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Practicum in Early Childhood Education: Student Teachers' Perspectives

Daniela-Maria CRETU[1]

[1] Associate Professor PhD., Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Social and Human Science Faculty, Teacher Education Department, daniela.cretu@ulbsibiu.ro

Abstract: Practicum is a central component of initial teacher education programs. Most teacher education studies focus on practicum in primary and secondary school, while the practicum in kindergartens has received less attention in international literature. The goal of this study is to explore student teachers' perceptions of practicum experience in kindergarten, within the context of an initial teacher education program. A total of 42 final year student teachers enrolled in the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education program at a Romanian university participated in the study. They completed a questionnaire about their final practicum experience in kindergarten, concerning the benefits of the practicum, the difficulties encountered, and the ways of coping with them. The main benefits reported by the participants were: professional relationships, planning and practicing teaching, professional and personal skill development, and insights into the preschool education system. Difficulties included implementing instruction, class management and self-concerns issues. The student teachers relied on internal resources, but also on external resources (the preschool mentor teachers, the student teacher supervisor and the colleagues) for overcoming the difficulties encountered during practicum. Based on their testimonies, we suggest possible improvements to the teacher education program.

Keywords: *teacher education, preservice teachers, kindergarten, mentor teachers, university supervisor.*

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1. Introduction

Learning to be a teacher requires knowledge, skills and professional attitudes that are developed through study and practice during teacher preparation programs, under the careful guidance of teacher educators. Initial teacher education is the first and crucial stage of teachers' career-long professional development' and it represents the entry point into the continuum of teacher education (European Commission, 2017). Preservice teacher preparation programs are expected to train competent teaching staff that can face the challenges they may encounter in their profession. Teacher education for kindergarten and primary school teachers is essential because these teachers set the foundation for everything that should be built in terms of education in children's lives.

At present, in Romania there are two main routes to follow in order to get the qualification as a teacher in preschool (kindergarten classes for children aged 3 to 6) and primary education (from preparatory class to the 4th grade for children aged 6 to 11). The first route, with a longer tradition, involves one's graduating from a four-year pedagogical high school, while the second one involves teacher training for preschool and primary education at university level and has its roots in the early 2000s, when the Bachelor's Degree program, called Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education (PPPE), was set up in several Romanian universities. In the following, we will focus on the second route, because our study was conducted within a PPPE program at a university in Romania. Graduates of this three-year PPPE study program must be able to take effective, professional roles at preschool and primary education levels, to teach the corresponding curriculum for these two levels (except for foreign languages and Religion). We shall further refer to all the university students enrolled in the PPPE study program as student teachers.

Within the PPPE curriculum, practicum is present every year (a semester in kindergarten and a semester in primary school), 3-5 hours per week and represents 15% of total training time of the student teachers. The practicum refers to the periods of kindergarten or school placement carried out by student teachers in accordance with the curriculum plan. This allows future teachers to directly experience aspects related to the teaching profession and to understand the educational reality, by observing and practicing teaching in the classrooms. The student teachers can "get the taste of" what it's really like to be a teacher. The practicum involves three important agents, namely student teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher

educators. During their practicum, the student teachers are assigned to groups, observe the educational environment and teach under the guidance of the university supervisor and of the mentors.

The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of student teachers on practicum, in terms of benefits and difficulties they encountered during their final semester of placement in kindergarten. More precisely, the present study attempted to find answers to the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What were the benefits of the practicum in kindergarten, as demonstrated by the student teachers?

RQ2: What difficulties did the student teachers experience during the practicum?

RQ3: How did the student teachers cope with challenging situations in the practicum?

The answers to these research questions are seen as important sources for identifying ways to improve the quality of the teacher education program.

2. Literature review

The researchers' keen interest in the field of practicum experience as part of the initial teacher education programs has been evinced in the large number of studies conducted on this topic. There are studies which investigated the issue of pedagogical practicum and the student teachers' reflection on it, in the context of different initial teacher education programs, by using different methods or tools, such as reflective writing, questionnaires, interviews (Walkington, 2005; Rauduvaitσ, Lasauskienσ & Barkauskaitσ, 2015; Dervent, 2015; Pop, 2015; Busher, Gündüz, Cakmak & Lawson, 2015; Hamaidi, Al-Shara, Arouri & Awwad 2014). For instance, by using a questionnaire as research tool, Hamaidi et al. (2014) found that early childhood education student teachers benefited from the practicum experience in the development of the interaction and communication with students and classroom management skills. In a recent study conducted by Bulgakova et al. (2020), practical experience in the process of training future teachers of preschool education was considered an important component for ensuring their readiness for professional activities.

In the comparative study conducted by Busher et al. (2015), the questionnaire was used to collect the opinions on the practicum of the 480 student teachers from Turkey and England. Other studies considered the use

of blogs as a way to encourage student teachers' reflection on their own professional growth (Garza & Smith 2015; Yang, 2009).

Practicum in educational environments not only brings positive experiences, but also poses difficulties and challenges for those participating in it. There are studies which help us to understand the problems encountered by the student teachers during the practicum time. For instance, a study by Moussaid and Zerhouni (2017), which involved 60 high school teacher trainees enrolled in a year-long teacher training program, highlighted frequent problems with teaching methodology, class control and time management. Özdaş, (2018) revealed that the preservice teachers had noticed or encountered many problems with regard to the teaching and learning processes as part of their school experience. In another study conducted by Macías and Sánchez (2015) it was also reported that the classroom management constituted a problem among preservice teachers in a teacher education program at a public university in Colombia.

These studies support the role of practicum in preservice teacher education and reveal various student teachers 'views on it. They help us get a deeper understanding of research within the international context in the field of student teachers' practicum. Most studies focused on the practicum in teacher education for primary and secondary schools. However, less is known about how student teachers perceive the experience of the practicum in the context of preschool teacher education. The present study tries to address this gap. Fukkink et al. (2019) also emphasized the need to focus by research on the learning process and experiences of the early childhood pre-service teachers, in order to gain a greater insight into their professional development.

The current study is based on the phenomenological research design, which focuses on the subjective experiences, perceptions, interpretations, attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings and meaning of agentic individuals (Denscombe, 2014, p.94). The experiences of the participants and their perceptions about these experiences are at the heart of this study, which was conducted in the context of a PPPE program, at a public university in Romania.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 42 student teachers in their final year (attending the PPPE study program) took part in this survey. We chose them for investigation

because the student teachers were at the end of their final practicum period in kindergarten (14 weeks of teaching practicum, in urban kindergartens). The ages of the participants ranged from 22 to 46. All of them were female. Participants were informed about the goal of the research and the voluntary nature of the study. The student teachers were asked to give their informed consent. No ethical issues were encountered.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In order to collect the students' opinions on their practicum in kindergarten, a questionnaire structured in two parts was designed. The first part was related to demographic information such as age and gender. In the second part, open-ended questions were used to collect the student teachers' views regarding: (a) positive aspects during practicum; (b) difficulties they were confronted with; (c) coping with difficulties.

Here are examples of the open questions contained in the questionnaire: *Did the practicum in kindergarten bring benefits to your training as future teachers?; If so, what were the benefits of pedagogical practice in kindergarten in this semester for you? Specify them and provide details; Did you encounter any difficulties during the practicum? If so, what were the difficulties you faced during the pedagogical practice? Specify and comment on them; What did you do to overcome these difficulties? Provide details.*

Three academic members working in the educational sciences department were asked to evaluate the questionnaire and to make suggestions in order to improve it and, based on their feedback, the questions were amended. The questionnaires were disseminated by hand during the meeting at the end of the practicum (before grading) and the student teachers completed the questionnaire. They were invited to respond as freely and as sincerely as possible and they were also assured about data confidentiality. A number was assigned to each questionnaire, in order to protect participants' identities. A mixed approach was used in this study: a quantitative one (in determining the frequency of participants' responses) and a qualitative one (in identifying and interpreting the types of benefits, difficulties and coping strategies).

The content analysis technique was used for the undergraduates' responses to the open-ended questions. The analysis involved some steps: reading the data word by word and line by line multiple times in order to identify common themes in the student teachers' statements; organizing these common themes into categories and sub-categories; calculating the frequencies and percentages of the resulting categories; identifying

representative quotations, which illustrate categories/sub-categories. Quotes from the participants' answers were highlighted and included in the results, using the letters ST (student teacher) and the number assigned.

4. Results and discussions

The results will be presented following the research questions.

RQ1: What were the benefits of the practicum in kindergarten in the view of the student teachers?

All the participants perceived the practicum as a source of benefits for their training as future teachers. They reported different benefits of practicum. Based on the analysis of the responses, 113 benefits were recorded and four categories were identified as benefits or positive aspects of the practicum. Frequencies and percentages for every category were registered, as presented in Table 1. The four categories are: (1) relationships, (2) teaching – planning and practicing, (3) professional, personal skill and attitudes development and (4) insight into the preschool education system.

Table 1. Benefits of practicum identified by student teachers

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Relationships	With pupils	64	57%
	With mentor		
	With the university supervisor		
	With peers		
Teaching – planning and practicing	Planning for teaching	34	30%
	Use of teaching strategies and materials		
	Working with curriculum documents		
Development of skills and attitudes	Self-assessment	11	10%
	Gains in self-confidence		
	Professional motivation		
Insights into the preschool education	Learning about life in kindergarten	4	3%
	Kindergarten practices		
Total		113	100%

As a result of participation in practicum, 57% of the benefits targeted the relationship category that student teachers were able to develop. Four sub-categories were identified here, namely the relationship with pre-schoolers, with the teacher mentors in kindergarten, with the practicum university supervisor and with peers. The opportunity to observe the pre-schoolers during the teaching activities and their chosen free games and the interaction with them during practicum were frequently reported by the student teachers as positive aspects of practicum. Here are relevant comments of two student teachers:

The chance to interact directly with the children has helped me to get to know them better. (ST 3)

I communicated without difficulty with pre-schoolers during both the didactic activities and the free games. (ST 17)

The participants mentioned the positive relationship with their mentors. The direct interaction with the mentor teachers, the opportunity to learn and benefit from their support were favourable circumstances for professional development mentioned by the students. This is important because, a healthy relationship between a mentor teacher (also named cooperative teacher) and teacher candidates is a central element of the practicum experiences in early childhood teacher preparation programs (Loizou, 2011; La Paro, Van Schagen, King, & Lippard, 2018). For instance, one student teacher wrote:

I have had a very good relationship with our mentor, who has encouraged me and has given me feedback and guidance throughout my practice. (ST 22)

Feedback from the kindergarten teacher is part of student teachers' expectations during practicum and it was reported as such by Dan and Simon (2016, p. 1378). The mentor teachers' support in terms of emotional and pedagogical engagement was also identified as a cherished factor by student teachers during practicum, in a study conducted by Martínez Agudo (2016). During practicum, the mentors were powerful players (Moen & Standal, 2016) and remained role models for the student teachers while they attended their activities with pre-schoolers and subsequently implemented their own teaching activities under their direct guidance.

Attending their group colleagues' teaching activities was a great opportunity for the student teachers to learn from the observation and analysis of the way in which their peers taught. Aspects related to teamwork (learning together with their colleagues, in the preparation and carrying out of the activities the practicum suggested), but also related to the positive

relationship with the university practicum supervisor (who visited the places of practicum and observed the student teachers' classes) were also classified by the students as benefits. The following student teachers' comments illustrate the above-mentioned ideas:

In our group, we offered feedback and mutual support. We felt like we were a team. (ST 36)

The practicum supervisor monitored our work during the practicum and helped us whenever it was the case. (ST 14)

Busher et al. (2015) found that preservice teachers appreciated the chance to develop positive relationships with students during their practicum and the endorsement of their universities and mentors, too. In a study conducted by Nonis and Tan (2011) at the University of Singapore, a good rapport with both their school and university supervisors was also identified as a part of a positive experience during practicum for 33 preservice special education teachers. Moreover, working well together - the mentors, student teachers, and the university supervisors is essential for smooth learning in a professional community (Chou, 2019).

Planning and practicing teaching represented the second category identified in student teachers' responses. Practising teaching in kindergarten, designing activities, applying different instructional strategies and working with curriculum documents (curricula, calendar planning, theme projects, integrated activities' projects etc.) were positive aspects, as described by student teachers:

The greatest benefit of this internship practice was the fact that I was able to teach in kindergarten activities on different subject areas. (ST 31)

I enjoyed preparing teaching materials for my activities with pre-schoolers. (ST 5)

I became more familiar with curriculum documents in kindergarten. (ST, 26)

Other benefits of the practice mentioned by the participants were related to the development of professional, personal skills, and attitudes (10%). There were student teachers who marked as benefits the self-evaluation (made at the end of their teaching performances in activity analysis), increased self-confidence and an increase in one's interest for the didactic profession. Here are some examples of comments of the student teachers:

I practised self-evaluation at the end of the lessons taught and I have learned that this can be a very useful exercise. (ST 41)

At the end of my practice, I feel more confident in my own power of managing a group of pre-schoolers. (ST 2)

I'm patient and understanding with children and I really want to practice this profession. (ST 16)

Finally, 3% of the practicum benefits included aspects related to the student teachers' understanding of the way in which kindergartens functioned (schedule, types of activities). Here is a comment made by one student teacher:

I have understood much better now the kindergarten schedule, starting with the arrival of the children and the morning meeting, continuing with the activities on different domains, the freely chosen games and activities, the routines, the transitions, and ending with the kids' departure. (ST 35)

Reflecting on their experience, the participants identified multiple benefits of practicum in kindergarten, with relevance to their future professional activity. We can infer that student teachers developed a positive perception of practicum. However, the participants reported difficulties, too.

RQ2: What difficulties did the student teachers experience during the practicum?

For the purpose of the present study, difficulties were defined as problems that student teachers faced and which prevented them from acting effectively during their practicum. The analysis of the student teachers' responses with regard to the 51 difficulties they faced during their pedagogical practicum in kindergarten led to the identification of three main categories, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Difficulties student teachers were confronted with during practicum

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Implementing instruction	Catching and maintaining pre-schoolers' attention	28	55%
	Adapting instruction to the children's needs		
	Using the appropriate voice		
	Lack/shortage of teaching materials		
	Dealing with unexpected situations		
Class management	Class control	17	33%
	Disruptive behaviour		
	Establishing rules and routines		

Self-concerns	Emotions related to teaching Self-confidence	6	12%
Total		51	100%

Only two thirds of the participants reported difficulties encountered during practicum. The first category of difficulties, which had the highest frequency (representing 55% of the total), is linked to the implementation of instruction. Herein, student teachers reported difficulties concerning the following: catching and maintaining the pre-schoolers' attention, adapting instruction to the children's needs, using the appropriate voice, lack/ shortage of teaching materials, unexpected situations. Some student teachers reported having spent personal resources in order to prepare the necessary means for hands-on activities (worksheets, posters, objects, images etc.). Here are some student teachers' comments that illustrate these difficulties:

The little ones get bored very quickly. It has been hard for me to keep their attention. (ST 6)

Children needed more time to fill in the chart than I estimated in my project and we did not have time to analyse the works. (ST 12)

I still have difficulty making myself heard over all the children. I do not speak loud enough when needed. (ST 4)

The video projector failed during the presentation and I was scared because I had not thought of a backup solution. (ST 17)

Taking into account the fact that pre-schoolers' attention is limited, catching and maintaining it turned into a challenge for the student teachers. Furthermore, in the act of teaching, one cannot always follow the pre-written project. Elements that cannot be anticipated, but come up during teaching require students to have situational adaptive capacities. The use of the appropriate voice and time management are personal and professional aspects that can be improved once one gains more experience in the didactic profession.

Of the reported difficulties, 33% were in the area of class management. Herein, student teachers identified issues connected to the management of the pre-schooler groups, of disruptive behaviour (such as hyperactivity or lack of attention, resistance) and to the setting of rules and routines. One student teacher wrote:

In the group I taught there was a child who could hardly sit on the chair. He frequently interrupted others and me. He did not have the patience to listen to my instructions. I sat him next to me, but it was not enough. (ST 18)

A colleague of hers mentioned the difficulty of managing a large group of pre-schoolers:

Working with a group of 29 pre-schoolers was difficult for me. (ST 14)

Unfortunately, large groups of pre-schoolers are a reality in Romania and the management of these groups is a challenge for experienced teachers as well. The management of pre-schooler groups and of disruptive behaviours turned out to be problematic for the student teachers. It was a difficulty enhanced by the fact that the Class Management course at the university was planned for the semester following practicum (the 2nd semester of the final year). Class management was also found to be a significant challenge for different groups of teacher candidates during their teaching practicum (Gan, 2013; Yusof et al., 2014; Aldemir & Kurt, 2014; Ulla, 2016; Simon & Dan, 2017; Sahin et al., 2019). Challenging situations from work placement, such as lack of classroom control, pupils with special needs were also reported by student teachers in the study conducted by Lindqvist (2019).

The third category of difficulties was related to self-concerns (12%), as some student teachers lacked self-confidence when they had to teach or felt stressed or nervous in the teaching process. One respondent wrote:

When I taught, I kind of messed up. I have to learn to control my emotions that could escalate in panic. (ST 2)

These results are consistent with the ones obtained by Catalano and Catalano (2015), in a study focused on 58 third year undergraduate PPPE students. The respondents mentioned similar weaknesses or difficulties in teaching, such as emotions, the lack of class management, difficulties in communicating knowledge in a limited time frame, the inability to draw and maintain the children's attention, time management. Self-concern problems were also reported in the study that Moussaid and Zerhouni (2017) conducted on teacher trainees.

RQ3: How did the student teachers cope with challenging situations in the practicum?

Regarding the ways to approach and overcome these problems or difficulties, the analysis of the participants' response points to the following categories: (1) by myself (33%); (2) receiving help from the teacher mentor (31%); (3) receiving help from the university supervisor (20%); (4) receiving help from my colleagues (16%). Some of the student teachers who reported difficulties mustered their efforts and tried to find solutions on their own. For instance, two student teachers with the stress management issue stated:

I repeated the explanations and the questions for the pre-schoolers, in front of the mirror. (ST 13)

Before the times when I had to teach and I was overwhelmed with emotions, I encouraged myself, repeating that it would be fine. (ST 34)

With regard to catching and maintaining the pre-schoolers' attention, another student teacher wrote:

I played more games with the children. (ST 22)

Many student teachers viewed the class mentor as professional support when they were confronted with problems and did not hesitate to ask questions or to ask for help or guidance.

We had the chance of a mentor who made time for us and helped us throughout the practice with tips and recommendations. (ST 41)

The mentor was the first person I asked for help or advice when I needed it. (ST 23)

The university supervisor and the colleagues were also seen as support sources in overcoming problems.

It helped me that our supervisor understood our teaching emotions, encouraged us and supported us with practical recommendations. (ST 34)

There were times when I worked with colleagues to prepare the activities. The fact that we discussed and learned from each other was very helpful. I knew I could rely on my colleagues. (ST 18)

This findings align with a previous study (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005), where similar sources of support were mentioned by student teachers during their practicum. This kind of external support, coming from colleagues and teachers, called "collective sharing", has been reported in a recent study (Lindqvist, 2019), which involved 22 student teachers in their last year of teacher education.

With benefits, but also with difficulties, we can appreciate that the practicum was a mixed experience for students. Early childhood student teachers' mixed perceptions on the field experience were also revealed in other studies (Van Schagen Johnson, La Paro & Crosby, 2017; Sahin, Sen & Dincer, 2019).

The student teachers' reflections regarding the practicum are useful for teacher educators and preschool mentors in terms of inspiring their efforts to highlight, extend or refine their analysis of the areas where students feel most vulnerable or uncertain. The student teachers' voice should be taken into consideration. This kind of knowledge can provide new ways of improving the teacher education programs and the culture of

practicum, in order to help student teachers in their transition to the teaching profession. What happens at university and in practice should not be seen as two separate worlds. The need to tailor instruction to preservice student teachers is also supported by Thomson and Palermo (2014). In this regard, here are some suggestions and recommendations that can be considered in order to improve the quality of PPPE program:

- more focus on implementing instruction is needed within the teaching methodology and inclusive education courses, for instance: adapting instruction to the needs of all children, emphasis on inclusive practices in the preschool classrooms, etc.;
- more emphasis should be placed on equipping future teachers with skills related to classroom management (by learning and practicing effective strategies for managing the behaviour of the children, by the contribution of mentors who can share their classroom management experience) and repositioned, in the sense of advancing it across the teacher education curriculum (from year three to year two, the latest, when the student teachers start teaching);
- more attention and time are needed for the student teachers' preparation to deal with the unforeseen situations in class (technology goes wrong, the children do not understand a question, do not want to respond or make mistakes, etc.); all these problems can be addressed within the Teaching Methodology courses;
- performing activities, in-class practice and special exercises meant to increase the self-confidence of the student teachers and to manage anxiety and negative emotions during teaching, which could be integrated into the Personal Development course (this is already part of the teacher education curriculum), but also into the other courses from the PPPE curriculum;
- more support for student teachers during the three years of study by the faculty members involved in the program, but also by the mentors in developing teaching materials, which can be used in their practicum; this can be an experience integrated in the field practicum, in the university courses (especially in those focused on the didactics of certain disciplines or fields), or in shared workshops.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of student teachers enrolled in a PPPE study program on pedagogical practicum, in the preschool environment. Student teachers had the opportunity to reflect upon

the benefits, but also on the difficulties they encountered and the ways they coped with them. The following major aspects were drawn from the findings of this study:

- the practicum was a mixed experience for the student teachers; benefits were reported by all student teachers' and difficulties by two thirds of them; twice as many benefits were reported as compared to difficulties.
- the main benefits of the practicum from the participants' perspective were professional relationships, planning and practicing teaching, development of personal, professional skill and attitudes, insight into the preschool education system;
- the aspects related to the implementation of the instruction and class management were the main difficulties, as reported by the participants;
- for overcoming the difficulties, the student teachers relied on internal resources, but also on external resources (the preschool mentor teachers, the student teacher supervisor and the colleagues).

Bringing to the surface the perceptions of future teachers regarding the practicum experience is fundamental for identifying the positive aspects, but also of the problems they have encountered, as the basis for finding solutions to improve the practicum and the initial teacher education program as a whole. Student teachers' perceptions of the difficulties they face during practicum can help teacher-educators and preschool mentors consider new ways of strengthening the areas where teacher candidates may require further support. In this case, more support is needed in the following areas: implementing instruction, classroom management and increasing the self-confidence of the student teachers.

Encouraging student teachers to think about their experience can create the background for a habit that is desirable throughout their continuous professional development. The practice of reflection is necessary for student teachers, who are often too rushed to complete courses, take exams, write portfolios, but without the patience and thoroughness all these require. Cojocariu and Mares (2019) also consider that the period of initial preparation for teaching career is significant in terms of forming the reflection ability. The need to increase the importance of the pedagogical practice within the initial teacher training program and to encourage the systematic reflection practice is emphasized by Dumitriu, Timofti, Dumitriu (2011), too.

The findings of this study are limited to one group of student teachers and their experience related to practicum in kindergarten during one

semester in the final year of undergraduate studies. We estimate that this study may be the foundation for a more extensive, longitudinal study, incorporating data about what student teachers experience during practicum in kindergarten over the three years of undergraduate study. Integrating into one research the perceptions of student teachers, mentor teachers and teacher educators regarding the practicum could be another direction for further research.

Our investigation endorses the idea that practicum is a central component of teacher education programs and its role should be valued in order to provide quality training for future teachers and to facilitate a smooth transition from the student teacher status to that of the teacher. There is a need to continue doing research on practicum in the preschool environment, and to explore the ways in which this experience affects student teachers.

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