

### **'An Eye-opening Experience': Providing Opportunities for Pre-service Teachers to Apply their Knowledge and Skills in Diverse Educational Settings**

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#### **Abstract**

Without any doubt, the classroom placement model of focusing on skill development, mastering lesson plans, and classroom management is, and will continue to be, an important component of pre-service teachers' preconceptions of teaching; however, there is a need for a consideration of other attributes of the teaching and learning process such as enthusiasm, caring, open-mindedness, cultural sensitivity and/or critical thinking. This paper is based on a qualitative study developed by the researchers to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions of their practicum experiences in a range of educational spaces that included international school placements and non-school placements such as museums and hospitals. The findings demonstrate how teaching in unfamiliar environments can challenge and broaden pre-service teachers' understanding of the core attributes of a teacher, raise their awareness of the links between theory and practice, and increase their understanding of the teaching and learning process.

**Key Words:** Teacher education; Teaching practicum; Pre-service teacher; Practicum placement; Practicum setting; Pedagogical approach

#### **Introduction**

The act of becoming a teacher is a lot more complex than obtaining certification and standing in front of students (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). The skills, knowledge, strategies, attitudes, beliefs and understandings that comprise being a teacher are numerous, interconnected and nuanced. Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) suggests that powerful teacher education programs aim to provide explicit strategies to help pre-service teachers "confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning and students..." (p. 41). Two of the primary strands of research approaches to studying the purpose, intent and outcomes of the practicum experience within teacher education programs are the skills centered and the teacher as researcher approach. Without any doubt, the skill-centered practicum strand of focusing on skill development, mastering lesson plans, and classroom management is, and will continue to be, an important component of pre-service teachers' preconceptions of teaching. This focus on skill management however, does appear to assume that all education students plan to become classroom teachers and will continue to teach in traditionally-defined ways. The teacher as researcher strand expands on the skills centered approach and identifies important attributes such as mindful thinking, professionalism, and inquisitiveness (Abrahams, 2009). This approach recognizes a need for consideration of other attributes of the teaching and learning process such as enthusiasm, caring, open-mindedness, cultural sensitivity and critical thinking. Jugović, Marušić, Ivanec and Vidović

(2012) found that other personality traits such as extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness were key predictors of pre-service first year teachers' satisfaction with their choice of teaching as a career.

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### **Practicum Experiences within Teacher Education**

Smith and Lev-Ar (2005) report that practicum experiences influence students' views on education and have a positive impact on their attitude towards their future. Teacher educators value the practicum component as the educational context within which pre-service teachers can put into practice their developing pedagogies. They tend to view the placements as a time for pre-service teachers to implement the pedagogical content knowledge that they learned in course work (Atputhasamy, 2005; Onslow, Beynon, & Geddis, 1992), reflect on their experiences (Borko & Mayfield, 1995), and take some risks (Chandler et al., 1994). Although student teaching is highly valued by education students, there are challenges. There is a concern that while in their practicum placement, student teachers tend to follow very traditional approaches to teaching (Moody, 2009) rather than implementing new and innovative pedagogical approaches. Another challenge in the practicum experience is the disconnect between university-based coursework and the field experiences which is an issue that has been long standing in teacher education programs (Zeichner, 2010). The practicum however, is a critically important part of any teacher education program and is consistently valued highly by pre-service teachers (Brown and Danaher, 2008; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Turnbull, 2005). Pre-service teachers stress that the practicum "serves as a culminating event that attempts to bridge academic coursework and the realities of classroom teaching" (Koc, 2012).

Schulz (2005), Goodlad (1990), and Zeichner (1996, 1999), however, question some of the traditional approaches in teacher preparation programs and advocate a need for alternative practicum models. Schulz (2005) argues the need for a change towards "a practicum experience that provides teacher candidates with opportunities for inquiry, for trying and testing new ideas within collaborative relationships, and for talking about teaching and learning in new ways" (p. 148). Alternative practicum placements, whether school related or community placements, can offer pre-service teachers opportunities to gain a richer understanding of the community resources, families, and the children and youth in the programs. Diverse settings also can support the pre-service teacher in recognizing the important role of context in teaching and learning situations (McDonald, Bowman, & Brayko, 2013). As Zeichner (1996) stresses, the practicum should be a time for growth and learning, where preservice teachers come to understand the broader implications of being a teacher.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In Canada, the practicum experience is a main source of the variation among teacher education programs as they differ in the number and duration of placements; timing of the placements; how and by whom they are supervised; and how they are evaluated (Pitt et al., 2011). The practicum is seen as the traditional context within which pre-service teachers can put into practice their developing pedagogies, and it is therefore considered to be one of the most important components of education programs by both pre-service teachers and teacher educators (Gallego, 2001; Tang, 2003). A number of

authors promote a need for including diverse practicum placement sites as a way to expand student concepts of educational spaces and opportunities (Anderson, Lawson, and Mayer-Smith, 2006; Furlong, 2000; Metz, 2005).

According to Metz (2005), students who supplement their local practicum with educational experiences in alternative settings are likely to broaden their understanding of formal education and enhance their educational skills and philosophies. Diverse placements are valued for “equipping educators with a wide range of skills that can be readily transferable across contexts, inside and outside of school settings” and for providing pre-service teachers “exposure to and opportunities to practice in a wide array of learning environments” (Anderson, Lawson, and Mayer-Smith, 2006, p. 342). In a similar vein, Brown and Danaher (2008) emphasize the importance of helping pre-service teachers to expand their views of teaching and learning beyond the boundaries of classroom-based environment and to develop a more holistic view of education.

The research on experiences in diverse practicum settings is limited (Chin, 2004; Chin & Tuan, 2000; Metz, 2005; Middlebrooks, 1999; Tal, 2001), and the existing literature advocates for additional research. This paper is based on a qualitative study developed by the researchers to examine the pre-service teachers' experiences and the value they attribute to their alternative practicum placements. For purposes of this study alternative practicum placements refers to international school placements and non-school placements such as museums, hospitals and non-profit organizations. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- In what ways does an alternative placement differ from the traditional local school placement on pre-services teachers' understanding of their role as an educator?
- What do pre-service teachers identify as the strengths and challenges of teaching in an alternative educational milieu?

This research is of educational importance as it expands on the knowledge and understanding of the impact and outcomes as well as the strengths and the weaknesses of practicum models that are different from the classroom-only practicum traditionally offered during teacher education programs. The study adds to the body of research that informs the role of diverse practicum placements in teacher education practices across Canada

## **The Design of the Study**

The research takes place within a tradition of social research which states that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1972), and that the processes and dynamics in that construction and reconstruction of meaning are open to inquiry. This study employed a qualitative research design to explore pre-service teachers' perceptions of their experiences in diverse practicum settings. Qualitative research paradigms emphasize the social construction of knowledge and allow the voices of the participants to be the central point of the research (Creswell, 2007). Two qualitative methods of data gathering and analysis were used: a) an individual, written questionnaire of open-ended questions and b) a focus group interview. Using multiple research methods can enrich the data and to enhance validity (Reinharz, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants in the study were pre-service teachers enrolled in a BEd program in Atlantic Canada. It is a two year, consecutive program that requires that applicants have completed the requirements for an undergraduate degree and meet all the pre-requisites for admission that relate mostly to teacher certification. There are two major practicum blocks in the program. In their first year students complete

two weeks in December and five weeks in April/May. In the second year they are in practicum from December to April. The students spend their last semester in a school placement. Within this placement there is an option to apply for a four-week alternative placement, if they have been successful in their school placement. Students in other placements, such as international locations or with students from distinct cultures, may have longer placements but still must be successful in the initial weeks of their second year school placement to be eligible for an alternative placement option. Options typically include non-profit, government institutions such as health care institutions, museums, community colleges, environmental and humanitarian organizations.

A written questionnaire was developed by the researchers based on the literature review. An e-mail was sent to the second year pre-service teachers who had completed their alternative practicum. Twenty responses to the questionnaires were received, analyzed following an inductive process and coded to identify key elements through emergence of “patterns and processes, commonalities and differences” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 34). Emerging patterns were developed into themes. Respondents to the questionnaire were invited to become participants in a focus group that was conducted via teleconferencing. The information gathered from the questionnaires was used to guide discussion at the focus group. The focus group discussion involved six participants. The group discussion was audio recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts was conducted following the same processes as the written questionnaire. The emergent themes will be presented in the following section along with verbatim quotes of participants to illustrate their perceptions and experiences.

## Findings and Discussion

Alternative practicum offered pre-service teachers many benefits. As noted by Anderson, Lawson and Mayer-Smith (2007) teaching in unfamiliar or non-traditional environments can help educators develop a more holistic view of education, raise their awareness of the links between theory and practice, and increase understanding and tolerance by engaging in different communities. As one participant explained:

*When these alternative placements came out, there was a mad rush for signing up. There were multiple people applying for any given alternative placement. I think that speaks to how much interest there is out there among the student population in the education program, to try something new.*

Some of participants in the study however, were hesitant to apply for an alternative practicum but later embraced the opportunity to expand their thinking about education to other contexts, and to experience teaching and branching out into non-school settings. In the words of the participants:

*The alternate practicum opportunity is something I was a bit skeptical about but having nearly completed it, I can honestly say I am so glad I decided to follow through with it.*

*What surprised me in my alternate practicum was how much I loved it, how that became my career path. I loved my junior high and high school experiences. They were amazing, and I didn't think anything could top those. And then I went to my alternate practicum, and I came home feeling refreshed and energetic, and so happy. The first day that I was there, I came home saying, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. So the biggest surprise was liking something more than I already loved [classroom teaching].*

Alternate practicum settings provided multiple opportunities to broaden pre-service teachers' understanding of formal education and enhance their educational skills and philosophies. Participants noted:

*I hadn't really realized how much education is a part of different organizations, and even how specific organizations like museums and other areas within the government have mandated parts to bring education in, and have representatives dealing with education. And so that was definitely a learning experience for me.*

*So for me, in terms of learning, it was realizing what the degree itself could hold, and what else is actually out there, and how we could put that degree to use. So that was an extreme positive for me.*

*...I think that it really gave me a skill set that is invaluable as a teacher.*

*I got to see more than just a classroom but to work with children on a more personal level by working with NGOs, special needs units and assisting with teaching classes.*

Other benefits to the pre-service teachers include developing new values, knowledge and skills as a consequence of adapting to the new context. The participants also outlined their experiences of teaching multiple grade levels practice and adapting their pedagogical approaches to different developmental levels. For instance, some of the participants noted:

*Another thing I found really beneficial was being able to see a different group of students come in every single day. So getting to experience not just two classes, really, from your first or second year [placements], but being able to see different classes come in every day, and the different dynamics. And how two classes that are the same grades and have the same number of kids, definitely don't always act the same or are on the same level.*

*Getting to work one-on-one with students with disabilities allowed me to see a more personal side to teaching special needs and how I want to learn more about how to teach and what to do to help students with disabilities have a more equitable and accessible education and life.*

Pre-service teachers identified the requirement to develop new programs and connecting these to existing curriculum outcomes as a challenge, but once that they felt successful in doing this work, they identified growth in their confidence in making autonomous decisions about the pedagogical approaches and strategies they employed. One of the participants explained, *"In my alternate placement I have been given projects to work on independently... and I am hugely motivated to work hard in my alternate placement now that I have ownership over the product while knowing that my efforts are valued"*

Alice Pitt (Pitt et al., 2011) states that "the dilemma for the pre-service programs is to prepare future teachers for schools as they currently exist while also enlarging their vision about what schools and public education might, should, or will become" (p. 4). She urges teacher educators to create the opportunities that prepare pre-service teachers for "the complexity of their work in a complex world" (Pitt et al., 2011, p. 5). While the employment prospects for many pre-service teachers continue to be grim, the collected data were rich in positive responses from the participants who attested to the importance of the alternative practicum in expanding on the value of teaching degree beyond the classroom and opening up other career possibilities. As the participants outlined:

*As we went through our education degree, these stories and the news articles started coming out more and more about the lack of positions for the traditional teacher within the Province. So I felt that this opportunity to do an alternative placement, to see somewhere else outside of that provincial placement, would be that much more important as time went on, and as we graduated and thought about actually getting into the workforce.*

*Recently, I was able to get a permanent position at the museum where I did my alternative practicum.*

*I definitely think even the job market for some who are coming out of the education program, the alternate placements are not only an excellent way to kind of explore different options and opportunities, but it's also a great way to develop your skills.*

*I loved my alternative practicum and I am so happy I did it. I really ended up finding my niche. I loved the group of learners I was teaching and ended up landing a summer job one week after graduating. Alternative practicums allow pre-service teachers to explore the other definitions of "teacher". I found mine and I work every day to make this my career.*

*... to be offered a contract right after being done [the program] was really an uplifting and positive experience to know that education degree is valued.*

Janzen (2014) also found that alternative practicum placements encourage graduating teachers to explore versatile and varied career opportunities in non-traditional settings.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) have challenged schools of education to broaden their view of practice teaching and design programs that "help prospective teachers to understand deeply a wide array of things about learning, social and cultural contexts, and teaching and be able to enact these understandings in complex classrooms serving increasingly diverse students" (p. 302). This study was designed to examine pre-service teachers' perceptions of their experiences in diverse practicum settings. The research focused on the value pre-service teachers attribute to their alternative practicum placements that included international school placements, and non-school placements. The findings demonstrate how teaching in unfamiliar environments can challenge and broaden pre-service teachers' understanding of the core attributes of a teacher, raise their awareness of the links between theory and practice, and increase their understanding of the teaching and learning process.

With a growing need to be responsive to an increasingly diverse Canadian student population and with the globalization of the education job market (Association of Canadian Deans of Education [ACDE], 2005), alternative practicum placements have proven to be an effective way through which education programs can encourage pre-service teachers to push the boundaries of their knowledge, skills and perspectives as well as to adapt to the new educational context. As one participant indicated:

*The alternative practicum has broadened my perspective on what teaching is and how some of the skills I have further developed through this program—open-mindedness, appreciation for all forms of diversity, self-confidence, the ability to work with others, etc.—will be useful in any field.*

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