

Original Research Article

The Dynamics of University-School Partnerships in Teacher Education Practicum: A Comprehensive Analysis and Framework for Successful Implementation

ABSTRACT

This research delves into the dynamics of university-school partnerships in the context of the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka, aiming to develop a framework for successful implementation. The study recognizes the critical role of the teaching practicum in shaping effective educators and acknowledges the diverse teacher education programs offered by the Faculty of Education. The literature review establishes the importance of the teacher education practicum, emphasizing its role as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical classroom experiences. University-school partnerships are explored as integral to the success of the practicum, with various models identified, including the clinical practice model and co-teaching model. Challenges in these partnerships, such as communication gaps and differing expectations, are discussed. Existing frameworks and strategies for successful implementation are also examined, highlighting the need for a collective approach and reciprocal learning models. The methodology involves a qualitative research approach, including documentary analysis and focus group discussions with master teachers and university academics. The research objectives include identifying the existing framework of the teaching practicum, exploring strategies for enhancing its quality, and establishing a new school-university partnership framework. Results and discussions present the existing framework of the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka, emphasizing specific assessment mechanisms and school-based projects. Stakeholders' perspectives contribute to the formulation of innovative strategies, such as improving program interactions, building partnerships with model schools, and creating a stable master-teacher pool. A conceptual framework/model is proposed, illustrating the collaborative synergy between the university and schools to optimize the teaching practicum. In conclusion, the study underscores the critical role of a robust university-school partnership in the success of the teaching practicum. Recommendations include enhancing communication, capacity building for examiners, implementing innovative partnership strategies, maintaining a stable master teacher pool, establishing empirical arrangements, and creating a dedicated helpdesk. The research findings provide valuable insights for improving the quality and impact of the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Professional Development, Teacher Education, Teaching Practicum, professional competencies, University partnership

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching practicum stands as an indispensable cornerstone within teacher education programs, providing a pivotal period for the development of essential skills and knowledge among prospective educators (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). As an experiential phase, it serves as a critical induction process, demanding meticulous consideration to ensure the comprehensive growth of future teachers within any teacher education program. The Faculty of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka is dedicated to advancing professional competencies and capacities among graduate teachers

and novice student teachers. Offering undergraduate programs such as B.Ed in Drama and Theater, B.Ed in Natural Science, B.Ed in Special Needs, and B.Ed in Primary Education, along with postgraduate diploma programs including Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and Post Graduate Diploma in Special Needs Education (PGDSNE), the faculty recognises the central role of the teaching practicum component in shaping effective educators. Teaching practice is underscored by Kiggundu and Nayimully (2009) as a foundational element in the journey toward becoming an effective teacher. This research seeks to delve into the dynamics of university-school partnerships within the context of the teacher education practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study aims to develop a framework for successfully implementing these partnerships, acknowledging the unique characteristics and requirements of both undergraduate and postgraduate diploma programs. The teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka follows a structured format with two distinct stages. In Stage I of the PGDE programs, students spend ten weeks in their own schools, undergoing assessments by designated assessors, often master teachers. Conversely, students pursuing B.Ed degree programs undertake the responsibility of identifying relevant schools for their Stage-I practicum, with or without support from the department, faculty, or university. Stage II of the teaching practicum is a shared experience for both programs, involving placement in selected schools specified by the relevant departments, with evaluations conducted by university academics or selected external examiners.

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This research seeks to explore the intricacies of university-school partnerships during the teaching practicum, shedding light on their effectiveness in enhancing the teaching capabilities of student teachers. Through a thorough analysis, the study aims to contribute valuable insights and propose a framework that can guide the successful implementation of university-school partnerships in teacher education practicum settings.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Importance of Teacher Education Practicum

Teacher education practicum plays a pivotal role in the preparation of future educators, serving as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical classroom experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). This experiential learning phase is widely recognized as a critical component in the professional development of teachers, providing them with opportunities to apply pedagogical theories in real-world settings (Innocenti & Hilberg, 2016). The period encompassing initial teacher education, induction, and the early years of employment serves as the bedrock for cultivating a robust teaching force, demanding a pedagogically sound, coherent, and high-quality foundation to ensure the efficacy and lasting impact of new educators (Donaldson 2010). Teaching practicum plays a significant role in every teacher education programmes in the world and it helps to upgrade the professional capacities and competencies of student teachers. Crookes (2003) defines the teaching practicum as 'a short-term, intensive opportunity for professional growth, occurring under relatively favorable institutional conditions. Accordingly teaching practicum develops a more complex knowledge base and more challenging goals for student learning, it is increasingly important that the transition into teaching be a carefully staged process, as with internships in most professions. Marais and Meier (2004) note that "the term teaching practicum represents the range of experiences to which student teachers are exposed when they work in classrooms and schools." It is an integral component of teacher education and refers to students' placements to schools to practice lesson planning, classroom organization and management and most importantly classroom teaching. As mentioned by Lynch et.al (2012), As initial teacher education students transition to the profession, the experiences offered by the university and partner institutions require intentional, careful, and strategic planning, to ensure positive relational, organizational, and pedagogical experiences for all stakeholders. The transition from pre-service teacher to professional has long been acknowledged to require targeted support (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; American Federation of Teachers, 2012; Kelley, 2004). This transition involves the process of being socialized into a new school environment as well as growing and adjusting to the expectations of a new professional role (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

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2.2 The Role of University-School Partnerships

University-school partnerships are integral to the success of teacher education practicum, facilitating a collaborative learning environment (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Such partnerships contribute to the development of a shared vision between academic institutions and schools, ensuring the alignment of

theory and practice (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Effective collaboration between universities and schools has been shown to enhance student teacher learning experiences (Bullough & Draper, 2004), emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of the dynamics involved. Empirically, it has been identified that, to provide sound teaching practicum experience to the student teachers efficient and effective collaborative arrangement is needed. According to Sharon and Chan (2012) The traditional view of university as a place for one-off training is now considered outdated. Instead, the strong focus on lifelong learning urges teachers, educators, and academics to reconceptualize and transform education. In this new era, successful schools adopt outreach strategies and seek support from external agencies such as universities for their development. Institutions of higher education provide consultation or work with partner schools for collaborative sharing, reflection, research, and growth.

2.3 Models of University-School Partnerships

Research highlights various models of university-school partnerships, each with its unique characteristics and impact on teacher preparation. The "clinical practice model" emphasizes immersive, hands-on experiences in authentic classroom settings (Grossman et al., 2009). In contrast, the "co-teaching model" promotes collaboration between university instructors and classroom teachers, fostering a symbiotic relationship (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Understanding the nuances of these models is crucial for tailoring partnerships to the specific needs of teacher education programs.

As mentioned by Handler and Ravid (2001) emphasized, Schools and universities enter into a collaborative arrangement in which they are equal partners working to meet common interest. For this movement, some countries have specially created Professional Development Schools (PDS) in USA build effective university-school partnership. According to Handler and Ravid (2001), the PDS model is collaboration between a university and PDSs, with the main purpose on pre-service teacher education. Both a formal and informal relationship between the school and the university may emerge.

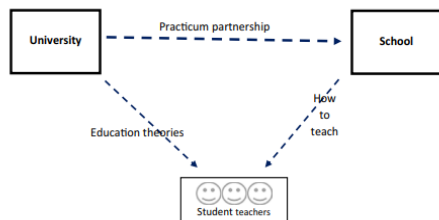


Figure 1: PDS Model for university-school practicum partnership

Source: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-020-00171-3>

Many researchers identified that building sound university-school practicum partnership is as a difficult and challenging task. The development of an appropriate mode of collaboration remains a challenge for successful school–university partnerships. In the sense, commitment of both parties is essential to build the sound university-school partnership. Then the stakeholders of universities and schools should have a vision to move beyond the existing research focus to explore ways to build school–university partnership. As cited by Bernay and et.al (2020), research over the past 20 years outlines elements of an effective school–university partnership model, with a focus on one essential critical feature: student teachers' teaching practice improves mostly through a practicum/apprentice model, and particularly when delivered through school–university partnerships (Darling-Hammond,2006). As Donaldson emphasized, Current experiments involving a more intensive relationship between a university and identified schools, analogous to teaching hospitals, should be pursued as possible models of practice more generally. Joint appointments between schools and universities, for example, would provide a very tangible form of partnership as a practical expression of the theory/practice relationship. This joint appointment is described in figure 2.

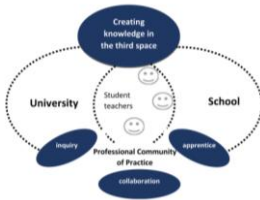


Figure 2- university-school partnership
Source: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-020-00171-3>

The creation of a network of such 'hub school' partnerships across all authorities and also involving national agencies would enable much more direct engagement of university staff in school practice, with research as an integral part of this strengthened partnership rather than as something which sits apart.

2.4 Challenges in University-School Partnerships

University-school partnerships play a crucial role in teacher education practicum, offering aspiring educators practical experiences in real classroom settings. While these partnerships bring numerous benefits, a growing body of literature highlights several challenges that can impact their effectiveness. This literature review explores the challenges associated with university-school partnerships, focusing on communication gaps, differing expectations, and resource constraints.

One of the prominent challenges identified in the literature is communication gaps between university faculty and school personnel (Feiman-Nemser&Buchmann, 1985). Effective communication is essential for successful collaboration, but misunderstandings and misalignments can hinder the achievement of shared goals. For instance, university faculty may have specific expectations for student teachers, while school personnel may prioritize different aspects of the practicum experience. This miscommunication can lead to confusion, frustration, and a lack of coherence in the teacher education process. Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann (1985) emphasize the importance of establishing clear lines of communication between universities and schools to bridge this gap. Regular meetings, collaborative planning sessions, and shared documentation can enhance understanding and promote a more cohesive partnership. Differing expectations between university faculty and school personnel pose another significant challenge (Levin, 2009). While teacher education programs aim to prepare future educators with a strong theoretical foundation, schools may prioritize practical skills and classroom management. This misalignment of goals can create tension and compromise the quality of the practicum experience. To address this challenge, Levin (2009) suggests the development of a shared vision for teacher education that integrates both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Collaborative curriculum planning and joint professional development opportunities can help align the expectations of university faculty and school personnel, ensuring a more harmonious and effective partnership. Resource constraints, including time, funding, and personnel, represent a third challenge in university-school partnerships for teacher education practicum (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Schools often need help in providing adequate support and supervision for student teachers, while universities may need help with allocating sufficient resources to maintain meaningful partnerships. Cochran-Smith and Zeichner (2005) argue for the necessity of addressing resource constraints to build sustainable partnerships. This may involve securing additional funding for collaborative initiatives, allocating dedicated time for mentorship and supervision, and establishing support structures to ease the burden on both schools and universities.

2.5 Frameworks for Successful Implementation

To navigate the complexities of university-school partnerships, a comprehensive framework is essential. Darling-Hammond (2017) advocates for a "collective approach," wherein universities, schools, and policymakers collaborate to create a cohesive teacher education system. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993)

propose a "reciprocal learning model," emphasizing the bidirectional flow of knowledge between university and school settings. These frameworks underscore the need for intentional design and sustained efforts to foster successful partnerships.

The literature reviewed underscores the critical role of university-school partnerships in teacher education practicum. As this research seeks to examine the dynamics and propose a framework for successful implementation, insights from existing literature will inform a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between academic institutions and schools. By addressing challenges and leveraging effective models, this study aims to contribute to the enhancement of teacher preparation programs and the overall quality of education.

3. METHODOLOGY

This proposed study endeavours to scrutinise establishing a novel framework/model for school-university partnerships with the explicit aim of alleviating the quality of teaching practicum within the diverse teacher education programs offered by the Faculty of Education. The study employs a qualitative research approach and involves meticulous data analysis through thematic categorisation. The first research question is addressed through documentary analysis, and data derived from focus group discussions with master teachers and university academics are subjected to a thematic approach to answering the second research question. Subsequently, stakeholders' perspectives contribute to developing a pioneering framework/model for university-school partnerships, thereby standardising the quality of teaching practicum across all teacher education programs. This research seeks to fulfil the imperative of elevating the educational landscape by establishing an innovative framework that addresses the multifaceted dimensions of adequate teacher preparation.

3.1 Research Objectives

01. Identifying the existing framework of the teaching practicum system adopted by the Faculty of Education.
02. Explore Strategies and Innovative Methods for Enhancing Teaching Practicum Quality.
03. Establishing a School–University Partnership within a New Framework/Model

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Existing Framework of Teaching Practicum

The teaching practicum constitutes a substantial component within both academic programs, including postgraduate diplomas and undergraduate programs, particularly the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programs. This integral practicum undergoes a structured implementation in two distinct stages. In the initial stage (Stage-I) of the Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programs, spanning a duration of ten weeks, student teachers engage in practical experiences within their own respective schools. During this phase, guidance and support are provided by school mentors selected by the student teachers under the recommendation of the school's head.

Similarly, student teachers enrolled in Bachelor's degree programs are mandated to identify pertinent schools independently to fulfill their Stage-I teaching practicum requirements, with or without the assistance of the relevant department, faculty, or university. This cohort of students is also obliged to complete a ten-week teaching practicum under the guidance and support of school mentors. The existing framework of the teaching practicum is delineated in Table 1, outlining the procedural aspects and key components of the practicum structure.

Table 1-Existing framework of teaching practicum adapted by the Faculty of Education

Indications	Teaching Practicum: Postgraduate Diploma Programmes	Teaching Practicum: Undergraduate Programmes
Stage -I		
Duration	10 Weeks	10 Weeks
Placement	Teacher Student's own school	Selected school by

		Student Teacher
Assessment and evaluation	5 lessons of each teacher students evaluated by prescribed master teacher	5 lessons of each teacher students assessed by prescribed master teacher
Special requirement	Completion of a school-based project	Completion of a school-based research project
Stage -II		
Placement	Selected school prescribed by examiner	Selected school prescribed by examiner

In consonance with contemporary pedagogical practices, the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka integrates specific assessment mechanisms facilitated by appointed assessors, commonly referred to as Master teachers. This practice aligns with research emphasizing the importance of effective assessment in teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). These assessors, with their expertise and experience, play a crucial role in evaluating the performance of student teachers during the initial stage (Stage-I) of both Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) and Bachelor of Education (BEd) programs.

Moreover, the incorporation of a school-based project or research project for each student teacher during Stage-I of the teaching practicum aligns with the contemporary discourse on enhancing teacher preparation through experiential learning and research engagement (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Grossman et al., 2009). This practice reflects the recognition of the value of practical projects in deepening the understanding and application of pedagogical theories in real-world contexts.

The existing framework, structured to facilitate practical exposure through the teaching practicum, resonates with the literature highlighting the need for a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experiences in teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Zeichner & Conklin, 2005). The engagement of specific assessors and the incorporation of school-based projects align with contemporary research suggesting that effective teacher preparation involves a blend of mentorship, assessment, and practical application (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

In conclusion, the practices embedded in the current framework of the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka, involving specific assessors and school-based projects, draw support from contemporary literature advocating for comprehensive and experiential approaches to teacher education. These practices contribute to the cultivation of well-prepared and effective educators.

4.2 Strategies and Innovative Methods for Enhancing Teaching Practicum Quality

During the focused-group discussion, the evaluators and examiners involved in the assessment of the teaching practicum identified several challenges attributable to the absence of a robust university-school partnership. These difficulties, elaborated in Table 2 below, underscore the consequential impact of an insufficient collaborative framework between the university and schools.

Table 2: Difficulties faced by evaluators/examiners during teaching practicum.

No	Difficulties
1	Lack of awareness of Principals about the teaching practicum of teacher education programmes delivered by university and its necessity for professional development of teacher students due to poor communication of university. (Master teachers)
2	According to some principals, facilitating university teaching practicum is disturbing their normal school activities (Master teachers)

3	Wrong ideology of university authority as finding schools for teaching practicum stage-II is a sole responsibility of examiner. “ we have to go three-four times to meet principal to get the permission to complete teaching practicum stage -II, some principals are rejected the request mentioning various reasons” (University Examiner A)
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As delineated in Table 2, examiners confront a spectrum of challenges and issues that emanate from deficiencies in the university-school partnership. These encompass a lack of awareness among principals regarding the nuances of the teaching practicum, negative attitudes exhibited by principals towards the teaching practicum, and the disapproval or rejection of teaching practicum initiatives attributed to the inadequacies in the existing university-school partnership. Drawing upon their insights, the focus group discussions served as a platform for the generation of alternative strategies aimed at enhancing the outcomes of the teaching practicum. These strategies, meticulously discussed and detailed, are cataloged in the subsequent Table 3.

Table 3: Strategies suggested by stakeholders (university academics +master teachers)

No	Strategies
1	Improve the quality of interactive session of the all-teacher education programmes.
2	Quality improvement of external and internal examiners in relation to the teaching practice supervision and assessment
3	Building a sound university-school partnership with innovative strategies enabling all stakeholder's participation and engagement.
4	Identifying zonal wise schools (representing all administrative districts in the country) as model schools to facilitate the teaching practicum for specially stage II with the support of Ministry of education. Preparation of policy documents/circulars and communicating with all stakeholders to build sound effective university- school partnership.
5	Stabilizing of updated Master teacher pool by the relevant departments and providing them CPD opportunities with the participation of heads (principals) of selected schools.
6	Develop empirical arrangement for the areas of teaching practicum and teacher professional development with the participation of all stakeholders. Conducting impact studies by relevant departments periodically to assess the impact of teaching practicum on professional development of teachers and incorporating results of empirical studies to improve the programme outcomes and organizing dissemination forum with the participation of relevant stakeholders.
	Stablish a special helpdesk by each department during the teaching practicum period to facilitate all stakeholders

As elucidated in Table 3 above, pivotal and innovative strategies have been proffered by pertinent stakeholders. These strategies are designed to establish and sustain a robust university-school partnership with the overarching goal of optimizing the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching practicum. The significance and groundbreaking nature of these strategies underscore their potential to usher in transformative changes in the collaborative dynamics between the academic institution and schools, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the teaching practicum experience.

4.3 Establishment of a School–University Partnership within a New Framework/Model

In light of the strategies put forth by pertinent stakeholders, the researcher successfully formulated an outcome-based framework/model. This framework is meticulously designed to cultivate a robust university-school partnership, specifically tailored to enhance the teaching practicum across all teacher education programs offered by the Faculty of Education at the Open University of Sri Lanka. The proposed framework, illustrated in Figure 3, encapsulates a strategic amalgamation of innovative

approaches and stakeholder insights, aiming to optimize the collaborative synergy between the academic institution and schools. This outcome-based model stands as a culmination of thoughtful consideration and represents a concerted effort to elevate the effectiveness and impact of the teaching practicum within the academic landscape.

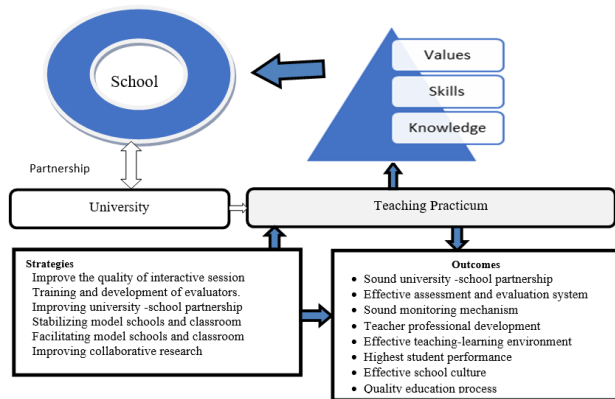


Figure 3; Conceptualization of university -school partnership

As depicted in Figure 3, the teaching practicum is fundamentally contingent upon the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values requisite for the development of student-teachers into proficient professionals. Consequently, it is imperative to ensure a comprehensive preparation of student-teachers, fostering their growth into high-caliber professionals. The symbiotic partnership between the university and schools becomes instrumental in this process, proving advantageous not only for the learning and development of student-teachers but also for the mutual benefit of both the university and the school. This collaborative engagement aligns with the overarching goal of cultivating quality professionals and underscores the reciprocal advantages derived from a well-established and synergistic university-school partnership

5. CONCLUSION

The examination of the existing framework of the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka reveals a structured and multifaceted approach within both undergraduate and postgraduate diploma programs. The integration of specific assessment mechanisms and the inclusion of school-based projects align with contemporary pedagogical practices, emphasizing a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experiences in teacher education. The challenges faced by evaluators/examiners underscore the critical role of a robust university-school partnership in the success of the teaching practicum. Stakeholders have contributed valuable insights and strategies to overcome these challenges, emphasizing the need for improved communication, quality enhancement of examiners, and innovative strategies to build a sound university-school partnership. The proposed outcome-based framework/model, as depicted in Figure 3, represents a comprehensive response to the identified challenges. It leverages innovative strategies such as improving program interactions, building partnerships with model schools, and stabilizing a pool of updated master teachers. The model underscores the importance of collaborative arrangements, empirical studies, and the establishment of a dedicated helpdesk to facilitate effective university-school partnerships.

6. SUGGESTIONS

Enhancing Communication: Establish a structured communication plan to increase awareness among school principals about the importance and benefits of the teaching practicum. This can include regular meetings, workshops, and the distribution of informative materials.

Capacity Building: Develop training programs for both external and internal examiners to enhance their skills in teaching practice supervision and assessment. This ensures a high standard of evaluation during the practicum.

Innovative Partnership Strategies: Implement innovative strategies to foster a strong university-school partnership. This may involve identifying model schools, involving the Ministry of Education, and creating policy documents/circulars to guide the partnership.

Master Teacher Pool: Create a stable and updated pool of master teachers by providing continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. Involving school principals in this process can contribute to the sustainability of the master teacher pool.

Empirical Arrangements: Develop empirical arrangements for the teaching practicum and teacher professional development. Conduct periodic impact studies to assess the program's effectiveness and incorporate the findings to improve program outcomes.

Helpdesk Establishment: Set up a special helpdesk by each department during the teaching practicum period. This helpdesk can serve as a central point for communication and support for all stakeholders involved in the practicum.

In conclusion, the research findings emphasize the necessity of a robust university-school partnership for an effective teaching practicum. The proposed framework/model and recommendations provide a roadmap for enhancing the quality and impact of the teaching practicum at the Open University of Sri Lanka.

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