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MAKING PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS BETTER: THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF THE PRACTICUM IN THE UNDERGRADUATE TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAMME

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Abstract

Pre-service Bachelor of Education (Arts) teachers indicate a benefit of having a practicum in their teacher preparation programme. Yet, with a shortage of highly effective education teachers, there is limited research about the effectiveness of practicum experiences on pre-service education teacher's preparation. The study examined preservice education teacher's perception of acquiring a practicum experience in their undergraduate programme and determine if there was a gain in clinical expertise. Pre-service teachers were evaluated using the Clinical Evaluation Continuum (CEC) at the beginning and end of their practicum; reflections were gathered regarding their perception of the value added experience. Results showed gains in clinical expertise, knowledge, and approval for the practicum.

Key Words: *Clinical Evaluation Continuum; practicum.*

Introduction

Teachers learn to teach by teaching¹. Following this philosophy, teacher preparation programmes embed field experiences, practicum, and student teaching within their programmes. These experiences have been credited for being an important bridge between theory and practice². This allows teacher candidates the opportunity to develop and apply knowledge and to experiment with best-practice strategies³. The teacher candidates use the theoretical underpinnings learned in academic courses to become authentic experiences⁴; and, to develop a more genuine perception of pedagogy⁵. Research findings have indicated that field experiences gave perspective teachers the opportunity to reflect on their understanding of teaching as a profession and modify their self-perceptions about teaching careers⁶. These experiences have also been associated with helping teachers remain in the field, develop skills and competencies in classroom management, and progress in the teaching profession^{7:8}. This has led to the assertion that student teaching is often the first real opportunity for students to think as teachers and inquire actively rather than passively; which statement was in line with the observation that "...a person planning to teach should be experienced in the classroom prior to assuming independent responsibility for one..." (p. 263)⁹.

Teacher candidates also report the benefits of the practicum experience. The preservice and in-service teachers expressed the benefits of field experiences in aiding professional growth and the invaluable teacher training experience. In one such study teacher candidates reported that their practicum experience provided them with the hands-on experience needed to develop an understanding of students' needs within the classroom and other school related

matters. Those interviewed reported that practicum experience helped them develop an improved comprehension of pupils' social needs. Those who participated in the education practicum experience reported that an essential link between the conceptual framework of theoretical underpinnings and 'real world' classroom practice was created through authentic situations and hands on experiences¹⁰.

Also noteworthy was their ability to try out new and different teaching strategies and to reflect on their lesson delivery. Similar findings indicate the opportunity for application as the most valuable experience for participants, explicitly mentioning this specific phenomenon to their practicum programme¹¹. Another study that examined data dating back to 1998 regarding teachers' self-perception of their preparation for teaching consistently indicated that the education graduates from tailored traditional programmes that provided extensive preparation and practicum experience reported being significantly better prepared to teach subject matter, develop curriculum, and handle classroom management¹².

The practicum experiences of tailored programme educators have been studied extensively and improvements on practice need further study for the full benefit to be passed on to the educators. One such study¹³ examined a reading methods course with a practicum component to determine the impact of the field experience on student learning. The study found that when pre-service teachers had opportunities to apply instruction in a classroom environment, their quality of reading instruction improved. Conversely, without the benefit of real-world application, teacher candidates struggled to apply the concepts learned in coursework. Method courses in reading and mathematics that were combined with field experiences, integrated theoretical content

delivery methodology with hands-on application, creating instructional delivery that improved academic achievement of students were recommended. The finding from two separate studies demonstrated that coursework that included structured field experience provided pre-service teachers opportunities to improve reading-based content knowledge, which improved their ability to promote student reading achievement^{14;15}.

Similar conclusions were noted in a study that examined the documented reflections of pre-service elementary teachers' field experiences¹⁶. The study revealed that pre-service teachers had a better image of their duties as science teachers through having this early practicum, elucidating the positive influence of practicum on teacher self-efficacy. Despite the efforts of teacher preparation programmes to embed field experiences as a requirement for a teaching certificate, this practice has been criticized for not sufficiently preparing graduate pre-service teachers to cope with full time teaching. In one of such studies, the teacher candidates reported that the practicum "...did not adequately prepare them for the complexities and demands of fulltime teaching, despite their consistently held beliefs that [it] was a key part of their preparation for teaching..." (p. 233)¹⁷. It has also been observed that there was a disconnection between teacher preparation and professional practice, where pre-service and in-service training was offered in "...discrete and disconnected events..." (p. 1049)¹⁸.

Literature

Without a cohesive preparation programme to connect course content and practicum experiences, candidates fail to see the full picture of the teaching profession. However, qualitatively examined Bachelor of

Education (Arts) third year preservice teachers' perceptions of how their practicum experiences prepared them to start teaching offers an alternative perspective¹⁹. While most reported a mismatch at the beginning of their teaching practicum phase that resulted in a disruptive effect on their transition into teaching, this did not last throughout the entire phase. These pre-service teachers did not understand what teaching was like at the beginning of the year. Now, as new teachers, they were responsible for setting up everything in their rooms, establishing routines, developing behavior management strategies, and introducing curriculum. Additionally, these teachers stated that while in practicum, they mainly focused on lesson planning and reflecting on lessons taught, but as a teacher they realized how much more they had to do. Although faulty, teacher preparation programmes do have their merits in relation to teacher preparedness and retention^{20; 21; 22; 23}.

Large datasets have been used to arrive at a determination that greater academic achievement gains were made by students whose teachers completed pre-service preparation programmes; providing preliminary data demonstrating a link between student achievement and traditional teacher programmes²⁴. Analogous conclusions have also been made in exploration of personal attributes, preparation, and school environment²⁵. In one key review of school staff surveys and beginning teacher self-reports found that a combination of pedagogical foundations instruction and practicum experience helped the preparation and securing beginning teachers in their professional teaching assignments than their professional peers who had minimal to no field experience²⁶. In a similar study conducted with two groups of teachers, twenty who earned a traditional license and twenty who held an emergency

provisional license, it was found that the traditionally licensed teachers were rated statistically higher by an experienced supervisor across three ratings: planning and preparation, classroom environment, and instruction. However, according to their self-assessments, all of the teachers rated themselves similarly in teaching proficiency, which may possibly indicate a lack of self-awareness in weaker professional areas. Previous studies involving self-evaluations reveal that regardless of licensure track, traditional or non-traditional, teachers rate themselves equally in professional competency^{27;28; 29; 30}.

One other study examined the practices of beginning teachers who participated in three preparation routes, finding that teachers graduate from campus-based, alternative programmes, and a district-university collaborative program felt better prepared and more competent than district-only alternative program graduates. The authors concluded that novice educators, who completed traditional preparation programs, outperformed those who completed alternative programmes. In support of these findings, through qualitative interviews and observation, strong positive influencing factors for instruction quality flourished as teacher candidates had multiple opportunities to apply their theoretical knowledge of reading content and instructional delivery to students, showing that variations in preparation experiences and individual qualities of beginning teachers blend to inform teachers' practices³¹.

In addition to evaluations that determine levels of professional mastery, data has also been gathered regarding the attitudes and beliefs of teaching proficiency by the candidates. One study concluded through response analyses that pre-service teachers liked having a year-long internship programme because it made them feel

confident and prepared for their own classrooms. They also expressed the benefits of the hands-on experience under guidance³². It has also been found that field experiences, which were designed to implement strategies acquired during coursework, had the most promise for increasing pre-service teachers' sense of efficacy, perceptions of competence, and lesson planning abilities³³. For example, teacher candidates who implemented evidence-based strategies when creating lesson plans and delivering instruction during a four-hour practicum that lasted for fourteen weeks, "...made a noticeable impact in over 60% of sampled lessons..." with high levels of accuracy and fidelity (p. 24)³⁴.

Another study with similar findings used a workshop approach that included weekly three-hour training sessions, field experiences, and coaching sessions for instruction on how to conduct and implement functional behavior assessments and positive behavioral supports. Those who participated using the collaborative consultation model of behavior intervention showed the significant professional gains for themselves and the targeted student population, surpassing the results from the control group participants³⁵.

The current literature base on teacher candidate preparation is "...scattered in focus and uneven in quality, thus making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about how high-quality ... education teacher training should be conceptualized and implemented..."³⁶. Further studies have considered practicum experiences as the most meaningful component of a teacher preparation program; however, there is little empirical evidence to support its paramount significance in the education field. In their extensive literature review regarding teacher preparation programmes and professional skillset it was concluded that it would be difficult to deduct from the research what impact a specific field experience may have

Table 1. CEC Standards and examples of Essential Clinical Skills

Standard	Example of Essential Clinical Skill
Standard 1: Creating and maintaining a positive learning environment	Establishes, monitors, and enforces expectations and safe for student behavior.
Standard 2: Planning for instruction	Demonstrates knowledge of subject matter content and student development.
Standard 3: Engaging and supporting students in learning	Uses a variety of research-based educational practices that are responsive to students' diverse needs and experiences.
Standard 4: Assessing student learning	Creates and explains criteria for assessing student work.
Standard 5: Developing as a professional	Exhibits a commitment to professional standards associated with their areas of expertise.

Adapted from the Santa Cruz new teacher project continuum of the new teacher center, 2005¹⁹

on the pre-service teacher. To ensure that pre-service teachers have opportunities to apply their knowledge, access to high-quality field experiences is essential. Research aimed at developing effective strategies for improving the quality of field experiences is imperative.

In this age of educational accountability where no child left behind (NCLB) requires that all teachers should be highly qualified and with the new rigors of the common core state standards, it is critical that we understand the results of our efforts in preparing teacher candidates during their initial licensure programmes³⁷. This underlying observation draws attention to the essence of Clinical Evaluation Continuum (CEC) Standards and the Essential Clinical Skills during the practicum phase.

Therefore, this study explored the impact of embedding a practicum experience for Bachelor of Education (Arts) pre-service teachers in their undergraduate programme. More specifically, the aim was to determine if there was a gain in clinical expertise for pre-service education teachers enrolled in the practicum, and to examine their perception of this experience.

Methodology

This descriptive survey study collected data to determine the impact of adding a practicum for Bachelor of Education (Arts) preservice education teachers, and to examine their perception on adding a practicum experience in their master's program. Descriptive survey studies are used to describe a one-time interaction with groups of people at one point in time, and are often described as the best method for collecting research data prior to performing an experimental study. This study took place at a large university in the southeast region

of the United States, in a master's level methods course for candidates studying to be special educators. The study evaluated Bachelor of Education (Arts) education preservice teachers who were enrolled in education teacher methodology course that required fourteen-weeks of face-to-face instruction and practicum. The total participants in this study included: (N=10; 90% were female and 10% were male) who had received their practicum posting in neighbouring schools in Mumias Sub-County, Kakamega County. The schools were St. Peter's Boys Secondary School (4), St. Mary's Girls Secondary School (4) and Mumias Secondary School (2).

Instrumentation

For the purpose of this study, the Clinical Evaluation Continuum (CEC) (Adapted from the Santa Cruz new teacher project continuum of the new teacher center³⁸ which included five standards, each with a series of essential clinical skills for Bachelor of Education (Arts) preservice teachers) was used to assess the teacher candidates' gain in clinical expertise. The original Santa Cruz continuum contained six standards that focused on advancing the professional practice of beginning teachers. The CEC was adapted to focus beginning teacher practice and growth over time on the following five clinical expertise standards: (Standard 1) creating and maintaining a positive and safe learning environment (7 essential skills); (Standard 2) planning for instruction (7 essential skills); (Standard 3) engaging and supporting students in learning (7 essential skills); (Standard 4) assessing student learning (6 essential skills); and (Standard 5) developing as a professional (19 essential skills). Table 1 shows the five core standards and examples of essential clinical skills that guide activities for the practicum. The preservice teacher was assessed across each standard from unacceptable to target; each

level presuming that the teacher has reached the previous level. During the practicum portion of the course, candidates were not expected to achieve target levels; rather, demonstration of progress across the standards was expected.

The CEC scoring rubric evaluates preservice teachers on a scale of 0 (unacceptable) to six (target). Scores of 1 to 2 may be given for candidates at the beginning level, 3 to 4 for those at the acceptable level, and 5 to 6 for those at the target level. For each level, except unacceptable (where the rating is 0), there is a high end (2, 4, 6) and a low end (1, 3, 5). A rating of "no opportunity to observe" is permissible for skills that instructors and cooperating teachers are not able to observe during the evaluation period. Each of the five standards also contains a narrative section. To understand the Bachelor of Education (Arts) preservice teachers' perceptions of the practicum, they were asked to reflect on three open-ended questions: "...What were the impacts of embedding the practicum into this Bachelor of Education (Arts) programme?"; "...What would you like to see more or less of during this practicum experience?"; and "What are further recommendations for improving the practicum?"

Co-operating teachers and preservice teachers were all trained to use the CEC on the first day of the fourteen-week face-to-face section of the course. During the training, the instructor, who is the author, engaged in a group discussion, deliberating on potential problems that may occur during practicum placements. For example, cooperating teachers are encouraged to provide preservice teachers the opportunity to perform each standard and essential skill in the CEC rubric; however, the design of the instrument allows for a rating of "no opportunity to observe," indicating that

preservice teachers may be unable to perform standards and skills. The cooperating Teachers and preservice teachers were encouraged to bring potential issues that occur during the practicum placement to the Instructor for any clarification.

secondary setting. Co-operating teacher's role was to provide the Bachelor of Education (Arts) preservice teachers with immediate feedback, supervision, and mentoring support during the practicum.

Table 2. Practicum candidate's pretest and posttest rating (N=10)

CEC Standard	Pretest		Posttest	
	(M)	(SD)	(M)	(SD)
Standard 1: Creating and maintaining a positive and safe learning environment	2.20	(.92)	3.30	(.48)
Standard 2: Planning for instruction	1.70	(.48)	3.30	(.48)
Standard 3: Engaging and supporting students in learning	1.90	(.32)	3.20	(.42)
Standard 4: Assessing student learning	1.90	(.57)	2.70	(.67)
Standard 5: Developing as a professional	2.00	(.47)	3.20	(1.03)

Procedures

The methods course was carried out at the start of the 2018/2019 academic year and ended early May, 2019, with the first eight-weeks providing intensive face-to-face instruction on teaching strategies and the implementation of assignments. The course assignments addressed assessing and monitoring student performance; adapting instructional interventions based on students' response to intervention; and selecting evidence-based, best-teaching practices that have the greatest likelihood of success. Following the fourteen-week face-to-face instruction, candidates were well advanced to the practicum experience. During the fourteen-week practicum, preservice teachers received mentoring from the instructor and cooperating teacher. Candidates were paired with the cooperating teacher for the eight-week practicum, where they worked side-by-side, based on common interests including the elementary or

Major assignment

During the fourteen-week face-to-face instruction period, the preservice teachers developed a unit plan, guided by the Bachelor of Education (Arts) course instructor that consisted of ten evidence-based lesson plans and assessment material that support during classroom instruction. The lesson plans included assessment material to inform student achievement and reflection on instruction. Throughout the practicum, the preservice teachers implemented their unit plan under the supervision of the course instructor and cooperating teacher, who both provided formative and summative feedback.

Administration of the survey instrument and data analysis

During the fourteen-week face-to-face section of the course, Bachelor of Education (Arts) pre-service teachers completed a self-evaluation using the Clinical Evaluation

Continuum (CEC) survey, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The self-evaluated was then repeated after completing the fourteen-week practicum. The course instructor also rated each candidate using the CEC at the end of their experience based on two practicum observations. Additionally, after 40-hours of support, guidance and mentoring, the cooperating teacher provided a CEC rating. Statistical analyses were performed on the pre/posttest survey and then compared. Descriptive statistics (that is, mean, standard deviation) were reported in Table 2 seen above. The quantitative results were calculated and reported alongside the respondents' qualitative narrative. The comments on the three open-ended questions were examined using recognized qualitative analysis techniques whereby data were broken down for distinct trends and patterns and thematically reorganized. While the quantitative data produced some useful feedback about the impact of the practicum, the qualitative data also generated some useful information.

Results And Discussion

The overall findings from the study indicate that the Bachelor of Education (Arts) preservice teachers made gains to their CEC clinical skills during the practicum experience. Preservice teachers showed significant gains with each standard. The highest-rated scores were: "creating and maintaining a positive and safe learning environment" and "planning for instruction" in which the average score was 3.30 (.48). Table 2 displays the means of the pre-posttest of students' clinical skills related to each of the CEC standards. Table 3 depicts the means scores provided by both the instructor and cooperating teacher who rated preservice teachers on the CEC scale. Overall, the instructor and cooperating teachers' scores indicated that the preservice teachers made

gains. The instructor rated "planning for instruction" with an average score of 3.60 (.52), "developing as a professional" with an average score of 3.30 (1.06), as the highest skills; while "engaging and supporting students in learning" with an average score of 3.20, and the other standards were aligned with student ratings. For the cooperating teacher, "developing as a professional" with an average score of 3.60 (1.07), and "planning for instruction" with an average score of 3.40 (.52) were highly rated; as well the other standards were aligned with the ratings of the preservice teachers. Despite showing gains, practicum teachers 2.70 (.67), instructor 2.60 (.52), and cooperating teacher 2.70 (.48) rated "assessing student learning" below that of the other standards.

Discussion

As previously indicated, the significance of teacher preparation programmes embedding field experiences, particularly practicums, are essential to developing professional teaching skills and competencies^{39;40;41}. The struggle to link theory and classroom practice without the benefit of a practicum experience has also been documented⁴². To that point, practicum experiences offer preservice teachers the ability to develop and actively engage in critical skills, which may positively impact their teaching quality and performance with students in the classroom.

Table 3. Post clinical practicum rating (N=10)

CEC Standard	Instructor		Cooperating Teacher	
	(M)	(SD)	(M)	(SD)
Standard 1: Creating and maintaining a positive and safe learning environment	3.10	(.32)	3.20	(.42)
Standard 2: Planning for instruction	3.60	(.52)	3.40	(.52)
Standard 3: Engaging and supporting students in learning	3.20	(.42)	3.10	(.32)
Standard 4: Assessing student learning	2.60	(.52)	2.70	(.48)
Standard 5: Developing as a professional	3.30	(1.06)	3.60	(1.07)

While the relationship between practicum and training in an authentic setting, to develop and apply new or different strategies that improve preservice teachers' retention is acknowledged within the general environment^{43;44}, there is limited research on this practice specifically in the education field⁴⁵. The current study sought to determine whether a practicum experience for preservice education teachers would be effective and to examine the preservice teachers' perception on this addition to their programme. This study was conducted with 10 preservice teachers enrolled in the Bachelor of Education (Arts) programme aimed at teaching high school students. The participants were asked to evaluate (pre-test) their knowledge and skills on 5 standards (46 essential skills), and again (post-test) at the conclusion of the practicum.

Overall, the findings revealed that candidates made gains across the clinical standards. The most significant gains were made in "creating and maintaining a positive and safe learning environment," and "planning for instruction." This is not unexpected, as issues related to the safety

were comprehensively reviewed in the fourteen-week of intensive in-class classroom time to prepare students for the practicum. Additionally, preservice teachers spent a considerable portion of their practicum experience working with the instructor and cooperating teacher in planning for the unit activity. Although the clinical standards, "engaging and supporting students in learning," "assessing student learning," and "developing as a professional" made gains, it is suggested that consideration be made on increasing the potential for candidates to have more instruction and opportunities for practice with these standards as the gains were not as significant.

Despite the gains marked by the pre-test and post-test results for many of the CEC standards, ratings for Standard 4, "assessing student learning" that included self-assessment post-test ratings, 2.70 (.67), instructor 2.60 (.52), and cooperating teacher 2.70 (.48), suggest that preservice teachers remained at the beginning level according to the scale. The struggles faced by new teachers with student assessment and self-assessment; organization time management and lesson planning; and differentiated instructional

practices. In order to improve teacher preparedness for beginning educators, the study recommends more focus on instruction on multiple methods of assessing student progress have to be considered. In a study pertaining to novice teachers' attention to student-centered instruction, it has been explained that "...teacher preparation, however, remains largely teacher centered..."⁴⁶ and that "...method courses focus on the things that teachers do, from instructional methods to management strategies and programmes emphasize self-reflecting and identify information..." (p.144)^{47; 48;49;50}.

The research argued that there must be more attention placed on novice teacher assessment preparation. Therefore, as it relates to this present study, and therefore suggest that teacher preparation programmes pay close attention to preservice training relating to assessing student learning formatively and summatively. This study did not ask preservice teachers for their perception on their preparation for each standard; it is not known with confidence their struggle with assessing student learning.

Overall, the findings revealed that candidates made gains across the clinical standards. The most significant gains were made in "creating and maintaining a positive and safe learning environment," and "planning for instruction." This is not unexpected, as issues related to the safety were comprehensively reviewed in the fourteen-week of intensive in-class classroom time to prepare students for the practicum. Additionally, preservice teachers spent a considerable portion of their practicum experience working with the instructor and cooperating teacher in planning for the unit activity^{51;52;53}. Although the clinical standards, "engaging

and supporting students in learning," "assessing student learning," and "developing as a professional" made gains, it is suggested that consideration be made on increasing the potential for candidates to have more instruction and opportunities for practice with these standards as the gains were not as significant.

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known with confidence their struggle with assessing student learning.

Candidates' perception of the practicum

As a means to gain more insight into their perception of adding the practicum, candidates were asked to reflect on three questions following the completion of the survey, as stated in the instrumentation section. At large, pre-service teachers appreciated the opportunity to have a practicum experience that provided access to authentic classroom experience with students. There were three themes which emerged from the response. Preservice teachers' responses indicated a desire for more practicum experiences to be embedded into the master's program. For example, one response suggested that working hands-on with cooperating teachers and students should be a requirement for each major assignment in their program.

This finding is validated by research indicating preservice teachers' perception of the benefit and value of practicums^{57;58}. In one of such study⁵⁹, it was recommended that there was need to investigate how continuous practicum experiences help to reduce stress related to transitioning into the teaching profession and to better understand students' social and academic needs. It is suggested for this study and for other special education teacher preparation programs that practicums be built and sustained across the program.

Preservice teachers also identified that having cooperating teachers correct instructional challenges and available for assignment and classroom management feedback was crucial to their success. For example, one preservice teacher indicated that the cooperating teacher helped her to understand school culture and other teaching experiences that can only be gained from field experience. Additionally, the

supervising or mentor teacher's compatibility is critically important to the success of the preservice teacher. The importance of the student teacher and cooperating teacher relationship has also been identified⁶⁰; indicating that student teacher's outcomes were affected by the relationship they held with their cooperating teacher regarding the teaching experience. Other studies support the positive practicum learning experience influenced by a compatible relationship between preservice teachers and their mentors and supervisors^{61;62;63}. Therefore, another area for future study may consider the pairing of the instructor, mentor teacher, and student or practicum teacher to create the most suitable relationships. Few teacher preparation programs assess the quality of the university supervisor's supervision⁶⁴.

For final emergent pattern, preservice teachers noted a frustration in having to purchase their own resources and supplies, and having to reconsider technology-based instructional ideas due to limited university and school funding options. One study on new teacher retention revealed that novice teachers leave the field after using rations of their salary to purchase materials due to their school's limited funding scheduled for teaching supplies⁶⁵. The researcher discussed the difficulties for teachers to perform the latest teaching strategies, to include technology related advances; all due to limited resources. A point that needs to be emphasized is that experiences and evidence-based practices embedded in teacher preparation programs through practicum experiences may have limited worth when it cannot be translated into authentic classroom practice in the classroom. Therefore, teacher preparation programmes must understand the needs of partnering community schools and pool resources to develop effective practicum

experiences that will translate to real-world experiences for preservice teachers.

Recommendations

Further research is needed to understand the relationships between teacher preparation and quality in terms of Instruction, Programming and Practicum. There is need to investigate and shed light on how field experiences are evaluated. There is also need to know the characteristics of the school placement, supervisor and how the classroom environment affects the experiences. Addressing these limitations may offer one more step towards improving novice Bachelor of Education (Arts) teacher quality and the overall impact of practicum programmes.

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