



## DEVELOPING STUDENT TEACHERS EXPERIENCE THROUGH CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PLACEMENT\*

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### ABSTRACT

*Critical reflection shows a great potential in enhancing professional practice and can be considered as a vital component of teacher training courses. In the context of teaching placements, critical reflection can act as an important lens through which students can interrogate, share and compare their experiences. In agreement with Stephen Brookfield's works (1995; 2005) which valued reflective practice as a mean of learning, this study applies critical reflection process to identify and analyse the ways student teachers have dealt with the incidents during their placement. This data, combining with assessment of students after placement collected by Department of Training and research of other lectures at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, can produce an informative resource about placement for teacher training program. The findings of this study might contribute to a better understanding of students' placement experiences and then inform future curriculum improvement in teacher education courses of Ho Chi Minh City University of Education.*

**Keywords:** critical reflection, placement, assessment, student teachers.

### TÓM TẮT

#### *Nâng cao trải nghiệm của sinh viên sư phạm thông qua quá trình phản tư trong giai đoạn thực tập sư phạm*

*Phản tư thể hiện tiềm năng to lớn trong việc phát triển kỹ năng thực hành chuyên môn, có thể được coi là một thành tố không thể thiếu trong chương trình đào tạo giáo viên. Trong bối cảnh thực tập sư phạm, phản tư thể hiện như một lăng kính qua đó sinh viên được chất vấn, chia sẻ, so sánh các trải nghiệm. Đồng quan điểm về việc đánh giá cao thực hành suy ngẫm như một phương tiện trong quá trình học tập trong công trình nghiên cứu của Stephen Brookfield (1995;2005), bài báo vận dụng quá trình phản tư để nhận diện và phân tích cách giải quyết các tình huống của sinh viên trong quá trình thực tập. Kết quả này, cùng với các số liệu đánh giá kết quả thực tập sư phạm thu thập từ Phòng Đào tạo được xem là nguồn dữ liệu hữu ích cho quá trình đào tạo giáo viên. Kết quả của nghiên cứu này cung cấp cái nhìn sắc nét hơn về chương trình thực tập của sinh viên, góp phần cho việc cải tiến, phát triển chương trình đào tạo giáo viên tại Trường Đại học Sư phạm Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh.*

**Từ khóa:** phản tư, thực tập sư phạm, đánh giá, sinh viên sư phạm.

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## 1. Introduction

Critical reflection shows a great potential in enhancing professional practice and can be considered as a vital component of teacher training courses. In the context of teaching placements, critical reflection can act as an important lens through which students can share, explain, justify and compare their experiences.

The aim of this study is to apply critical reflection process to identify and analyse the ways student teachers have dealt with the incidents during their placement. This data, combining with assessment of students after placement collected by Department of Training at Ho Chi Minh City University of Education (HCMUE), can produce an informative resource about placement for teacher training program. The findings of this study might contribute to a better understanding of students' placement experiences and then inform future curriculum improvement in teacher education courses of HCMUE.

The notion of 'critical reflection' has repeatedly been discussed in literature on teacher education (Brookfield 1995, 2000), Freese (1999), Loughran (2002). Dewey and his work (1933) can be seen as pivotal to the development of our current notions of reflection. Dewey defined reflection as 'the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (p.9). Reflection can also be defined as 'a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation' and it is 'a forum of response of the learner to experience' (Boud et al. 1985, p.18-9). Whilst Boyd and Fales (1983) raise the idea that critical reflection is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective. For Reid (1993), "reflection is a process of reviewing an experience of practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and so inform learning about practice" (Reid, 1993 p.305).

Most contemporary literature on reflection refers to the work of Donald Schön (*e.g.* Argyris and Schön 1974; Schön 1983, 1987), as being formative in their development of the idea of reflective practice, particularly for its application in professional practice learning. Van manen (1991a) agreed that reflection is an experience that distances itself from situations so one can think about the meanings and consequences of their actions. Hence, reflection, by definition, is also often referred to as reflective practice.

However, reflective practice 'is something more than thoughtful practice' (Jarvis, 1992), it can also be a form of practice that seeks to problematise many situations of professional performance so that they can become potential learning situations enabling practitioners to continue to learn, grow and develop in and through practice" (p.180).

According to Schön (1983), reflective practice involves: ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on action’

‘Reflection-in-action’: is a particular form of problem-solving. It involves thinking at a meta level about the process in which one is engage. Rolfe *et al* (2001) added: ‘Reflection-in-action’ related to two individual elements. It consists of thinking about an action and reflecting it while practitioner is carrying out the action.

But Schön (1983, p. 128) described ‘reflection-in-action’ as a reflecting on something happening or what and how someone is doing an action rather than using experience to get benefit for similar/other situations or solving the incidents differently in future time.

‘Reflection-on-action’: involves reflecting on how practice can be developed (changed) after the event ‘We reflect on action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome’ (Schön, 1983, p. 26).

A more focused on reflection theory is well-articulated in the extensive work of Brookfield (1995, 2000) and Mezirow (2000; see also Mezirow and associates 1990) in which there is a clear distinguish between the traditions inherent in the reflective practice literature, critical pedagogy, and adult education.

It is clear to say that critical reflection or reflection practice is a “meaning-making process”, a link between thinking and doing, a ‘conversation with situation’ (Schön, 1983). The idea is people can learn from their own experiences. It is also a tool for improving professional practice... which allows the practitioner to access “the understanding which have been implicit in his action, understanding which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action” (Schön, 1983, p. 50)

Therefore, the concept of reflection has been widely used by educators to connect multiple independent cognitive and procedure domains, such as problem-solving and decision making (Adler, 1991; Tomlinson, 1999). By articulating questions, confronting bias, examining causality, critical evaluation and knowledge transfer are being made (Ash & Clayton, 2009, p. 27).

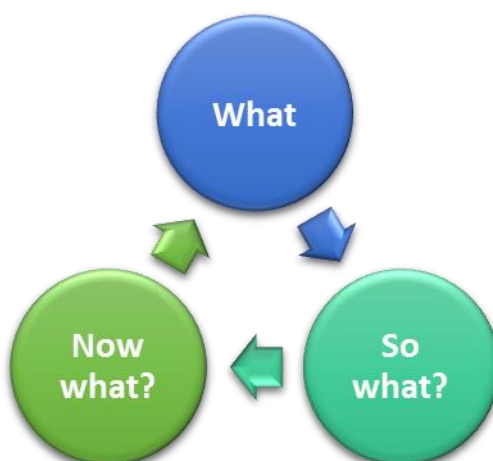
many frameworks for understanding the process of critical reflection have been devised. One of the earliest and simplest frameworks was developed in the 1970's by Borton and endorsed by Rolfe *et al* (2001) which essentially involves 3 simple questions: *What, So what and Now what*. To summarise:

*What:* descriptive facts

*So what:* shift from descriptive to interpretive meaning of experience

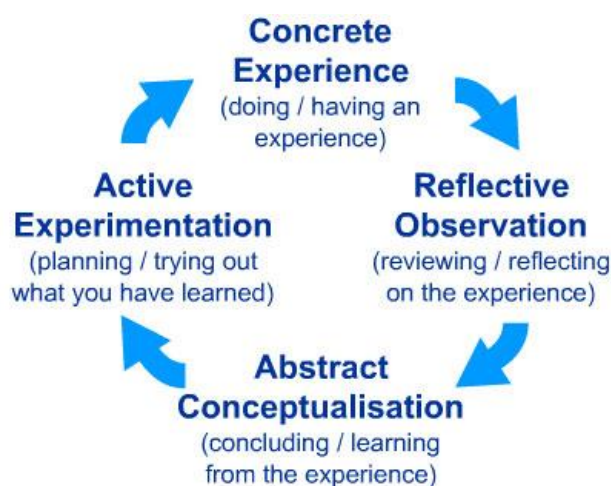
*Now what:* insight gained to new situations setting future goals, creating an action plan

This model brings forward a key aspect of critical reflection: namely that it is an experiential process designed to gather evidence and provide adjustments to facilitate improvement by deeply analyzing and interpreting evidences.



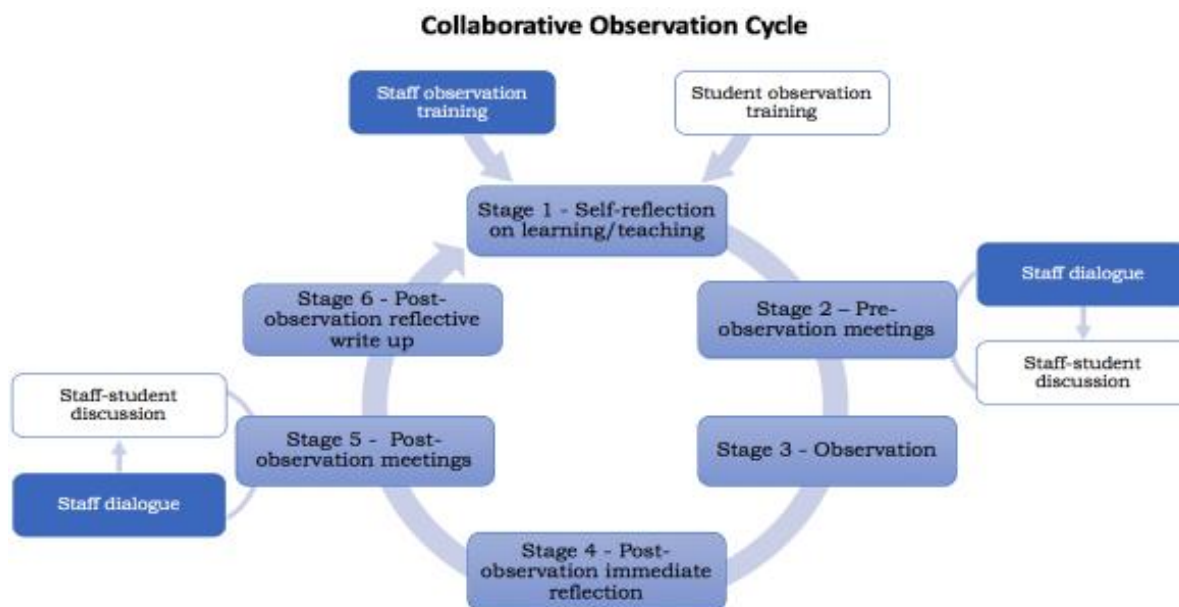
**Figure 1.** Model created by Borton's (1970) and endorsed by Rolfe et al (2001)

In a similar vein Kolb (1984) developed a reflective practice model based on his idea that 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (p. 38). In his model, he presented four basic steps of critical reflection: experience, reflective observation, conceptualization and experimentation.



**Figure 2.** Kolb's cycle of learning and learning style

O'Leary in 'Learning about vocational learning and teaching through collaborative observation' introduced his framework for the process of collaborative observation in which the concept of reflection plays as a key activity during teacher development process.



*Figure 3. Collaborative observation cycle (O'Leary, 2017)*

It is obvious from this model that critical reflection plays a key role in a cycle of effective learning to concrete new experience. This concept therefore is wide applied in educational research, and specifically applied in this study.

## 2. Research Design

### 2.1. Participants and context

A group of 6 student teachers in a chemistry teacher education program (three male and three female students at an average age of 22.17) took part in the study. These student teachers have finished their teaching practicum at high schools and volunteered to participate in the study.

Participants were guided to use the concept of critical reflection to retrace their placement experiences. We used the questionnaire to study problems which these student teachers faced during their placement time on three main issues: (1) how they apply knowledge and methodology taught at university on their teaching at high schools and how successful the lessons were; (2) how they solve unexpected problems occurred during their practicum and if they had a chance to resolve the problem they would use the same solutions or not and why; (3) what skills/knowledge/methods should students be taught to be well-prepared for placement period.

Our objectives were to use their reflection of their training experience at high schools to evaluate knowledge and skills which lecturers have been teaching. We also aimed to listen to their comments and suggestions to improve teaching quality and effectiveness at HCMUE.

## **2.2. Data collection**

Data gathering was conducted in three phases:

### *2.2.1. From each individual student teacher*

Student teachers participating in the study were asked to provide documents they had created including their practicum handbook, lesson plans, and other plans for their extra activities with high school students during their placements. They were also asked to include photos and give reasons for why they took each photo on that period of time in 5 themes (\*): Tutors and teaching; Student Teachers and teaching; Learners and learning; Equipment and Learning spaces; Materials of Student Teachers for their placement.

Participants were guided about ethical standards taking photo and using data about students at high school.

### *2.2.2. From group discussion of student teachers*

We gathered the student teachers for a group reflective discussion. The group discussion focused on analyzing the materials the student teachers had provided and discussing any problems they had faced on their placement period in relation to reflection. Activities in this meeting were recorded in text and photos and brought together for data analysis later.

The student teachers were requested to state/discuss their thoughts when they reviewed and reflected upon the photos and the owners of the photos to share with each other the reasons why they took the photos. The whole group then discussed whether what the photos clearly represented the situations/memories that they had experienced whilst on placement.

After that, we discussed some of the problems student teachers experienced during their placement and asked the whole group to discuss then with a view to exploring some solutions across the whole group for future use.

Students were also asked what resources, knowledge, support and skills they thought students could use to solve the problems they had raised.

#### **Questionnaire designed for group discussion:**

##### *Questions for students with incident:*

- What have you done in this situation?
- What have learnt through the group discussion? Can you consider the incident from different perspectives?

- If you could do it again, would you do the same or could you apply some of the solutions the wider group suggested?

**Questions for group:**

- What would you do if you were in the situation shown?
- What resources, knowledge, support and skills do you think students need to solve this problem efficiently?

**2.2.3. From Placement Review and Placement Preparation Workshops**

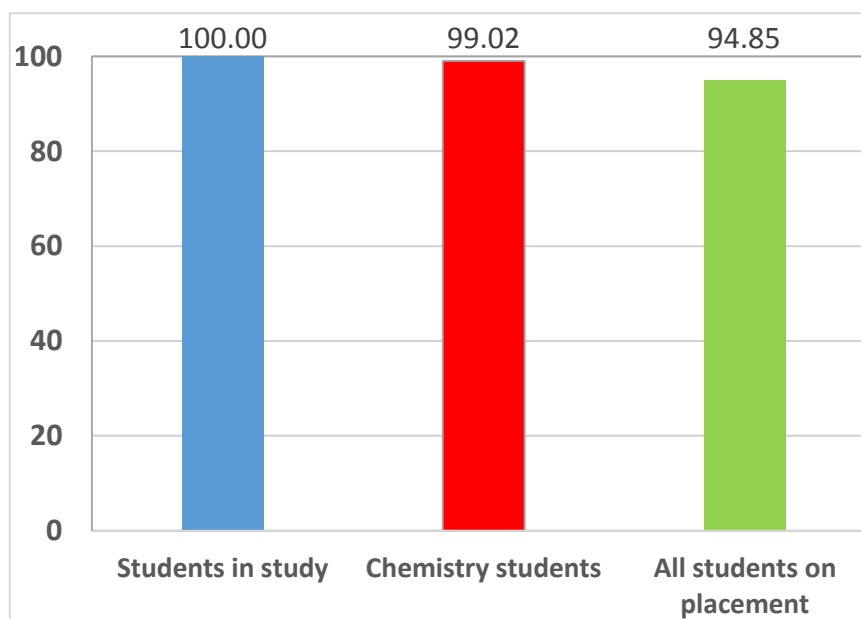
Information about results of all student teachers who finished placements at HCMUE in school year 2016-2017 was collected. We wrote down comments of school governors (employers), and mentors about some students at some aspects including knowledge understanding, communication skills, and performance,

Data about placement results and students' comments at a Placement Review Session of Faculty of History were also collected. Additionally, we attended and noted students' opinion and suggestions at a Placement Preparation Workshop of Faculty of Chemistry.

### 3. Results and discussions

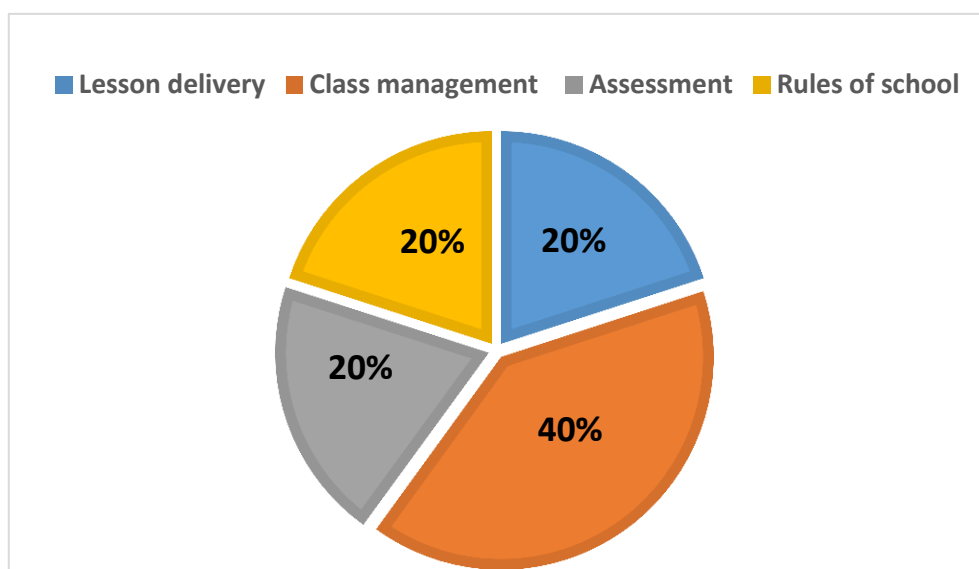
#### 3.1. Assessment results of all students for the placement of 2016-2017 academic year

The results show that 100% (6/6) chemistry student teachers participating in this study got A after their placement while for whole Faculty of Chemistry 101/102 students (99.02%) received an A grade. For university scale, 94.85% (1751/1846) of students completed their placement with an A grade. It is clear that most students passed their practicum with a good outcome of A.



**Figure 4.** Proportion of students graded A on placement of school year 2016-2017

Although all students in this study achieved A for their placement, 5/6 (83.33%) students reported that they faced various types of problems including lesson delivery, class management, assessment, and the rules of the schools where they conducted their practicum. Students thought that there were differences between their teaching practice with lecturers at university and real teaching practice at high schools. For lesson delivery, the difference may be because of a change in their audience from their classmates and lecturers to high school students that caused the different responses during their teaching. The difficulty one student teacher got with class management was due to the non-cooperation of students in class, while another student encountered disagreements between the students themselves. One student had to cope with a disagreement on assessment form. The fifth student had challenge with strict rules of school. A chart presenting these problems is illustrated in figure 6.



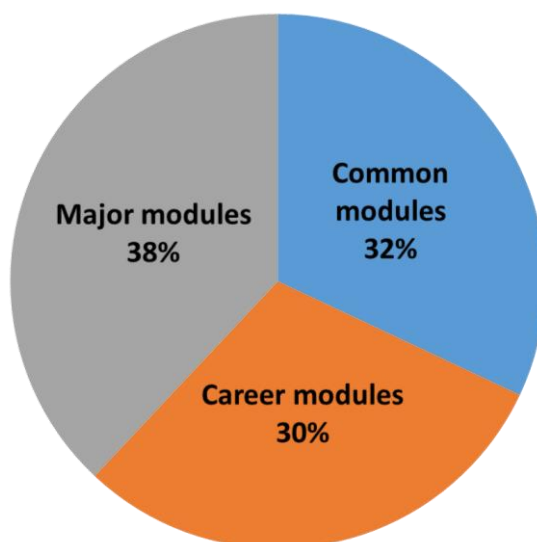
*Figure 5. Proportion of problems students faced during their placement*

Further analysis was made using data collected from group discussions about the other problems student teachers faced. Participants have applied simple reflection model for this phase. Only three out of six students (50%) felt confident on their own problem-solving ability while others confirmed they needed more practice and help on this area. After taking part in group discussion and listening to other members' ideas, two students wanted to change/modify the solutions they had used and agreed that they would apply/try new ways to tackle similar problems in the future. All students agreed about the necessity to have more input about problem-solving, assessment, and class management. They even suggested that students should have a "hot line" for student to get well-timed support from university and lecturers.



### 3.2. *Student Teacher Education Curriculum at HCMUE*

Student Teacher Education Curriculum at HCMUE was then analysed to see whether students were provided with enough modules for career preparation. Result could be seen in figure 7.



*Figure 6. Student Teacher Education Curriculum at HCMUE*

The study found that the proportion of career modules at university is nearly 30%, which is a remarkable number. However, students still felt they lacked problem-solving skills on their practicum time. Moreover, data collected from Placement Workshop of the university revealed that the quality of students is still satisfactory for many employers. It is suggested therefore that HCMUE need to investigate content, teaching and assessment methods of career modules, especially which directly related to placement.

### 3.3. *Effectiveness of Review Session, Placement Review Workshop and Preparation Workshop*

#### **University Placement Review Workshop**

In this workshop, a review of placement model and results of faculties and university in general was carried out. Some common issues were briefly mentioned. For example, some employers (high school's governors) said that most students met standards of teaching practice. However, they were not really satisfied about some students with regard to their as communication skills and ability to adapt new environment.

#### **Faculty of History Placement Review Session**

Review session after placement was another source for us to gather data. In the Faculty of History, they reviewed the placement results of history student teachers in general. Then students talked about common problems they may face on placement, but not in detail.

The ways utilised in this faculty to investigation and analysis data may not be efficient enough to have deep understanding of problems student teachers faced on their placement.

### **Placement Preparation Workshop**

In order to enhance quality of student teacher placement, the Faculty of Chemistry conducted a placement preparation workshop. They invited experienced teachers from the high schools where the student teachers spent the practicum period, to talk about a variety of topics, including teaching activities in classroom and class management as well as some remarkable topics and notes on teaching high school chemistry.

The students found these workshops useful, however, they wanted to have longer time training with more real situations to be well-prepared for placement.

Respond of students and quality of student teacher placement are basis to require the review and preparation workshops to be organized in appropriate ways so that students can understand what and how they are taking their placement better.

### **3.4. Reliability of criteria of teaching practice and pedagogical practice**

Criteria around teaching practices and pedagogical practices for student teacher placement were investigated and compared with the assessment results and comments of students. Student teachers' placement results were evaluated in two main parts: pedagogical practice and teaching practice.

#### **3.4.1. Assessment of pedagogical practice**

Student teachers performance was assessed via the following criteria for 8 weeks.

1. Frequency of taking part in activities of school and placement team;
2. Making weekly plan for class sufficiently, appropriately, and in details;
3. Organizing weekly review for class efficiently and scientifically;
4. Organizing education activities for students efficiently;
5. Ability to gather different organizations for education purposes;
6. Identifying problems in education for general students and particular students who having problems and suggesting suitable solutions;
7. Suitable behaviors with teachers and staff at school;
8. Appropriate performance in front of students;
9. Attaining respect from colleagues and students;
10. Class achieved improvement during student teachers' placement.

**Total: 10 mark**

### 3.4.2. Assessment of teaching practice

#### **Teaching preparation: A (10 mark)**

1. Frequency of taking part in major activities of school and placement team;
2. Making teaching plan for the whole practicum sufficiently, appropriately, and in details;
3. Positive and effective observation of mentor and other student teachers;
4. Preparing qualified lesson plans logically and creatively;
5. Practicing teaching and learning from experience seriously and efficiently;
6. Designing suitable programmes for students' self-study, helping students at different levels to have considerable improvement.

#### **Teaching practice (10 lessons, 10 mark for each lesson)**

#### **Overall results = (A+B)/11**

### 3.4.3. Overall Assessment for the placement: C

#### **C = [(Result of pedagogical practice) + (Result of teaching practice) x3] :4**

Some of the criteria used to assess student performance were considered to be blurred for evaluation.

For example, take 'assessment of pedagogical practice' the criterion number 5 is "Ability to gather different organizations for education purposes". However, in the responses this skill seemed to be beyond the requirements for a teacher student in practicum or perhaps the statements was is not clear enough. We suggest that it should be modified as "Ability to gather students for class and school events".

Another example was criterion number 6. "Identifying problems in education for general students and particular students who having problems and suggesting suitable solutions". It is recommended to be changed to "Identifying particular students in class who having problems and suggesting suitable solutions".

WE also felt that Criteria number 7, 8, and 9 should be combined into one: "Suitable behaviors and performance with teachers, staff, and students at school".

Criterion number 10 should be an additional because. If student teacher could have an achievement "Class achieved improvement during student teachers' placement" they may earn extra mark or receive a reward.

We propose in the light of the above that all the criteria be reviewed and modified in order to measure student teacher ability more accurately.

### 3.5. *Usefulness of photos taken*

Participants provided a variety of photos which mostly reflected to five themes (\*) mentioned in section 2.2.1. The student teachers confirmed that the Photos taken during placement were not only help them to capture important/significant moments but were also helped them to reflect on why the photos were taken. Student teachers agreed with our idea that the photos can be usefully deployed as materials for student reviews, after placement. We also introduced an app created by the Birmingham City University team which can immediately upload photos/videos and be used to develop/comment on themes, depending on users' set up with comments/notes for each photo. All students came to an agreement that if students could upload photos showing their incidents on placement, it would allow lecturers and peers to discuss and offer advice.

## 4. **Conclusions and implications**

This study indicates the potential of encouraging reflection for student teachers so that they can look back and learn from their experiences on placement to gain their own personal development in their teaching career.

The results of the study led to a recommendation that student teachers need to be trained more efficiently by experienced educators and to improve their performance, communication skills and class management. We argued in the light of the study that Student teacher's should study school rules in order that they may understand the placement setting more fully and give them selves plenty of chances to practice problem solving for situations related to their specific school and students during their placement.

We also felt that the career modules across the university should be examined and revised when necessary to provide better knowledge and skills for student teachers before they go on their placement. University should also organize more orientation courses for students before their placement in details: preparing for placements, workplace learning, feedback, assessment and goal setting in placements.

The criteria used for assessment should be reviewed and amended to achieve more accurate and reliable evaluation for student teacher practicum. In addition, the form and quality of review and preparation workshops need improving.

In order to offer student teachers timely support, the university should contact students and mentors more frequently during placement to grasp their difficulties.

Finally, the potential of the app developed by Birmingham City should be exploited by University team as a tool to help encourage students to share their problems with mentors during placement and create a space for reflection after replacement.

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