Assessing the Practicum in teacher education – Do we want candidates and mentors to agree?

Kari Smith *

Department of Education, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Christiesgt. 13, 5020 Bergen, Norway

ABSTRACT

One of the most important components of teacher education is the practical part, the Practicum, and assessment of the candidates' performance plays a major part in forming the future generation of teachers. Little is known about the extent of agreement between the two main actors in the Practicum, the candidates and the school-based teacher educators. The aim of this paper is to add information about a rather blurred area of assessment in teacher education. The findings indicate there is a considerably extent of disagreement about assessment in the Practicum between the mentors and the candidates. It is suggested that instead of seeing the disagreements merely as obstacles to valid assessment, they can be exploited to initiate professional learning for the candidates.

© 2010 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Background

There is agreement in the research literature that the Practicum is a major component in the education of teachers (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Tillema (2007) calls it the core of the teacher education program, and Graham (2006) claims that it is *an important rite of passage* in a teacher's career. Our own feedback from candidates on the teacher education program at the University of Bergen confirms the above.

However, as important as the Practicum is, there are still several problems related to assessing candidates' performance during the Practicum. Smith (2007) discusses the many challenges assessors meet and she suggests a process for empowering all actors in the practice triad, student teachers, mentors and university supervisors, in assessment, in order to improve the quality of assessment during the Practicum. Tillema and Smith (2009) found that all involved parties agree that assessment for learning plays a major role during students' teaching practice, but there is unclarity or even disagreement about what to assess and how assessment is to be carried out. Tillema and Smith (2009) conclude that there is a lack of guidelines for assessing the Practicum. Similar issues have been discussed in earlier studies by Zeichner and Wray (2000) and Snyder, Lippincott, and Bower (1998).

The primary issue discussed in this paper is the extent of agreement in the assessment of the Practicum between mentors and their candidates in a specific teacher education program at a Norwegian university. The focus is on the meeting between the school-based mentor and the candidate during the extended Practicum period. The university supervisor, who usually observes the candidate teaching one or two isolated lessons during the 7 weeks practice period, is not included in the current study. Assessment carried out by the supervisor is of a more formal and judgmental character than the more formative assessment practiced by the mentor.

2. Assessment of teaching practice

Assessment of candidates' teaching practice during the Practicum is, to a large extent, assessment of work-based learning, which differs from assessing learning in an academic context. According to Brodie and Irving (2007) knowledge that is required to assess work-based learning takes on three main forms, declarative knowledge, which characterizes the "what" of the learning product, procedural knowledge which informs about the practical application of the knowledge, and finally, conditional knowledge which relates to knowing when to do what in the best possible manner. Assessment of work-based learning is similar to the assessment of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) in the sense that critical reflection on own practice is likely to lead to a deeper insight into and new understanding of practice which often initiates professional growth. More than a decade later Kolb (1998) expanded his experiential model of learning by introducing the concept "reflective dialogue" which emphasizes the importance of discussing personal experiences with others. During

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +47 55582846; fax: +47 55 58 98 71.
E-mail address: kari.smith@iuh.uib.no.

the Practicum the candidates are at the entrance gate of the professional practice and for them the dialogue with the mentor becomes crucial to their professional development. During the Practicum the candidates learn the very complex task of teaching, as described by Borko and Mayfield (1995):

> Learning to teach is a complex process determined by the interaction of personal factors, such as the prospective teachers' knowledge and beliefs about teaching, learning and subject matter; situational factors such as expectations, demands and feedback from key actors in the university and public school setting (p. 501).

As stated above, a major role assessment plays in the Practicum is to enhance students' continuous learning, development and professional growth. Several researchers (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 2009; Shute, 2008) argue that in relation to formative assessment, the quality of feedback the learner receives is a core factor in promoting learning. During the Practicum the candidates seek feedback mainly from the mentors, a form of feedback which can take them forward, feed forward (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Moreover, Timperley (2001) claims that school-based mentors have unique opportunities to promote professional learning in their interactions with the students during the Practicum. A question to ask is if agreement between the mentor and the candidate forms the best kind of feedback or if an eventual disagreement which requires a moderating dialogue between the mentor and the candidate might be the trigger to professional growth?

Assessment which highlights the formative aspects serves, perhaps, the main function of assessment during the Practicum, yet, there is an additional function, the summative, a gate keeping function, as the best suitable candidates for teaching are to be selected in order to protect the profession from incompetence. In the current context the responsibility for the summative judgmental assessment mainly lies with the university, however, it is, to some extent, informed by reports from the school-based mentor. Smith (2006) has discussed the various roles of assessment in teacher education, and she claims that the two contradicting functions, the formative and the summative, the feed-forward and the judgmental role, increase in complexity when both functions of assessment are carried out by the same person. It can be stressful to have the role of supporter and judge at the same time, even though the final decision is placed with the university.

In brief, assessment of the Practicum is a complex issue which has not been given sufficient attention in the research literature, and the intention of the current paper is to add to our understanding of underlying agendas, such as perceptions of teaching, required teaching during the Practicum, and functions of assessment, related to assessment during the Practicum.

The paper reports on a small pilot-study with the main aim of examining the extent of agreement between mentors and their individual candidates in relation to assessment of teaching during the Practicum. Some underlying assumptions illuminated by relevant theories are briefly presented to support the issue of inquiry, before the paper proceeds to describe the study, including context and instruments for data collection. Following presentation of the findings, the paper discusses possibilities of exploiting disagreement to enhance professional growth. At the end suggestions for possible focus for further studies are presented.

3. Underlying assumptions

The following section aims at explaining some of the underlying assumptions brought into the current study supported by selected theories related to assessment and learning, such as Messick's work on construct validity (Messick, 1989, 1995), activity theory

(Engeström, 1987, 1999; Tsui & Law, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978), and feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1998).

3.1. Construct validity

In principle as well as in practice, construct validity is based on an integration of any evidence that bears on the interpretation or meaning of test scores, including content, and criterion related evidence, which are subsumed as part of construct validity (Messick, 1995, p. 742). A good construct has a theoretical basis which is translated through clear operational definitions involving measurable indicators. A construct is a way of defining something. A major problem with the Practicum is the construct validity, what are we really looking for in terms of students' performance? Are we able to define the underlying construct forming the focus of assessment, and to which extent is there agreement among the various stakeholders regarding the construct? Several researchers have pointed to this complexity (Graham, 2006; Smith, 2007; Tillema & Smith, 2009; Tillema, 2007; Tsui & Law, 2007). Construct validity is the evidence and rational that supports the trustworthiness of score meaning, in our case, assessment of teaching during the Practicum. An additional aspect of construct validity is the consequential validity of the assessment which looks at the consequences the assessment task has on learning and teaching. Likely consequences are strengthened motivation to become a teacher and professional growth, or a summative decision made by the candidate herself or externally at the university that teaching is no longer an option.

3.2. Activity theory

Tsui and Law (2007) who refer to both Engeström and Vygostky, explain activity theory as follows: Individual or group actions are embedded in activity systems which are collective and social in nature. The motive for an activity is the object, and activities are realized by goal directed actions that are subordinate to motives (Tsui & Law, 2007, pp. 1290–1291).

In the Practicum, the candidate's learning how to teach is the object, and the teaching, observation, mentoring and assessment are all activities, or mediating tools. When the candidate comes to school he/she meets a system of norms, rules and regulations within the community, the school, of which the mentor is a member. In the specific context of the Practicum the roles are quite clear, the mentor, the candidate and the pupils. There are also other actors involved, such as the university supervisor, who is not part of the current pilot-study. Two different systems, or actors are involved (candidate and mentors), and they bring different knowledge, perceptions, understandings into the activity. The candidate is, at this point of the education, absorbed in the academic world, which in the Norwegian context has a rather theoretical focus. The mentor is, above all, a practitioner whose focus is on the daily teaching of pupils, and that is also where her/his current expertise lies. It is likely that representing two different worlds, the mentor and the candidate will not always see challenging situations eye to eye. Both parties will have to cross boundaries by engaging in dialogues and interaction with an open mind in order to understand the other. Daring to cross the boundary of one's own "culture", leads to the creation of new knowledge and better understanding of teaching. This new knowledge entails elements from both cultures. The actors have developed insights of which they were probably unaware beforehand. The interlocutors are crossing boundaries, and in a way we can say that when the interaction between the two, the mentor and the candidate, initiates new activities, the boundary crossing becomes a lever for change and innovations. Thus, boundaries are being crossed and new understandings are