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**THEORETICAL OVERVIEW OF THE PRACTICUM PROGRAMS
FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS**

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Abstract

The teaching practicum programs in schools represent a key element in teacher training in Higher Education Institutions, in terms of connecting curricular content with professional competencies development and real life situations. The current study provides a contemporary overview of the practicum programs in training special education pre-service teachers in Israel, as expressed in theoretical papers and concurrent studies examining practicum experiences. The practicum programs are examined from the perspective of their theoretical rationale, scope and various formats. There are three practicum models in Israel: the traditional model, the Professional Development Schools (PDS) model, characterized by a collaboration between the academic teacher training colleges and the schools where the practicum training is conducted, and the "academy-class" model. The last model focuses on the development of broad-scope partnership processes between schools and colleges, while presenting the student as a co-teacher in the class and emphasizing the practicum's intensity (3 days per week). Additionally, this theoretical paper includes lines of discussion for future comparative analysis of the perceptions and attitudes towards the practicum program by Arab and Jewish pre-service teachers in special education in Israel.

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1. Introduction

Based on the assumption that learning is achieved through experience, experimental learning is considered at the core of curriculums in teacher training institutions (Maskit & Mevarch, 2013). The curriculums at Israeli education colleges place an emphasis on combining theoretical studies with practical experiences that take place in educational frameworks during the course of the students' educational studies. The colleges also offer courses that train special education teachers, where the practicums take place at special education frameworks (Shalev & Gilat, 2017).

1.1. Practicum in special education

In the state of Israel, special education training takes place in education colleges. In 2008, the Council for Higher Education published "guidelines for teacher training", based on the recommended principals expressed in international literature. According to these guidelines, special education is perceived as a unique discipline. Teachers who are trained in special education can teach in both special education and integrative frameworks (Avisar & Vogel, 2014). According to a report published in England in 2008 by the Training and Development Agency (TDA), which is responsible for improving the quality and quantity of educational candidates, there is a significant importance in experiencing special education frameworks. Instructors, teachers and pre-service teachers (PSTs) indicate the positive education this experience has on the development and cultivation of confidence and self-efficacy in educational work with special needs children (Lindsay et al., 2010).

At international level, a few studies have examined the impact of practicums in special education schools on pre-service teachers and their findings are diverse. In Ireland, for example, a study was conducted on pre-service teachers who underwent a practicum program in special education schools. The results indicated that following the practicum, the pre-service teachers' level of support for integrating students with severe and complex disabilities in general schools decreased, most probably because these schools were not equipped to accommodate the needs of such students (Lambe & Bones, 2008).

A follow-up study (Feeney et al., 2010), which gathered data on pre-service teachers who underwent a practicum in a special education school in England over a period of eight years, found that the pre-service teachers identified changes in their professional identity, their stances and teaching skills. The researchers interpreted this as an increase in their sense of self-confidence, in their ability to accommodate students with disabilities and the recognition that all children are constantly learning and developing. Therefore, the researchers recommended to oblige all PSTs to undergo practicums in special education schools.

The study by Recchia and Puig (2011) conducted an in-depth analysis of the pedagogical journals of PSTs who underwent a practicum in a special education school in Colombia. The study found the practicum to be of significant importance, as it expanded the pre-service teachers' understanding of the meaning of learning environments to students with severe and complex disabilities, contributed to their openness and thinking flexibility and to the development of insights and understanding of educating special needs students.

Avisar and Vogel (2014) examined the change that occurred in the stances towards integrating PSTs in special education programs in Israel, by including a personal integration plan for students with severe and complex disabilities in the practicum. According to this study, the involvement of pre-service teachers in the planning and operating of an integration plan had a significant impact on formulating stances and perceptions, thus deepening their knowledge and helping them acquiring skills for working with students with severe and complex disabilities.

1.2. The theoretical rationale of the practicum

Teacher training programs in Israel and across the world place a great emphasis on a broad practical training of pre-service teachers, aimed to best prepare them to a classroom of children with various needs, to improve their teaching skills and their ability to link between theoretical and practical knowledge in order to develop their professional self-efficacy (Gardiner, 2011).

According to Anderson and Stillman (2013), the practicum is often perceived as the most meaningful component in educational training. Several researchers describe the practicum as a clinical trial that takes place in the educational field in real time (Nissim & Nifeld, 2020; Ran, 2018). When the theoretical knowledge that is acquired in the college is translated into a practical aspect, it has the potential to form teachers with high academic abilities and knowledge, and to equip them with practical tools required to cope with their field placement. Other researchers perceive the practicum as a phase in which pre-service teachers are required to implement and practice theories in schools, under the supervision of more experienced teachers and special pedagogical instructors from the academy (Abu Ajaj & Abu Saad, 2020; Assadi et al., 2019).

Landon-Hay and associates (Landon-Hays et al., 2020) consider that educator's preparation programs have two main goals: to promote the professional growth of pre-service teachers by increasing their understanding of the teaching profession, its content and context and to provide real-life experiences of the teaching profession to PSTs via the practicums and field placements.

Field placements allow pre-service teachers to experience interaction with students, colleagues and administrative staff while implementing the theoretical, academic, managerial and behavioral skills they acquired during their education, to actual classrooms (Maheady et al., 2014; Landon-Hays et al., 2020). These experiences allow PSTs to better understand how the environmental factors, such as the school culture, the state and the district policies, might affect the daily conduct in the classroom. Through actual classroom experiences, the pre-service teachers can gain an advantage over mere didactic teaching (Landon-Hays et al., 2020).

According to Assadi and Murad (2017), as part of the practicum at schools, the pre-service teachers have the opportunities to become familiar with various aspects of the education system, including the facilities, curriculum and student population. They will also become familiar with textbooks and didactic aids used in teaching a variety of subjects and disciplines, taught using various teaching methods. The practical training will allow the PSTs to acquire work habits, learn how to prepare balanced and efficient lesson plans, and introduce an adequate teaching unit.

1.3. The scope of the Practicum

According to Anderson and Stillman (2013), despite the general consensus on the importance of practical experiences in teaching, the duration of such practicums is not definitive. As per Yonay (2003), the Council for Higher Education (1981) and the Ministry of Education (2014) require the practicum in teacher colleges in Israel to span over their three years of education. The scope of the practicum programs is usually defined by two concepts:

1. A spaced practicum (also known as a “weekly practicum” or “regular practicum”) – where pre-service teachers attend classes in schools once or twice a week throughout the entire or part of the school year.
2. A continuous practicum (also known as “practicum work week”): where pre-service teachers experience teaching in a continuous manner, every day for a week or two, with up to two such potential periods during the school year.

Majority of the colleges in Israel implement both types of practicums. Some institutions schedule the practicum for a day or two per week in each of the three education years, as well as a massed practice of ten days one or twice a year, and at times also a massed practicum week at the beginning of the school year. Other colleges hold the practicum for one day per week in the first year or avoid it altogether during that period. In the second and third years, one practicum day is held per week and the massed practice is held over an entire week, twice a year.

1.4. Practicum models in teacher training programs

In Israel, there are various models to practicums. Each model emphasizes the connection of the college with the schools where the PSTs are placed, as well as the intensity of the practicum and the level of the pre-service teachers’ involvement. The models range from traditional models where the connection with the school is scarce (Alian & Daniel-Saad, 2013), to models that perceive the school as a key element in the professional development of pre-service teachers and as such, they combine reciprocal processes of development and learning (Ran, 2018). According to Ran (2018), the practicums developed in recent years place an emphasis on both practical and professional aspects of teaching through spaced practicum at schools. Unlike the traditional practicums, the modern practicums believe in deepening the theoretical and academic knowledge separately from the practical knowledge.

Most academic teacher education colleges combine the practicum program between the various training models: traditional practicum, PDS and the "academy-class" model (Assadi & Murad, 2017).

The practicum models in special education in Israel are described as it follows:

1. **The traditional model** – In this model, which is frequently used in teacher education colleges in Israel, PSTs are sent to schools where they observe lessons in the subject matters that they study at the college, while being under the supervision of the school teachers. The disadvantage of this model is the sense of disassociation the PSTs feel between the theoretical studies and the practical experience in the schools (Assadi & Murad, 2017). According to Alian and Daniel-Saad (2013), in the traditional model practicum, the pre-service teacher is interacting with one specific professional teacher and has no interactions with others at the school. As per Korthagen et al. (2006) and

associates, this model does not express a meaningful partnership between colleagues, instructors and PSTs in both learning and teaching.

2. **The Professional Development Schools (PDS) Model** – Since the 1980's, several reforms in the partnership between the training schools and the academic institutions have taken place in England, the U.S., and in other countries, including Israel. These reforms were at the base of different teacher training models developed by experts from Israeli Ministry of Education, including the American model known as Professional Development Schools (PDS) (Assadi & Murad, 2017). The PDS is a model activated by the U.S National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2001). The model emphasizes the importance of practicums in the pre-service teachers' training process, as well as the partnerships and collaborations between the academic institutions and the schools. For this purpose, standards for professional development schools have been set and only the schools that meet these standards are recognized as PDS by the NCATE.

According to Darling-Hammond (2010), the existence of a practicum at a quality framework, is a key component in a substantial training. As such, it is important the PSTs to be placed in chosen schools in which the academic institution is involved and seeks to advance them, such as the PDS schools. This type of experience improves the personal and professional development of PSTs. Other researchers believe that the PDS model seeks to establish the field abilities of pre-service teachers by strengthening the partnerships between the academy and the schools during the practicum, based on the perception that the schools contribute to their professional development (Abu Ajaj & Abu Saad, 2020; Ronen et al., 2018).

3. **The “Class-Academy” model** – This model was first suggested by the Israeli Ministry of Education in 2014, with the objective to change teachers' training based on partnerships and collaborations between academy institutes and leading schools. The purpose of this collaboration was to improving the qualities of training processes, teaching and professional development, while developing meaningful learning in education institutes and expanding the partnerships between universities and schools (Ministry of Education in Israel, 2014). According to Ronen et al. (2018), the “class-academy” model is found on the spectrum between the two practicum models: the traditional and collaborative models, with three main goals: (1) promotion of significant learning based on co-teaching of the experienced teacher and the PST; (2) professional development of the PST and the instructor; (3) development of educational leadership and beneficial school climate.

According to Abu Ajaj and Abu Saad (2020), the schools activating the “class-academy” model are hand-picked by the Ministry of Education. In order to ensure the successful training of PSTs and the enrichment of their knowledge and skills, the teachers who train in the program have both seniority and a pedagogical orientation.

In the co-teaching practicum, the pre-service teacher is integrated as a second teacher in the classroom and is de facto a partner and colleague to the training teacher in both the teaching aspects and other areas of responsibility (Bacharach et al., 2004). Co-teaching has clear advantages to its participants, such as: the training teachers report of significant professional development, the pre-service teachers experience a mutual learning process with the training teacher and gain experience in collaborations

within the school systems, and the students in the classroom are exposed to more mediation opportunities and experience educational advancement (Bacharach et al., 2004; Nissim & Nifeld, 2020).

2. Problem Statement

- Several studies in Israel and abroad have examined the pre-service teachers' various training courses with practice components. However, there is scarce literature examining the practicum programs in training special education pre-service teachers in Israel.

3. Research Questions

Which practicum models are presented in the literature for training pre-service teachers in special education in Israel?

4. Purpose of the Study

The current study provides a contemporary overview of the practicum programs in training special education pre-service teachers in Israel, as expressed in theoretical papers and concurrent studies examining practicum experiences.

5. Research Methods

The current study is a theoretical study based on concurrent literature review, examining the practicum programs in special education in Israel, by analysing the program's theoretical rationale, its scope, the various models of practicums that exist in teacher training institutions in Israel and by depicting the uniqueness of the practicum program in Israel compared to similar programs across the world, from the different perspectives introduced in prior theories and studies.

6. Findings

A review of local Israeli and international literature indicates that practical experience has a significant role in the training of pre-service teachers in special education frameworks. The literature refers to special education as a discipline of its own. In Israel there are three practicum models:

1. The traditional model.
2. The Professional Development Model (PDS), characterized by a cooperation between the academic teacher training colleges and the schools in which the practicum is held.
3. The "class-academy" model, which focuses on developing broad partnership processes between the schools and the colleges and presents the pre-service teachers as a co-teacher in the classroom while placing an emphasis on the intensity of the practicum.

The findings of the current study indicate that majority of the practicums held in Israel have similar bases to other programs across the world, such as the traditional model and the PDS model. However, our study indicated that the "class-academy" model of the practicum, which was set by the

Israeli Ministry of Education in 2004, is exclusive to Israel. The scope of the practicum of pre-service teachers is greater in the “class academy” model than in other practicums, as it is held during three days per week in each school year (Abu Ajaj & Abu Saad, 2020). This intense practicum allows pre-service teachers to experience diverse teaching systems (teaching in a pair, singular learning, group learning and investigative learning) and exposes them to a variety of teacher roles, the school activities and familiarity with its organizational structure (Maskit & Mevarch, 2013).

7. Conclusion

The current study sheds light on the longtime existing practicums and the recently developed ones, while placing an emphasis on their contribution in training pre-service teachers. The special education training program and the practicum of pre-service teachers in special education will be further examined in the future in a more comprehensive study. This study aims to investigate the role of special education practicum experience in the professional development, role perception and self-efficacy of Israeli pre-service teachers: Intercultural analysis. The specific goals are:

1. To examine the differences and similarities between Arab and Jewish PSTs in their professional identity, their perceptions of the role of a special education teacher and their self-efficacy in teaching in the beginning and in the end of the semester (with and without participating in special education practicum program).
2. To examine the short-term (after the semestrial program) and long-term (after the second semester) impact of a special education practicum program among Arab and Jewish pre-service teachers on their perceptions on personal and professional identity.
3. To examine pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties they faced, their support systems and the help they receive during the training, and the contribution of these to their professional development.

This future study may have a local contribution by conducting a comparison between two sectors of the Israeli society, since the practicum program will be examined by the researcher among pre-service teachers during the practicums in special education classes in one of the Israeli colleges while comparing between the Arab and Jewish sectors of the Israeli society who attend the same program and experience the same education. Seeing as the Arab sector is considered a minority among the Israeli society, the comparison between the two sectors will be the novelty in the field of special education at national level. With regard to the international contribution, the findings of a comparison between the two sectors in the future study can shed light on other minority groups that are integrated in other countries across the world.

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