

How Does it Feel to be a Teacher? Personal Journeys and Lessons for a Malaysian University

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to understand beginning teachers' perceptions of their profession after an eight to ten-week stint of teaching in schools. Beginning teachers of the Faculty of Education at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, were asked to respond in writing to the simple question: How does it feel to be a teacher? Using a qualitative approach the data were analysed for insights into the challenges they faced as beginning teachers, their hopes, beliefs and anguish; the understandings they gleaned from training and their interpretation and presentation of these understandings during their interactions with students. The paper explores and describes the beginning teachers' perceptions of being teachers, the impact of their teaching stints on their perceptions, and the factors they have identified as inhibiting or enhancing their potential as teachers. The paper concludes by discussing ways and means of facilitating their growth into maturity as competent teachers. It focuses on how to ensure the retention of beginning teachers in the profession, the kind of programme required to make them adjust to the culture of teaching as new members of a community of practice, and the kind of support they would require in order to develop their pedagogical skills.

Introduction

A beginning teacher is defined as “an intern or a fully certified teacher in his or her first or second year” of teaching (Field Descriptors, 2003).

Brock and Grady (1997) conducted a study on teachers in the United States, and discovered that an average of 30% of teachers quit during their first two years in the profession. Within the next five years, another 10 to 20% decide to leave. It was said that schools lose approximately 50% of teachers after seven years into the profession. This percentage is extremely high and certainly challenges the viability of the teaching profession as a vocation. In Malaysia to date there have been a few studies and they suggest that the teaching profession has its share of casualties and that this could be a cause for concern especially when the government has invested heavily in the education sector.

The question of why so many teachers abandon the teaching profession has been the focus of many research projects. Research on novice teacher attrition generally attributes this phenomenon to heavy workloads, lack of support, a sense of being isolated professionally and “reality shock”– the experience that full-time teaching does not cohere with the novices’ expectations (Abbot, 2003). According to Chubbock, Clift, Allard, & Quilan, (2001) the most challenging factor is the lack of sufficient professional and emotional support accorded to novices. There is a consensus amongst educationists that providing novice teachers support which is well planned and easily accessible is important not only to their retention and professional well-being but also to their becoming well adjusted members of a community of practice.

A lot of research has concentrated on novice teachers who are already in the service. However, fewer studies, especially, local ones, pay attention to the challenges faced by trainee teachers undergoing teaching practicum, their hopes, beliefs and anguish; the understandings they glean from training and their interpretation and presentation of these understandings during their interactions with students as beginning teachers.

One of the initiatives would be to look into the training programme that was being conducted at Faculty of Education, UiTM. In order to establish an effective training ground for teachers-to-be, it is crucial for us to first understand their perceptions of the teaching profession. This study was therefore conducted to find out beginning teachers’ positive and negative experiences while doing their teaching practicum in secondary schools.

It is hoped that the findings will provide insights and understanding on the beginning teachers’ view of teaching. This will help the faculty to

further improve the present teacher training programme in UiTM, and propose recommendations to be shared with other institutions.

This paper aims to examine trainee teachers' perceptions and the meaning of being teachers, the impact of their teaching stints on their perceptions and the factors they have identified as inhibiting and enhancing their potential as teachers. It will also discuss ways and means of facilitating their growth as competent teachers by answering the following questions:

- How do we ensure retention of beginning teachers in the profession?
- What kind of programme is required to allow them to adjust to the new demands and culture of teaching in a new community of practice?
- What kind of support do they require in order to develop their pedagogical skills?

Literature Review

Studies on Pre-service Teachers

Ahmet (2003) conducted a study on prospective elementary school teachers who were enrolled in a teacher education programme in Turkey. He investigated their characteristics and their views of teaching. He utilised a questionnaire as the main instrument for data collection. Among his findings were that more than 50% of the participants opted for teaching as a career due to altruistic reasons. Furthermore, the majority also believed that they had made the right choice and intended to make it a lifelong career. It is interesting to find out that most of them also had a positive attitude toward becoming teachers and showed enthusiasm for the profession. When asked about roles of teachers, they strongly believed that teachers should play the combined role of knowledge expert, didactical expert and pedagogical expert in order to be effective. To them, teaching is not only to transmit knowledge but also to facilitate student learning and assist students to “acquire certain social, ethical and moral values” (p. 842).

Quite similar to the study above, Virta (2002) studied eighteen pre-service history teachers in Finland focusing on their development, motivation for studying history and their beliefs about teaching. She also explored how these trainees evaluated their experiences in the beginning

of pre-service education. Contradictory to the results in Ahmet (2003), her findings revealed that the majority displayed a stronger commitment to the history subject than to teaching. According to the teachers, venturing into teaching was merely an opportunity to obtain a job that suited their qualification as history graduates.

In responding to the question of the kind of teacher they wanted to become, the majority wanted to be able to “awaken student enthusiasm” (p. 692). Approximately half the group stated the importance of knowing and understanding their students and establishing good rapport with them.

These trainees also wrote about their first teaching experiences and among the challenges encountered were teaching difficulties, lack of natural interaction with their students and classroom management. Among the coping strategies employed initially were focusing their attention on content as well as procedures when planning lessons, and utilising styles and methods of teaching they witnessed when they were school students. Nevertheless, as they gained more experience in the later part of their training, their teaching skills and selection of methodology appeared to have improved. They also admitted the difficult process of becoming good teachers.

To examine the challenges faced by trainee teachers and the kind of support needed, Tang (2003) did a qualitative case study that aimed at understanding seven trainee teachers’ learning experiences in a two-year initial teacher education programme in Hong Kong. The study examined the dynamics of challenge and support in three facets of student teaching context: action, socio-professional and supervisory contexts. It was revealed that the trainee teachers faced various types of challenge and support in the three contexts. It was also found that each context offer different opportunities for development of these trainees. It appeared that in order for trainees to have productive learning experiences, a teacher education programme should firstly provide a low risk action context such as allowing them to teach well-behaved students so that they could focus on polishing their pedagogical skills. Secondly, they should have an affiliated or engaged socio-professional context whereby they are in close contact with colleagues and peers inside and outside of school so that they would gain learning experiences beyond the class setting too. Thirdly, they should be exposed to a facilitating supervisory context where both school teachers and tertiary supervisors collaborate and establish a systematic coordination in linking theory and practice to ease trainees’ professional learning.

In the local scenario, one of the main challenges highlighted was pedagogical skills. Zakaria et al. (2001) conducted a study on trainee teachers' experience during teaching practicum and discovered that the greatest challenge they faced was related to the teaching and learning process. When the trainees planned their lessons, it was difficult for them to select appropriate teaching methods and to prepare good teaching aids that suited the students they taught. It was said that most trainees could not apply the various teaching methods learnt at the university to an actual teaching session in school. The reality in school was different from their expectations. Some of the factors that might have influenced their inability to put theory into practice were readiness, motivation, attitude and lack of experience.

The next challenge is disciplinary problems in the classroom. This was highlighted in the study carried out by Abu Bakar and Ali (1996) on trainee teachers' initial teaching experiences. It highlighted the difficulties that trainee teachers faced in handling students' disciplinary problems since they lacked experience. It was also said that they found it hard to handle various types of students in big classes as it was beyond their expectations. Related to the findings above, the results in the study conducted by Ng Foo Seng (1995) also showed that the majority of beginning teachers did not know how to tackle disciplinary problems in their classrooms. He found that these teachers received minimal support and assistance from the school to counter students' disciplinary problems. They had to learn on their own and cope with their own emotions when dealing with students' misbehaviour. This can be traumatic for beginning teachers.

Developing Expertise in the Work Place

The concept of community of practice was first discussed by Lave and Wenger (1991) as cited in Viskovic (2006) to refer to the learning of members of a community which is situated. They learn by being part of a social context of real practice.

Expertise is *relational* to a particular community of practice where it is entrenched in social practice over time. It requires a practitioner to develop competence in the discourse, activities, norms and conventions of the community. It also requires *pertinence* — knowing what behaviours are acceptable (Billet, 2001 as cited in Viskovic, 2006, p. 325).

Trainee teachers need to engage in and contribute to the practices of their community. Only a good support system by the school and higher educational institutions can ease the burden and trauma of these teachers in their initiation as new members of their community.

Research Methodology

Upon returning from teaching practicum in April 2005, 57 Faculty of Education students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia, were selected to participate in the study. These students belonged to three different programmes at the faculty, namely TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), Art and Design Education and Music Education. They were asked to respond in writing to the question: How does it feel to be a Teacher? Out of 57 trainees, 47 (82.5%) submitted their written responses to the researchers. All of these were TESL students. These students entered the programme after TESL matriculation certification, after obtaining a diploma, or after *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Higher Certificate of Education,) that is a certificate of education obtained at the highest level of secondary education. They were chosen to enter the programme after their speaking, reading and writing abilities in the English language were ascertained to be competent as indicated by their academic results. They also had to undergo interviews, along with reading and writing placement tests, during the selection process.

This study utilised textual analysis of essays and journal entries to understand what the trainee teachers feel about their teaching experiences. The trainees' essay writing was used as the main data. The researchers explained to the trainees the possible areas to be touched upon in their writing such as their interest in the teaching profession, their perceptions of their teaching experiences as well as the challenges they faced during the practicum period. They were urged to be very honest in their responses.

Besides the essay, the trainees' writing journals were also collected and examined. The trainees kept the journals during the duration of their teaching practicum. They were required to record their teaching experiences, teaching successes and disappointments, initiatives taken to overcome the challenges and other reflections. These journal entries were used for the purpose of triangulation and to further clarify what

was written in the essays. From both the essays and journals, common patterns emerged and recurring themes were extracted.

From the main data, the respondents were classified into categories based on their interest in pursuing the programme and their perceptions of the teaching profession as a whole.

Findings and Discussion

The research revealed that there are three categories of TESL teachers who are generally admitted into the teaching profession:

- those who have always wanted to become teachers and have not wavered in their decision to remain in the profession,
- those who were not interested in teaching initially, but later have accepted teaching as a vocation, and
- those who were not interested in teaching but were forced into it, and have not been persuaded to change their perceptions of teaching even after a teaching practicum stint.

Thirty-three trainee teachers (70.21%), fall under the first category. The other nine (19.15%) belong to the second category, and the remaining five (10.64%) are the minority who are not interested in teaching despite having gone through the rigour of teacher training and receiving support from their lecturers and friends.

The first two categories of trainee teachers cited the following reasons for remaining in the teaching profession.

- a. *Teaching has improved their views on life and has taught them to be better human beings*

Before the teaching practicum, many trainee teachers were a bit apprehensive about having to teach teenagers and dealing with their behaviour. However, after the experience of teaching practicum, they realised that some of the students may be bigger in size but smaller in terms of knowledge. The opportunity to mingle with the students also taught them a lot about teenagers and they learnt to appreciate them. Some of the trainee teachers mentioned that they had learnt to look at challenges more positively.

The trainee teachers also claimed that 'they are now more proper in terms of mannerism, appearance, speech and attitude'. During the practicum, they had to dress accordingly, control their mannerisms, be

polite in their speech and display good attitude. They felt that their experience had affected them positively; improved their perceptions of life and made them better individuals.

b. *Teaching has changed them to become more mature and independent*

During the teaching practicum, the trainee teachers were given a lot of responsibilities besides teaching such as being in charge of sports practice, debates and school newsletters, painting murals and advising clubs. They claimed that the wealth of experience they gained from school made them more “mature” in terms of accepting and carrying out responsibilities entrusted upon them. In addition, the experience taught them to be “more independent” for they had learnt to do things on their own and not to be dependent on others – in particular on friends or senior teachers.

c. *Teaching is a noble profession*

It is very interesting to note that most of the trainee teachers in the first two categories felt that teaching gave them a sense of pride, fulfilment and satisfaction in serving the nation. A few of the trainee teachers stated that they got a lot of satisfaction when they saw the students “produce good work”. They also realised that teachers would have to deal with not only students in class, but also the community. That, they said, makes teaching a noble profession.

d. *As teachers, they felt important, needed, appreciated and respected*

According to all the trainee teachers, it was a great feeling to be respected by the students. The joy of being greeted by most of the students when they met at corridors was indescribable. Some of the trainee teachers enjoyed receiving gifts from the students, as they felt important and appreciated by the students. One of the trainee teachers wrote, “I like being a teacher because I get lots of gifts from my students. They appreciate me.”

e. *Teaching is fun and enjoyable*

The experience in school exposed them to real teaching. All of the trainees enjoyed teaching even though they found it tough, tiring and challenging. All of them admitted to having both sweet and bitter moments in the schools they were assigned to. Some of the sweet memories

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mentioned were the cooperation and “trust” that was given to them by principals and senior teachers in handling students’ clubs and activities. Another sweet moment mentioned was a farewell party organised specifically for them. Besides the sweet moments, some tough moments shared by many were that they found it difficult to juggle work and pleasure. Nevertheless, they were able to face the challenges due to their positive perceptions of the profession.

What is clear is that the teaching stint has not only given them the opportunity to reflect on their growth as individuals but also strengthened their enthusiasm for the profession. By comparison the trainee teachers in the third category remain consistent in their detachment from the profession and stating their reasons for wanting to leave the profession as follows:

a. *Teaching requires a lot of preparation*

All the trainee teachers in this category complained about the massive preparation that they had to do prior to classes. They claimed that it was tiring and they did not like it. The pressure of having to read books and prepare lesson plans and teaching aids were “torturing” as one of the trainees stated.

b. *Non-teaching activities waste their time*

It is a fact that teachers not only have to teach, but also have to handle a lot of non-teaching activities. All the trainee teachers aired their dissatisfactions about not having time for themselves. During the practicum, they were given a lot of “silly chores” as one of them put it. Preparation for teaching was already a burden and the addition of other responsibilities made the situation worse. It is interesting how differently the trainee teachers from this category viewed the added responsibilities compared to the trainees from the previous category.

c. *Teaching involves too much sacrifice*

The general complaint that the trainee teachers put forward was that they not only had to sacrifice their time, but also money and energy. During the practicum, they spent a lot of money on materials like mahjong paper, manila cards, markers, coloured paper, etc. for teaching aids. Furthermore, they had to photocopy handouts for students using their own pocket money because such a facility was not provided for in some schools. Other than those factors, some complained about the amount of

energy they had to put in for teaching was beyond comparison with other professions. However, they did not state which professions they were referring to. As a result of the dissatisfactions, many of them mentioned that if they were given another job they would take it because they could not withstand the pressure.

Factors That Enhance or Inhibit the Trainee Teachers' Potential as Teachers

What were the factors that enhanced or inhibited the teaching potential of the three categories of teachers? Our analysis reveals five common factors that affect the trainees' performance as teachers. The list below is based on the most frequently mentioned factors in the students' writing for all the three categories.

a. Students

Thirty-seven trainee teachers (78.72%) from all the three categories mentioned students as the most influential factor in determining their liking or not liking the job. The trainees who listed students as an enhancing factor stated that if the students were cooperative, did the work assigned to them and showed progress, the trainee teachers would enjoy teaching. They would also feel motivated to teach if the students respected them and appreciated the knowledge disseminated to them.

On the other hand, the trainee teachers who highlighted students as the factor that inhibited their potential, claimed that if the students were uncooperative, rebellious, lazy or rude to them, they would feel demotivated to stay in the profession.

b. The Job

Twenty-five trainee teachers (53.19%) stated that the job itself was an important factor that would ensure their retention in the profession. The trainees who claimed that *the job* was an enhancing factor said that the job invested them with authority in the classroom. They enjoyed having the power to decide what they wanted the students to do. The job itself, according to them, also allowed them to gain respect from students, parents and community.

The trainee teachers who remained detached from the profession viewed *the job* as an inhibiting factor. They were dissatisfied with the low salary that teachers receive. They claimed that the low pay does not commensurate with the heavy workload and demanding profession.

c. School Staff

Seventeen trainees (36%) stated *school staff* as one of the enhancing or inhibiting factors in influencing the students' perceptions on teaching. The trainees regarded this factor as enhancing if the teachers, principals and administrative staff in the school were understanding, and treated them professionally. They appreciated the trust given to them, and this consequently became a morale booster that led to their having high self-esteem and self-confidence.

The trainees who viewed this as an inhibiting factor said that if the school staff took advantage of them and bullied them, they would feel very disturbed. Consequently, it would reduce their motivation to remain in the profession. They mentioned that from their experience, senior teachers liked to assign many "relief classes" to the junior teachers. Furthermore, some of these junior teachers were given the weakest classes. They also claimed that some senior teachers did not treat them professionally and looked down on them.

d. Facilities

Only one trainee teacher (2.13%) chose facilities as the factor that enhanced or inhibited her teaching potential. She pointed out that it is regarded as an enhancing factor if the school allowed trainees to use the school facilities. Moreover, if the facilities were in good condition, she would be able to vary her teaching mode. This would make her lessons more interesting.

On the other hand, it is regarded as an inhibiting factor when the school did not allow her to use some of the facilities in the school because they did not have enough facilities or if they did have, they were not in good condition.

e. School Environment

Another trainee (2.13%) wrote *school environment* as one of the factors influencing her views on teaching. She believed that this factor could enhance her teaching potential if the school maintained its cleanliness and created a conducive environment for studying.

Along the same lines, she thought that if the school were dirty and not conducive to teaching and learning, the beginning teachers would lose interest in teaching. She had had the experience of a very congested staff room. It was difficult for her to concentrate on her work and this dampened her enthusiasm for teaching.

Implications of the Study

All the three categories of teachers are relevant to the teaching profession and teacher preparation programmes in critical ways. We shall attempt to examine the implication of each category for our teacher training programme.

What the investigation has revealed is that there are students who have gone through the rigour of training as teachers but have remained detached from the profession. The three-year training they have acquired has not changed their stance on teaching. If they are to remain in the profession without a concerted effort by the school to persuade them to change their stance, their presence may be counter productive for they will not be effective leaders in the classroom. Ultimately, they may leave the profession.

How does a teacher preparation programme inculcate and sustain students' interest in a profession they have been "coerced into"?

It is clear to us now that a teacher preparation programme must recognise the need to prepare teachers beyond the classroom and this must be reflected in the curriculum that is not conceptualised in a traditional mode. Hence, a combination of specialised areas such as double majors, and a wide of range of minors to choose from would be desirable. This would allow for a choice of career or a career switch midway.

The current practice is that the students go for a one-hour class observation in the early years of their training, which is then followed a few semesters later by microteaching, both of which are quite remote from the realities of the classroom. Hence, it is also clear to us that early exposure to the rudiments of teaching would have some impact on the potential teachers' decision of whether to stay or not to stay in the profession; this could be done by making the students sit in classrooms of their choice for a couple of weeks during their term break and then reflect on their experience upon completion of the task. Their reflections would offer us glimpses of how they perceive the profession. In addition, exposing the students to best practices via workshops, talks or seminars, success stories of teachers and good models during the course would not only offer different perspectives of the teaching profession but also heighten their interest in it.

In the three-year programme at UiTM, the practicum comes in the final year and often students are thrown into the deep end of the pool

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without knowing precisely what to expect of the real classroom. From the data, it is apparent that they need substantial preparation prior to their debut in the classroom. Induction into the classroom could begin a year before his or her practicum by assigning each student a faculty mentor. The role of the mentor is to guide the student, counsel and facilitate his or her readiness for the classroom through discussions, observations of the mentor's classes and reflective activities and professional conversations. In short, the students' apprenticeship begins at the faculty. This would be further supported by an eight-week or a ten-week internship in the seventh semester. The post-practicum period would serve as a platform for the students to further articulate their beliefs and strengthen their pedagogical skills. If this could be accomplished then the harsh realities of the classroom might be lessened. However, as Diez cited in Halford (1999), beginning teachers often experience problems when the beliefs that they have developed during their university years do not cohere with the culture of their first school.

How does the school capture and sustain the interest and enthusiasm of these beginning teachers to prevent them from leaving the profession?

Beginning teaching, which is marked by a great deal of anxiety and trauma (Hidalgo, 1987; Ryan et al., 1980; Moo Swee Ngoh & Isabella Tan, 2000), is a crucial period in the development of a teacher. The possibility of their leaving the profession has to be reckoned with unless they are given timely and adequate support in the early years of their career. A study conducted by Singapore's Ministry of Education revealed that 25% of teachers there leave the profession (Ng Swee Ngoh & Isabella Tan, 2002). Unfortunately, there is no such study so far in Malaysia.

Research suggests that mentoring by experienced teachers is an important reform strategy (Darling-Hammond and Sclan, 1996) that has the potential to transition beginning teachers into the classroom based on the following assumptions:

- The support provided will help new students adjust to the new demands of their profession and become acculturated within the school organization (Feiman-Namser, Carver, Schwille and Yusko, 1999)
- Mentoring supports their pedagogical development (Feiman-Namser, Carver, Schwille and Yusko, 1999)

- Mentoring will encourage the retention of beginning teachers in the profession (Huling, 1990)

These assumptions are based on the supposition that there exists in the system well-qualified veteran teachers who will act as mentors and their wisdom will be drawn upon.

Mentoring as a strategy to ensure that beginning teachers survive and thrive is a well-established practice in the west. The U.S. Department of Education (1998) reports that 51% of teachers with up to three years of teaching have undergone some form of induction activity. In our region, its dynamic is already apparent. In Singapore, for instance, in order to coax beginning teachers to stay in the profession, Singapore schools are required to set up a teacher induction programme for the new teachers and young teachers are supervised and guided by older and more experienced colleagues. In Malaysia, several studies cited in Lazarus (1999) strongly support the need for beginning teachers to be under the tutelage of mentors. However, the mentoring system which is already in place

“has to be adapted to fit the Malaysian concept. As mentoring is firmly linked to behaviours, roles and dimensions such as acting as role model, being a critical friend, trainer and assessor, such dimensions should be highlighted first and foremost”.

(Lazarus: 11-12)

All the models of mentoring share key components. For the models to be successful, the leaders, particularly principals, must be committed to the notion of helping beginning teachers find success. From our data, support from the principals come in varying degrees. A supportive management would prioritise the provision of adequate work area, facilities and emotional support.

Principals must understand the realities of the classroom of the beginning teachers by ensuring that there is no mismatch between teachers' skills and teaching assignments for example, making a teacher who is less qualified teach a disadvantaged classroom may not yield the desirable outcome. So schools can avoid setting beginning teachers to tasks that are beyond their capability. Principals are encouraged to assign them average classes. If the classes were too advanced, it would frighten them and reduce their self-confidence. Likewise, if the classes are very weak, the beginning teachers may feel frustrated in making the students comprehend a specific lesson. Besides average classes, principals are

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also requested to assign lighter workload to the beginning teachers compared to the senior teachers. This will facilitate the process of getting adjusted to the teaching environment. Finally, principals are urged to get senior teachers' and administrative staff's cooperation to provide a pleasant and effective teaching and learning experience for the beginning teachers. These are in line with the low risk action context and the affiliated socio-professional context suggested by Tang (2003).

When new comers become a part of a community of practice they come into contact with more experienced practitioners and they are inextricably linked to the processes of learning. Cooperation from all parties, namely school administrators, teachers, practicum supervisors and university administrators, is essential to ensure retention of beginning teachers in the teaching profession. A good mentoring process has great potential as part of an induction programme for beginning teachers. This preparation process serves as a foundation for the students to understand the requirements of their profession so that they will be able to develop their repertoire, styles and discourses. It is during this process that they should be able to decide whether or not to remain in the teaching profession. With the introduction of double majors and other changes, students who decide to pursue a non-teaching career may be able to venture into other areas. This will definitely provide more avenues for them, and reduce the number of unemployed graduates.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study was conducted on a small sampling of trainee teachers and therefore is not representative of the wider population of trainee teachers in the country. Due to time constraint, the researchers could not conduct any interviews with the trainee teachers. The post-practicum period was very short, the schedule was tight, and the trainees left the faculty immediately after the two weeks. Attempts were made to contact them for interview sessions, but they had made prior arrangements with their friends and families for other activities such as travelling, holding temporary jobs and the like. If there had been more time for both the researchers and the beginning teachers, the findings would have been more thorough and more reflective of their real thoughts. A follow up study with a new batch of trainees using interview can be conducted to extricate more detailed information on the experiences and views of beginning teachers towards the teaching profession. Since the duration

of both the teacher education programme and the teaching practicum period for the new batch have been lengthened, it would be enlightening to compare the views and experiences of the two batches.

A more in depth study involving a larger sampling also needs to be conducted to identify the percentage of beginning teachers who stay or leave the teaching profession in Malaysia. A comparative study of local trainees and those abroad would be useful for insights into how other countries deal with this situation.

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