

A Narrative of a Student Teacher's Internship Experience and Its Implications for Optimizing Practice Teaching Systems: A Case from Guangdong, China

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Abstract: This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach to conduct an in-depth analysis of an 11-week internship journal maintained by a student teacher specializing in primary education. It traces her complete developmental trajectory from "romantic immersion" to "belief internalization." The findings reveal that the core growth of student teachers centers on latent dimensions such as emotional resilience, ethical judgment, and the formation of educational beliefs, with their professional learning being highly dependent on "critical incidents." However, the existing support system demonstrates a bias towards "prioritizing procedural compliance over experiential depth." In response, the study proposes a threefold pathway for optimization: in terms of objectives, a shift from a skills-based orientation to fostering "holistic development"; in the process, constructing a scaffolding dialogue community anchored in critical incident analysis; and regarding the improvement mechanism, establishing an evidence-based decision-making loop grounded in narrative evidence. This research provides granular, field-derived evidence and practical insights for reforming practice teaching systems within the context of teacher education accreditation.

Keywords: Student Teacher; Professional Accreditation; Practice Teaching System; Narrative Inquiry; Teaching Practicum; Chinese Case.

1. Introduction

Driven by the core principles of "student-centered, outcome-oriented, and continuous improvement" underpinning teacher education accreditation, the restructuring of practice teaching systems in higher education has become a focal point of teacher education reform. However, current research and practice predominantly concentrate on macro- and meso-level aspects such as top-level design, model construction, and management mechanisms. This focus inadvertently distances the discourse from the very core of practice teaching: the lived, individual experience of student teachers as "teachers-in-the-making." The micro-level processes that constitute the essence of professional growth—inner emotional fluctuations, cognitive conflicts, the tacit generation of practical knowledge, and critical decision-making in complex situations—are often simplified or obscured within grand narratives.[1] This "system-centric" perspective risks resulting in support and evaluation mechanisms that fail to address the authentic needs and dilemmas faced by student teachers.

Therefore, this study advocates for a "return-to-the-field" perspective, placing student teachers themselves at the center of narrative and inquiry. We adopt a narrative inquiry approach to conduct an in-depth interpretation and analysis of a complete 11-week internship journal kept by a student teacher specializing in primary education. This continuous, nuanced, first-person text faithfully documents his complete inner journey from "romantic immersion" and "reality shock" to "strategic adaptation" and the "internalization" of beliefs. By providing a thick description of this story of growth amidst "witnessed warmth" and confronted "shock," this study aims to achieve three objectives: first, to unveil the internal trajectories and critical turning points in the development of student teachers' professional identity and practical

competence; second, to critically reflect on the latent dimensions—pertaining to emotional resilience, ethical judgment, and educational beliefs—that may be overlooked by outcome-oriented competency checklists; third, and ultimately, to translate the insights gained from this vivid case into concrete, micro-level implications for optimizing the existing practice teaching system, particularly concerning the alignment of objectives, the nature of process support, and the mechanisms of evaluation and feedback. Thus, it seeks to provide an empirically grounded, life-infused footnote to system reform within the accreditation context.

2. Research Design

This study adopts a narrative inquiry paradigm, utilizing 11 consecutive weekly internship journals (approximately 16,000 words) authored by a student teacher pseudonymously referred to as "Liu Yu"(male) as its core textual data. The aim is to gain a deep understanding of the complex process through which a student teacher constructs a professional self within an authentic educational setting. The participant completed his practicum at a primary school located in a suburban-rural transitional zone, serving as a student teacher for fifth-grade mathematics and homeroom duties.

The research process followed the theoretical path of narrative analysis, which comprised: 1) Immersive reading to holistically grasp the emotional tone and narrative structure of the text; 2) Interpretive coding, focusing on three categories of meaning units: "critical incidents," "emotional vocabulary," and "professional reflections"; 3) Narrative reconstruction, whereby events and reflections were re-woven into a coherent story with "growth" as its central theme, following the internal logic of professional cognitive development.

The analysis consistently adhered to the principle of being "grounded in the text," with all core arguments substantiated

by direct quotations from the original journals. The study has undergone ethical review, with all personal and geographical information anonymized, and informed consent was obtained from the participant. Through this in-depth case narrative, the study seeks to reveal the authentic texture of student teachers' emotional and cognitive development in practice—an aspect often overlooked by institutionalized assessment.

3. Shaping Amidst Chaos and Glimmers: A Complete Narrative of a Student Teacher's Growth

For student teachers, the teaching practicum is far more than a simple instructional exercise; it is a "rite of passage" that fundamentally reshapes the self. Liu Yu's eleven journals resemble a continuous documentary of the mind, documenting how he was thrust into the authentic arena of education, where he experienced disorientation, struggle, and a search for direction, ultimately allowing her professional self to gradually emerge from the chaos. This story is not a linear triumph but a journey of repeated traversing between the starkness of reality and the warm glimmers of hope.

3.1. Embarkation: The "Intruder" with Candy and Rose-Colored Glasses

The beginning of the story is imbued with an almost lyrical warmth. The October morning breeze is "cool," yet the school gate of Banlang Elementary appears "exceptionally warm" in Liu Yu's eyes. This is not merely a description of the weather but a projection of her inner state—a young person filled with romantic ideals about the future, stepping into the sanctuary of education with "excitement" and "anticipatory palpitations." The beverages and snacks offered by her mentor teacher, Qin Huxi (Mrs. Qin), make the "unfamiliar environment instantly feel like home." This sense of acceptance, beginning with taste and touch, establishes her initial foundation of emotional security.

What followed was an even more potent, positive jolt from the very heart of education. The children's unreserved greeting of "Hello, handsome teacher!" instantly placed him in a role of being liked and noticed. The three Canadian lollipops he brought triggered a "near desk-overturning frenzy" of raised hands in the classroom. At that moment, the magic of education seemed so simple and direct: a small material token could be exchanged for boundless learning enthusiasm. Immersed in the moving gift of "being trusted and expected," he could savor a "marvelous sense of satisfaction" from the immature handwriting while grading assignments. He observed classrooms, analyzing the distinct dispositions of Class Five and Class Six; he attended training, theoretically understanding that a teacher's happiness lies in "witnessing growth." At this stage, he resembled a curious "educational tourist," or a "young prince" attempting to win over everything with affection and sugar. The education he depicted was bathed in "sunlight," its core verb being "to illuminate"—though her understanding of "illumination" at this point remained nearly a one-directional, pleasurable radiance.[2]

3.2. Disillusionment: When the Fairy tale Castle Reveals Its Cracks and Undercurrents

Beneath the polished surface, however, the grim complexity of reality began to reveal itself. The first crack

appeared, concerning a loss of control. He found himself unable to stop students from leaving their seats and roughhousing during the midday reading session. Upon reporting this, he heard a different side of the story from Mrs. Qin: divorce, left-behind children, lack of supervision... "Behind their noise," came the insight, "lies a desire to be seen." This realization marked the first profound shift in her professional perspective—from judging behavior to probing its roots. The icy touch of reality began to erode the rose-tinted filter.

What followed was a relentless series of "shocking" lessons. A student, chastised for playing chess during class, retorted with insolence towards the teacher; the sharp crack of a ruler snapping was "exceptionally jarring." The joyful sweat from an autumn field trip had scarcely dried when the sight of glaring "D" grades across a unit test (13 students in Class Five, 15 in Class Six) delivered a heavy blow. Before her, Jiang Yecheng and Hu Jinhao tussled into a tangled heap, while nearby, Lin Zijun knocked over a desk, provoking a violent response from Li Yixuan—classroom order "collapsed" in an instant, and he felt "powerless." Most heart-wrenching was the night Zhou Yuhan, after a conflict with her mother over a haircut, ran away from home in a fit of pique. He began to understand that the classroom was not a sterile laboratory, but a micro-theater staging all the pressures, traumas, and conflicts of society and family. Those seated behind the desks were whole individuals, each bearing the weight of their own burdensome lives.

Subsequently, the efficacy of "motivational" strategies began to wane. He observed students employing diverse methods of academic dishonesty and confronted the sobering decline of class averages to the lowest ranks within the grade level. The incident stemming from "Hu Fei's confession" and the subsequent physical altercation it incited at the school entrance, compounded by Li Yi's derogatory remark—"they don't even see teachers as people"—decisively ruptured the idealized conception of teacher-student relationships. He further learned, through student accounts, that some were already experimenting with betel nut consumption. These events transcended the realm of isolated "disciplinary problems"; they coalesced into a suffocating mire termed "pedagogical impotence." The "candy and rose-colored glasses" he had initially carried were irrevocably shattered. He came to the realization that her charges were not *tabulae rasae* awaiting "enlightenment," but rather complex individuals whose lives were already deeply etched—and at times marred—by experiences of hostility and trauma. The balloon of idealism had descended into the thorny undergrowth of reality.

3.3. Navigating the Depths: Groping for New Beacons in the Waters of Understanding

Upon the ruins of shattered ideals, authentic professional learning truly began. Rather than remaining mired in shock and helplessness, Liu Yu embarked on a difficult act of "navigation"—seeking a vessel upon which to traverse the chasm between the distant shore of theory and the immediate bank of reality.

His strategy shifted from "management" to "relationship." He moved beyond merely attempting to suppress chaos, experimenting instead with "gentle command." A simple statement like, "Those who are being noisy will not be invited to come up front," could bring about "momentary order." A more significant transformation was her turn towards the

individual, engaging in deep dialogue. He sought out Zhou Yuhan alone, the student deeply affected by the hair incident. Instead of reprimand, he posed a soft inquiry: "Do you like the person you are right now?" This question transcended rules, speaking directly to the heart. He began to understand that education, at times, is not about correcting a mistake, but about catching an emotion and affirming a sense of worth.

The presence of her mentor teacher, Mrs. Qin, served as the most vital beacon during this dim voyage. Her crucial insights, such as "a child's growth is not a straight line but a tug-of-war" and "education is not about taming, but about illuminating," ceased to be mere aphorisms. Instead, they became a philosophy of action repeatedly validated within specific situations. Transitioning from a passive chronicler, he began to actively apply this wisdom. When Mrs. Qin was absent due to illness, he independently managed the class, using wafer biscuits as rewards and organizing instruction through a "Group Point System" system, thereby experiencing the sense of mastery that comes with a "lively and fulfilling classroom atmosphere." He began systematically providing tutoring and conducting dictation exercises for students, immersing herself in the substantial work of "pedagogical cultivation."

Meanwhile, unsolicited kindness from students became unexpected glimmers of light illuminating this arduous journey. The pork floss pastry quietly passed by Liao Zhirou, the Usacchi mug gifted by Deng Ziqi after an offhand remark of his liking, the strikingly "accurate" portraits sketched by students, and Hu Yaxi's blessing, "Wish you happiness and good health" — these moments interweave with scenes of conflict, violence, and deceit, together composing the true landscape of education: it is both a heavy burden and a precious gift. Liu Yu aptly described this experience as "mutual nourishment." He was no longer merely a unilateral "giver" or "manager," but had become an "interactive participant within relationships," drawing strength and warmth from students' sincerity while offering guidance. This shift in perception marks a return of his professional identity from an external authoritative role toward an inherently relational essence.

3.4. Internalization: Mapping the Constellation of Education within the Storm's Eye

After prolonged immersion, confrontation, and adaptation, a more profound and steadfast educational belief began to crystallize within Liu Yu. This process of internalization did not entail finding all the answers, but rather forming a framework for coexisting with problems and taking action amidst uncertainty.

He began to develop his own "hermeneutics of educational events." Confronted with the intricate turmoil of Zhong Zhiting and Zhou Yuhan's "phone purchase" and "cutting ties," what he felt was no longer merely absurdity, but an "inexpressible complexity" — he came to understand that "a child's world is like a dense, unyielding fog." In the face of Li Yixuan repeatedly sending classmates to the hospital through violent acts, he somberly accepted a certain "limitation of education" — "Having counseled him for three years still felt like shouting into the wind." This sober recognition of the "limits of change" is not passive resignation, but rather a sign of professional maturity stripped of omnipotent illusions. It transforms the teacher's responsibility from the heavy shackles of "transforming every student" back to the practical action of "exerting professional effort in every present

moment."

In the end, as the practicum drew to a close, his reflection transcended specific skills and touched the essence of education. He wrote: "The charm of teaching likely lies in this mutual nourishment. The teacher educates, and is also being educated." By this point, "education" had transformed for him from a technical activity to be "implemented" into a life-interactive process in which he himself was immersed and through which he grew. The term "illuminate" that he used at the outset, now tempered by the baptism of darkness, had gained profound richness—it was no longer a facile act of shining light, but a courageous commitment, made in full awareness of its shadows and weight, to still believe in, kindle, and guard that flicker of light.

"Education is not about manufacturing standard answers, but about illuminating one flickering soul after another." This closing statement serves as the spiritual constellation he has drawn to map his own tumultuous journey. Here, the "handsome teacher" who first stepped into the campus with candy and ideals has now receded. Standing before us is a reflective practitioner who has glimpsed the difficulty, the weight, and the beauty of education, and who is resolved to uphold the duty of "illumination" within this complex system. Forged in the crucible of chaos and glimmers of light, his professional self has undergone its first crucial shaping.

4. Discussion and Implications: Threefold Insights from Individual Narrative to System Optimization

Liu Yu's growth narrative offers three profound insights drawn from lived experience for optimizing practical teaching systems under the framework of professional certification.

4.1. Deepening the Connotation of "Outcomes": From Skill Checklists to the Symbiotic Cultivation of Affective Beliefs

Current "outcome-based" approaches in teacher education often materialize as observable, competency-based checklists. However, Liu Yu's narrative reveals that the most arduous and pivotal growth occurs in the latent dimensions of "emotional fortitude" and "educational conviction." When confronted with pedagogical "shocks"—such as student aggression, familial trauma, or complex ethical dilemmas—her need transcended classroom management techniques, demanding instead a capacity for situated ethical judgment and the emotional labor necessary to sustain professional relationships under duress.[3] The core of her identity transformation, from seeking the gratification of "being needed" to embracing the reciprocity of "mutual nourishment," signifies the crystallization of a personal, action-oriented educational philosophy. This case underscores that system optimization must move beyond a technocratic focus. It necessitates the explicit integration of "affective-ethical development" and "critical belief reflection" as fundamental program objectives, paralleling traditional skill acquisition. To prepare student teachers for this reality, pre-practicum curricula should be augmented with structured, high-challenge case simulations that allow for the rehearsal of emotional and ethical reasoning within a supported environment.

4.2. Reconstructing the Support Paradigm: From Process Supervision to Scaffolded Dialogue Around Critical Incidents

Current practical teaching support often emphasizes “procedural compliance” (e.g., number of observed lessons, submission of lesson plans) but falls short in providing deep intervention for the “critical incidents” encountered by interns. [4] Each cognitive leap in Liu Yu’s development was closely tied to specific conflict events and the subsequent reflection and mentorship he received. The direction for optimization lies in shifting the focus of support from supervision to “scaffolded dialogue centered on critical incidents.” Reflective narratives (e.g., weekly journals, incident reports) should be formally adopted as core mediums to drive targeted guidance from mentors. Furthermore, when significant incidents occur, collaborative debriefing involving both university and school-based mentors should be initiated to transform crises into opportunities for deep learning.

4.3. Activating the Cycle of Improvement: From Summative Evaluation to Evidence- Based Use of Narrative Data

“Continuous improvement” relies on effective feedback, yet traditional summative internship assessments tend to be delayed and overly generalized for enhancing both individual learning and program design.[5] Liu Yu’s coherent weekly reflections themselves constitute rich formative evidence, dynamically capturing shifts in his competencies, emotions, and cognition. The system should establish an improvement loop grounded in such narrative evidence: evaluation should incorporate an examination of reflective depth and situated judgment; anonymized trainee narratives should be regularly analyzed thematically to extract common challenges and exemplary experiences, which can then directly inform adjustments to curriculum and instructional content; furthermore, de-identified critical incidents should be developed into a case repository, transforming individual experiences into a shared knowledge base that supports the professional growth of all student teachers and in-service educators.

5. Conclusion

The study reveals three core findings: First, the most severe challenges and the most critical growth for student teachers during their practicum often occur outside the domains of traditional “competency checklists”—particularly in the development of emotional resilience, ethical judgment, and personal educational beliefs. This calls for a shift in the “outcome orientation” of practical teaching systems, moving beyond a narrow skill-based focus toward fostering the holistic development of student teachers.

Second, the professional learning of student teachers is deeply intertwined with the “critical incidents” they encounter. However, the current system emphasizes procedural supervision and lacks timely, in-depth professional response mechanisms for such incidents. Therefore, the support paradigm must urgently transition from “administrative

management” to building a “professional learning community” characterized by narrative reflection as the medium and collaborative response as the practice.

Third, the “continuous improvement” of the practical teaching system should be driven not only by summative evaluation data but, more importantly, by the rich formative narrative evidence generated by interns throughout the process. Systematic analysis of this evidence can provide the most precise, evidence-informed basis for curriculum reform and program enhancement.

This study advocates for a paradigm shift in the construction of future practical teaching systems, emphasizing three key dimensions: in terms of objectives, embracing the complexity of emotions and the centrality of beliefs; in the process, embedding scaffolded professional dialogue around critical incidents; and in improvement, establishing an evidence-based decision-making cycle grounded in narrative evidence. Only through such an integrated approach can we build a professional growth ecosystem that not only meets certification standards but also genuinely nourishes the development of future teachers, supporting their journey from initial “shock” to enduring “wisdom.” Ultimately, this will cultivate a generation of outstanding educators for China’s basic education—teachers who are emotionally resilient, firmly grounded in their convictions, and capable of navigating the complexities of reality with steady purpose.

This study is an in-depth narrative case inquiry. While its findings offer profound insights, their generalizability is limited. Future research could expand the sample to conduct cross-case comparative analyses of practicum narratives from student teachers across different educational stages and backgrounds. Alternatively, longitudinal designs could be employed to explore the long-term impact of the growth trajectories revealed in these narratives on their post-qualification professional development.

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