



From Theory to Classroom Reality: Reflections on a Teaching Practicum in an Urban Public Secondary School

Chee Kong Yap*, Nur Wafaa Aqilah Mohd Ridzuan, Mashitah ShikhMaidin and Shahrizim Zulkifly

Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

Teaching practicum constitutes one of the most important components of teacher education because it provides opportunities for pre-service teachers to translate educational theories into authentic classroom practice. Through direct engagement with students, teachers, administrators, and school communities, pre-service teachers develop pedagogical competence, classroom management skills, professional communication, and reflective thinking that cannot be fully acquired through university coursework alone. This reflective commentary is based on a teaching practicum conducted from 30 March 2026 to 31 July 2026 in an urban public secondary school. The objective of this reflective commentary is to examine the professional learning experiences gained during the practicum and to critically reflect on how these experiences contributed to the development of pedagogical competence, professional identity, and continuous professional growth. The commentary discusses experiences in classroom teaching, student engagement, co-curricular participation, professional collaboration, and institutional observations that collectively shaped the author's understanding of the teaching profession. The practicum demonstrates that effective teaching extends well beyond curriculum delivery and requires adaptability, empathy, collaboration, and lifelong reflective practice. Overall, the experience illustrates that authentic school environments remain indispensable in preparing competent, reflective, and resilient educators capable of responding to the diverse challenges of contemporary education.

Keywords: Teaching Practicum; Reflective Practice; Teacher Education; Professional Development; Secondary Education

Introduction

Teaching is widely recognised as a profession that combines scientific knowledge with practical wisdom. Although teacher education programmes provide comprehensive foundations in pedagogy, educational psychology, curriculum studies, assessment, and classroom management, genuine professional competence is developed only when these theoretical concepts are applied within authentic educational settings. Consequently, teaching practicum represents a critical transition from university learning to professional practice by allowing pre-service teachers to experience the realities, expectations, and responsibilities associated with teaching [1].

A practicum provides considerably more than opportunities to conduct classroom lessons. It exposes future teachers to the complexities of school organisation, student diversity, professional collaboration, co-curricular activities, administrative responsibilities, and educational decision making. These experiences encourage reflective thinking because pre-service teachers continuously evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional approaches while adapting to changing classroom situations and institutional environments. Reflection therefore transforms routine teaching experiences into meaningful professional learning that contributes to long-term career development [2].

The objective of this study is to critically reflect on the professional learning experiences acquired during a teaching practicum in an urban public secondary school. Specifically, the paper examines classroom teaching, student engagement, co-curricular participation, professional interactions, and institutional observations while discussing how these experiences collectively contributed to the development of pedagogical competence, reflective practice, and professional identity as a future educator. The discussion is presented as a reflective commentary that seeks to connect authentic school experiences with broader perspectives on teacher education and professional development.



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*Correspondence:

Chee Kong Yap, Department of Biology,
Faculty of Science, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, Serdang 43400, Malaysia,
E-mail: yapchee@upm.edu.my

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Methodology

This paper employed a narrative experiential learning approach to examine the professional development of the preservice teacher, Nur Wafaa Aqilah Mohd Ridzuan, during the teaching practicum conducted at SMK Seri Serdang, Jalan Persiaran Timur, 43300 Seri Kembangan, Selangor, Malaysia, from 30 March 2026 to 31 July 2026. The practicum provided authentic teaching experiences through lesson planning, classroom instruction, student assessment, co-curricular activities, and active participation in the daily routines of the school. Narrative experiential learning was selected because it enables the interpretation of professional growth through lived experiences and critical reflection rather than quantitative measurements [2, 3].

The practicum was supported by a structured supervisory system involving both university and school mentors. Professor Dr. Chee Kong Yap served as the university supervisor for Biology, while Dr. Mashitah Shikh Maidin served as the university supervisor for science. At the school level, the student was guided by two appointed mentor teachers who provided continuous classroom supervision, lesson observations, constructive feedback, and professional guidance throughout the practicum. This collaborative mentoring system enabled the student to progressively strengthen teaching competencies, classroom management skills, and professional confidence within an authentic secondary school environment.

Throughout the placement, Nur Wafaa Aqilah Mohd Ridzuan maintained systematic reflective records documenting teaching experiences, classroom challenges, instructional strategies, interactions with students and colleagues, and personal professional development. Upon completion of the practicum, these reflections were compiled into a comprehensive reflective report, which was subsequently presented to the university supervisors. The presentation provided an opportunity to elaborate on significant experiences, clarify key reflections, and validate the interpretations contained in the written report.

The reflective commentary presented in this paper was developed through an interpretive thematic analysis of the student's written reflection and oral presentation. Recurring themes concerning teaching practice, mentor support, classroom management, professional identity, reflective practice, and lifelong learning were identified and synthesized into a coherent narrative. This qualitative approach provides an authentic account of the student's professional learning journey at SMK Seri Serdang and demonstrates how experiential learning, effective mentorship, and systematic reflection contribute to the preparation of competent and reflective Biology and Science educators.

Reflective Observation and Discussion

Teaching and learning in authentic classroom settings

Teaching students with different academic backgrounds quickly demonstrated that no single instructional approach is universally effective. During the practicum, one class initially showed limited classroom interaction but gradually became more responsive after trust and rapport had been established. Another class displayed high enthusiasm and active participation from the beginning but required greater classroom management because of students' energetic behaviour. These contrasting classroom environments highlighted the importance of adaptive teaching, where instructional strategies are modified according to students' learning characteristics rather than rigidly following predetermined lesson plans [4].

To promote meaningful learning, various student-centred instructional approaches were implemented, including Four Corners, Peer Teaching, Gallery Walk, Show and Tell, Draw, Label and Present, Mind Mapping, experimental investigations, and model construction. These activities encouraged students to collaborate, communicate scientific ideas, solve problems, and actively construct knowledge instead of relying solely on teacher explanations. Such pedagogical practices reflect constructivist learning principles that emphasise active engagement as a prerequisite for deeper conceptual understanding [5, 6].

The practicum also revealed that many students possessed relatively limited awareness of contemporary scientific issues because classroom learning frequently centred on textbook content. This observation emphasised the importance of integrating current environmental, technological, and health issues into science lessons to increase relevance and stimulate critical thinking. Connecting curriculum content with real-world contexts enables students to appreciate the significance of science in daily life while strengthening scientific literacy and informed decision making [7]. Consequently, contextualised learning should become an integral component of future classroom practice.

Professional growth through school and community engagement

Professional learning during the practicum extended well beyond classroom instruction. Participation in co-curricular activities, including Chess Club, Visual Arts Club, uniformed body programmes, sports competitions, leadership activities, and various school events, provided opportunities to observe students in different learning environments. These experiences reinforced the understanding that schools play an important role in nurturing students' intellectual, physical, emotional, creative, and social development simultaneously.

Interaction with mentor teachers, administrators, permanent teachers, and fellow trainee teachers further strengthened professional confidence and communication skills. Although the unexpected transfer of the supervising teacher temporarily interrupted lesson plan consultations, this challenge demonstrated the importance of professional adaptability and collaboration within school communities. Effective teachers must be capable of maintaining professional responsibilities despite organisational changes while continuing to seek constructive feedback from colleagues [8].

Perhaps the most valuable outcome of the practicum was the gradual development of reflective practice. Every lesson, successful or otherwise, encouraged critical evaluation of teaching strategies, classroom management decisions, student responses, and learning outcomes. Reflection enabled instructional experiences to become continuous learning opportunities rather than isolated teaching events. This habit of systematic reflection represents one of the defining characteristics of effective educators because it supports lifelong professional growth and continuous instructional improvement [2].

Institutional reflections and implications for teacher development

The practicum also provided valuable opportunities to observe broader aspects of school organisation that influence teaching effectiveness. Several institutional issues became evident, including teacher absences that complicated relief schedules, lengthy weekly assemblies that reduced instructional time, and classroom arrangements that occasionally created difficulties for teachers and

visitors. These observations demonstrated that educational quality depends not only upon effective classroom instruction but also upon efficient organisational management and supportive institutional practices.

Student participation in co-curricular activities presented another area for reflection. Attendance was occasionally less than satisfactory because some activities were perceived as insufficiently engaging. Increasing programme diversity, encouraging student participation from lower secondary levels, and providing activities that align with students' interests may strengthen motivation and long-term participation. Such improvements support the principles of self-determination theory, which suggests that meaningful participation increases when learners experience autonomy, competence, and social connectedness [9].

These institutional observations broadened the understanding that teachers contribute not only as classroom instructors but also as active members of educational organisations. Effective teaching therefore requires awareness of school management, collaboration among educational stakeholders, and participation in continuous school improvement initiatives. Developing such institutional awareness represents an important dimension of professional identity formation during teacher education.

Conclusions

The teaching practicum provided an invaluable transition from university preparation to authentic professional practice within an urban public secondary school. Experiences gained through classroom instruction, co-curricular involvement, professional collaboration, and institutional engagement collectively strengthened pedagogical competence while broadening understanding of the diverse responsibilities associated with the teaching profession. Rather than serving merely as a graduation requirement, the practicum functioned as a comprehensive professional learning experience that transformed theoretical knowledge into practical educational competence.

The reflective experiences discussed in this commentary demonstrate that becoming an effective teacher requires considerably more than mastery of subject knowledge. Successful educators continuously adapt their instructional approaches, respond to diverse student needs, collaborate with colleagues, and critically evaluate their own practices to improve future teaching. Reflection therefore becomes a mechanism through which everyday teaching experiences are transformed into professional growth.

Ultimately, the practicum reaffirmed that teaching is a lifelong journey of learning, adaptation, and continuous improvement. The experiences gained have strengthened confidence, professional identity, and commitment to student-centred education while providing a solid foundation for future contributions to the teaching profession. It is hoped that the reflections presented in this commentary will contribute to broader discussions on teacher preparation and encourage future pre-service teachers to embrace reflective practice as an essential component of professional excellence.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors declare that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the authors' own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The authors retain full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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