logical basis.

The study revealed that CTs were not trained to perform their role effectively in the grooming of PTs; and they do not get any professional incentives in return for their services. Lack of recognition and rewarding CTs in their career promotion and financial incentives in return for their services is just asking them to work with PTs on a charity basis. Ramanathan and Wilkins-Canter (2000) postulate that most CTs are not qualified as evaluators and feedback providers for their function. There is nevertheless evidence that teachers are more productive formally trained for their positions as CTs (Smith, 2010). To ensure their commitment and all-out efforts in such a scenario may be an illogical expectation from them when they are neither professionally trained nor rewarded for their required input.

CTs viewed that they regularly provide oral and written feedback to PTs in teaching practicum. Findings from the data collected from PTs did not agree to the statement. They didn't concede to giving directions in arranging exercises, structuring exercise, overseeing classroom discipline, rehearsing most recent procedures, giving feedback and reflection on exercise, and so forth. According to White’s (2007), a blend of oral and written feedback is very significant to learn teaching skills. It is a really alarming situation for the Teacher Educators and a wake-up call to think about the capacity building of CTs, and also providing them official incentives for effective supervision and feedback practices.

PTs also revealed that those (14%) who provide feedback in teaching practicum are irrelevant and not per their requirements. It is in the context of critique, rather than any constructive or motivating comments. Initial presentation of lessons and managing classroom discipline is an uphill task for the PTs in Cooperating Schools. Instead of encouraging and supporting, as advised by Vygotsky in the form of scaffolding, CTs are award criticizing and discouraging remarks. University tutors also did not visit regularly to schools for lesson observation. They only visit once or twice during the whole practicum and consequently, PTs suffers in learning the teaching skills. The research conducted by Ngoh and Tan (2000) confirmed this finding that the majority of the CTs, allocated by schools do not demonstrate their interest in providing help during practicum. CTs and PTs agreed that immediate feedback is more effective than delayed feedback. In case of delayed feedback, CTs and PTs are not able to recollect the learning events of the class and engage themselves in the critical and reflective discussion. The majority of the CTs also criticized the theory ridden curriculum of pre-service teacher
education that is lacking in developing teaching skills. Teaching is not only knowledge of teaching strategies but also practicing teaching skills applied in the classroom. CTs also viewed that PTs did not reflect what they learn from feedback findings. In addition, a report conducted by Hudson (2010) verifies the findings of the current research that PTs were not interested in learning, had inadequate prior experience and were not prepared to teach in the course, etc.

Findings of the current study revealed that both oral and written, constructive, systematic feedback on lesson planning, lesson observation, and teaching strategies has been missing that has serious implications for the preparation of teachers in the pre-service teacher education program. UTs and CTs did not have sufficient time to meet PTs and review practicum files to discuss progress regularly. UTs are busy with their schedules; they are not available to share the post-JAV feedback with PTs and take the responsibility of drafting and finalizing the school placement joint report. PTs also revealed that feedback in teaching practicum is irrelevant and not per their requirements most of the time. It is in the context of critique, rather than any constructive or motivating comments. The majority of PTs mentioned that their UTs do not observe their lessons regularly. They did not provide oral feedback that is important for their career. On the other side, UTs viewed they would try to attend several schools to observe and provide feedback, but it is difficult for them to visit every school.

7. Conclusions and Implications

In light of the results, it is concluded that a huge inconsistency exists between the views of PTs, CTs about the provision of feedback practices in PTEP. It is also concluded that regular, comprehensive, and systematic oral and written feedback on lesson planning, lesson observation and follow up has been missing which has serious implications for the preparation of teachers. The number of PTs attached to CTs and University teachers is also unmanageable. University Tutor and CTs are not commanders who have to plan and issue order rather they have to work with participants in a scaffolding way and engage them in dialogical discussion for the application of theoretical learned techniques into classroom practice. Teaching skills and habits cannot be learned in a day or week or a month. These actions are naturalized by doing and practicing again and again. Therefore, School Practicum is to be a weekly part of the curriculum throughout the Preservice Teacher Education Program. It is also concluded that without building the capacities of CTs and rewarding their services in the form of their career promotion and financial incentives, the story of effective preparation of teachers may not be accomplished.

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