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**PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THEIR
PRACTICUM IN SCHOOL**

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Abstract

Embracing the idea that practice is essential for teacher training, this study aims to present and analyse the perceptions of 127 pre-service teachers on their first semester of practicum in lower-secondary urban schools. All participants were enrolled in a teacher education program at a university in Romania in the 2017-2018 academic year and came from a broad range of disciplines. The data were collected using a questionnaire with open-ended questions, filled in at the end of practicum. The participants' reflections on the more and the less successful aspects of their practicum experience are analysed and discussed. More positive aspects of the practicum were recorded than negative ones. The pre-service teachers' responses reflected various aspects related to themselves, pupils, school, mentors, university supervisors, teaching profession, mirroring a profound understanding of the practicum and its importance for their professional development. The pre-service teachers also provided 156 suggestions for developing a successful practicum, which are relevant to all participating in the preparation and operation of the practicum: the university teacher educators, mentors in schools, school principals. Their suggestions reinforce the evidence that university courses and practicum in schools should be approached and improved side by side. Based on the knowledge provided by pre-service teachers' reflections, the support for their professional development can be optimized.

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1. Introduction

Preparing candidates for a teaching career is a challenging task for initial teacher training programs. The teaching profession is becoming more complex, the teachers' adaptation skills are being permanently challenged. Teachers are expected to have a wide range of competencies, in both specialty and pedagogical fields. The initial teacher training period is a time when future teachers start to build their professional competencies. A high quality of initial teacher education is vital for the possibilities of future teachers to face the demands they confront with, in terms of knowledge of academic subjects and pedagogical skills. Even so, initial teacher education will not be able to prepare teachers for all the changes they will experience across their working lives (European Commission, 2007). For that reason, the continuous professional development is needed and essential in order to update the professional competencies for a successful teaching career.

In Romania, students have the opportunity to enrol in a three years initial teacher training program for lower secondary education, since their first year at the university, which goes in parallel to their undergraduate studies in different fields. We will refer to these university students enrolled in the teacher training program, using the term of pre-service teachers. This teacher training program has the purpose to support the development of professional competencies that a teacher needs, such as: designing didactic activities; managing and monitoring the learning process; evaluation of educational activities; the use of digital technologies; knowledge, counselling and differential treatment of pupils; classroom management (Potolea & Toma, 2013).

2. Problem Statement

Within the initial teacher education program, the pre-service teachers will study various disciplines, as follows: Educational Psychology, Pedagogy, Didactic of a specific subject domain (and Didactic of a second subject domain for those who will teach two subjects school disciplines), Educational Management, Pedagogical practicum and Computer Assisted Training. These disciplines are scheduled throughout the three years of study. Pedagogical practicum is a compulsory discipline that contributes in a great measure in the development of professional competencies for the teaching profession. The number of hours allocated to this discipline (3 hours weekly) for two semesters of the third year is higher than for any discipline in the teacher education program. The delivery of the practicum is based on a team approach, which includes university supervising teachers, school mentor teachers and pre-service teachers. Under the guidance of the university supervisors (who are full-time members of a faculty) and the experienced school's mentors, the pre-service teachers, organized in groups of ten, get in touch with the school world, have their first teaching experiences, see and feel how it is to be a teacher.

The practicum incorporates systematic observation and teaching. The pre-service teachers begin as observers in the assigned school classrooms and then they start to teach lessons under the supervision of the school mentors and the university supervisors. More precisely, pre-service teachers are engaged in various activities according to the practicum syllabus, for instance: they observe the way their mentor conducts his/her teaching activities, have contact with school students, they teach some classes for the school students, they observe how other pre-service students teach their lessons, they characterize school students completing the psycho-pedagogical form etc.

Throughout the semester the reflection of pre-service teachers on practicum experiences is constantly encouraged through discussions, observations, analyses, completion of practicum papers. The practicum experience is monitored and assessed by university supervisors by means of individual portfolio, which includes documents elaborated over the semester (lesson plans, reflection journals, lesson observation form, curriculum documents etc.).

The teaching practice in initial teacher education varies in terms of location and length but also in regard to its philosophy, aims and assessment methods in the different programs (Flores, Vieira, Silva, & Almeida, 2016). Despite this variety, there is a vivid interest in the practice aspect, which is justified by its importance in teacher training. This was one of the reasons that inspired this study.

The practicum is vital to the successful preparation of teachers (Cherry, 2015). In its different forms, practicum in pre-service teacher education programs, “typically constitutes the longest and most intensive exposure to the teaching profession experienced by prospective teachers” (Cohen, Hoz, & Kaplan, 2013, p. 345). The importance of practicum in teacher training is also underlined in a previous study (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russe, 2006), which supports the idea that what student teachers experience in their practicum creates their view of the profession.

Another reason for this study is related to the fact that knowledge and understanding how pre-service teachers experience the practicum is important for teacher educators and school mentors, in order to provide the appropriate support for their development. In a study about what characterizes a good practicum in teacher education (Ulvik & Smith, 2011), is underlined that in order to improve teacher education it is important to listen to those who are affected by it- in this case, the pre-service teachers.

The present study is part of a wider research project, which aims to understand the reality of practicum experience from the perspectives of kindergarten, primary and secondary school pre-service teachers, with the possible and desirable consequence of improving the practicum. In this study we focus on the practicum experiences of a group of secondary school pre-service teachers.

3. Research Questions

The study was guided by two research questions: Which are the most and the less successful aspects of practicum experienced by pre-service teachers?; What are the pre-service teachers’ suggestions for developing a successful practicum?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of a group of 127 third year undergraduate pre-service teachers (103 female, and 24 male, aged twenty-one to twenty-nine) on the first semester of practicum. All participants were enrolled in a teacher education program at a university in Romania in the 2017-2018 academic year and came from a broad range of disciplines. Practicum took place in lower-secondary urban schools, with which the university has partnership agreements.

The study involved pre-service teachers from the following majors: Letters - Literature and Foreign Language (n=68), Sciences (n=31), Social Sciences (n=28). Almost all of them are prepared to teach two different school subjects. The first semester of practicum is dedicated to their first school subject.

5. Research Methods

Right at the end of practicum period, the pre-service teachers were asked to reflect upon their practicum experiences with the aid of a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The data collection tool was designed in two sections: personal details (major, age, gender) and views. All participants were informed that the empirical data was to be handled confidentially. They were informed about the purpose of the research and its voluntary basis. It was made clear that the questionnaire was not part of the examination and their responses would have no effect on their results of the practicum course. Informed consent was obtained from the participants. Respondents were encouraged to express their personal opinions openly.

6. Findings

When the pre-service teachers were asked to identify the more successful aspects of the practicum, a wealth and a variety of responses were found. These were carefully analysed in order to obtain a sense of the overall data and to identify emergent themes. There were 342 successful aspects of the practicum emerging from this data. Who the aspects refer to became the criterion that grouped the answers in certain themes. Thus, the more successful aspects of practicum were grouped in five central themes, which emerged from the data and which were named: (1) “self-related”; (2) “student-related”; (3) “mentor and university supervisor-related”; (4) “school-related”; (5) “teaching profession-related”. These major themes are presented in Table 01. Based on the content analysis there were more categories emerging inside these themes, that will be presented next.

Table 01. The most successful aspects of practicum in the view of the pre-service teachers

Themes:	Percentages
Self-related aspects	47.66%
Student-related aspects	25.14%
Mentor or university supervisor-related aspects	15.78%
School-related aspects	6.14%
Teaching profession- related aspects	5.26%

Almost half of the answers (47.66%) were recorded for the “self-related aspects” theme. This includes the comments that were explicitly about a learning process- developing knowledge, skills, values- but also the comments that were about motivational aspects or personal development.

For the pre-service teachers, practicum gave the possibility to teach students for the first time. This opportunity for professional development was appreciated by the future teachers and this reflected in the frequency of their comments on the subject. The respondents’ comments were pointing to specific aspects of planning, designing instruction and teaching lessons: developing lesson plans, applying instructional methods, engaging students in dialogue, using teaching materials, providing feedback to students, etc. Here are some of the comments on this theme: *“I learned to do lesson plans and realized how much effort teaching a single lesson requires.”*; *“The practicum offered the chance to be a teacher, to organize my teaching in such a way that students understand what I was teaching”*; *“I used different instruction methods I learned in university during the practicum and I adapted them to the students I worked with”*.

Other comments were about the possibility to practice class management elements: *“I was very happy I managed to control the class, despite being nervous each time I taught”*; *“I learned how to use student grouping, give tasks and check on the students’ involvement”*. For some pre-service teachers practicum was an opportunity to confirm or strengthen the professional motivation: *“Teaching is what I want to do, and practicum has helped me to understand that I am on the right way”*; *“I see myself while practicing this profession in the future. It’s worth doing it.”*

Another category of answers focused on personal development. Pre- service students appreciated as a successful aspect the fact that they could discover or develop desirable personal qualities for the didactic profession, such as: patience, empathy, confidence, and creativity. The following statements reflect this situation: *“I found myself quite creative when I had to teach lessons. Even my mentor noticed this.”*; *“The fact that I am a patient and an understanding person has helped me in relationship with the students. I understood them and offered my support when they needed it.”*; *“I conquered my public-speaking fear and gained more self-confidence.”*

Getting confirmation on some personal characteristics or discovering other characteristics in the given context, represents a cognitive and/or emotional gain for the participants, not to be neglected when facing such an important issue as professional preparation.

The second most successful aspects of practicum (25.14%) were grouped under the theme “student-related”. The pre-service teachers appreciated the opportunity to know and interact with students as a successful element of practicum. Their comments reflect it: *“Most students were respectful and cooperative with us, even though the age gap between us is of only a few years.”*; *“I saw how different students were when it comes to interests, skills, working style, aspirations, even though they are in the same class.”*; *“I discovered some students that are interested in studying and care about their future”*.

The third category of answers (15.78%) grouped participants’ statements under the theme “mentor or university supervisor related aspects”. The pre-service teachers especially emphasized the value of having the opportunity to learn from school mentors, by observing their lessons and participating in the discussions after the lessons, by receiving guidance for planning teaching and feed-back. A good relationship with school mentors was also mentioned. Here are some examples of such comments: *“Working with an experienced teacher was a great chance for me. The lessons were high quality and we analyzed them together. We had useful discussions.”*; *“We had the support of our mentor throughout our practicum. The feedback I received was of great help in preparing the lessons.”*; *“I liked that our mentor didn’t make us feel inferior, instead treated us like partners and permanently encouraged us; A true model teacher.”* These comments confirm that mentors are “central figures” for pre-service teachers during their practicum.

Another source for learning was considered to be the university supervisors. It’s true that less comments pointed at them compared with those regarding mentors; this aspect can be correlated with the fact that university supervisors, unlike mentors, had to handle more than one group of students at a time. As a consequence, university supervisors couldn’t assist all the lessons pre-service teachers taught, but each pre-service teacher was assisted at least once by a university supervisor. Future teachers appreciated the clarity of the requirements that came from the university supervisor and, also, the feedback they received during the practicum: *“My university supervisor insisted on being organized in managing the documents during practicum. Clear requirements received from the beginning of the semester have helped me to do*

that.”; *“At the end of one lesson I taught, my university supervisor helped me to identify its strengths and weaknesses. Thanks to that discussion, I learned to learn from mistakes.”*

Another category of comments (6.14%) was about “school-related aspects” theme. Through the practicum, the pre-service teachers had the occasion to participate in the culture of the schools where the practicum took place; they observed and participated in the school life, meetings, projects and various educational activities with students, all of these helping them better understand the way schools work. One of the participants wrote: *“I found it interesting to be back in school, to observe the relationships between teachers and students, the way in which rules are respected in the hallways, libraries, the school yard, not just in classes”*. Another respondent wrote: *“I was pleasantly surprised by the diversity of projects and activities that took place in school. During my practicum I had the opportunity to participate in an activity teachers and students prepared for Romania’s National Day.”*

There were comments- less in percentage (5.26%), that contained general reflections on the “teaching profession-related aspects”. Knowing the multiple roles a teacher must take, the responsibility teaching involves were just two of the aspects these comments contained: *“I learned that being a teacher means more than just teaching, it involves more activities such as: preparing the curriculum documents, knowing students, extra-curricular activities, collaborating with parents etc. ”*; *“I understood that the teaching profession is complex and needs a lot of training, a lot of patience, work, great responsibility and an altruistic attitude. Done with passion, it brings satisfactions.”*

The diversity of aspects the pre-service teachers mentioned in their comments prove that the practicum is a training form with a generous potential for initiating future teachers in learning about teaching, in developing professional relationship with school students and mentors, in considering the personal potential related to teaching profession or in understanding the school culture and the complexity of the teaching profession.

Regarding the problems students had to face or the less successful aspects of practicum, there have been 167 complaints in the comments. Based on their content analysis the following themes have been identified: (1) “self-related”; (2) “student-related”; (3) “school-related”; (4) “practicum organization – related aspects”, presented in Table 02.

Table 02. The less successful aspects of practicum as viewed by the pre-service teachers

Themes:	Percentages
Self-related aspects	35.79%
Student-related aspects	32.95%
School-related aspects	20.45%
Organizing practicum-related aspects	10.79%

Most answers were in the first two themes: “self-related” (35.79%) and “student-related aspects” (32.95%). Thus, the participants wrote about their lack of knowledge or/and limited skills in areas such as: designing and teaching, classroom management. Their comments illustrate the situations they have faced: *“It was difficult preparing the necessary information for teaching and preparing the worksheets for the students. It took me more time than I’d have thought.”*; *“It was hard to know how much time students need for each activity. During my first lesson I couldn’t get the timing right.”*; *“Sometimes I wasn’t sure which method to use and I couldn’t always hold the attention of the pupils”*; *“I didn’t know how to maintain a*

balance between authority/ permissiveness”. Emotional issues have also been mentioned, especially related to self-control of emotions during teaching: *“When I taught the lesson I could feel nerves slowing down my communication abilities. I spoke softer than I had too and sometimes I was incoherent.”*; *“Each lesson was difficult because of my nerves. I still have a fear of public speaking”*.

When it comes to “student related aspects”, the participant’s answers were mostly in regard to some pupils behavior (lack of attention, naughtiness, lack of respect etc.) but, also their diversity in terms of needs and interests. For example: *“The energy of the pupils who weren’t interested created me real difficulties”*; *“Some pupils were really noisy and didn’t show us pre-service teachers the same respect they showed their teachers. There were special needs students in the class too, and they required special attention”*.

Issues related to school resources and spaces were also mentioned by pre-service teachers (20.45%), for example: *“In the school where I taught, the materials were old and few. I wish I’d have found modern technologies that we could have learned to use in teaching”*; *“There was no place in the school where we could sit and talk about the lessons we had observed/taught. We had these talks during breaks, in the students’ classrooms. When the next classes started we had to stop even if the discussion wasn’t finished.”*

Another problem the respondents signaled was related to the organization of practice (10.79%), such as the size of the practice groups and the program at the university during the day of practicum. The pre-service students appreciated that the practice groups were too numerous and that there was no balancing with the university program on the day of practicum. The comments below illustrate these issues: *“We were too many pre-service teachers for one mentor. We could barely fit inside the classroom.”*; *“We had other classes at university the same day we had practicum activities. The program was quite full and tedious.”*

Through the open questions in the questionnaire, we managed to bring to light the less successful aspects of the practice, which concerned different aspects. Faced with teaching for the first time, the pre-service teachers confronted their own limits first, and those came from their still growing skills. It is necessary that teacher training program be developed in the direction of enhancing teaching skills, class management, and communication skills. The issues with school resources depend on financial issues and school management. Some of the problems with the practicum organization are also related to financial issues (having smaller groups for each mentor implies costs for paying more mentors), while others need a better communication between the university structures (the department of teacher preparation and the faculties that students are enrolled in) in order to balance the students’ schedule in their practicum days.

After identifying the most and the less successful aspects in practice, the participants in this study were asked to provide suggestions for developing a more successful practicum. The pre-service teachers made 156 suggestions for optimizing the practicum. Based on the content analysis they were grouped in the following themes: “schools”, “university curriculum”, “organizing the practicum” and “mentors related” suggestions.

Most suggestions (33.97%) were in the school-related aspects. In the schools where they have their practicum activities, the future teachers would like to find: *“more resources for teaching”*, *“modern equipment for teaching and learning”*, *“larger rooms for the classes where future teachers have their practicum”*, *“special spaces for the meetings between mentors and the groups of practicum students.”* These suggestions could inspire school managers for a better institutional policy regarding a quality practicum program in their schools.

A part of the suggestions (30.76%) were about optimizing or even developing the university curriculum. Thus, the participants suggested more emphasis on treating themes within the actual teacher training curriculum, such as: the student centered approach, differentiated instruction, planning lessons, student assessment, class management, motivating children to learn, organizing extracurricular activities for students. All these aspects are already components of the theoretical courses pre-service teachers attend during the initial training for the didactic profession, but the suggestions coming from them are welcomed, because they can inspire the teacher educators to focus more on these aspects during the course and seminar activities. Thus, the respondents' suggestions may be embedded in the teaching and learning practices of several subjects of the study program, such as: Educational Psychology, Pedagogy, Didactic of the subject domain, or Class management. Another suggestion from future teachers has been *"to learn about the integration of new technologies in teaching, learning or student assessment process"*. This suggestion is a reasonable one taking into consideration that being a teacher in the 21st century involves digital competences and the use of new technologies in instruction. Fortunately, these issues will be answered in the Computer-assisted training course, scheduled for the semester immediately following the one in which this research was conducted.

Some suggestions aimed at extending or developing the curriculum by: *"increasing the duration of practicum"; "starting practicum earlier"; "introduction of a course focused on working with children with special needs"*. The fact that the curriculum for the initial training of teachers doesn't have a module for special needs children education is a weak point, considering that regular schools have such special needs students. If they aren't prepared for this type of education during their formation stage, how will they manage the special needs students as novice teachers? An initiation for future teachers in working with children with different disabilities is a real necessity.

Another suggestions were grouped under the "organizing the practicum" theme (23.71%), relevant to the university supervisors. We mention some of these ideas: *"It would benefit us to see more than one school per semester, more and different", "I wish there were less students for one mentor, so there's time for each pre-service teacher feedback", "having less classes in the days when we have practicum", "interacting with other teachers in schools, not only with the mentor."*

There were some suggestions for the mentors too (11.53%). Here are some of them: *"using more active methods and technology", "more time for lesson analysis", "involving us in designing and correcting assessment tests", "facilitating contact with students' parents in case of need", "more patience and tolerance in the relationship with us, as future teachers"*.

These pre-service teachers' suggestions are further evidence that university courses and practicum in schools should be approached and improved side by side. Some areas of instruction need to be strengthened and practicum programs should be adapted to support the pre-service teacher's needs. Even curricula designed by Ministry of National Education can be developed taking into account the voice of future teachers (by extending the practicum's duration, diversifying or adding more classes such as Teaching pupils with special educational needs). Built on this knowledge, the support for the development of future teachers can be optimized.

7. Conclusion

This investigation allowed future teachers to reflect on the successful and less successful aspects of their first semester of practicum, based on the experiences they lived through, even to make suggestions about optimizing the practicum. The participants reported more successful than less successful aspects of the practicum, which can be a reliable indicator of their degree of satisfaction with the practicum experience. The pre-service teachers' responses reflected various aspects related to themselves, pupils, school, mentors or university supervisors, teaching profession, mirroring a profound understanding of the practicum. Their suggestions about optimizing the practicum are relevant to all involved in designing and implementing it: teacher educators, mentors in schools, school principals.

The next stage of this study is to investigate the pre-service teachers' perceptions at the end of their second semester of practicum (this is at the end of the teacher education program), when they are even closer to the reality of being teachers, and to compare the data.

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