



The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Effects on the Preservice Teacher Practicum: A Literature Review

Joseph Vancell¹

University of Malta, Malta¹

Abstract

During the past year, schools and universities, shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic causing disruptions in initial teacher education in many parts of the world. The training dimension that was hardest hit was the pre-service practicum. Due to the shutdown, prospective teachers were deprived of the 'normal' field experience and actual classroom teaching practices in authentic school settings. Various practicum modalities however unfolded all over the globe and these are documented in many papers published during 2020 and early 2021. Through a systematic literature review, this paper attempts to answer the question: How has COVID-19 impacted teacher education and particularly the students' practicum? It explores how pedagogies adapted when practicum students, learners and examiners moved to new online spaces. It describes how established student teaching practices changed quickly, with students showing an immense disposition for change. However, despite the rapid move, many principles and teaching philosophies and orientations remained unchanged. This research is relevant on an international level as it considers the alternative pedagogies and technologies that can support professional learning in lieu of a non-classroom based practicum. It also reveals that it is critical for teacher education institutions and tutors to think beyond normal educational practices so that they can plan and consider limitations that they may face in the future. It argues that it is necessary to provide student teachers with opportunities and skills that were largely lacking in teacher training such as online teaching, interacting with children through this medium, and also having students reflect about how best to promote development and learning using online communication tools.

Keywords: Covid-19, practicum, initial teacher education.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the key component of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, is the practical experience in schools, normally referred to as the practicum but also called "teaching practice" or "field placement" in the literature [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] experience is considered essential because it develops the students' professional identities, their social interactions and pedagogical skills [6]. It is during this phase of their professional development that future teachers can apply all of the theoretical knowledge and skills they have acquired during their studies and test their teaching abilities [7] [8].

The practicum, thus, typically constitutes the longest and most intensive exposure to the teaching profession, in real educational settings, experienced by prospective teachers [9] [10] [11]. Preservice teachers, during this experience, can act relatively independently under the guidance of school-based cooperating teachers, a mentor and a university/college supervisor-examiner [12] [13].

At the end of March 2020, when the last Master of Teaching and Learning (MTL) practicums on the Faculty of Education calendar for the 2019-2020 academic year was already in its second week, educational institutions, including schools and tertiary institutions in Malta went on lockdown, as happened in most countries, due to the rapid start of the pandemic, and its unpredictable yet dangerous nature. Due to various reasons, including the initial inaccessibility to the online teaching of learners in schools, the Faculty of Education in Malta had to postpone the practicum to November 2020 in what was called the 'continuation practicum'.

MTL student teachers were rapidly trained during September 2020 to adapt to remote teaching. During the 'continuation practicum' examiners had then to assess synchronously through Zoom or MS Teams, or asynchronously, through video-recorded lessons produced by the students. For the latter, various gadgets (including video cameras, smartphones and webcams) and internet-mediated tools (including Zoom, MS Teams or Loom) were used. The live transmissions or video-recordings were made from the students' own residence, not schools, and thereby, the MTL students had no learners to interact with.



Similar practicums were held internationally and an ongoing debate has developed regarding the effectiveness and pedagogic validity of these ‘alternative’ remote forms of practicums that were developed to comply with health and safety measures mandated by the pandemic. Like the pre-Covid practicums, the studies published during the Covid-19 period, indicate that the construct of the new practicum is also a contested one. This paper aims to systematically review empirical studies that investigated practicums held during 2020.

2. Methodology

Initial teacher education in the virtual setting has a relatively short history [14] [15] [16]. Research on practicums held online was non-existent before 2020 [17].

To construct this study, a literature search was conducted through Google Scholar, Microsoft Academic and HyDi, the University of Malta Library search platform. All studies about teacher education, particularly those that looked at initial teacher education (ITE), published in 2020 and up to the end of May 2021, were selected, reviewed and analysed. The author was mainly concerned with the alternative practicum, rather than teacher education generally. The author also reviewed the quality of the research presented in terms of the robustness of its methodology to ensure that only high-quality findings were analysed.

The initial search term used was ‘teacher education’. During the review process, the researcher realised that the initial term did not cover all the articles published on this topic. Some studies which were potentially important for the current research were hidden within papers with titles that did not include the term. Therefore, subsequent searches were expanded by covering all the alternative terms, including, ‘teaching practicum’, ‘teaching practice’, ‘preservice teachers’ and ‘field placement in teacher education’. All papers published before 2020 were ignored, unless they made an important argument, such as the importance of video-recorded sessions and peer-to-peer assessment in teacher training.

In summary, the papers analysed in this study were (i) mainly published between in 2020 and early months of 2021; and (ii) reported on ITE conducted in some kind of partnership with schools involving a school placement or practicum.

3. Findings

As far as teacher education is concerned, descriptions of how institutions and stakeholders adapted to the new scenario created by the COVID-19 outbreak [18] [19] [20] [21], as well as training strategies and experiences of innovation [22] [23], were reported. The literature agreed that qualified teachers, students and Faculty members were rather lost when the schools and colleges were physically shut down. Then, to fulfil their obligations as teachers, they had to rapidly adapt to web-based remote pedagogies, particularly real-time lessons using video-conferencing tools and/or asynchronous pre-recorded lessons. Although generally termed ‘online education’, few educators and students were trained in the theory and practice of online teaching and learning. They rather used video-conferencing and recordings of lessons hosted in a virtual learning environment (VLE) as the main educational methodologies. This transition proved difficult to both students and their educators.

From the thematic analysis performed on these reports four major themes emerged.

Theme	Interpretation
e-Practicum modes	Transition from face-to-face to online/hybrid placements
Unpredictability	Anxiety, fear in key stakeholders, uncertainty
A change in attitude	A more positive outlook towards technology-mediated instruction
Lack of training in e-learning	No distinction between e-learning and emergency and <i>ad hoc</i> distance learning

3.1. Video-conferencing: sudden change of setting and teaching modality

Many key stakeholders, in many countries, were concerned that trainees would not be given a fair opportunity to qualify by the end of their training, and on the other hand, felt responsible for ensuring that those qualified as teachers are of the highest possible quality. Moreover, many were concerned with the recruitment of new teachers were concerned with “the dangers of preparing teachers who know much about theory and little about practice” [24]. At the same time, Faculty members together with the key stakeholders were quick to identify *ad hoc* possibilities that would substitute the regular practicum in schools [25]. In Malta, the interrupted practicum for 2nd year MTL students was



continued during November and December 2020. This allowed students to graduate in a postponed Graduation ceremony in February 2021.

The 'continuation practicum' by the Faculty of Education, in Malta, consisted of students preparing lessons and delivering the lessons to a non-existent class, synchronous through Zoom or asynchronously through recorded lessons. The students were trained for online delivery during the summer months. Faculty examiners would then assess their performance according to new criteria developed for this distance learning opportunity.

In other countries, other methodologies were adopted. For example, in a number of teacher-preparation institutions, preservice teachers cooperated with teachers and built technology-mediated lessons that were then integrated into the collaborating teachers' schemes of work. In Israel, for example, student teachers built escape rooms, created videos, podcasts, games and quizzes for use by the teachers [26] (Donitsa-Schmidt & Ramot, 2020). Another prevalent method used in Israel was the use of peer learning whereby preservice teachers acted as students. In this way, the students were exposed to diverse teaching, learning and assessment methods presented by their peers, sharpened their teaching abilities, and acquired peer learning skills for future professional development. Finally, student-teachers were asked to teach family members and friends, children in the near neighbourhood or local community and even compose TED-type mini lessons. All these were recorded and sent to the pedagogical experts and their peers for feedback and evaluation.

3.2. Unpredictability and anxiety

Ellis et al [27] note that, in March 2020, education "came to a screeching halt". The speed at which the COVID-19 crisis hit key stakeholders in teacher education was fast and the impact profound. Neither the providers of teacher education programmes, nor the students could ever have envisioned this unpredictable scenario and the drastic change - from a face-to-face teaching model to a remote teaching practice - required by most teacher placement programmes [28]. Ellis et al [29], for example, reported a "feeling of shock and confusion" among their multi-national sample of ITE leaders. Other investigations [31] [32] [33] [34] showed that, similarly, preservice teachers "related to these external conditions as introducing fear, stress, anxiety and a sense of lacking control" [35] of anxiety and panic about the lack of school experience and the different demands of the improvised alternative practicums, particularly those conducted online. All the papers reviewed agreed that COVID-19 and the online practicum strongly affected their learning process, some positively (e.g. teaching while staying safe, rewatching recordings to enhance their performance, no class-management issues), most negatively (e.g. more preparatory work and less familiarity with online teaching). This was particularly more pronounced in students teaching subjects which required a non-virtual presence, such as, physical education [36].

3.3. Technology-mediated instruction

A significant shift from class-based to teaching and learning through web based tools happened all over the world, particularly throughout 2020. This was observed across teacher educators' own teaching and also the teacher educators' uses of technology to conduct meetings and collaborate with partner schools. More importantly, it was also observed in their assessment processes, and the students' attitudes towards the use of technology. The lockdown helped to alleviate academic staff and students' fears about online learning and removed some of the resistance that existed in pre-Covid days.

Despite this positive feeling, pre-service teachers and their University educators were very anxious to use technology-mediated teaching and learning, including online learning [37].

This notwithstanding, studies agreed that students and their university supervisors/examiners reacted well to e-practicum modalities. Kidd and Murray [38], for example, reported that most of those concerned experienced a sense of innovation as they developed new technological skills or reconfigured previous practices for the online environment. The literature indeed indicates that these Covid-mandated, yet previously existing practices [39], can also ease the transition from teacher training courses to professional practice [40].

3.4. Lack of training in e-learning

Most papers noted that school leaders, academics and students failed to differentiate between e-learning and distance learning caused by this health crisis. In the former, there tends to be extensive, anticipated and careful planning [41] [42], long-term investment strategies and evidence-based approaches to establish the desired type of learning environment. While in the latter, ongoing planning



and design of online courses, on-the-spot adaptations to face-to-face courses and familiarisation with new technologies for teaching and learning seem to be predominant factors. The literature agrees that academics and students needed more exposure to theoretical knowledge and online learning experiences, before engaging in e-practicums.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Higher education institutions including universities and teacher-training colleges, were among the few public bodies that were not paralysed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching and learning continued, by and large, with almost no disturbances. This notwithstanding, field placement had to readapt itself to distance learning forms. As various studies note, including [43] [44] [45], the practicum had to move online, across the globe and particularly during 2020, due health and safety protocols.

Despite the many challenges this 'emergency practicum' caused, including anxiety, a number of benefits were noted. These include:

- in addition to learning how to teach, students also learned how to teach online – a valuable and needed commodity in today's world.
- A change in attitude towards technology, by students and academics.
- Increase in interactivity, relatedness and professional learning are sustained as opportunities through remote professional learning communities (PLC) involving collaborating teachers, mentors, assessors and students.
- The more 'innovative' approaches (for example, micro-teaching through Internet-mediated recordings and remote PLCs) might be retained in the future

However, the fear of a perceived sub-standard practicum which, for example, could not assess formatively or otherwise, a student's class management abilities, still exist.

Although there has been a rising interest in how training has been implemented via distance learning, there is a dearth of research about the development of online teaching placement activities in the context of the global pandemic. Moreover, pre-service teachers need to be well equipped with online pedagogies for the future, in which, hopefully, they would not need to participate in an e-practicum for health and safety reasons.

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