

## *Is there a need for a practicum experience in the Bachelor of Special Education Program at Memorial University? – Teachers' and administrators' perspectives.*

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### **Abstract**

Using open-ended survey questions, experiences and opinions regarding the extent to which a practicum course in special education prepares special education teachers to teach students with exceptionalities in individual, in-class grouping and inclusive settings is explored. Perceptions of 29 preservice special education teachers, 20 practising teachers and 18 administrators were sought regarding the need for a practicum course, reasons for requesting a waiver of the course and recommended changes to the practicum. Findings indicate that preservice teachers perceived more positive benefits of the practicum than practising teachers. Preservice and practising special education teachers and administrators felt that the practicum better prepared special education teachers for individualized than inclusive instruction. Implications of findings are discussed within Memorial University's mission, values and principles.

### **Context for the Research**

The Special Education Working Group in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University, while engaged in their ongoing efforts to ensure relevancy of courses in the Bachelor of Special Education Degree Program, questioned whether Education 3650 a practicum course of three (3) credit hours was necessary since many of the teacher candidates completing this Degree Program have already finished an introductory and extended internship experience as part of their initial Bachelor of Education Degree Program. The question regarding the importance of a special education practicum experience has become more timely within the current provincial context of an expanding role of special education teachers in inclusive classrooms (Government of NL, 2011).

Recalling the meaningfulness of my own special education practicum experience at Memorial University in the early 1980s, I pondered whether my taken-for-granted assumptions about the critical importance of a special education practicum were consistent with current perceptions of special education teacher candidates, practising teachers and administrators. Although I had also experienced a semester-long internship during my Bachelor of Education Degree Program as well as seven (7) years as a classroom teacher, the special education practicum course had provided a means for me to create new knowledge by extending my theories and practices of teaching and learning while engaging in authentic hands-on experiences of helping students meet their individual learning needs. I recognized that research-based practises and programs have changed since my special education practicum days and that many of the cardboard games I developed have been replaced with effective technology and more contextualized learning experiences in inclusive environments. However, I assumed that my "storied life" of engaged conversations with peers, instructors and cooperating teachers regarding educating students with exceptionalities and the opportunities for observation and constructive guidance about special education teaching practices which I had experienced and valued were still considered meaningful and relevant by special education teacher candidates as well as practising special

education teachers and their school administrators (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). The use of narrative to explore the interconnectedness between personal and academic experiences, values and beliefs has been explored in previous issues of the Morning Watch. With my practicum story, I entered the world of preservice and practising teachers and administrators through their responses to open-ended survey questions as I tried to understand their perceptions of the special education practicum experience at Memorial.

Historically, within national and international contexts, the need for improved special education teacher preparation has been identified and field experiences in special education preparation programs continue to be reconfigured to meet professional standards (Brownell et al., 2010). In addition, although identification in the literature of the need for improvements in special education teacher preparation programs and research regarding the nature and effectiveness of special education practicum experiences was widespread, I quickly realized that research regarding perceptions of preservice special education teachers, and school, district, university and provincial administrators was not as prevalent (Ergenekon et al., 2008; Sindelar et al., 2010).

To address this gap in the literature and to provide a forum for teachers and administrators to explore the meaningfulness and relevance of the current practicum experience, a review of the practicum course in the Bachelor of Special Education Degree Program was undertaken. Surveys, comprised of open-ended questions, regarding perceptions of the extent to which the practicum course prepares special education teachers for individual and inclusive instruction, were completed by preservice and practicing teachers and administrators. Sixty-seven (67) respondents completed the surveys; 29 of whom were preservice teachers who were completing or had recently completed the practicum. Twenty (20) of the respondents were practising special education teachers and graduates of the Degree Program while 18 of the participants were in administrative roles as either, course instructor, coordinator of undergraduate studies, principal, cooperating teacher, district program specialist for student support services or provincial consultant for student support services.

Data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. However, results based on quantitative analysis are presented in this paper, while qualitative analysis of the data will be discussed in follow-up issues of the Morning Watch. Simple and combined percentage values, frequency counts and rank ordering were used to explain and reflect upon the data. The following common themes emerged from the survey data which are followed with discussion of related literature (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

### **Theme 1      Preservice and Practising Teachers Recognize the Need for a Practicum Experience**

*Preservice and practicing teachers were unanimous in their recognition of the need for a practicum course; 96.15% of preservice teachers and 80% of practising teachers identified a need for a practicum course.*

The research literature has identified several benefits of the special education practicum experience including easing the transition into the role of special education teacher, helping decrease stress and anxiety related to special education teaching and increasing special education teacher retention.

*Transition from role of student to teacher.* Practicum in special education has been described as the most important component of an effective special education teacher preparation program (Recchia & Puig, 2011; Conderman, et al., 2012). Practicum offers opportunity for preservice special education teacher candidates to transition from the role of student to that of teacher through active inquiry and engagement in authentic teaching and learning environments (Clifford et al., 2005; Conderman et al., 2005). Preservice teachers become socialized into the teaching profession through development of improved collaboration and communication skills and supportive relationships with schools, students, cooperating teachers, university supervisors and parents (Leko et al., 2012; Ergenekon et al., 2008).

*Decrease in stress and anxiety.* Beginning special education teachers who lack adequate initial preparation often experience increased stress and disillusionment about teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Rice, 2003). Engaging in practicum experiences has been associated with teachers' positive perceptions of teaching competence and attitudes toward diversity, feelings of self-efficacy as well as improved student performance (Leko et al., 2012; Ralph et al, 2007; Neville et al., 2005).

*Increase retention.* Limited practicum experience has also been identified as the most significant factor affecting the attrition rate of special education teachers, particularly beginning special education teachers (Boe et al., 2007; McLeskey et al., 2004, Connelly & Graham, 2009). According to The National Center for Education Statistics, 29% of new special education teachers without practicum or internship experiences left the profession within five (5) years compared with 15% who had completed field experiences (Conderman et al., 2005).

## **Theme 2      Teachers and Administrators Request Increased Practical Hands-on Experience**

*Preservice and practising special education teachers noted that the practicum experience needs to provide more opportunity for practical application of theoretical knowledge. Only 39.28% of preservice teachers and 17.64% of practising teachers described the practicum as a hands-on experience. Practicing teachers identified the need for less focus on theory and more on practical application including inclusion and hands-on experiences.*

Like the research findings of this study, other research has identified teachers' preferences for practical experience of course content. This practical hands-on experience has been associated with reducing the theory-practice gap.

*Teachers preferred practical application of course content.* The most frequent change suggested to teacher education programs has been the need for more thorough and hands-on application of learning for teacher candidates (Conderman et al., 2012; Ergenekon et al., 2008). Hands-on application of learning through authentic practicum experiences allows relating of experiences with skills and dispositions while developing new knowledge (Kold, 2005).

*Theory-practice gap.* The literature also confirms that practicum experiences are often disconnected from coursework and teaching responsibilities (Bay & Parker-Katz, 2009; Conderman et al, 2012). Preservice teachers are frequently required to complete knowledge and theoretical course content prior to application of learning (Leko et al., 2012). Thus, it is critical

that practicum experiences help close the gap between theoretical and practical components of teacher education (West & Hudson, 2010). However, in addition to practical application of course content, the importance of theoretical understanding cannot be ignored (Ergenekon et al., 2008; Conderman et al., 2005). Understanding of underlying theories of test development, learning, and exceptionalities is required in order to competently develop and implement general and child-specific practices with the goal of empowering teachers to form their own theories and beliefs to guide their teaching and learning.

### **Theme 3      The Need to Extend Duration of the Practicum Experience is Identified**

*When asked “What if any changes are needed to Education 3650?” the most frequent suggestion by preservice teachers (55.55%) and administrators (37.50%) was that the practicum should be of a longer duration similar to an internship in order to “delve into the full role of a special education teacher,” collaborate with special education teachers, and plan and participate in individualized education programs (IEPs). Practising teachers on the other hand were less concerned with the practicum being of a longer duration as long as it occurred in inclusive settings. Only 31.25% of practising teachers identified longer duration as a needed change to the practicum.*

These views align with the recurrent concern expressed throughout the literature regarding inadequate length of the special education practicum and the need for extended practicum placements (Ergenekon et al., 2008; Connelly & Graham, 2009). Studies of special education teacher education have demonstrated benefits of extended practicum experiences to the overall quality of the special education teacher preparation program (Ralph et al., 2008). Extended practicum opportunities offer preservice teachers sufficient time to acquire and improve knowledge of content subject matter and pedagogy as well as engage in active inquiry based practises (Boe et al. 2007). In addition, sufficient duration of practicum allows preservice and practising teachers time to utilize specific evidence-based teaching strategies in their practicum placements and to offer active experiential learning opportunities, e.g., inquiry based practices and collaborative and problem-based learning experiences as well as curriculum accommodation and differentiation, assistive technology, increased collaboration and IEP development (Sharma et al., 2012; Leko et al., 2012; Conderman et al., 2005; Brownell et al., 2005; Ergul et al. 2013). Duration has also been identified as a strong predictor of special education teacher retention (Connelly & Graham, 2009). Other factors interacting with duration of practicum and affecting special education teacher retention include teacher characteristics, the school environment, administrative support, and increased special education student enrolment (Billingsley, 2003; Brownell et al., 2010).

### **Theme 4      Requesting a Waiver of the Practicum is Not Always Teachers’ Preference**

*Only two (2) preservice teachers and four (4) practising teachers in this study had requested a waiver of the practicum course. The unanimous reasons for requesting a waiver were prior teaching experience and the requirement that the practicum be completed while on St. John’s campus. Most (83%) of the six participants who requested a waiver were teaching in rural areas. The literature is consistent regarding connections between sufficient practicum hours and adequate preparation for special education teaching roles (Connelly & Graham, 2009).*

However, alternative routes to completion of special education teacher education programs are increasing and include waiving or substituting the practicum with a more content-oriented course (Conderman et al., 2005).

National and international requirements for admission into the special education program usually require candidates to hold an acceptable prior degree in education. However, it cannot be assumed that this prior degree provided an appropriate practicum experience for preservice special education teachers. Although differences in theoretical foundations of teaching and learning between special education and general education teacher preparation programs are narrowing, differences remain. General education teacher preparation programs frequently adopt more constructivist theories of teaching and learning with emphasis on specific subject matter pedagogy, whereas special education teacher preparation programs usually involve a combination of positivist and constructivist theories of teaching and learning including competency-based approaches and evidence-based teaching strategies for students with specific exceptionalities (Brownell et al., 2005).

### **Theme 5 Preservice Teachers feel Better Prepared for Group and Inclusive Education**

*Twice as many (38.45%) preservice teachers, as practising teachers (17.64%) and administrators (17.64%) indicated that the practicum adequately prepares teachers for inclusive teaching and recommended the need for practicum placements in inclusive rather than in pull out settings. Similarly, 59.25% of preservice teachers and 11.76% of practising teachers felt that the practicum adequately prepares them for teaching groups of students. On the other hand, almost all preservice teachers (92.00%), 90.00% of practicing teachers and 56.25% of administrators believed that the practicum prepares special education teachers for working with individual students.*

*Practicum under-emphasizes inclusive teaching and learning and over-emphasizes individualized instruction.* Other research studies have concluded that preservice teachers feel better prepared than practising teachers for teaching in inclusive environments (Winter, 2006; Recchia & Puig, 2011). Preservice teachers in Sharma et al.'s (2012) study also indicated feelings of improved efficacy in inclusive instruction.

Preservice teachers' more positive perceptions of preparedness for teaching within inclusive structures may be influenced by increased emphasis in teacher education programs and calendar descriptions towards inclusive teaching (Sharma et al., 2012; Kuyini & Desai, 2007). Such a structure focuses on understanding and enhancing the student's learning context or environment rather than over-reliance on fixing student deficits through individualized instruction.

However, special education teachers require preparation to teach across both inclusive and pull-out environments within the school setting (Recchia & Puig, 2011; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2011). Effective pull-out interventions have reported positive outcomes including increased teacher awareness of the need for and nature of flexible teaching for all children as well as comprehensive development of their special education teacher identities (Recchia & Puig, 2011). Through inclusive practices, preservice and practising special

education teachers are helped to become more mindful of “values of pluralism” and disability theory while cautious of any unintended consequences of pull-out practices (Baglieri et al. 2011).

**Theme 6: Memorial University practices its underlying values and principles.**

This research has allowed the researcher an opportunity to contribute to available research concerning the usefulness of practicum in special education teacher education and the involvement of special education in school-community partnerships. However, most importantly, the research has demonstrated Memorial University’s recognition of its obligation to the people of Newfoundland and Labrador and its commitment to quality and excellence in the delivery of its programs and services. The research solicited perceptions of preservice and practising special education teachers and administrators regarding Education 3650, a special education practicum course. The Special Education Committee in the Faculty of Education listened and were responsive to the people of the province and have maintained the practicum course in its perceived rightful place within the Bachelor of Special Education Degree Program.

**Summary**

Preservice and practising teachers’ and administrators’ views were generally reflective of the research in special education teacher preparation. There was strong recognition among participants of the importance of the practicum experience in the Bachelor of Special Education Program, as well as the need for continuation and possible extension of the practicum. While participants valued the practical hands-on experience of the practicum, they were not as positive regarding the utility of theoretical foundations of special education teacher preparation. Participants identified the current emphasis of the practicum on preparation of teachers for individualized settings, while expressing the need for increased practicum experiences in group and inclusive settings.

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