Chapter 66

Impact of a Professional Development Programme on Trainee Teachers' Beliefs and Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study emerged from the concerns experienced by the last-year English language trainee teachers during their school practicum. An increasing number of trainees complained that their existing beliefs conflicted, in many ways, with the school-based mentor's teaching practice. A collaborative action research (CAR) professional development programme (PDP) was established to help prospective teachers resolve many of the dilemmas and improve their classroom practices in a 10-week practicum course. It was found that CAR has a powerful impact upon teacher candidates as it solves many of the dilemmas and concerns. Belief changes of one trainee teacher are presented as an exemplary case. While such findings can improve our understandings of pre-service teachers' cognitive learning and problem solving skills at the practicum site, they also generate useful insights into designing a PDP to promote trainee teachers' school-based professional development in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematic) education.

INTRODUCTION

In the initial teacher education, teaching practice has been recognized as one of the most important aspects of the L2 teacher education programme (Farrell, 2003; Gebhard, 2009; Tang, 2004). Research investigating student teacher practicum reveals that the practicum component constitutes a very important aspect of language teacher learning (Johnson, 1999; Borg, 2006; Farell, 2008). It provides opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge and skills, previously gained through instruction to authentic educational settings (Williams, 2009). During the practicum, trainees can apply their beliefs based on language learning theories they acquired in the course of their university studies.

Much evidence points to the value of pre-service student teaching due to the realistic nature of the experience (Slick, 1998). Hascher, Cocard and Moser (2004) state 'it is the best way to acquire professional knowledge and competences as a teacher' (p. 626). As noted by Leshem and Bar-Hama (2008), the practicum is the trainee teachers' first hands-on experience with their chosen career; as such, it has an important impact on trainees' future careers (Myles, Cheng & Wang, 2006; Rozelle & Wilson, 2012). The practicum also serves as a 'protected field for experimentation' and 'socialization within the profession' (Hascher et al., 2004). Thus, a trainee's future in education may be determined by what happens during their training period (Leshem & Bar-Hama, 2008). Zeichner (1990) points out that trainees consider the practicum experience as the most significant element in their teacher training; they benefit more from spending time in the field watching others teach than from attending classes at the university or colleges. Tsui (2003) supports this assertion in her discussion on teachers' personal values and beliefs by claiming that trainee teachers consider classroom experience as the most important source of knowledge about teaching.

Among the important aspects of the practicum, school-based mentor teacher plays a crucial role in shaping trainee teachers' beliefs and teaching skills, contributing to their knowledge base and professional development. By teaching under the supervision of mentoring teachers and engaging in various classroom tasks, trainee teachers can enhance their teaching knowledge and skills and reflect upon their deeply held values and beliefs, which can contribute to their cognitive learning and development (Cheng, Cheng & Tang, 2010; Gebhard, 2009). Additionally, mentors, through their own teaching, "can model appropriate teaching practice, and have a positive impact on mentees' self-confidence, and effectiveness" (Noe, 1988:459).

Ragins and Kram (2007) highlight the crucial effect of mentoring as follows:

At its best, mentoring can be a life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning and development. Its effects can be remarkable, profound and enduring; mentoring relationships have the capacity to transform individuals, groups, organizations and communities (p. 3).

The literature on mentoring in L2 teacher education has tended to focus on mutual effects of the mentor-mentee relationship, models of mentoring and mentor-mentee roles (Eliahoo, 2011). Yet, the impact of the mentoring on trainee teachers' cognitive change, particularly on the process of trainees' belief change and teaching practice, has remained relatively unexplored (Borg 2006; 2009).

To fill this gap, this study investigates

a)   the impact of mentoring on the process of belief change among the trainee teachers, and

b)   the impact of an innovative professional development programme (PDP) that highlights cognitive, constructive and interactive aspects of development on trainee teachers' beliefs.

The following chapter aims to present the implementation of an innovative PDP for the last-year trainee teachers of English as part of a 10-week practicum course. First, the collaborative action research is provided as the theoretical grounding for the development of the PDP. The ensuing section gives the rationale for initiating this study and details the methodology that is used to answer the research questions of this study. The process of the collaborative action research (CAR) applied in this study is described, followed by a presentation of a case study of a pre-service trainee teacher's belief changes and teaching experiences

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