

A Perspective of Practicum...

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The practical learning experience for Early Childhood Education (ECE) students can be both an amazing and challenging opportunity. How the student begins to integrate the theory they have learned in the classroom to practice in the field, can influence their lifelong practices (Shulman and Colbert, 1988). This is why the practicum experience is so critical for the beginning ECE teacher. As educators of early childhood professionals for over 20 years, we have struggled, agonized, celebrated and anguished over how to best meet the student's learning needs as well as continue to contribute to the support of the professionalism of the ECE community.

Many years ago we frequently noted the influence of mentors; those who work with students in the field. As research indicates, these individuals often have a stronger impact on students' practices than those who connect with them in the classroom (Hobson, 2002). Daloz (1986) suggests that, "far more than any other factor, it is [this] partnership...that finally determines the value of an education." (p.244) Therefore, we discovered that it was critical to incorporate the practitioner into the triad of learning for our students.

Through research and implementation of a variety of practicum models (Garvey, and Alred, 2000), we have developed a model that has allowed us to support the student's learning needs as well as make a positive connection with the community by encouraging and educating those who mentor the students. We believe this connection and increased valuing, support and education of the mentors are what make this model unique and successful to our Early Learning and Child Care Diploma program.

The Model

The practicum model consists of three layers of support. The first is the faculty member or

Practicum Coordinator, who oversees the administrative functions of the practicum (ie. policy and course expectations, student placement, agency liaison etc). Next is the *Practicum supervisor* (also a faculty member) who oversees student supervision in the practicum settings. Both of these roles traditionally exist in most practicum models. The third layer and the innovative part of the model is the inclusion of *mentors*. Mentors are the professionals employed in the practicum agency (child care centers, family child care agencies, preschool programs, school age care programs etc.). To be eligible to apply for the position of mentor, the staff person must hold a ECE Diploma (or equivalent), submit written permission from the agency director, work directly with children, have two years frontline experience and have been employed a minimum of 6 months in their present professional position. This practicum model theoretically uses the same resources as a more traditional practicum with the distribution of roles and duties as follows:

- The *Practicum Coordinator* organizes and manages all aspects of the practicum from the College perspective including recruiting mentors, developing course outlines, policy manuals and evaluation. The Practicum Coordinator (in consultation with the practicum supervisor) also matches students with mentors; provides support and guidance over the term to faculty; and makes any necessary changes to the practicum course expectations. We recognize that many practicum models have this role with similar functions. In our model, there are several additional functions that are added and will be shared in more detail as the model is explored.
- The *Practicum Supervisor* conducts onsite visits and seminars for a specified group of students enrolled in practicum

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(typically between 15-25 students per term.) The Practicum Supervisor meets with student and mentors throughout the term to assist in interpreting and carrying out requirements for the practicum; monitors progress and provides support as needed; and assists in the evaluation process. Visits are made to the practicum site (e.g. 2-3 per term) when the Practicum Supervisor can ensure that there is time to meet with both the student and mentor. They also receive bi-weekly written updates from the student and mentor.

- The *mentor* is the key contact for the student within the agency. They orient the student to the programs, model best practice, review lesson plans and provide feedback; both formative and summative. They have been "...touted to be able to, hold the keys for successful passage... and are in a position to make judgments [to] select or reject. ...handling it is delicate work" (Daloz, 1986, p.96). Therefore, providing the mentor with educational support is critical (Portner, 2001).

Mentor Education

The key to this model is the educational information and support provided to the mentor, recognizing that by working together, we will be able to affect the most success for the student (Garvey, and Alred, 2000). All mentors are invited to an extensive orientation hosted by the practicum coordinator and supervisor. This orientation includes an in depth review of the course outline (e.g., expectations, assignments, protocols, evaluation) and provides information related to mentoring and supervision. This information includes articles, video observation, online resources and participative learning activities. Throughout the semester, we also plan evening mentor in-service sessions and a full 'Mentor Day' where, in consultation with our local licensing body, we have received permission to allow practicum students to be counted in ratio in the playroom in the mentor's absence. (It should be noted that this practice only occurs where the mentor feels comfortable with the student's practices and can ensure that there will also be another certified practitioner with the student for the day).

The 'Mentor Days' have provided us the opportunity to develop stronger relationships with the community and discuss professional specifically to mentorship and supervision. The day focuses on specific issues associated with practicum. Topics covered have included communication, supervision and coaching styles, and motivation and feedback evaluation strategies.

Benefits

This practicum model has taken several years to develop. In particular, it took some time to have sufficient numbers of mentors available for students. Over the years, we have developed a large roster of participants across agencies so that we can provide a wide array of practicum opportunities to students. As the model has developed, we feel we have built on its strengths and have realized a number of benefits.

- **Students**

Students benefit from having a connection with an educated professional when they are undertaking practicum. This professional (mentor) is current and immersed in early learning and child care. The mentor connection provides ample opportunity for students to observe good practice as the mentors are actively involved in routine responsibilities. Mentors are well oriented to the practicum assignments and expectations so can effectively guide the students through the practicum process. This also means that the translation from theory to practice is seamless. Students are able to receive immediate feedback and support as educated mentors are well oriented and understand the goals, purposes and expectations inherent in practicum experiences.

Students have frequently indicated how they appreciated being assigned to one individual in the agency – ensuring that they have one person to discuss the challenges they come up against. We often see the relationship established during practicum continue even after the student leaves the agency. A good mentor often becomes a referee and sometimes a colleague and/or confidant.

Students have also commented about the benefits they experience when the mentor participates in the mentoring professional development opportunities, indicating that the information the mentor receives is a benefit to their practicum and certainly influences their success. Another positive student outcome in this model is when the student is counted in ratio for the 'mentor day'. The majority of students return to seminar feeling very empowered to be entrusted with the children's care for the day as well as a stronger appreciation of the early childhood educator's role and responsibilities.

- **Mentors**

Career advancement in ECE is somewhat limited. For the most part, becoming a program supervisor or director of a child care programs is often the primary means of advancement. By participating as a practicum mentor within this model, another avenue of advancement in terms of professional development opportunities for the early childhood educator is provided. The PD component along with the experience of mentoring provides opportunities for growth in mentorship, supervision, evaluation and communication. The skills the mentor attains in the process of mentoring can easily be applied in their workplace practice.

- **Community**

We have witnessed the commitment of ECE faculty to support the development of child care and child care professionals in the community. We have found that this practicum model has been beneficial for this purpose in that it has promoted the development of skills useful in child care practice as administrators (e.g., coaching, mentoring). In addition, mentors have been able to network both in terms of networking for child care professionals who are in supervisory or administrative positions and networking for staff they employ in child care. In addition, mentors are provided with continuing PD opportunities to build practical skills that can be used in the field. It has also been our experience that agencies appreciate this model because it provides an excellent opportunity to become known to graduating students for employment.

Challenges

Although we have recognized the benefits this model has provided to our learning community, it is not without its challenges. To date, we have not made the participation of the professional development component mandatory, as we have typically had over 80% participation. Though our observation concurs that when the mentors do not attend the orientation and professional development opportunities, we have noted more problems in the relationship triad. We feel that we cannot impose attendance as it may influence the number of applications to mentor.

The model appears to be most beneficial when the mentor has an ECE Diploma preparation as these mentors are familiar with the expectations for practicum. Challenges occur in agencies where staff in supervisory positions have related but different educational backgrounds (e.g., education, social work). Mentors with different educational preparation may require increased levels of support from the College.

Funding is consistently a challenge. Although technically, the resources required for practicum are not significantly different in this model as resources are re-allocated from full-time faculty to mentors, the model always raises budgeting questions. Given the questions that arise, it is difficult to increase the level of support provided and faculty feel the need to defend the practicum model when funding issues arise. However, given that costs are similar or may be somewhat more, we do believe that this practicum model better serves students learning.

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