

## Keeping the Practicum of Chinese Preservice Teacher Education in World's Perspective

Shah Syed Manzar-Abbas

Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

Lijie Lu

Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China

Email: lvlj@nenu.edu.cn

**DOI Link:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v3-i4/112>

**Published Date:** 14 April 2013

### Abstract

The paper analyses the practicum programme offered in Chinese Teacher Education institutions (TEI) as compared with that of the other countries of the world. Researchers explored the ways to improve Chinese practicum programme comparing it with that of some developed and developing countries of the world. Practicum experiences of ten universities of the world from different countries were analyzed with objective to compare Chinese practicum. There emerged three basic issues from the study; the duration, timing, and mode of practicum. The researchers identified that the time allocated to practicum experiences in China was too short; the timing for sending student teachers (STs) to the field (schools) was inappropriate, and the mode of practicum adopted was outdated. The time should be expanded for practicum experiences and the practicum should be integrated throughout the programme. The STs should be sent to schools as early as possible. The other countries integrate practicum into the whole (teacher education programme) TEP ramifying it into different stages, which is also recommended for the Chinese TEI.

*Keywords:* Comparative analysis, Normal Universities, practicum, Pre-service, student teachers, teacher education

### Introduction

Beyond doubt the teaching practice is a vital part of pre-service teachers' education (Marais and Meier 2004; Perry 2004:2; Quick and Sieborger 2005; Maphosa, Shumba & Shumba 2007), because for STs, it is the first connection and transition to real field of teaching (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003). STs also value the teaching practice because it works as an interface between their studentship and a prospective profession (Menter, 1989) and strongly influence their ideas about teachers' roles (Smith & Snoek, 1996). The literature reported practicum as a vital factor in the preparation of professional teachers (MacKinnon, 1989). Unfortunately, less

attention is given to the quality of teaching practice in pre-service TE (Kiggundu 2007; Hill, Ball, & Schilling, 2008). Conventionally, the factors like students' recruitment criteria, repute rankings, and the existence of well known faculty are the basis for measuring the quality of universities throughout the world (Huber & Hutchings, 2005), but, the case of education faculty of universities is rather different than that of other faculties of universities (Heeralal & Bayaga, 2011). Kiggundu (2007) states that the present literature advocates a "... range of experiences to which student educators are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools" (p. 25). He further says that a vital role of teaching practice is "chance provision to the prospective teachers for theory and practice integration (Kiggundu 2007: 27). That is why other factors are not the only measure for quality in education (Huber & Hutchings, 2005), but teaching practice is also a vital factor for the training of any competent teacher (Nancy, 2007). Literature also reports that an effective practicum has an influence over students' achievement, teachers' retention, and teachers' preparation for the lesson (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2010).

Currently, there is a debate that education stake holders are concerned about the quality of teaching practicum throughout the world (Nelson 2007). Literature has reported that STs are also much concerned about teaching practice (McBride, 1984: 41; Wendt & Bain, 1989:178; Behets, 1990). Practicum is a context in which the prospective teachers experience intricacies and ground realities of teaching profession (Kiggundu & Nyimuli, 2009). It also provides a laboratory experience to prospective teachers to validate their career selection decision (ibid). Perry (2004) declares that the main aim of practicum is orientating prospective teachers to the assignments of teacher profession (p. 2).

Practicum is a field experience when prospective teachers teach in schools and apply their learnt knowledge in the real situation (Ngidi & Sibaya, 2003) while other viewed it as a supervised and guided teaching experience of prospective teachers under an experienced mentor (Chireshe & Chireshe, 2010). Stanton and Giles (1989) defined practicum as 'field experiences that focus on professional practice' and 'activities that are explicitly focused on pre-professional practice (180)'. Researchers and educators emphasize the importance of practicum and contend that it provides, to the STs, a chance to observe and work in the real context (Huling, 1997: 1), engage in teaching to achieve the knowledge about their future profession (Shulman, 1987), and to develop their teaching competence (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005: 291) or 'practical theory' (Handal & Lauvas, 1987). The researchers suggest that the teaching practicum should be given a universal concern by all the stakeholders of education (Nelson, 2007).

So the researchers have made an attempt to study the practicum experiences of different universities of different countries of the world so that they can improve Chinese practicum system. We have analyzed practicum experiences offered in Chinese universities comparing with those offered in other universities of the world. We tried to find out the ways with which we can incorporate the good points of practicum experiences of other countries.

## **Purpose of Practicum**

The practicum is aimed to make the prospective teachers a reflective professional in addition to provide them with a practical field to apply the acquired knowledge through the courses (Laurentian University, 2011; Antioch University, 2010). According to Salvatori (2010) the practicum lets teacher candidates “integrate theoretical, practical, and experiential knowledge in the understanding of and resolution of professional issues.” The university of Newcastle Australia also states the objectives of practicum to make the ST reflective professional, theory and practice linkage, and the professional socialization of prospective teachers (University of Newcastle retrieved on July 25, 2010).

According to the literature following are the major kind of practicum purposes. A well-planned practicum:

- 1) provides a real field to apply the acquired knowledge (Daresh, 1990; Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2007; Bezzina & Michalack, 2008);
- 2) Provides a real field to understand the real context of professional understanding (Shulman, 1987; Huling, 1997; Nancy, 2007; Kinggundu & Nyimuli, 2009);
- 3) Provides a laboratory to validate the choice of career and commitment to it (Daresh, 1990; Yan & He, 2010);
- 4) Provides feedback for further development and an opportunity to become a reflective practitioner (Jaworski, 2006; Yan & He, 2010; European Commission, 2010);
- 5) integrate/links the theory to the practice (Schon, 1987; Moor, 2003; Kiggundu, 2007; Cavanagh & Prescott, 2010);
- 6) Provides the prospective teachers to observe and experience diverse contexts and learners (Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1995; Beck & Kosnik, 2002); and
- 7) Is a transition of roles from a student to a professional worker (Menter, 1989)?

## **Methodology**

The design of the study is qualitative. The qualitative study approach is an approach which allows the researcher to understand the phenomenon (Karamustafaoglu, 2009). The researchers have adopted the document analysis and literature review approach to investigate the problem. The practicum structures of different countries of the world have been analyzed through practicum handbooks or from the websites of the universities directly. Along with this the accessible literature has also been reviewed.

## **Structure of Practicum Experiences in Different Countries**

For the sake of a standardized practicum it should be administered at least in two schools (Kinggundu & Nyimuli, 2009). Some institutions manage to send their STs a day per week while some manage a block of practicum (Perry, 2004: 2). A study by Quick and Sieborger (2005) recommends that one third of the time should be allocated for practicum, which should be sub-divided into two or three stages.

In most of the countries of the world the semi or partial integrated kind of practicum structure is interwoven throughout the TEP with a little bit difference. Here we can see the practicum structures offered by the universities of different countries.

The practicum of Laurentian University in Canada comprises three different elements<sup>1</sup>; pre-practicum placement (PPP), initial placement (IP)<sup>2</sup>, and professional year practicum (PYP). PPP comprises 120 hours in total that are composed of 40 hours every year starting from the second year. The ST spent these phases with different teachers. During IP the ST spend four weeks with an assigned mentor teacher. But the ST spend PYP with different mentors. There are two PYP's with a total time of 12 weeks. See table 1.

**Table 1**

*Practicum Structure of Laurentian University, Ontario, Canada*

|                                          |                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Pre-Practicum Placement (PPP)</b>     | 120 hours; 40 hours every year for three years<br>excluding first year with different teachers |
| <b>Initial Practicum (IP)</b>            | 4 weeks with a mentor teacher                                                                  |
| <b>Professional Year Practicum (PYP)</b> | Two practica totaling 12 weeks with various mentors                                            |

Salem State University in USA offers the practicum structure that needs at least 75 hours as pre-practicum experience and 300 hours for student teaching, which lasts almost for full semester (four months). In Shorter University Rome, USA, the practicum structure is almost like that of Salem State University with a little bit difference. It comprises three basics elements; observation, practica, and student teaching. Starting from 2<sup>nd</sup> year, the university offers 15 hours every year for observation. At least three practica are pre-requisite for student teaching. Finally 75 consecutive days are offered for student teaching. See table 2.

**Table 2**

*Practicum Structure of Shorter University, Rome, Georgia, USA*

|                         |                                                        |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Observation</b>      | 15 hours every year starting from 2 <sup>nd</sup> year |
| <b>Practica</b>         | at least three practica                                |
| <b>Student Teaching</b> | Consecutive 75-day term                                |

The University of Glasgow follows a more integrated practicum structure. In the first semester of the first year, the STs go to schools once in every week for the time of six weeks. In the second semester of the first year they experience four full weeks in a middle or primary school. Again before the first semester of second year (overall 3<sup>rd</sup> semester), the students go to school for three full weeks. One day every week for four weeks in the second semester of second year (overall 4<sup>th</sup>). And the students also have field experience for full four weeks in the second semester of second year. Before the first semester of third year the students go to schools for four full weeks with the focus on moral and religious education. They again have four full weeks practice in the second semester (6<sup>th</sup>) with the focus of expressive arts. In

<sup>1</sup> Pre-practicum Placement Handbook EDUC 0150 (2011-2012), School of Education, Laurentian University

the last semester of the last year they have to teach in the schools for ten full weeks focusing on science. They will also write a dissertation of 10,000 words in the last year.

**Table 3**

*Practicum Structure of University of Glasgow, UK*

| <b>Year</b>   | <b>School Experiences</b>                                                                                                                               |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Year 1</b> | Semester-1: One day/week at least for 6 weeks<br>Semester-2: Four full weeks in middle primary school (grade 4/5)                                       |
| <b>Year 2</b> | Before Semester-1: Three full weeks with pre-five sector<br>Semester-2: a day/week for four weeks child development focus<br>Semester2: Four full weeks |
| <b>Year 3</b> | Before Semester-1: Four full weeks with religious/moral education focus<br>Semester2: Four full weeks on expressive arts (dance, drama, music)          |
| <b>Year 4</b> | Semester2: Ten full weeks focusing science                                                                                                              |

In another university of UK, the University of Edinburgh, the practicum is consisted of four phases; one in each year. In the second semester of first year there is five weeks nursery school experience; in the second semester of second year they offer school experience of six weeks for early stages; in the first semester of third year there is practicum for middle and upper stages for ten weeks; and in the last semester of the programme (2<sup>nd</sup> semester of 4<sup>th</sup> year) there are 11 weeks for practicum at school of own choice.

**Table 4**

*Practicum Structure of University of Edinburgh, UK*

| <b>Year</b>   | <b>School Experiences with duration</b>         |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Year 1</b> | Semester-2: Five weeks in Nursery School        |
| <b>Year 2</b> | Semester-2: Six weeks in Early Stages           |
| <b>Year 3</b> | Semester-2: 10 weeks in middle and upper stages |
| <b>Year 4</b> | Semester-2: 11 weeks at own choice school       |

The practicum structure of National Institute of Education Singapore is developmental in nature and it also comprises of four different components; school experience (SE), teaching assistantship (TA), teaching practicum-1 (TP-1), and teaching practicum-2 (TP-2). Two weeks of schools experiences are offered before first semester of 2<sup>nd</sup> year; five weeks of teaching assistantship are offered before the first semester of year 3; five weeks of teaching practicum are offered before first semester of year four; and ten weeks are offered during the second semester of year four. See table 5.

**Table 5**

*Practicum Structure of National Institute of Education Singapore*

|                 | <b>School Experience (SE)</b> | <b>Teaching Assistance (TA)</b> | <b>Teaching Practice-1 (TP-1)</b> | <b>Teaching Practice -2 (TP-2)</b> |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Duration</b> | 2 weeks                       | 5 weeks                         | 5 weeks                           | 10 weeks                           |
| <b>Timing</b>   | Before Semester-1 of year 2   | Before Semester-1 of year 3     | Before Semester-1 of year 4       | Semester-2 of year 4               |

Education institute of the University of Brunei Darussalam also offers a developmental kind of practicum structure both in competence and in duration of time spent in the field. TP-1 is offered in the second semester of second year as teaching assistantship for three weeks; TP2 is offered in the second semester of 3<sup>rd</sup> year for seven weeks; and TP-3 is offered in the second semester of fourth year for fourteen weeks. See table 6.

**Table 6**

*Practicum Structure of University of Brunei Darussalam, Sultan Hassanal Bolkia Institute of Education*

|                            | <b>TP-1: Teaching Assistantship</b>         | <b>Teaching Practice-2</b>                                       | <b>Teaching Practice-3</b>                                       |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Year and Duration</b>   | 2 <sup>nd</sup> year, semester-4<br>3 weeks | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year, semester-6<br>7 weeks                      | 4 <sup>th</sup> year, semester-8<br>14 weeks                     |
| <b>Minimum Requirement</b> | as Teacher Assistant                        | at least 8 hours of planning, teaching, and supervision per week | at least 8 hours of planning, teaching, and supervision per week |

The practicum structure of the University of Hong Kong offers three practicum experiences throughout the programme. TP-1 is offered in the second year for three weeks which has six credit hours; TP-2 is offered in third year for eight weeks of 12 credit hours; and TP-3 is offered in fourth year for eight weeks of 12 credit hours. See table 7.

**Table 7**

*Practicum Structure of the University of Hong Kong*

|                          | Teaching Practice-1           | Teaching Practice-2           | Teaching Practice-3           |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Year and Duration</b> | 2 <sup>nd</sup> year, 3 weeks | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year, 8 weeks | 4 <sup>th</sup> year, 8 weeks |
| <b>Credit Hours</b>      | 6                             | 12                            | 12                            |

In the University of Cape Town South Africa, practicum is comprised of three stages; observation, TP-1, and TP-2. These three stages are offered in three different school settings. Observation stage is administered before registration for two weeks. It is an unsupervised activity. TP-1 is conducted at the beginning of second school term and TP-2 is managed during the third school term for six weeks.

**Table 8**

*Practicum structure of University of Cape Town South Africa*

|                            |                                                   |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Observation</b>         | Two weeks before registration                     |
| <b>Teaching Practice-1</b> | Five weeks at the beginning of second school term |
| <b>Teaching Practice-2</b> | Six weeks during third school term                |

In the University of Canberra Australia, the practicum experience is well interwoven throughout the programme. Starting from the second year school based experience is offered every year and in the third year it is offered during the both semesters. See table 9.

**Table 9**

*Practicum structure of University of Canberra Australia*

| Year          | Semester and Duration         |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Year 2</b> | Semester 1; 15 days at school |
|               | Semester 1; 15 days at school |
| <b>Year 3</b> | Semester 2; 15 days at school |
|               | Semester 2; 15 days at school |
| <b>Year 4</b> | Semester 1; 15 days at school |

University of Delhi offers different kinds of strategies for theory and practice linkage. The university offers on-campus practice experiences like tutorials, colloquia, workshops, and experiences of performing and fine arts. All these experiences are integrated throughout the programme. See table 10.

**Table 10**

*Practicum structure of University of Delhi, India*

| Year   | Experiences               | Marks weightage |
|--------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Year 1 | Performing and fine Arts  | 75              |
|        | Craft, Participatory work | 25              |
|        | Colloquia and Tutorials   | 50              |
| Year 2 | Observing Children        | 75              |
|        | Self-development Workshop | 50              |
|        | Colloquia and Tutorials   | 50              |
| Year 3 | Classroom Management      | 75              |
|        | Materials and Evaluation  | 75              |
|        | Colloquia and Tutorials   | 50              |
| Year 4 | School Internship         | 250             |
|        | Colloquia and Tutorials   | 50              |
|        | Project Work              | 100             |

### Chinese Teacher Education

China also understands the importance of TE and regards it a capstone in the preparation of effective teachers (Nanzhao & Muju, 2007). Chinese TE has more than hundred years of history starting from Shanghai Nanyang Normal School in 1897(Chen & Mu, 2010). From that time till now the Chinese TE has gone through a lot of changes. There are three major programmes enacting to train the teachers for future; junior colleges, undergraduate, and masters. Though the three programmes differ in their objectives and emphasis, yet they have almost the same curriculum (Chen & Mu, 2010). Now the focus of China in TE is to develop such an organized system which can ensure the development of skilled and qualified professionals (Guo & Pungur, 2008). In spite of all these endeavours to improve the TE system the Chinese TE is still facing challenges like quality and direction to teacher preparation (Guo, 2005; Li, 1999).

There is a lot of literature reporting the challenges the TE of china is now facing (Li, 1999; Guo, 1996; Zhang, 1995; Paine, 1990). One of the problems identified by the researchers is more focus on theory and less focus on practice (Li, 1999; Zhang, 1995; Paine, 1990). Moreover, the

time for practice is not sufficient to prepare the teachers for working in the field (Guo, 1996; 2005) entailing to produce the teachers with little teaching experience (Guo, 2005). Reflective and cooperative practices are lacking in the TEPs (Guo & Pungur, 2008). Zhou (2002) has also identified the less internship time and recommended an increase in its timing. Zhu and Han (2006) also suggested that there is dire need to investigate that how can we align the TEPs with that of teaching practice in the schools.

Most of the Chinese Normal universities follow a rationalist (Schon, 1983) model of TE, which contends that first learn the theory and then apply (Ur, 1992) it in the field (Yan & He, 2010). The practicum experience is offered mostly in the 7<sup>th</sup> semester (beginning of 4<sup>th</sup> year). The duration of the practicum is from 8 to 10 weeks (Chen & Mu, 2010). It starts mostly in the month of September, so, at the end of September there are support days and the first week of October is also of National Vacation. Considering this we can say that the planned weeks are actually not the true situation in the sense of time allocation for practicum purposes. According to Chen and Mu (2010) thesis and practicum comprises only 4% on the basis of credit hours and less than 6% on the basis of time (assuming 10 weeks) allocated.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

If we analyze the practicum experiences of different universities in the world, there emerge three important themes which have critical importance for Chinese TE. The two issues relate to time (period of time or duration of practicum) and timing (the point of time, the time when STs are let visit the field). The other is the mode of teaching practicum offered. Time and timing both influence in achieving the TE goals (Ure, 2009). Both of these issues have a vital importance and a key role in achieving the intended goals of practicum. If we have a close view of the practicum goals which we have mentioned earlier in the 'purpose of practicum' section, then we can easily understand that how much goals are not being achieved by this model and if we change this model how can we be successful in achieving those goals.

Time allocated for teaching practicum in China is too short to gain mastery of teaching skills and understanding of real context of the field (Liu & Xu, 2007; Wang & Gao, 2007; Fei, 2007). Even the researchers have recommended one third of the full time duration for the whole programme (Quick & Sieborger, 2005). Because the teaching is a practical profession and it demands practice. As we practice teaching we become more skillful and adept in the profession. The timing of the practicum is also not appropriate because in China mostly the practicum experiences are offered in the last year. The literature reports that if the practicum is practiced at the end of the programme it hampers the STs' development (Wang & Ren, 2002). Yan and He (2010) also found that the timing and duration of conducting teaching practicum was inappropriate and insufficient. Linda Darling-Hammond and Charles E. Ducommun (2011) suggested more than 30 weeks for teaching experience with expert mentors which should be linked to course work. American Association of Colleges for TE (2010) also recommended at least one full semester (450 hours) for practice and suggested full year (30 weeks or 900 hours) teaching practice as a typical practicum experience. The duration of time allocated and timing of placement both have impact over goal achievement of TEP (Ure, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Bransford 2005).

The mode of practicum applied in the Chinese TE is also outdated. Now the world is finding the modes, which are more interactive with field and which provide more connections between theory and practice. The literature suggests that the teaching practicum should be conducted in different sites in spite of just only one (Butt, 1994; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Klein, 1995). Reflection has been regarded as the vital part of classroom practice for the development of teachers (Jaworksi, 2006). The European Commission (2010) suggested that the pre-service teacher preparation “should be cyclical in nature, so that reflection upon the previous period of classroom practice informs preparation for the next”. The past study has evidence that stress of ST decreased significantly in the second time practicum (Yan & He, 2010).

Keeping in view all above discussion it is strongly recommended that the practicum experiences offered during TEP should be extended in time duration and these should be divided into different phases. The observation phase of the practicum should be started from the first year of programme. As we have mentioned that one of the objectives of the practicum is to validate the choice of career so it is compulsory to send the student teacher to real context so that s/he could confirm his/her choice of career selection experiencing the real field.

The other purpose of practicum is to integrate/link theory to practice. By dividing the practicum into different phases we can offer more connections to theory to the prospective teachers. We can manage our course work and practicum experience in line with each other. In other words we can say that by different phases the STs can develop more connections of theory with the practice. In one block at the last of programme offers practicum as a fragmented part of the programme which has no link with the theory which is a big issue of TE.

One of the important purposes of practicum is to make future teachers as reflective practitioners. With the help offering practicum experiences we can achieve this goal easily. As European Commission (2010) has recommended that the practicum experiences should be cyclical in nature so that by the help of reflection over first experience the prospective teacher could prepare themselves well for the next practicum experience.

By dividing practicum into different phases can help us in solving one of the management problems; that is if there is any mismatch between the mentor and mentee, we can solve that problem by changing that pair in the next phase without disturbing and letting the mentor teacher know the situation. So in this way we would not hurt anyone’s feelings or ego and can solve our problem in a better way.

By sending the ST to different contexts (school settings), we can offer to the prospective teacher to observe and experience varied contexts and the needs of diverse learners. To know different contexts and learn about the needs of individuals having various needs and socio-economic backgrounds, is also one of the important goals of practicum experiences.

To conclude we can say that China should take some benefits from the experiences of others. We strongly recommend that the Chinese Ministry of Education and the management of Chinese Universities may take these suggestions into their consideration to improve the TE

system. The findings also have implications for the teacher educators to consider these findings and apply them to validate them in the real contexts.

The universities of which we have analysed practicum experiences may not be representatives of their countries. So we may not apply the practicum mode of only one university to the whole country. We can study more universities of the world to know different experiences offered by different countries of the world.

### Acknowledgements

The authors extend their gratitude to the Ministry of Education, Pakistan and China Scholarship Council to give us opportunity to accomplish this academic task. The authors also acknowledge the services of all those who helped to finish the article in any way at any step.

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