IMPROVING TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH A SELF-STUDY OF PRACTICUM PROGRAMMES:
Conversations and Reflections of Two Teacher Educators

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Teacher educators are expected to compare, contrast, and explore field experiences from a holistic and global perspective. Yet, there is a paucity of comprehensive research examining the field experience, especially in the Caribbean. This paper uses collaborative self-study as a method for examining our practices of teacher education through a comparison of the practicum programme at a Caribbean university with that of an established American university. Our goals were to explore commonalities of each practicum programme and consider distinctive features that could be of benefit to each model. Perspectives are compared in terms of principles, structures, and other factors influencing the design and delivery of the practicum programmes that existed in these two institutions between September 2008 and April 2010. This exploration may be of interest to teacher educators in the Caribbean, where models of teacher education are being restructured in keeping with international trends. It may also be of interest to teacher educators in the United States, where a national strategy to transform teacher education through clinical practice has been proposed by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

Background, Context, and Purpose

The meaning of a teacher education program is to be found in its substance as well as in its structural characteristics. ...With regard to the substantive aspects of teacher education programs, their meanings are to be found in the elaboration and enactment of particular program features rather than in their mere presence or absence. (Zeichner & Conklin, 2008, p. 285)

Teacher educators recognize that the practicum—school/classroom observation and field-teaching experience—is one of the pivotal experiences for students to develop teacher efficacy. Yet, practicum experiences at teacher education institutions are structured differently. In

their review of published research, Zeichner and Conklin (2008) concluded that practicum programmes vary widely across institutions in terms of: the length of the student teaching internship; the timing of the internship; the location of the practicum experience; the degree of connection between the field and course components; the personnel involved in the supervision of the students; and the explicit expressed expectations of the field experience.

For us as teacher educators, these innate characteristics noted in practicum programmes were the catalyst for understanding what might be important for programme review, renewal, and reform in our individual programmes (Wimmer, 2008; Wyss, Siebert, & Dowling, 2012). As such, this paper emerged from a conversation between us, two Caribbean-born teacher educators, as we engaged in a comparison of our experiences in our practicum programmes. This study provided an opportunity for us as teacher educators in two different geographical contexts—one Caribbean and one North American—to engage in a personal and professional dialogue about the varied structure, design, and delivery of teacher education programmes. In so doing, we will be able to make more informed decisions about new ways of designing, organizing, and modifying our existing teacher education programmes.

As teacher researchers who seek to "better understand: [ourselves]; teaching; learning; and, the development of knowledge about these" (Loughran, 2004b, p. 9), we have been influenced by the growing movement of self-study in teaching during the past decade (Berry, 2007; Clift, 2004; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Russell, 2005; Samaras, 2011). Therefore, we formalized our collaboration into a self-study to better make sense of the ways in which the practicum experiences in our individual programmes are conceptualized, delivered, monitored, and supervised, and how these observations could possibly serve as guidelines for developing and improving teacher education in both contexts.

At the time of the study, Joyanne was based at The University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT) as the coordinator of the practicum in a Bachelor of Education programme. Deborah was the coordinator of the undergraduate Childhood/Early Childhood teacher education programme at State University of New York (SUNY) Potsdam. For both of us, the descriptors of being Afro-Caribbean born and educated, with university training and teaching experience in international arenas, were common threads in our professional development. We were also both content-area educators at our institutions. We both see ourselves as lifelong learners and our professional development as ongoing.

We explored perspectives on the principles and structure of the

practicum in the teacher preparation programmes that existed at our two institutions during the period September 2008 to April 2010. Our initial conversations and discussions revealed that while there are comprehensive accounts of the development of teacher education in American universities (see Labaree, 2008), there is very little information available on the development of teacher education programmes, and more specifically practicum experiences in teacher education programmes, in the Caribbean context. We also recognized that there were varying degrees of growth and development in specific teacher education programmes over time, often as a result of economic, political, or professional reform efforts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005).

In this paper, we use the following three questions to frame the key findings and our analysis of our explorative study:

1. *What are the underlying principles and structures of the practicum programmes at our institutions?*

2. *In what ways did these underlying principles and structures influence our teaching?*

3. *What features of either practicum structure did we find that may be further explored in each context to improve our present practice*?

We trust that this paper will make a contribution in the area of the use of self-study in teacher education programme renewal, and encourage other teacher educators at different universities to engage in similar comparative work as they seek to establish, reform, and/or improve their teacher education programmes, their teaching, and their students' learning (Loughran, 2004a). Teacher educators may also gain insights into alternative ways of organizing and improving teacher education programmes.

Theoretical Perspectives

In exploring our experiences as teacher educators and comparing the policies, structures, and principles of our teacher education programmes, we located our perspectives within the theoretical frameworks of reflective practice and self-study (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Reflective practice is an ongoing discourse in teacher education. Reflection has been regarded as an indicator for effective professional practice and is essential to teacher education (Berry, 2007; Huntley, 2008; Schon, 1983, 1987). Teacher educators need to determine how they can foster a climate of critical inquiry into their own practice and

improve teacher education by reflecting on their own practice. They need to closely observe and critically analyse what climate and cultures are fostered and encouraged in their learning communities, and consider how these influence their decisions and teaching (O'Loughlin, 1992).

For teacher educators, this shift from teaching prospective teachers how to reflect, to teacher educators reflecting on their own practice, can be time-consuming, challenging, and uncomfortable (Lasley, 1998; Loughran, 2004a, 2004b; Magestro & Stanford-Blair, 2000). Additionally, teacher educators need to examine their own learning and development if they are to achieve change in teacher education and the programmes they are facilitating, as well as improvement in their teaching (Berry, 2007; Russell, 2005). By thinking about our practice, by taking time to think about our thinking, and by talking to one another and assessing our teaching behaviours and institutional structures, we, as researchers, hope to explore new ideas that can improve student learning.

Within the last two decades, teacher educators have begun to reflect on, study, and research their own practice of teaching and learning (Berry, 2007; Loughran, 2004b; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Schulte, 2009). Samaras (2011) suggests that self-study: draws on personal experience of practice; is collaborative; is for improved learning; is a "transparent and systematic research process requiring an open, honest, and clear description of questioning, framing, revisiting of data, and reframing of a researcher's interpretations" (p. 11); and contributes to a knowledge base. Self-study in teaching is also an analysis and reconstruction of oneself as a teacher. It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political, and involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009).

This development of self-study research in education aims to help researchers better understand themselves, their teaching and learning, and the development of related knowledge. Like the work in the edited volume by Kosnik, Beck, Freese, and Samaras (2005), this paper marks the beginning of our journey to employ professional dialogue in critically exploring our own practice and narratives of experience.

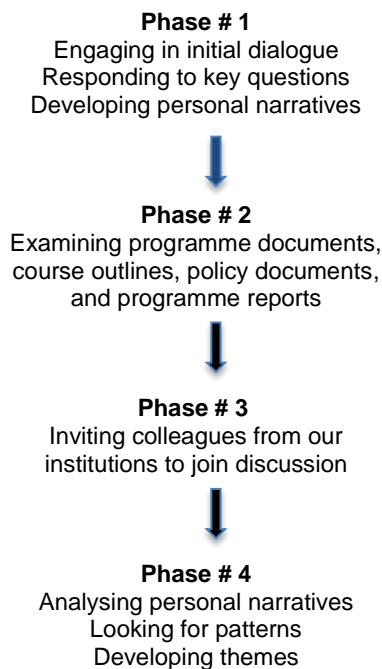## Methods of Inquiry, Data Sources, and Analysis

We used narrative inquiry (Chiu-Ching & Yim-mei Chan, 2009; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kitchen, 2009); dialogue method (East, Fitzgerald, & Heston, 2009); and document analysis (Creswell, 2007) in this research project. Narrative inquiry is based on "an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them" (Chase, 2011, p. 421).

As a methodology, it helps researchers to understand themselves, their context, and practice (Kitchen, 2009) because it enables personal reflection on experience and enables users to make meaning from that in-depth study of experience. The dialogue method (Arizona Group, 2005; East, Fitzgerald, & Heston, 2009) guided the ongoing analysis of our responses to our guiding questions. Document analysis enabled us to give voice and meaning through interpretation and coding of the public institutional documents.

Consequently, these methodologies made it possible for us to inquire into our practice, explore who we are as teacher educators, and reflect on and make sense of the factors that have influenced our pedagogical principles. We found opportunities to use our voices in a conversational style to authenticate our experiences, while asking how might we think differently about our practice and how might the process of reframing provide us with this insight. We also considered our audience, fellow teacher educators who can readily identify with our narratives, descriptions, and lessons learned as we seek to make sense of familiar ground.

We engaged in several phases of data collection and initial analysis between May and July 2010 (see Figure 1).

Phase # 1
Engaging in initial dialogue
Responding to key questions
Developing personal narratives

Phase # 2
Examining programme documents,
course outlines, policy documents,
and programme reports

Phase # 3
Inviting colleagues from our
institutions to join discussion

Phase # 4
Analysing personal narratives
Looking for patterns
Developing themes

Figure 1. Phases of data collection.

The first phase involved participating in face-to-face discussions about our individual programmes, responding orally and in writing to our key questions, and developing individual personal narratives. These narratives were important because they were used to frame our discussions in our weekly dialogue sessions. Further, the narratives gave us an insight into each other's experiences on the issues and provided opportunities for us to compare aspects of our practice as teacher educators. From September 2010, our analysis continued through discussions about our individual responses, establishing the themes and emerging conceptualizations of our inquiry. This was facilitated through weekly Skype sessions.

The second phase of data collection involved examining and analysing programme documents, course outlines, policy documents, and programme reports related to the practicum programmes generated at both institutions during the period September 2008 to April 2010. These documents are public and available as hard copies or on the university's department websites. They provided us with the concrete descriptions of the programme and helped us to note those aspects of our programmes that were similar or dissimilar. This analysis enabled us to compare our reflections on the structures and principles of each programme and derive deeper understandings about our practicum programmes.

We acknowledge that a limitation of using our personal narratives and programme documents as data sources is our lack of first-hand knowledge on some issues. To compensate for this, we engaged in a third phase of data collection and invited colleagues from our institutions to join us in some discussions and to help us further clarify our ideas. Audiotaping was not included in the data collection process, but during each discussion we took notes on salient issues that provided us with perceptions of our institutions' approach to practicum experiences. Our collaboration allowed us to work jointly on the patterns that emerged and to interpret the findings.

A systematic analysis of the data was conducted by coding. Preliminary findings were organized by the research questions identified earlier. We began with the analysis of our personal narratives. Using Skype and Google Docs simultaneously, we re-read each other's narratives and looked for patterns in our responses. These were categorized by codes, which were later developed into themes. Our written responses and narratives were analysed for emerging themes according to the Constant Comparative Method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This method also allowed for comparison within and across programmes. Emerging themes were identified, recorded, and classified, then systematically and continuously compared.

Understandings

In this section we use our guiding questions as a framework to present our understandings. In responding to each question, we use reflections drawn from our narratives to share our voices. We also use examples from our programme documents to highlight our experiences in our specific contexts. We use a highly descriptive format to provide a detailed picture of our practicum programmes. We also use illustrative tables to highlight the similarities, and comment on each context so that readers may use these to see the big picture and draw their own comparisons as they review their programmes.

Underlying Principles and Structures of our Practicum Programmes

Our first question asked: "*What are the underlying principles and structures of the practicum programmes at our institutions?*" In order to answer this question, we carefully reviewed our programme documents, and summarized and discussed the principles and structures of the practicum programmes at both institutions. The main elements of the structure of both practicum programmes are included as comparative tables (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Overview of Practicum Structure at UTT and SUNY Potsdam

	Institution	Semester I	Semester II
Year 1	UTT	Practicum I On-campus classes; focus on reflective practice	Practicum II On-campus classes. 3 days field experience; Observations in groups. Focus on classroom observation
	SUNY Potsdam	No practicum experiences; students complete liberal arts courses	No practicum experiences; students complete liberal arts courses
Year 2	UTT	Practicum III On-campus classes; focus on lesson planning	Practicum IV On-campus classes. 5 days field experience as follows: Field Orientation Visit (1 day), Field Observation (2 days), and Field-teaching (2 days). Teaching in pairs or trios

	Institution	Semester I	Semester II
	SUNY Potsdam	No practicum experiences; students complete liberal arts courses	No practicum experiences; students complete liberal arts courses
Year 3	UTT	Practicum V On-campus classes. 5 days field experience as follows: Field Orientation Visit (1 day); Field-teaching (on Tuesdays for 4 days—2 back to back). Teaching in pairs	Practicum VI On-campus classes. 11 days field experience as follows: Field Orientation Visit (1 day); Field-teaching (2 one-week blocks, not back to back) Teaching in pairs
	SUNY Potsdam	*Pre-Professional Block* – Mentoring Experience	*Professional Block I* – Practicum Experience with methods courses in Math, Social Studies, and Special Education
Year 4	UTT	Practicum VII On-campus classes. 11 days field experience as follows: Field Orientation Visit (1 day); Field-teaching (1 two-week block in October). Individual Teaching	Practicum VIII 35 days field experience as follows: Field Orientation Visit (1-3 days); Field-teaching (1 six-week block from mid-January). Individual Teaching
	SUNY Potsdam	*Professional Block II* – Practicum Experience with methods courses in Literacy, Science, and Classroom Management	*Student Teaching Field Experience*

Table 2. Time Allocation for Field-Observation and Teaching Experiences at UTT and SUNY Potsdam

Time	Institution	Practicum Experiences	Days	Hours
Year 1, Semester II	UTT	Field observation and reflection on visits to schools and classrooms	3	18
	SUNY Potsdam	None	0	0

Time	Institution	Practicum Experiences	Days	Hours
Year 2, Semester II	UTT	Field observation, planning, teaching, and reflection in groups	4	24
	SUNY Potsdam	None	0	0
Year 3, Semester I	UTT	Field observation, planning, and teaching in pairs; individual reflection on experience	6	36
	SUNY Potsdam	On-campus lab for full semester and mentoring programme with school-age students; one-on-one teaching	10	12
Year 3, Semester II	UTT	Field observation, planning, and teaching in pairs; individual reflection on experience	11	66
	SUNY Potsdam	Field observation and teaching in groups and/or individually; 1 four-week block (2 days per week)	8	50
Year 4, Semester I	UTT	Individual field observation, planning, teaching, and reflection	11	48
	SUNY Potsdam	Individual teaching of a unit plan; 1 six-week block (2 days per week)	12	84
Year 4, Semester II	UTT	Individual field observation, planning, teaching, and reflection	35	210
	SUNY Potsdam	Student teaching experience; 2 eight-week blocks	75	525

UTT: 70 days/420 hours
SUNY Potsdam: 105 days/679 hours

Practicum principles and structure at UTT. The initial courses of the Practicum Programme at UTT were first run in the academic Year 2008–2009. By April 2010, all of the courses had been designed, created,

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and taught at least once. These courses continued for the most part at the time of writing (see Table 1). The underlying philosophy of the practicum programme is stated in each course outline. These outlines are given to each student on the first day of each course. The practicum programme is based upon the "incremental professional development of prospective teachers, rather than training" (*All practicum course outlines*, January 2010, p. 2). The practicum courses are designed "to produce teachers who are reflective practitioners, critical thinkers, lifelong learners, creative planners, problem solvers, facilitators, change development agents, researchers, wise decision makers, collaborators, [and] effective teachers who are responsive to issues of diversity, special needs, democracy, equity and social justice" (*All course outlines*, January 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, the courses are designed:

i) To provide prospective teachers with practical experiences of teaching so that they can develop and deepen:

- their understanding of the practical circumstances in which teachers work (*personal practical knowledge);*
- their knowledge gained from classroom situations and the tasks of teaching *(classroom knowledge)*;
- their knowledge of how to teach specific subject matter *(pedagogical content knowledge)*.

ii) To provide opportunities for prospective teachers to link their theoretical understandings of teaching with their practical experiences of teaching and learning in an authentic learning environment (*All practicum course outlines,* January 2010, p. 2).

The Practicum Programme comprises eight distinct courses that are delivered one per semester (two courses per year) over the four years of the Bachelor of Education (see Table 1). The incremental structure and design of the Practicum Programme is intended to ensure that prospective teachers do not become overwhelmed by the challenges and complexities of classroom teaching too early in their practicum experiences. Additionally, different skills are emphasized and assessed in each course. Six of the courses have direct field observation and/or field-teaching experiences (see Table 2). Each practicum course is graded based on students' performance on written assignments, field-teaching, planning and preparation activities, simulated teaching, and classroom teaching. Students must pass all practicum courses to successfully complete the degree programme.

At the time of the study, there was no placement department for field teaching, nor were there separate clinical faculty to observe students in the field. The practicum advisors were all faculty members and were responsible for in-house/on-campus teaching, field observation, and field teaching assessments. Each practicum advisor was responsible for up to 12 students in each year group. Students were instructed in courses on specific teaching methods, student-centred pedagogy, classroom management, and assessment outside of the practicum programme.

The practicum at the UTT enables each student to spend a minimum of 420 hours in the field (see Table 2), engaged in orientation, observation, reflection, professional preparation, planning, and teaching. Students are taught in cohort groups based on specialization (Primary, Early Childhood, Special Education, Physical Education; or secondary specializations such as Mathematics, Language and Literature, Social Studies, Agriculture, and Integrated Science) by practicum advisors assigned to each group.

Practicum principles and structure at SUNY Potsdam. This description of the Practicum Programme at SUNY Potsdam relates to the period between September 2008 and April 2010. The preparation of pre-service teachers at SUNY Potsdam is a four-year Bachelor of Education degree in Childhood/Early Childhood Education, with teacher certification options in Birth through 2nd Grade, and the other certification in 1st through 6th Grade. The new certification options were in response to regional needs in local school districts and marks a period of transition for the overall programme. This practice continued at the time of writing.

Such programme changes are not unique; in fact, SUNY Potsdam has undergone many changes since its early establishment in the 1800s and later in mid-1900 when it became a teachers' college. Many of these changes were the result of educational reform efforts by state and local governments, and school administrators. For example, a noteworthy and significant change to the programme's overall philosophy occurred in 1999 when the State required that all of its teacher education programmes be revised and re-registered. As part of this process, SUNY Potsdam's education unit faculty revisited the mission statement and developed a conceptual framework organized around the vision statement, "*A Tradition of Excellence: Preparing Creative and Reflective Educators.*" The three major strands in the framework are "*Well-Educated Citizen,*" "*Reflective Practitioner,*" and "*Principled Educator.*" This framework has become the bedrock of the teaching/learning experience for the practicum activities (State University of New York at

Potsdam [SUNY Potsdam], 2007).

The practicum programme at SUNY Potsdam allows students to engage in the practice of teaching for a minimum of 679 hours (see Table 2). The practicum experience begins with an on-campus mentoring programme with school-age students in a Literacy Center. This is followed by 100 hours of continuous pre-student experiences progressing through two professional Blocks (see Table 1).

The student teaching experience consists of two 8-week (whole day) placements equalling a total of 75 days. Students completing the student teaching experience are required to fulfil general requirements (regular attendance in the field and student teaching seminars, weekly class activity schedules, reflective journals, lesson plans, self-analysis of teaching/learning experiences, and teacher work samples). Students are also required to maintain a professional disposition, measured by a disposition-tracking sheet. They complete a self-evaluation of their dispositions in addition to that completed by the university faculty.

Placements for the practicum are in selected schools in a specific geographical location. Supervisors move between two or three schools in a given school district. They develop partnerships between the college and P-6 schools in keeping with the mission of the Professional Development School (PDS). For both the practicum and student teaching experiences, the supervisors are full-time clinical faculty who may teach one of the methods courses. Experienced retired educators are also hired as part-time student teaching supervisors. Each supervisor may have a total of 8–10 students per semester.

Influences on Our Teaching

Our second question asked: "*In what ways did these underlying principles and structures influence our teaching?*" We acknowledge that while each institution had its own unique practicum programme structure, the underlying principles underscored the framework of the reflective practitioner. At both institutions, as students become grounded in instructional theory and practice they are also assisted in becoming reflective practitioners, as Deborah commented:

> *The overarching focus of the reflective practitioner coupled with State Education requirements and professional standards is a pivotal point influencing my teaching. I include the three major strands of the reflective practitioner as well as the expectations of curriculum standards framework and content and specialty standards. I use a disciplined inquiry approach, helping my students to develop a sense of themselves as learners. Early in*

my classes they are given the opportunity to identify their own biographical sketches as learner from both their earlier home and school experiences. By examining their own strengths, weaknesses, and beliefs about learning, they are able to reflect and consider what is likely to be appropriate instruction for their future students.

Joyanne also admitted similar influences:

The practicum has influenced my teaching because as stated in the course outlines the practicum is designed to "provide opportunities for prospective teachers to link their theoretical understandings of teaching with their practical experiences of teaching and learning in an authentic learning environment" and the students need to develop their skills through reflection, observation, and critical thinking, I say to them what better place to do that other than when you are sitting as a student in the university classroom. I ask them to pay attention and evaluate the strategies being used [in my content-area class] and record or share their feelings as they experience my teaching.

Also reflected in practicum sequences are the nature and quality of supervised support and distribution of time between programmes. There is a teamwork approach to supervision at SUNY Potsdam that is also apparent at UTT. The teamwork approach affords consistency in planning and implementation of programme goals for the practicum experiences, while meeting mandated requirements from the state and professional associations. A central office structure coordinates clinical faculty support, students' input, clear roles for cooperating teachers, and student requirements and roles during the practicum. This structure also promotes transparency and accountability, especially from the standpoint of ensuring that students meet academic and dispositional requirements throughout their field experiences. Deborah reflects on how this team approach has influenced her teaching:

The well-known proverb "Many hands make light work" comes to mind when I think about the experiences I have had working as a team. I feel a sense of consistency, orderliness and commitment. The key here is ongoing communication and while it may result in scheduling additional times for meetings, more is accomplished when everyone assumes a role and work toward the overall goals. I also find unique ways to translate these goals into my teaching especially those that are important to student success in the field. They in turn develop confidence, as there is

> *familiarity in the issues they converse about among their peers as to what is expected in the field. I also use the team approach in my teaching allowing students to take turns planning for class sessions, giving in-put to assignments and providing feedback to peer demonstrations. I have seen how the principles of courtesy, improved communication and consideration within a team approach facilitate a spirit of cooperation among my students. After all, it is what they will have to demonstrate as they move out into the field to work with their cooperating teachers.*

At UTT, while there was no central office structure to coordinate the operations of the programme, the Practicum coordinator and the various teams of Practicum Advisors met at least twice per semester to monitor the progress of the programme and the students. Additionally, course assignments were structured to measure student achievement in the field.

There is also a marked difference in the time frame in which students begin and continue their practicum experiences between programmes. At SUNY Potsdam, students are required to take a solid core of liberal arts courses before starting their practicum experiences, which means that methods courses are generally completed during their last two years of college. It is also the first time that students are interacting with their methods instructors in coursework related to field experiences, becoming acquainted with the conceptual framework, state and professional association standards, and gaining competence and confidence with content methods for instruction. Because of the demands of the methods and practicum requirements, there is a "fixed schedule of classes" planned so that students can meet the college and certification requirements to graduate on time. There is also a focus on meeting programme gates. Students are not allowed to move forward until they are deemed academically proficient (based on grade performance averages or GPAs), and professional dispositions evaluated through performance-based measures. When students do not "meet" these requirements, they are dropped from the programme and can reapply and continue from the point they were dropped when grades are improved. At UTT, students begin their practicum programme from the first semester. This may be a legacy of the past Teacher's Diploma system, where prospective teachers began field-teaching during their first year, and the requirement to have new prospective teachers reflect on their own educational experiences during their first semester of practicum (see Tables 1 and 2).

We both note and struggle with what appears to be the "inflexible nature" of the structure of the practicum programmes, which has an

effect on teaching time. As Deborah noted:

> *My methods course is taught in year four when students are completing their second practicum experience. They spend half of the time in the college classroom and the other half at their practicum sites. It seems that there is never enough time to teach all that is needed so that students are adequately prepared for their practicum experience. I have often felt frustrated in my attempts to meet this need and over time have made significant changes to my course content in collaboration with my colleagues teaching the other sections of the same course. I teach with the knowledge that my 'seniors' must be 'ready' to teach the content in their practicum experiences and later in their student teaching experiences.*

We also noted that the "cohort approach" to exposing curriculum to set groups of students provided our students with numerous opportunities to collaborate, critically examine, and provide feedback to their peers about instructional practices. Deborah explained:

> *I enjoyed the sense of community that appears to be readily encouraged by the cohort approach within the Block structure. I have the opportunity to work with other instructors. We are able to develop close relationships with our students. Over time we come to know their strengths and provide a context for them to build on these strengths while recognizing the areas they need to work on. The students on the other hand develop confidence within this cohort approach as they are affirmed by each other during peer demonstrations. They are also more responsive to critical discourse about teaching and their observations in classrooms.*

Joyanne also shared:

> *The cohort approach in the structure ensures that the same group is exposed to the curriculum and practicum at the same time. A sense of community is experienced by the students where they readily accept roles that they transfer into their teaching. They are comfortable with each other. They have opportunities to feel at ease with others and take risks more readily.*

The opportunity to examine the underlying principles and structures of our practicum programmes reminded us that teacher education is a complex process with many variables influencing the outcomes. In our case, the variables of engaging in reflective practice, time in the field,

peer demonstration and evaluation, and a cohort approach to practicum experiences were noteworthy points of difference between the two programmes.

Lessons Learned

Kinsella (2001, as cited in Procee, 2006) aptly describes our experiences as a result of engaging in self-study through reflection. She notes:

> Reflective practitioners think about their experiences in practice and view them as opportunities to learn.… Reflective practitioners are concerned about the contexts of their practices and the implications for action. They reflect on themselves, including their assumptions and their theories of practice, and take action grounded in self-awareness. Finally, reflective practitioners recognise and seek to act from a place of praxis, a balanced coming together of action and reflection. (p. 237)

As researchers, we can both attest to the value of examining, comparing, and reflecting on the two practicum structures. We learned that the process of comparison is an important activity to engage in, and it provided us with a broader view of how teacher education programmes, and more specifically practicum experiences, are interpreted in different contexts. Each context has its unique historical and institutional knowledge, which must be considered when planning for programme renewal or programme changes. Our comparisons were not weighed in terms of positives or negatives, but rather where each programme was in terms of the evolution or progression of teacher education programmes. We were also mindful of what is needed in our present programmes to prepare our students to be effective, thoughtful teachers in an era where the landscape of teacher education and practicum programmes is constantly changing.

In exploring our experiences within our practicum programmes, we gained several insights into what can emerge from such comparisons. We came to see the practicum as part of a larger piece of a jigsaw puzzle called teacher education. However, it is in itself its own jigsaw puzzle. The larger pieces of the practicum jigsaw were the mission, goals, principles, and structure of the programme. The smaller, more oddly shaped pieces were questions such as: How much academic and practical preparation is needed to become a teacher? Who is employed to assess prospective teachers? How much training should be provided for faculty members? Who is responsible for the cost of that training? When should

the field experience take place? How much time is needed in the field? How do we determine readiness of the candidates for the field experiences? Do practicum course requirements limit students' engagement in the field experience? These "pieces of conversations" became important in completing a "whole picture" of our practicum programmes.

Field experiences should be planned to begin early in the programme. However, early experiences should be more exploratory in nature, involving more observations, questioning, reflections, and interviews with experienced teachers. In this way prospective teachers can gain knowledge about the education system in which they intend to work. In short, this model may provide the students with insights about their readiness and desire to become teachers and confirm that they want to teach. At the same time, teacher education should include more stringent programme assessment gates, which would ensure that students meet the academic and dispositional requirements before they begin the final field teaching experience. This increases the likelihood that students have demonstrated sustained confidence with pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content, along with the values, commitments, and professional ethics of teaching.

Institutional structures to support practicum programmes should include: resource personnel with the sole responsibility of maintaining field placements; holding seminars for students to allow them to discuss their experiences; developing protocols for field requirements; allocation of physical spaces for record keeping and personnel to support practicum experiences. There should also be ongoing revision of these structures. Specific roles and responsibilities of personnel, along with a clear chain of command, should be communicated to all key stakeholders. We conclude that a cautious response to resolving these issues is needed because there is no rule of thumb as to what will work best. We need to be mindful of the resistance and different viewpoints on some of these issues. However, we believe that these aspects should be strongly considered to maintain a healthy balance.

Policy guidelines are important in outlining the mission and goals of any practicum programme. There should be a clear mission statement that is infused into all aspects of teacher preparation and communicated to key stakeholders, which underscores whether programmes are creating expert teachers or good beginning teachers. Programmes must ensure currency—what is currently being proposed in teacher education—and quality—measurement of standards of evaluation. Programmes should not hesitate to cap the number of students entering the practicum if the

quality of the delivery is being compromised by resource deficits, both in terms of personnel and physical allocations.

Each programme should include measures of accountability to professional standards. For example, SUNY Potsdam ensures that its practicum programme structure holds itself accountable to professional standards as outlined by relevant agencies and constituents, such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, now merged with the Teacher Education Accreditation Council to form the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Professional standards should be outlined to ensure currency and professional growth, which also provides confirmation of the worth and quality of a programme's mission and goals. Additionally, accountability to professional standards propels stakeholders involved to move toward experiences that maintain and sustain their professional growth.

Those involved in teacher education programmes need to acknowledge the evidence that the nature of professional education itself is changing (Wimmer, 2008). Teacher educators need to consider how changes within and across time set the stage for open public conversations, as well as scholarly dialogue about what it means for teacher educators to prepare students for a changing world, a changing school population, and responsibilities. For example, the Caribbean programme was changed from one that was a terminal post-secondary certificate for in-service primary teachers to a job entry-level requirement of a degree. Although the degree has more rigorous academic and pedagogical preparation, those participating are pre-service students and therefore do not come in or leave the programme with the experience of being able to teach, as the graduates of the former diploma programme. This creates a tension in the cultural context as stakeholders puzzle over the question: How can a person who has a teaching degree be less able to teach?

It is also necessary to consider the impact of national recommendations on existing teacher education programmes, as in the case of SUNY Potsdam. Presently, in the US, there is a proposal and a new vision that demand an entirely new approach to teacher education. This approach will require that partnerships be built in which teacher education becomes a shared responsibility for all schools from K–12th grade and higher education—colleges and the Schools of Education. A key element in this transformation of teacher education programmes is putting clinical practice at the centre of teacher preparation (see Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation …, 2010). We note here the need for further dialogue on how international recommendations will impact emerging programmes like those at UTT.

As an outcome of the reflective process that we engaged in for this paper, we recognized the importance of mentoring in preparing and sustaining faculty involved in both emerging programmes like that of UTT and established programmes as in the case of SUNY Potsdam. We recognized personal experiences and academic preparation in several contexts as setting the stage for leadership responsibilities. We also attributed self-initiated professional development at UTT and mentoring by senior faculty at SUNY Potsdam as influencing our positive experiences and growth in our roles. Furthermore, we felt that there was a critical need for collaborations between faculty in other Caribbean institutions that provide pre-service programmes, as well as those outside of the Caribbean region that may have longer established programmes, in exploring these issues.

There is the recognition that new teacher education programmes, like the one at UTT in this study, are expected to have growing pains as they come on stream. However, established teacher education programmes also experience transitional growing pains, because there is always a need for upgrade and change. Teacher education programmes cannot be static because they are consistently responding to economic and political issues, as well as economic and professional decisions and trends in teacher education. Therefore, as teacher educators, we need to keep abreast of developments in teacher education, have a historical understanding of the factors that bring about changes, and anticipate or predict future developments, while keeping the momentum of our practicum programmes in the present.

Conclusion

As teacher educators seek to assess and improve their programmes, make deeper sense of what they are doing, improve their practice and their students' learning, they are encouraged to review their programmes and compare them with others. In so doing, they will be able to explore similarities, differences, gaps, and best practices that exist in terms of developments in teacher education. This paper is a way of giving Caribbean and international teacher educators some insight into the benefits of such comparisons.

While teacher educators generally regard field experiences as the "core feature of a teacher education program" (Wilson, 1999, as cited in Wimmer, 2008), a consensus remains that teacher education programmes, including field experiences, should not be understood through a single lens of orientation (Zeichner, 1993). We sought to heed this advice as we completed this self-study. Through our conversations

we were able to explore each programme from our unique perspectives. We believe that this exploration has provided us with details that may also influence our decisions, or that of other teacher educators, as we seek to shape or modify teacher education programmes to facilitate global competencies and expectations.

We are mindful of the differences in contexts and resources of the two campuses and we recognize how notions of the descriptors of "emerging and established" may be applied. These differences were often raised in conversation with colleagues at both universities during our data collection. We noted the need to audiotape future conversations and increase the opportunity to capture more detailed discussions, which, we conclude, should be ongoing, and which are of themselves self-study data.

Yet, despite this limitation, reflection and self-study have given us the opportunity to pause and ask ourselves if what we have observed in each of our individual practicum programmes makes sense. We were also able to see the progress that we have made in both programmes and to acknowledge that factors continue to affect emerging and well-established teacher education programmes. We have come to recognize that there is a need for continuous improvement of both established and new teacher education programmes. We hope that our findings and conclusions can also serve to inform the direction and development of practicum programmes in our own, as well as other teacher education institutions, in t light of the increasing globalization in teacher education.

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