

# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PRACTICUM AT UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

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Teaching practice in the early childhood education training or labeled as practicum is the aspect that seems to be of greatest concern to pre-service student teachers that will give them the opportunities to apply knowledge and theories learnt to practices working with young children (Dinnebeil & McInerney, 2001). Regardless of the objectives of practicum in Early Childhood Education Program, practicum is still considered as part and parcel of the process of teaching. Thus, practicum in the classroom is a complex task, as it must be implemented appropriately to create an effective teaching-learning situation. Many factors play an important role in classroom practices that may create either effective or ineffective teaching. Drawing from the works of Smith and Lilach (2005), it is possible to indicate that besides classroom practices; the voice of the students is also an important factor that contributes to ECE program effectiveness. The main findings show that the practicum is evaluated highly by a large majority of students; however, students find importance in the more theoretical aspects of their education as well. Institutional-based supervisors of the practicum were perceived by student teachers to provide the strongest support, alongside peers and school-based mentors. The findings from the study also show that school principals were perceived not to be supportive of student teachers during the practicum.

A study by Nihat and Yezdan (2006) on the experiences of prospective teachers during their school placements reveals that student teachers in their second teaching placement said that they observed similar issues, repeated similar activities as they did in their first school placement. Student teachers enrolled in the last teaching practicum said that they did not feel like the teacher of the class and did not get enough chance to practice. Even with the existing interesting findings from researches on practicum, the need to examine the effectiveness of practicum is still at large to ensure a good quality teacher product. Besides, the research on practicum effectiveness would be able to give a valuable input on elements needed in order to improve ECE practicum that will then produce a quality teacher of early childhood education.

With due respect to the above needs, therefore the focus of this study is to investigate early childhood student teachers' and employers' perceptions on the effectiveness of early childhood education practicum. This study will unveil how student teachers used their knowledge to implement them into effective practices. The study reveals as well how employers perceive student teachers in their teaching practices at their school placement.

## Objectives

The main objective of the study is to examine the effectiveness of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Practicum at University of Malaya. Specifically the study is aimed at:

1. investigating student teachers' perception on factors contributing to the effectiveness of ECE practicum,
2. Investigating employers' perception on factors contributing to the effectiveness of ECE practicum.

## Research Questions

The study proposed to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are student teachers' perceptions on the effectiveness of ECE practicum?
2. What are employers' perceptions on the effectiveness of ECE practicum?
3. Are there any significant differences between novice student teachers' perceptions and the experienced one on the effectiveness of ECE practicum?

## Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was used to describe the variables in this study. The type of survey design used in the study is as such because the data were collected at just one point in time from a sample that had been drawn from a predetermined population in order to describe the existing factors at that point of time.

The sample was drawn from the practicum students enrolled in the Early Childhood Education study program of the 2007 – 2008 academic years. Students in this program complete the 8 credit hours practicum in two sequential practicum placements. The program is four years in duration. The total sample size was 92 students (45 beginning and 47 experienced). Beginning students are enrolled in Practicum 1 and experienced students in Practicum 2. Practicum 1 is completed in nursery or child care facilities. In Practicum 2 students work with children of 4 – 6 years of age in a variety of settings; including schools, child care centers, developmental centers, and residential facilities. Six of the students were males and 87% were between the ages of 20 – 22 years.

The sample used in this research was selected from 46 preschools (a combination of both private and government preschools) from Klang Valley. Other focus group participants were the employers from the school placement. All employers or the on-site supervisors had at least three years of supervisory experience in the early childhood program and had supervised students in a variety of settings. In certain circumstances, the word practitioners are used in the study to refer to student teachers whilst supervisors to refer to on-site placement supervisor.

A one day workshop for students involved in the teaching practicum in the term of 2006 – 2007 was held prior to the beginning of practicum. The student teachers and supervisors were informed that findings from this research would be used in the development of a future student's practicum.

Students enrolled in Practicum 1 and Practicum 2 completed the survey at the end of the seventh week of training. Students in Practicum 1 had completed approximately 4 credit hours of practicum, while those in Practicum 2 had approximately 8 credit hours.

In the study, an instrument was used to investigate these issues of practicum effectiveness. To investigate student teachers' perception on factors contributing to the effectiveness of ECE practicum, and employers' perception on factors contributing to the effectiveness of ECE practicum, the study had developed a 35 and 27 Likert-type questions pertaining to various aspects of student teachers' and supervisors' perceptions of practicum experiences respectively; including student goals, evaluation procedures, written assignments, seminars and the role of supervisors.

## Findings

In general, the practicum is accepted as a valuable component of professional education; and surveys of students, employers and graduates usually find that they prefer educational programs with a practicum component. However, persistent problems are identified with practicum placements which are poorly structured and poorly supervised, resulting in experiences that may actually undermine learning.

Concern is expressed by a number of writers regarding both the quantity and quality of research into use of the practicum in higher education. Little quality research has been undertaken on the effect of the length, structure and placement of the practicum such that no clear recommendations can be made with confidence.

Whilst the value of the practicum to student learning is widely acknowledged, the number of shortcomings identified suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the planning and implementation of practicum experiences; and to the evaluation of these experiences as successful stimuli for learning.

The study finds that differences between the novice and the experienced practicum students were found on the subscales of the effectiveness of ECE practicum's Likert-type questions. Two subscales for which differences were found focused on both employers' and student teachers' perception on attitudes (items: interested teaching, patient with children, fascinating teaching, rather not choose, feel bored, ready to solve problems and encourage creativity); and skills learnt (items: able to plan lessons plan, develop teaching materials, use teaching materials, use different strategy methods to teach, able to adapt methods, apply classroom management to facilitate, able to monitor and assess, maintain/keep teaching records, apply technology, prepare tests/exam/assignment, create stimulating environment and use communication skills).

The findings of the study indicate that the beginning students were more reliant on input from their employers than were the experienced students. The findings also indicated that from the employers' point of view on student teachers' knowledge, skills and abilities, the employers are very satisfied with the student teachers' knowledge, skills and ability especially in ability to create a safe learning environment for young children, knowledge of the subjects taught in the preschool, ability in communicating with young children and ability to plan teaching and learning activities. However, from the perception of the employers, the student teachers' ability in handling young children with behavioral problems is rather low.

### **Conclusion**

There is pressure on higher education institutions to achieve greater integration between campus-based learning and learning in the workplace; and at least in professional courses the practicum or field placement holds out the promise that this might still be achieved. However, this paper has raised a number of issues which need further investigation in order to enhance the effect of the practicum on student learning – particularly through better planning, and a much firmer research basis to design the curriculum for practicum with young children.