

A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Teaching Practicum on Teacher Belief among English Majors in Application-oriented University

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of teaching practicum on the development of teacher beliefs among English majors in application-oriented university. This research employs a qualitative method (mainly interview), focusing on four participants' views about their teaching, students and themselves in the first practicum experience. The findings indicate that the teaching practicum affects each participant's teacher beliefs to varying degrees, with changes observed across the five dimensions (such as teacher identity, teacher-student relationship, teaching methods, self-reflection, subject knowledge and perception for learners) of teacher beliefs, although not all dimensions are equally influenced. Meanwhile, the practicum has a predominantly positive impact on the participants' beliefs about teaching. The changes in these beliefs can be attributed to several factors, including external and internal factors. The study highlights the importance of the teaching practicum in shaping teacher beliefs and suggests that well-structured practicum experiences, supported by effective mentorship, reflective practice and teacher community of practice, are essential in fostering positive professional development among future educators.

1. Introduction

Beliefs play a fundamental role in shaping human cognition and behavior, acting as internal ideological forces that guide decisions and actions ^[1]. In the context of epistemology, beliefs represent the attitudes people hold about what they consider to be right or wrong, reflecting an acknowledgment of their surrounding world ^[2]. Beliefs are also influenced by and interact with the material world through practice, creating a dynamic relationship between belief and action ^[3]. In the realm of education, teacher belief, as a specific form of human belief, significantly impacts teaching practices, guiding instructional decisions, classroom behavior, and educational outcomes ^[4]. Despite extensive literature emphasizing the importance of teacher beliefs in shaping teaching practices, there is a noticeable gap in exploring how these practices, in turn, influence the development of teacher beliefs.

This research aims to address this gap by examining the impact of teaching practicum experiences on the evolution of teacher beliefs among student teachers. Teaching practicum, an essential component of teacher education, offers pre-service teachers their first real-world teaching experience, providing a unique opportunity to apply, evaluate, and refine their beliefs in authentic classroom settings. This study focuses on how such practical experiences influence student teachers' beliefs and how these changes can inform teacher education programs to better support the development of effective teaching skills and professional growth.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching Practicum

The concept of a teaching practicum refers to a structured, practical experience that student teachers undertake in various schools, organized by educational institutions ^[5]. This experience encompasses activities such as serving as trainee teachers, engaging in trial teaching, acting as class mentors, and participating in educational administration ^[6]. The primary objective of the teaching practicum is to facilitate the transition of student teachers from being learners of teaching to becoming educators themselves, by providing them with early exposure to a real classroom setting ^[7]. According to Kazaz and Alagözlü (2020), the necessity for teaching practicums arose from the challenges faced by student teachers in this transition ^[8]. Similarly, Ingersoll and Smith (2004) asserted that “the practicum addresses the socialization of teachers, which is evident through their collaboration with experienced teachers and interaction with students, involving activities such as the distribution of instructional materials, orientation sessions, classroom observations, seminars, and reduced workloads for qualified teachers” ^[9].

For student teachers, the teaching practicum represents a complex interplay of personal and contextual factors through which they negotiate their professional knowledge and socialization ^[10]. It is a critical phase in which they make significant progress toward becoming formal teachers. With guidance and reflection during this period, student teachers can refine their teaching strategies and acquire practical knowledge related to student engagement, curriculum design, institutional policies, and educational practices. They are also able to test and refine their beliefs and attitudes towards teaching, thereby shaping their professional identity. Through observing the teaching methods and classroom management techniques of certified teachers, student teachers gradually develop their own instructional approaches, integrating the professional knowledge acquired at university. As Yan and He (2010) noted, “the teaching practicum serves as a bridge linking theoretical coursework with practical educational experiences and is the most effective component in the training of preservice teachers” ^[11]. Specifically, the teaching practicum allows student teachers to apply pedagogical theories and professional skills in the context of primary and secondary education, thereby enhancing their professional competencies and teaching abilities.

Thus, the teaching practicum provides a critical platform for student teachers to gain in-depth exposure to educational practices. The real-world teaching experiences acquired during this period inevitably impact the pre-service teachers' pre-existing beliefs about teaching. Consequently, it is essential to study the dynamic evolution of these beliefs throughout the practicum.

2.2 Teacher Belief

Teacher belief can be understood as an internalized form of consciousness that shapes a teacher's behaviors and pedagogical concepts ^[12]. Kagan (1992) broadly defined belief as tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, the classroom, and the academic material to be taught ^[13]. Likewise, Shkedi & Laron (2004) suggested that “teacher belief reflects attitudes toward

education, students, and teaching”^[14]. Richardson (1996) illustrated belief as an individual’s psychologically-held understandings, premises, and propositions about the world, which are considered to be true^[15]. Therefore, teacher belief can be characterized as a subjective force that directly influences teachers’ actions. Specifically, teachers implement the educational philosophies and pedagogies they espouse, and the inner drive guiding them to utilize specific pedagogical approaches is rooted in their teacher beliefs.

From a functional standpoint, teachers’ beliefs can be viewed as a form of self-efficacy that develops as teachers enhance their competencies and continuously refine their educational philosophies through practice. In this context, teachers’ beliefs represent a process of enhancing self-efficacy in their professional practice. In teaching, self-efficacy beliefs are broadly categorized into “personal teaching efficacy belief” and “general teaching efficacy belief”^[16]. The former pertains to the belief that teachers have in their ability to be effective educators, while the latter relates to their capacity to address external challenges, such as meeting students’ emotional needs and improving academic performance. It is evident that teachers hold diverse beliefs, and these beliefs can manifest and evolve differently.

In fact, educational scholars hold diverse perspectives regarding whether teacher beliefs change with increased experience and education. Schommer (1998) described beliefs as multidimensional, arguing that “teachers’ beliefs evolve as they gain experience and reflect on their educational and life experiences”^[17]. Hofer & Pintrich (1997) similarly proposed that “a teacher’s belief system is dynamic and open to change, suggesting that beliefs may unconsciously influence teachers and students even if the effects are not immediately evident”^[18]. Brownlee (2004) proclaimed that “connected teaching” could be a framework for observing the evolution of teachers’ beliefs, noting that “this evolution is closely linked to practical experience and reflection”^[19].

In other words, teacher beliefs are subject to development and change due to various internal and external factors, including teacher education curricula, educational practices, school culture, and personal qualities. However, the teaching practicum, as the first authentic educational experience that pre-service teachers encounter before becoming licensed professionals, may exert the most profound and impactful influence. However, some research findings indicate that teacher beliefs do not always change during the practicum period^[20]. It is thus essential to acknowledge that student teachers’ beliefs may change positively, negatively, or remain unchanged.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participant

The study involves four English major students at Guangdong University of Science and Technology (GDUST) who were enrolled in 2020 and participated in a teaching practicum for one semester at various junior middle schools before graduation. To ensure the reliability of the research, the study follows grounded theory principles and controls variables such as the duration and frequency of the teaching practicum. Besides, given the limited research timeframe, interviewing a large number of participants would be impractical. Thus, a smaller sample size of 4 to 8 participants, as suggested by Kitzinger (1994), is considered appropriate for qualitative research^[21].

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with four English majors at GDUST. The interviews followed a pre-set of six questions (e.g. initial teacher beliefs, changes in teacher beliefs, specific dimensions of teacher beliefs that changed or remained unchanged, potential reasons for changes in teacher beliefs, and suggestions for educational

institutions to better support teacher development) designed to explore changes in teacher beliefs during the teaching practicum. Then, the data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed systematically to understand changes in teacher beliefs across different dimensions. Hence, common themes and variations in how teaching practicum experiences influenced the teacher beliefs of the participants were identified.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Demographic Variables of Participants

The study involves 4 participants, all of whom are English majors enrolled at GDUST in 2020. The participants comprise 2 males and 2 females, with ages ranging from 21 to 23 years. Each participant has undertaken a teaching practicum in China for one semester before graduating from the university. The demographic details are as Table 1 shows.

Table 1: Demographic Variables of Participants

Participant	Gender	Grade	Age	Duration of Teaching Practicum in China
A	Female	2020	22	One semester
B	Male	2020	23	One semester
C	Male	2020	22	One semester
D	Female	2020	21	One semester

All participants share similar academic backgrounds and practicum experiences, which provides a consistent basis for analyzing the influence of teaching practicum on their teacher beliefs.

4.2 Participants' Teacher Belief before Teaching Practicum

During the interviews, participants reflect on their teacher beliefs prior to their teaching practicum (Response to Question 1) and provide various insights. According to their responses, all four interviewees report that their initial teacher beliefs are significantly shaped by their teacher educators. They accept the effectiveness of the teacher beliefs and teaching skills imparted during their university education. Yet, four interviewees do not hold the same teacher belief (See Table 2).

Table 2: Initial Teacher Belief of Participants

Participant	Types of Teacher Belief
A	Opening teacher belief
B	Traditional teacher belief
C	A hybrid belief (Opening & Traditional)
D	A hybrid belief (Opening & Traditional)

To be exact, the first participant declares that her prior teacher beliefs aligns with the opening teacher belief paradigm. This alignment stems from her teacher educator's emphasis on maintaining a balanced relationship with students. During teacher training courses, her educator consistently encourages students to express their opinions and identify errors in the educator's own teaching. This approach significantly influences her, fostering a belief in the importance of a balanced teacher-student relationship.

The second interviewee describes her teacher beliefs during her university years as representative of the traditional teacher belief paradigm. Her educational experiences, characterized by a centralized approach from primary school through university, lead her to view this method as the most effective. In this context, where academic performance and examination results are paramount, teachers are perceived as the sole authority, and their instructions are to be accepted unconditionally by students.

The third and fourth interviewees convey that their teacher beliefs during their university period are a blend of both the opening and traditional teacher belief paradigms. Their teacher educators introduces them to the notion that teacher beliefs could be divided into various dimensions, each requiring different approaches. For example, in relation to subject knowledge, their educators advocate for a traditional approach, asserting that teachers, being more knowledgeable about the subject, have the authority to guide students on what and how to learn. Conversely, for beliefs concerning students, their educators endorse an opening approach, which emphasizes the importance of respecting students' subjectivity and fostering self-directed learning. This approach underscores the value of interaction and engagement with students in classroom activities.

Overall, the participants' initial beliefs vary, reflecting a spectrum from traditional to more progressive, student-centered approaches.

4.3 Situation of Student Teachers' Belief after Teaching Practicum

The data analysis for this section primarily relies on the feedback provided by four interviewees in response to Question 2, 3, and 4 (such as changes in teacher beliefs and specific dimensions of teacher beliefs that changed or remained unchanged). Three of the interviewees, excluding the fourth, report a shift in their teacher beliefs during their teaching practicum, with changes occurring across different dimensions.

The first student teacher notes a significant alignment with the opening teacher belief, which is heavily influenced by her teacher educator at the university. This belief, emphasizing a balanced teacher-student relationship, is actively applied during her practicum and is considered highly effective. She observes that maintaining such a balance is crucial for engaging students and tailoring teaching methods to diverse needs. Despite the unchanged nature of her beliefs about learners, her perspective on teacher identity undergoes considerable transformation. Initially motivated by fulfilling her parents' expectations, she realizes that teaching involves more than just academic performance--it encompasses nurturing students' ideological and moral development.

The second interviewee experiences a profound shift in his teacher beliefs regarding learners. Initially, he adheres to the traditional teacher belief, which emphasizes teacher authority and centralized control. While this approach yields immediate compliance from students, it later leads to issues such as students' dissatisfaction and complaints about excessive pressure. This prompts him to reassess and revise his approach, ultimately adopting a more collaborative and student-centered belief. He recognizes the importance of self-reflection in updating and correcting teaching practices, which he deems crucial for effective teaching.

The third respondent identifies a significant change in his teacher beliefs about subject matter. His experience teaching both Chinese and English unveils different subjects require distinct teaching approaches. Initially, he believes uniform teaching methods can be applied across subjects. However, he learns that flexible methods, such as integrating multimedia resources for teaching Chinese, are more effective in engaging students with familiar content. This shift in understanding highlight the importance of adapting teaching strategies to the specific needs of each subject and student group, underscoring the valuable role of experienced mentors in guiding novice teachers.

The last one relates minimal change in her teacher beliefs during the practicum. She attributes this stability to the alignment of her beliefs with those of her supervising teacher and the lack of rigorous reflective practices required by her educational institution. The absence of mandatory reflective logs limited opportunities for self-assessment and adjustment of teaching practices, which she feels could have contributed to a more pronounced evolution in her teacher beliefs.

In summary, the data analysis reveals that three of the four student teachers experience notable changes in their teaching beliefs during their practicum.

4.4 Factors Influencing Changes in Teacher Beliefs during the Teaching Practicum

Based on the narratives (Response to Question 5), it is evident that some student teachers experience changes in their teacher beliefs during their practicum. These changes may pertain to their attitudes towards the subject matter or their perceptions of learners. However, such changes are not universally experienced by all participants. Beach (1994) posited “teacher beliefs constitute a complex system influenced by various factors” ^[22]. Borg (2003) argued, within the framework of teacher cognitive theory, that “the formation and evolution of teachers’ cognitive frameworks are contingent upon factors such as schooling, professional curriculum, environment, and classroom practices” ^[23]. The analysis of interview data reveals the factors affecting the development of teacher beliefs during the practicum can be categorized into external and internal factors.

In the first place, external factors influencing the development of teacher beliefs include the influence of the practice school, the role of the practice supervisor, and support from educational institutions. The practice school impacts teacher beliefs through both tangible resources (hardware) such as teaching facilities and campus environment, and intangible aspects (software) like campus culture and teaching philosophies ^[24]. While advanced teaching materials are meant to enhance student interest, they might sometimes detract from core content. Additionally, the practice supervisor plays a pivotal role by shaping teaching practices through observation and emulation. A supportive, communicative relationship between student teachers and supervisors can positively influence their teaching beliefs. Furthermore, the support from educational institutions is crucial in aligning student teachers’ beliefs with practical experiences. Institutions need to bridge the gap between theoretical beliefs and real-world teaching to foster professional development.

In the second place, internally, self-reflection is a significant factor in shaping teacher beliefs. As student teachers encounter real-world teaching challenges, cognitive dissonance may arise from the conflict between their pre-existing beliefs and actual experiences. This necessitates ongoing reflection and adjustment to align their beliefs with practical teaching realities. Keeping a reflective diary during practicum can be particularly beneficial, allowing teachers to navigate challenges, understand student motivation better, and refine their teaching strategies.

In the last place, setbacks during the practicum also play a critical role in the development of teacher beliefs. Initial high aspirations and fear of failure can lead to emotional and cognitive responses when faced with difficulties. These setbacks create opportunities for self-reflection and adaptation, helping student teachers reconcile their internal beliefs with the demands of the teaching environment. Effective professional development involves integrating internal beliefs with external realities to overcome challenges and enhance teaching expertise.

4.5 Suggestions for Educational Institutions to Support Teacher Development

The participants in this study propose several ways (Answers to Question 6) in which educational institutions could better support teacher development, particularly during teaching practicums. Their recommendations primarily focus on three areas: providing structured guidance, fostering reflective practice, and creating a supportive community of practice.

First of all, the participants emphasize the need for more structured guidance during their teaching practicum. They perceive that educational institutions should provide detailed frameworks and specific objectives to guide the teaching practices, which include offering clear expectations regarding lesson planning, classroom management, and assessment strategies, which can help novice teachers better navigate the complexities of teaching in a real classroom environment.

Secondly, participants also recommend that educational institutions encourage reflective practices as a core component of teacher development. They suggest incorporating regular reflection sessions, mentorship, and feedback loops to help teachers critically analyze their own

teaching methods, identify areas for improvement, and develop new strategies. Reflection is seen as a crucial process for aligning theoretical knowledge with practical teaching experiences.

Finally, the participants highlight the importance of building a community of practice where teachers can share experiences, challenges, and successes. They advise that educational institutions could facilitate regular networking opportunities, workshops, and collaborative projects that connect novice teachers with experienced mentors and peers. Such interactions could provide emotional support, practical advice, and professional development opportunities.

Overall, these recommendations reflect the participants' desire for more comprehensive support mechanisms from educational institutions that go beyond the conventional classroom settings. They believe that these measures can significantly enhance their professional growth and development during the critical phase of transitioning from theory to practice.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Conclusions of the Study

This study explores the impact of teaching practicum experiences on the evolution of teacher beliefs among English majors in application-oriented university. The findings reveal that the teaching practicum plays a vital role in shaping and modifying student teachers' beliefs about teaching. While some student teachers experience notable changes in their beliefs regarding the learner, subject matter, and teacher identity, others report minimal changes due to factors like alignment with supervising teachers and limited opportunities for reflection. The study highlights that both external factors (e.g. the impact of practice schools, supervisors and institutional support) and internal factors (e.g. self-reflection and setbacks during the practicum) contribute to the evolution of teacher beliefs.

Simultaneously, the research underscores the dynamic nature of teacher beliefs of English majors, which are influenced by real-world teaching experiences. It also points to the need for educational institutions to provide more structured guidance, foster reflective practices, and create supportive communities of practice. These measures can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application, thereby enhancing the professional development of student teachers.

5.2 Limitations of the Study and Future Research Perspectives

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings, including a small sample size of four participants, which may not be representative of the broader population of student teachers, and limited diversity, as all participants are English majors at GDUST, potentially restricting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the short duration in the study, focusing on a single-semester teaching practicum, may not capture the full extent of changes in teacher beliefs over time. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews also presents a risk of bias. To address these limitations, future research could expand the sample size and participant diversity, employ longitudinal designs to track changes over extended periods, and conduct comparative studies across different educational contexts. Utilizing mixed-methods approaches could provide more comprehensive insights, while focusing on specific dimensions of teacher beliefs would allow for a deeper understanding of which aspects are most susceptible to change and why.

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