

Construction of Self-directed Practicum Program for PMDT

A Case of a Normal University in China*

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Abstract—Professional master degree on teaching (PMDT) has been popular in recent years in China but there is few research about it in literature. To fill this gap, the present paper analyses characteristics of Chinese PMDT candidates. On the basis of this analysis and self-directed learning theory, the paper studies the construction of self-direction oriented practicum program in a Chinese normal university and the pilot operation. The program encourages PMDT candidates to employ their advantages and to improve their performance through reflection and self-direction with the ultimate goal of enhancing professional improvement.

Keywords—*self-direction; professional master degree; practicum program*

I. INTRODUCTION

China has two kinds of master degrees nowadays: academic and professional master degree (PMD) (MOE, 2009). The increasing number of PMD candidates majoring in teaching during the last 5 years has indicated the popularity of the program, which arouse educators' concerns on its quality assurance (Yi & Jiang, 2014). Despite the popularity of professional master degree on teaching (PMDT) in universities, researchers seem to neglect the particularity of it and show less interest in it since very little literature in China has been found in this field. In this regard, the present paper tries to fill the research gap by studying a practicum program construction for PMDT in one Chinese normal university, and draws implications for the future operation of PMDT practicum programs. The reason for us to research practicum is that we believe practicum is the essential process for PMD program in that the principle of PMD program is to equip candidates with professional knowledge and skills and the ability to apply those in practice according to Chinese government legislations (MOE, 2009).

II. CONTEXT OF RESEARCH

PMDT programs in China are facing great challenges and lack of targeted practicum programs is the most serious one. The reality is that most of the PMDT programs do not construct practicum programs particularly for PMDT candidates, but applying programs for bachelor degree

candidates. We cannot deny that PMDT candidates have their own characteristics when we consider their experience and mentality.

- Education practicum is not something new for PMDT candidates since they have experienced it when they were pursuing bachelor degrees. Some candidates even have teaching experience as full time teachers in schools. They have already had initial ideas about teaching and were familiar with school management and operation. Compared with bachelor degree candidates who first teach in school field, PMDT candidates can adapt to the practicum in a shorter time.
- PMDT candidates are generally mature in mentality since their average age is above 25 years old. The 4-year undergraduate and 2-year postgraduate study experience enable them to exhibit self-discipline and independence when they enter school field. They are able to adjust themselves to different contexts.
- PMDT candidates are more determined to become teachers compared with bachelor degree candidates majoring in teaching. It is the unfortunate fact that Chinese higher education cannot satisfy all the secondary school graduates who are eager to receive higher education. So secondary school graduates have to focus on how to enter universities instead of finding their interest in major choosing. Therefore, many bachelor degree candidates majored in teaching did not have a deep understanding on the major they choose, let alone their future profession. Different from them, PMDT candidates have more freedom when making decisions to further their study after they get their bachelor degrees. To become PMDT candidates means they are willing to be teachers. Their intention to pursue education master degrees is closely related to their future profession choice.

If we consider the above unique characteristics, we may find it natural and necessary to design new practicum programs for PMDT candidates to guarantee the PMDT program quality.

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III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. *Self-Directed Learning Theory*

The only way for human beings to meet the challenge of the changing world is to conduct self-directed learning according to Candy (1991). Self-directed learning is both learning process and outcome. As a learning process, it depicts the choice of learners in learning. With increasing knowledge and ability, learners are willing to take responsibility of their own learning. They independently or not plan, implement, evaluate and reflect their learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). As a learning outcome, self-directed learning refers to the ability learners formed in learning. Learners can use self-direction to guide their future learning (Knowles, 1975).

B. *The Orientation of PMDT Practicum*

As an essential part of PMDT programs, practicum should provide opportunities for candidates to relate what they learn about the theory to teaching practice (MOE, 2009). In addition to common features of practicum in teacher education program, like practice opportunity providing, mentoring and reflection, teacher educators need to reconsider the orientation of PMDT practicum.

1) *Integration of "practice-research-reflection"*: PMDT practicum is a process of integration. Candidates are challenged by the reality in school field. The specific context demands candidates to re-exam their perception on education and skill developed before. What candidates need to do is to find out "why" and "how to solve", namely to carry out action research, which is to define the problem and find ways to solve the problem. During the action research process, candidates reflect their performance and the effects of solutions they adopted, hence integrating teaching practice, research and reflection.

2) *Stress on self-directness*: We cannot deny that teaching is more than technical. The growth of teachers depends on the integrated development of perception, knowledge, skill and ability. Teachers develop through self-construction during the process of practice and reflection. PMDT candidates are inner-motivated to develop and self-regulated, which demands a mechanism in practicum to guide them to reflect continuously and to direct themselves through reflection.

IV. PURPOSE OF STUDY

Given the lack of research on PMDT practicum programs in China, the present paper aims to study the construction of PMDT practicum program in a Chinese normal university. The reason for us to choose practicum program as the research focus is that Chinese Ministry of Education legislation claims that education practicum is the essential process for PMDT programs. It is in practicum that pre-service teachers improve skills, integrate theories and learn to offer good teaching (MOE, 2009).

We intend to incorporate self-direction concept to practicum program by construction of a self-directed practicum program for PMDT candidates in Northeast China Normal University (NENU), which is a prestigious university in China. As both researchers and designers, we reflect the program through the pilot operation and hope to provide contribution to practicum program construction.

V. CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-DIRECTED PRACTICUM PROGRAM

The practicum program in NENU focuses on the conception of self-direction. The program advocates that candidates should reflect and adjust their thinking and behavior with reference to the practicum evaluation standard articulated in the program. All the components in the program, like requirements and activities are under the guidance of this conception.

A. *Practicum Evaluation Standard*

The program includes a practicum evaluation standard which serves as direction for candidates during the practicum. Referring to the standard enables candidates to know clearly whether they meet the criterion of beginning teachers and also provides them an opportunity to improve themselves. The practicum evaluation standard was developed on the basis of Professional Standard for Primary and Secondary School Teachers, a legislative document published by Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE, 2012). It lists the basic requirements for primary and secondary school teachers comprehensively. Besides this legislative document, the evaluation standard considers fully the characteristics of PMDT candidates. The making process of the evaluation standard and its validation will be introduced in the following study.

The evaluation standard includes three-level criteria. The first level is the statement of essential values inspiring the articulation of statements of the other two levels: teacher belief, teacher behavior and teacher professional development. It is the guiding principles of teacher education in NENU and naturally that of practicum.

The second level statement defines the main categories of candidates' work under which the elements of their knowledge and practice are arranged. The details of the second level statements are the following "Table I":

TABLE I. STATEMENTS OF FIRST AND SECOND LEVEL CRITERIA

Level 1 statement	Level 2 statement
Teacher belief	1. The candidate understands the subject contents she teaches
	2. The candidate understands how children learn and develop.
	3. The candidate understands how children differ in learning approaches
Teacher behavior	4. The candidate designs lessons by using appropriate instructional strategies.
	5. The candidate manages her class and encourages children’s critical thinking, creation and problem solving ability.
	6. The candidate uses verbal and nonverbal communication techniques to support interaction in class.
	7. The candidate plans instruction based on students, curriculum goals.
	8. The candidate uses appropriate assessment tools to evaluate children’s development.
Teacher development	9. The candidate reflects her actions of teaching on others.
	10. The candidate fosters relationships with colleagues to support children’s development.

Statements of level three define criteria used to interpret and judge evidence of candidates’ performance. They are the statements about candidates’ observable behavior. Each of

the level 2 statements is developed into two to five level 3 statements. The following “Table II” is part of the level 3 statements.

TABLE II. PART OF LEVEL 3 CRITERIA

Level 2 statement	Level 3 statement
1. The candidate understands the subject contents she teaches	Master basic content knowledge
	Integrate IT/media/resources effectively and/or creatively
	Selects content to encourage
2. The candidate understands how children learn and develop.	Cater to children’ diverse needs and abilities
	Use appropriate approach to activate children’s prior knowledge
3. The candidate understands how children differ in learning approaches	Be aware of needs of different learners
	Know how to select materials for different learners
	Encourages all children to participate

For the sake of evaluation, the third level statements are developed into rubrics. Besides the statements in the standard, which are the basic requirements for qualified student teachers, the rubric defines four-grade performances, which are unsatisfactory, basic, proficient and excellent grade. The rubric is used by both cooperating teachers to grade candidates’ performance and candidates themselves as self-evaluation rubric.

B. Reflection Journal

The program asks candidates to hand in a journal weekly. Journals must focus on certain themes, ranging from reflection on candidates’ own instruction and management to thoughts on any of school events.

C. Week Plan

In order to help candidates understand their achievements and disadvantages, the program asks them to hand in a week plan. With reference to the evaluation standard, candidates define a criterion for them to improve. They set goals for the week with the help of cooperating teachers. After the plan is made, candidates strictly carry it out. They report the progress they achieved during the week on weekly sharing meetings. Evidence of progress is presented on the meeting when necessary. Cooperating teachers assess the progress according to the evaluation standard and their observation on candidates’ performance in class. If there are different opinions on the progress, candidates and cooperating teachers will exchange ideas until agreement is achieved.

D. Week Self-Evaluation Rubric

With reference to self-evaluation rubric, candidates grade their performance of the week according to the scale of unsatisfied, basic, proficient and excellent performance. In addition to grading, a more important work to do is to elaborate the grading. In other words, candidates have to explain why they grade their performance in the way they did. The purpose of this requirement is to encourage candidate to reflect their performance with reference to the evaluation standard as framework.

E. Weekly Sharing Meeting

Cooperating teachers hold experience sharing meeting weekly. Candidates present their work and progress made during the week. Their work presented should cover the following four domains, which embody all the categories in the evaluation standard: instruction focus, candidates’ self-identification of their role, their relationship with students, and with colleagues. University cooperating teachers grade and give feedback to candidates’ presentation, and offer help when candidates meet difficulties.

F. Evaluation

Candidates’ final marks are determined by three components. The quality of reflection journal, week plan and its implementation takes 30 percent of the total marks; the performance on weekly sharing meeting takes 40 percent and the self-evaluation rubric and another two rubrics filled separately by school cooperating teachers and university cooperating teachers take the last 30 percent.

VI. REFLECTIONS ON THE PRACTICUM PROGRAM

A. Self-Directed Practicum Program Inspires PMDT Candidates' Potential

Characteristics of PMDT candidates mentioned above enable them to behave actively in school field. They have the ability to make decisions on the basis of their own analysis and adjust their actions accordingly by themselves. During the practicum, what they need most is some mechanism to trigger their potential.

The primary principle of self-directed practicum program is to encourage candidates to reflect and direct themselves. With the help of cooperating teachers when necessary, candidates understand how to reflect and form the habit of reflection, so as to change their performance to fit the contexts. The principle of the program which is to encourage candidates to direct themselves instead of following cooperating teachers fulfills candidates' appeal to work independently and creates more autonomy and engagement in the practicum. The relationship between the key elements in practicum is presented in "Fig. 1".

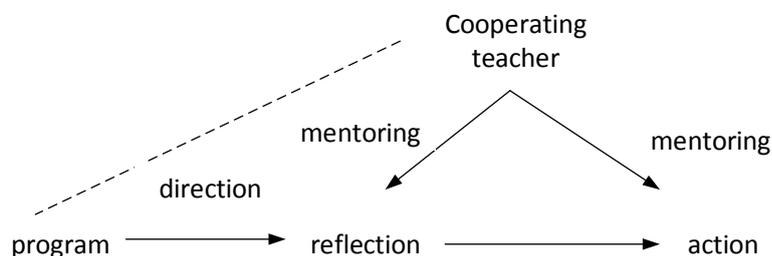


Fig. 1. The relationship between the key elements in practicum.

B. Reflection and Action Are Closely Related

The essence of candidates' work in practicum is trial and error. Whether new actions are appropriate or not is determined by their effects in practice. If they can solve problems, they are correct actions and welcomed in practice. If not, they are wrong behaviors and candidates need to reflect again to produce new actions. The cycle of trial - error -trial-error continues till problems are solved. During this process, the width and depth of reflection expand, which provides more options for trial and error.

C. Evaluation Unites Functions of Assessment and Development

Practicum evaluation should unite two functions: assessment and development. Assessment in practicum is to check whether candidates can instruct independently, whether they can manage class to ensure successful instruction and whether they have deepened their understanding on curriculum and education. While "the ultimate purpose of evaluation is not to prove, but to improve (Huang, 2008)." The evaluation standard should clearly define the orientation in order to direct candidates' professional development.

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