The Practicum in Professional Education: Pre-Service Students' Experiences

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1.   Abstract

A supervised practical experience of on-the-job training (variously known as *practicum, clinical training, internship*, depending on the discipline) forms an essential part of the pre-service preparation of professionals across disciplines. This article forms one part of an interdisciplinary, pan-Canadian research project examining the future of the practicum in undergraduate professional preparation. In the present portion of the study, the authors examined the views of 431 teacher candidates concerning the most positive *and* the most negative aspects of their 16-week extended practicum. In this article we summarize the findings of our analysis of their responses.

The data analysis yielded three positive themes: (a) the supportive relationships that the teacher candidates developed with various participants in the practicum setting; (b) respondents' perceptions of their successful teaching accomplishments and professional achievements; and (c) the teacher candidates' feelings of self-efficacy in being able to positively affect the students under their care.

By contrast, four broad themes reflected the post-interns' responses regarding the negative elements of their practicum experiences: individual personal/professional challenges; site-based interpersonal concerns; university-related policy/procedural problems, and practicum-office difficulties.

Implications are discussed both for the practicum leaders of the program in which these students were enrolled, and for practicum administrators in other institutions. The authors assert that leaders must develop and/or modify program policies, procedures, and practices not only to maintain/enhance the positive aspects identified in this study, but to reduce the negative ones.

2.   Background to the Study

There is a growing universal demand for well-prepared professionals in all disciplines (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006). Society has delegated to the professional schools the task of preparing its physicians, lawyers, engineers, teachers, nurses, and social workers; and the status and responsibility of these practitioners has

acquired an increased sense of importance and urgency in recent years (Aguayo, 2004). For example, the United Nations (World Health Organization, 2006) recently drew the world's attention to the looming crisis related to preparing enough trained personnel for the global health-workforce. The estimated worldwide shortage of 4.3 million healthcare professionals is most acute in developing countries. This crisis not only places pressure on educational and health institutions to "train, sustain, and retain" these health care workers, but it also requires increasing numbers of medical teachers and mentors to train these personnel (p.48).

   Moreover, a recent web-search that we conducted for the phrase "shortage of professionals" yielded 84,000 sites that described various facets of this problem, worldwide. In Canada, for example, the Canadian Council on Learning (2006) recently admonished governmental and educational decision-makers to address the growing labor shortages, both in the professional fields and the skilled trades. Factors influencing this scarcity are: (a) an aging workforce that will soon retire; (b) a shortage of adequately trained personnel to replace them and to teach them; and (c) the lack of a coordinated post-secondary educational plan to deal with these needs nationally and globally. The traditional educational landscape for professional preparation is being altered from one in which the large research universities served as the sole agents providing pre-service professional training to one in which a variety of providers is becoming involved – such as community clinics, affiliated organizations, or smaller colleges (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Schoenfeld, 2003).

   Regardless of the location and format of the preparation process, a key component of the pre-service education of professionals in all fields has been the clinical or practicum phase of their preparation (Goodlad, 1984; Rose & Best, 2005). A review of the pedagogical research literature that focuses specifically on this practicum/clinical aspect of pre-service education suggests that educators across the professions are recognizing the importance of enhancing this practical element (Carnegie, 2006; Clift & Brady, 2005). However, the number of such studies--particularly those highlighting the voice of students in the decision-making process--is small, compared to the volume of research related to other pedagogical topics in each discipline.

   Although the views of students often appear to be disregarded by policy-makers and program administrators (Clift & Brady, 2005), we believed that post-practicum students could provide us with a key source of information about the operation of the practicum program. We thus agreed with Schrantz (1993), who asserted that educators should not only acknowledge students' personal observations about a program in which they are involved, but that program administrators would in fact be remiss, if they disregarded students' perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the program (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006).

   We also concurred with Angelo (2004) who asserted that students are the only individuals who have direct, daily, and intimate involvement with all aspects of the teaching/learning situation. Therefore, our purpose for this present article was to examine the views of two groups of post-practicum students at a faculty of Teacher Education regarding their thoughts regarding the positive and negative features of their recently-completed teaching practicum. In fact, recent research on professional education has confirmed what earlier studies had found, and what students have

consistently reported: the practicum/clinical component is characterized both by definite strengths (which logically should be maintained and promoted) and chronic weaknesses (which should be ameliorated--but which appears to be a difficult goal to achieve).

3.   Positive and Negative Features of the Practicum Across Disciplines

Some of the most recent research regarding the education of professionals is being currently conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2006) through its *Preparation for the Professions Program* in six fields (Clergy, Engineers, Lawyers, Nurses, Physicians, and Teachers). In the report regarding the education of Clergy, Foster, Dahill, Golemon, and Wang Tolentino (2005) indicated on the one hand that three-fourths of Clergy alumni/a stated that their practicum learning/internship experiences were the most valuable part of their professional formation. On the other hand, former Clergy students would also have liked their field-experiences programs to have better equipped them to encounter the difficult cases and situations they met in their ministerial work.

With respect to the study of Engineering education, Silva and Sheppard (2001) identified innovative strategies in Engineering undergraduate education—such as the expansion of hands-on learning curricula, student-centered learning, and cooperative education opportunities. In 2006 Sheppard further suggested that there needed to be better connection between the academy and the professionals in the field ("negotiated agreements and partnerships between stakeholders on expectations and responsibilities", p. 18). As a consequence, both stakeholders would collaborate in specific ways to assist all students to consistently experience more authentic Engineering practice by learning to apply academic/ theoretical principles to solve real-world problems.

For the Carnegie study related to educating lawyers, Sullivan, Colby, Welch Wegner, Bond, and Shulman (2007, p. 4) reported observing "law school as apprenticeship to the profession…" in that it helped students gain skill in legal analysis. However, they also concluded that "there is room for improvement." Sullivan et al. recommended that students needed "to engage in advanced clinical training" (p. 9) by having more consistent opportunity to serve actual clients, and in having more realistic experiences in which they would be guided to ground their ethical and moral concerns.

Regarding the Nursing portion of Carnegie's Preparation for the Professions Program, Benner and Sutphen (2007) have examined the integration of three apprenticeships (i.e., intellectual capacities, skill-based clinical practice, and ethical dimensions permeating professional responsibilities) in Nursing pre-service education. They identified key characteristics of Nursing teachers who have demonstrated excellence in helping their students to accomplish this integration process. Three of these characteristics were: (a) treating clinical students as collaborators in the nursing role; (b) asking clinical students to participate in deciding the next steps in patients' care; and (c) engaging students in professional dialogue and in exploration of their thinking with respect to ethical issues related to actual cases. However, Benner and Sutphen have also noted that not all instructional personnel and supervisors in Nursing education are as skilled at helping new students accomplish this integration.

Improvement is required in assisting all supervisory personnel to enhance this integrative teaching function.

With regard to Carnegie's examination of Medical education, Cooke, Irby, Sullivan, and Ludmerer's (2006) analysis suggested that it "seems to be in a perpetual state of unrest" (p. 1339), and over the last 100 years has been criticized "…for emphasizing scientific knowledge over biologic understanding, clinical reasoning, practical skill, and the development of character, compassion, and integrity" (p. 1339).

Although these authors applauded the recent advances in medical discovery and knowledge, they admonished decision-makers and administrators involved in Medical education to radically transform the integration of the clinical-practice component with other facets of the program. Accomplishing this goal will help medical students better able to connect their theoretical knowledge, their acquisition of technical skills/procedures, and their development of ethically-based professional attitudes

The Teacher education practicum has also been consistently characterized by definite strengths and recurring weaknesses over the years. For instance, Neville, Sherman, and Cohen (2005) compared the preparation of teachers to that of six other professional fields. They found that:

> "…the richness and value of the clinical experience vary depending on the quality of the supervisor and the amount of time she or he spends monitoring and coaching the student. In Education, clinical experiences are often reported to be limited, disconnected from university coursework, and inconsistent". (p. 13)

These researchers also found that many practicum students lacked skills in professional reflection and self-evaluation, which further reduced the ultimate benefit they received from the practicum experience.

In a related study that compared the mentoring process in pre-service professional Teacher Education with that in Medicine and Business/Management, Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2004) analyzed over 300 research studies across the three disciplines. As was the case in the preceding studies, these authors likewise identified positive and negative aspects of the supervisory/mentoring process that affected either the protégés, or the mentors, or the institutions, or combinations thereof. Ehrich et al. advocated that all stakeholders in the practicum program must collaborate to minimize the problematic areas, because "…mentoring has enormous potential to bring about learning, personal growth, and development for professionals" (p. 536).

This positive/negative record for the practicum in Teacher Education was also described by Levine (2006) and Whitcomb, Borko, and Liston (2007). Although they acknowledged that some institutions have been effective in adequately preparing new teachers for the 21st century, they decried the apparent confusion and disarray that has existed among many professional schools for 60 years (see Lortie, 1975). This problem has hindered the integration of theory and practice (Author, 1994, 1994-1995). Many teacher education curricula appear to come up short in providing their teacher candidates with appropriate practicum learning experiences to prepare them to teach in difficult settings, such as "high need schools", multicultural/multilingual settings, and inner city neighborhoods.

4.   Methodology

We agreed with Clift and Brady (2005) that practicum-students' views must be considered in any effort toward practicum innovation. A key reason for this stance is that, in the final analysis, students are the most qualified persons to render judgment on how effectively the program structure and processes meet their unique learning needs and interests as they move towards their professional certification.

In two successive years, we solicited written responses from two cohorts of teacher candidates to two brief questions. Each group had recently completed their 16-week extended practicum (internship) in K-12 schools in a Western Canadian province. The 2005 cohort consisted of 226 post-interns, and the 2006 cohort had 214 individuals, which totaled 440 interns. Each group had returned to the campus of a Faculty of Education at one Western Canadian University to complete their final semester of coursework before receiving their Bachelor of Education degrees.

There was a 96.9% response rate for the two-year survey with respect to students who wrote comments regarding positive aspects of the internship, and 97.4% for those writing responses concerning negative aspects. The respondents were representative of the total undergraduate student population at the Faculty, in terms of gender, age, subject major/minor, elementary/middle years/secondary grade teaching-level, urban/rural placement, and Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal program stream. The two questions on each cohort's print survey were: *What for you was the most positive aspect of the internship experience?* and *What for you was the most negative aspect of the internship experience?*

We collated and categorized the post-interns' written responses to these questions, and observed for emerging patterns and themes, using the constant comparison technique of analytic induction (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2005). During this process, we continuously examined and re-examined the data, searching for regularities and common patterns, and placed the comments into evolving categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2005).

5.   Findings Regarding the Positive Aspects

Overall, the responses to this survey were consistent with research results describing prospective professionals' positive view of their experiential learning experiences cited earlier in this paper. This perspective was that students, across all disciplines, typically rank the practicum/clinical component as the most valuable part of their professional education (Author, 1994, 1994-1995). It provides them with the opportunity to apply their previous learning to real situations in schools (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Goodlad, 1984; Riehl, 2006). As shown in part one of Table 1, nearly 80% of the respondents in our survey mentioned the support they received from various participants involved in the practicum program.

6.   Supportive Relationships

As indicated in Table 1, many teacher candidates identified two or more supportive individuals, with 35% of the respondents signifying that the entire school staff made them feel welcome (e.g., "I had a great support system that extended past my family

and friends. I received support from all the personnel from the school I was at"). Twenty-eight percent of the teacher candidates specified that their classroom cooperating teachers had the most positive influence on them during the internship (e.g., "She was both supportive and frank, which let me know that her primary motivation was to help me succeed. She made both practical, specific suggestions and open-ended, 'fuzzy' proposals that motivated me to use all of my creative energy in developing lessons").

Table 1: Teacher-Candidates' Views of the Positive Aspects of Their Extended-Practicum Experiences (N=431)

Category	Percent of Respondents
1. Supportive Relationships	
School staff	35
Cooperating teachers	28
College supervisors	8
Parents	4
Fellow interns	4
2. Successful Teaching Tasks	
Applying theory to practice	27
Mastering skills/Completing full-time teaching	19
Achieving/Confirming teaching "calling"	16
Co-planning/Co-leading extracurricular activities	6
3. Positive Interaction with Pupils	
Facilitating pupil learning	23
Influencing/Celebrating pupil accomplishments	11
4. Satisfactory placement	2

Note. Nearly all respondents reported two or more positive aspects; hence, the values reflect these multiple responses and therefore they total more than100%.

Considerably fewer respondents identified the support received from other from practicum participants, such as (a) their college-based supervisors (e.g., "He gave me helpful feedback and was very supportive. I am glad he was a retired teacher/principal that had spent his whole career in schools"); (b) the parents of their students (e.g., "The relationships I built with the students and parents was a *very* positive experience which was the reward for me knowing that I did a job well done. It was hard to leave"); and (c) their fellow teacher-candidates (e.g., "It was great when we periodically had the opportunity to meet with other interns and talk about our ideas and the sorts of things we had done").

7.　　　Successful Teaching Tasks

A second major category of positive experiences identified by 68% of the respondents was related to the theme of the teacher-candidates' professional-task accomplishments or successful teaching achievements. Twenty-seven percent of both cohorts indicated that the most positive aspect of the practicum was the opportunity for them to narrow the proverbial theory/practice gap, by engaging in real teaching/learning activities with students in authentic classroom interactions. Comments illustrating their views on this aspect were: "It's real. It's practical. It's where you actually learn to teach", "I learned things I could never learn in a university classroom, such as how to interact with parents, and how to accommodate kids' different learning abilities, etc." and "I had real teaching experience in an authentic setting and was becoming a 'member' of the teaching community".

A second sub-theme in this professional achievement category that was identified by nearly one-fifth of the respondents referred to their satisfaction with successfully mastering certain instructional skills or completing their mandatory full-time teaching segment (i.e., a minimum three-week period occurring in the last half of the four-month practicum, in which interns were required to undertake--with reduced but appropriate supervision-- the complete role and responsibilities of the regular load of a teacher in the school setting). Illustrative comments identifying this task as the most positive experience were: "It was being with the kids and having control of the classroom during full-time teaching", and "I was able to take a class from day one and got full impact of decision-making for that group".

A third sub-category in this teaching-task area that was identified by 16 % of the respondents reflected the satisfaction they gained in affirming their personal teaching capability or calling. Examples of comments related to this aspect were: "The real-life classroom experience validated my career choice through such a positive experience", "Finally affirming my knowledge of the subject I have studied", and "I got the opportunity to take on the responsibilities of a teacher that really allowed me to see if the profession was for me, and how I am as a teacher".

A final sub-theme in the professional practice category that six percent of post-interns rated positively was the opportunity to co-plan and co-direct extracurricular activities that were an addition to their regular teaching duties. Responses related to this sub-topic were: "I got involved in all aspects of the school and rural community", and "My chance to coach senior girls volleyball and basketball. This gave me a great chance to get to know my students and was helpful in developing a positive rapport in my class".

8.　　　Positive Interaction with Pupils

As shown in Table 1, the third major category that we identified from the cohorts' responses was the opportunity teacher candidates had to engage in meaningful interactions with their students. Nearly one-quarter of the post-interns commented on the pleasure they derived from enhancing students' learning and attitudes, as illustrated by the following comments: "I always love getting to know students and seeing learning actually take place", "It was positive to work with students. The media has portrayed

youth extremely negatively; therefore, I had relatively low expectations of kids, but I was pleasantly surprised", "It was positive to see the difference I made for a girl who was suicidal and depressed", and "When the students would tell you you're a good teacher".

Another sub-category of this third theme was related to becoming acquainted with and impacting students, which was identified by 11% of the respondents. This category reflected the respondents' recognition of their students' growth and achievements. For example one post-intern reported "I loved building relationships with my students. The length of the internship really allowed me to get a feel for the profession and see growth within my students", A second wrote "It was seeing the joy in students' eyes when they were successful in some of aspect of the educational experiences", and a third respondent asked "Is it a cliché to say 'the students'? Being able to connect with, teach, and coach the students allowed me to see the worth in our profession".

9.   Satisfactory Placement

Two percent of the post-interns specifically expressed satisfaction with their internship placements. Sample statements from respondents in this category were: "I thoroughly enjoyed everything about interning in the school I was at…I felt like I was part of a big family", and "I had a chance to do my internship in a rural community. I loved the experience of a small town setting, where I had--and still have--positive relationships with students, staff, and the community".

10.   Findings Regarding the Negative Aspects

With respect to the negative experiences that the post-practicum students identified, we summarize the data-categories in Table 2, and we also provide sample comments to illustrate respondents' views. The responses reflected the post-interns' concerns in four major categories. Seventy-eight percent of the respondents identified various challenges they faced regarding their personal circumstances and their instructional performance during the practicum; 61% of the respondents identified specific interpersonal difficulties they encountered while at the practicum site; 54% of them cited problems they attributed to general faculty policies/procedures; and 34% of the post-interns mentioned particular concerns they related directly to the practicum field-office.

11.   Personal Challenges and Frustrations

Twenty-six percent of this group identified financial concerns as being most perplexing. Many of these respondents had no doubt been placed in rural schools (at this college, approximately one half of each year's practicum cohort are placed in rural areas). Evidence for this concern was that many respondents reported incurring *double costs* during the extended-practicum, as illustrated by the following responses: "Too expensive. I didn't get any of my three location choices, and needed extreme loans to pay for tuition *and* living expenses in an expensive city. There needs to be reimbursement or tuition credits to help us with this cost." Another post-intern wrote: "Four months of free labor for the school, while I paid tuition, was ridiculous. All other internship programs *pay* you for your work".

Table 2: Teacher-Candidates' Views of the Negative Aspects of Their Extended-Practicum Experiences (N=424)

Category	*Percent of Respondents*
1. Personal Challenges and Frustrations	
Financial concerns	26
Workload issues	22
Feelings of isolation	10
Travel problems	6
Instructional/Management difficulties	6
Long-range planning trouble	3
Other (unique individual situations)	5
2. Site-Based Interpersonal Concerns	
Conflict with cooperating teacher	22
Excessive negative criticism	19
Feelings of non-acceptance (not appreciated)	13
Staff cliques/unprofessional demeanor	6
Insufficient exposure to a variety of school settings	1
3. University-Related Logistical/Procedural Problems	
Concerns with post-practicum term	21
Program and organizational inequities	17
Pre-practicum coursework insufficiently prepares interns	8
Practicum is too short	7
Other	1
4. Concern with the Practicum-Office Policies/Roles	
Practicum in-service tasks laborious/irrelevant	14
Unprofessional treatment by practicum-office staff	8
Negative manner of college supervisors	7
Unsatisfactory final evaluation process	3
Unsatisfactory placement	2

Note. Nearly all respondents reported two or more negative aspects; hence, the values reflect these multiple responses and thus total more than 100%.

In a second sub-category, nearly one-fifth of the respondents reported that the extra workload of the practicum proved to be detrimental. Typical comments were: "The work for the university during the internship was too *intense*!!" and "The negative part was how busy I was, and the long hours." In a third sub-theme, 10% of the post-interns (probably those who had received rural placements) cited their feelings of isolation as being most difficult. This view was illustrated by such responses as: "I felt isolated and abandoned", "I had to move away, so I lacked the support system that I had at home", and "Moving away sucked and there was not any financial support".

Four smaller sub-categories within this theme reflected teacher-candidates' personal frustrations, such as: (a) travel costs (e.g., "I had to travel to my school because it was rural; gas money would have been nice", and "I paid tuition for no instruction, and my transportation/living expenses were not alleviated at all"); (b) various instructional concerns (e.g., "There was a lack of teaching resources and administrative support in this small town school", and "Class management was hard. I had a tough time with some classes. I was told by other teachers that these classes were tough"); (c) planning (e.g., "I was very bogged down with lesson plans and preparation during the term. I would have liked to get the majority of my materials ready in the summer, but my co-op didn't want to meet 'til late August"); and (d) unique situations (e.g., "There was teacher and student apathy, and blatant racist/sexist/class reactions and comments").

12. Site-Based Interpersonal Concerns

The second broad category of negative experiences summarized in Table 2 reflected teacher candidates' concerns with troubling interrelationships, which arose at their placement sites. Forty-one percent of the respondents wrote either of receiving unhelpful criticism from supervisory personnel, or of having direct conflict with their cooperating teachers. The following comments illustrated these situations: "I had a *very* difficult relationship with my co-op. She would change expectations at the very last minute, which was very unnerving", "There was constant negativity from my co-op, and unprofessional relationships among the staff that I got sucked into", "My cooperating teacher was sometimes difficult, and stated that my fate was in her control", "…having a co-op and college supervisor who believed in 'beating you down before building you back up'. She took an intern in order 'to relax' for 16 weeks. If I could have evaluated her, she would *not* be allowed another intern", and "Finding out that there was no consequence for the unprofessional cooperating teachers, and knowing that future interns could be placed with these people".

Thirteen percent of the respondents in this second broad category indicated that the most negative aspect of the extended practicum was that they did not feel accepted or appreciated for their professional contributions. Examples of these perceptions were: "I liked the practicum, but it was stressful. I was just the intern", "I found that there was systematic structuring and policy that inhibited student voice and leadership", "There was hierarchy of school authority structure, with the interns at the bottom", "As an intern I had limited choice in decisions", and "A select few of the teachers did not view me as 'a real teacher' and I wasn't respected as I thought I should have been".

Six percent of the teacher candidates identified the unprofessional deportment of the staff as the most unfavorable aspect of the internship. This sentiment was reflected

in such statements as: "I wished that the school staff in particular was a little more open and accepting. The little groups of staff were set in their ways and didn't value the ideas and opinions of other staff members", "I disliked the staff talking behind each other's back", "The toxic teachers continuously discourage, humiliate, and build a hostile environment", and "I felt trapped in collegial infighting".

One percent of the post-interns expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of opportunities to participate in a wider range of instructional and/or school experiences. Illustrative comments were: "I did not get to teach in another grade", and "I wish I could have had exposure to kids with disabilities and to working with TAs--how to deal with/handle both".

13.   University-Related Procedural Problems

Altogether, 54 % of the respondents expressed that the most disadvantageous aspect of the extended practicum were certain unacceptable or deficient university policies and procedures that were related to the program. The largest sub-theme in this category consisted of comments from more than one-fifth of the teacher candidates, who were critical of the final semester of post-practicum coursework. Illustrative comments in this sub-category were: "I disliked having to come back to the university for the last semester: What confidence I gained in internship is now gone", "It felt like a step back, not a step forward", "Having to return to university for four months of boring and useless classes", "It could have been completed in one month instead", and "It was hard coming back to university and being patronized, pigeon-holed, and kept from getting a job (i.e., subbing) for no damn reason… ".

Seventeen percent of the cohorts expressed displeasure with what they perceived as program weaknesses or inequitable practices. Examples of such comments in this second sub-category were: "The entire program should be re-organized to give us more time spent in several experiences in schools right from the first year, rather than all at once in a 16-week internship", "The internship should be run in Term 2 not Term 1", and "They originally asked us for our three choices for internship placement, but a lot of us did not even get one of them".

Eight percent of respondents stated that the first year of the undergraduate program was ill conceived (e.g., "We were not prepared in all aspects, such as teaching in a multi-grade class, or how to assess kids, or the legalities in schools", and "Finding out that most of what I learned in my first year of Education had little or no relevance in the school classroom").

Seven percent of respondents in this third category complained that the internship was not long enough (e.g., "It was way too short; the relationships were just becoming strong and then I had to leave", "When I finally started to feel comfortable it was over", and "The four months at the high school doesn't match the school's semester. I wish I could have stayed right to the end of their term").

Two percent of post-interns identified unique concerns they, such as: "The service-learning part was beneficial, but it took me away from my classroom responsibilities", and "Not enough information was provided for interns' rights and roles".

14.   **Practicum Office Difficulties**

As shown in the fourth section of Table 2, a total of 34% of the respondents were disconcerted with certain policies and/or personnel in the office of field experiences. Fourteen percent of the respondents in this sub-category identified dissatisfaction with the monthly practicum seminars that were organized by the practicum office. Statements illustrating this perspective were: "I found some of the seminars to be a bit useless at times. They were not scheduled for appropriate times during internship and often added to pressure rather than easing it", "The internship meetings were pointless", "There were too many hoops to jump through for the seminars, the assignments were too time consuming and not useful", "It was difficult to focus on teaching with so many external requirements to please the college", and "The seminar days would have been better spent with your co-op teacher planning and evaluating together back at the school".

Eight percent of the post-interns indicated that the most disturbing aspect was how they were treated by the field-experience office personnel. Typical comments in this sub-category were: "… the hostility and somewhat rude interactions with people in the practicum office", "I found them *impossible* to deal with", "They were rude, impatient, belittling and had histrionic fits", "The Centre was very unhelpful. They and the co-ops did not seem to give the same message about preparing unit plans over the summer", and "Dealing with the practicum center was so formidable that it made internship intimidating".

Seven percent of the respondents indicated that unprofessional treatment by their college supervisors was the most troubling aspect of the internship. Sample comments in this sub-category were: "College supervisors sometimes have unrealistic expectations; they have forgotten what it is like to be an intern", "The expectations from my college supervisor kept changing. Half of the time my co-op and I had no idea what to do, or what was needed or expected of us", and "The college supervisor was very confrontational … not fit for the job … who didn't get along with my co-op and that made it hard on me".

Three percent of respondents in this fourth category expressed misgivings with the evaluation of interns' performance, as shown by such comments as: "Not knowing why some things were written on my final supervisory report", "I did an international internship and the supervision and feedback from that university-based supervisor was somewhat lacking".

Two percent of the cohorts reported annoyance with the placement procedures enacted by the office of field experiences. Typical comments were: "My co-op felt that she was forced to take me and did not want me in her classroom", and "I had a horrible placement, and I had no support from the Centre in remedying the very dire situation until I spoke to the Assistant Dean (who was awesome)".

15.   **Discussion**

We shared Clift and Brady's (2005, p. 334) dissatisfaction with the scarcity of research on the contribution of the voice of students to the decision-making process for program planning. However, we believe that this present research-report provides

relevant information for consideration by program organizers--both from the faculty involved in this study, and from other faculties--as they seek to revitalize the practicum/clinical phase of their respective professional preparation programs.

16.   Affirming Results

The results of this present study not only confirmed previous research with respect to pre-service professionals' assessment of their practicum/clinical experiences, but the findings were also congruent with those of a similar study conducted thirteen years ago on the same teacher-education practicum program (Author, 1994, 1994-1995). Essentially, the positive and negative aspects of the practicum identified by the cohorts of post-interns in both studies were consistent.

The strengths identified in both studies were that the practicum: (a) granted teacher candidates the opportunity to apply theory to practice; (b) provided them with a setting, in which to develop their professional knowledge and skills; (c) created an atmosphere conducive to allowing them to *try their wings* by experimenting with different techniques, and by self-reflecting and making adjustments according to feedback received; and (d) established a positive environment for participants to engage in professional collaboration and to profit from mutual support.

It is fitting that the practicum administrators of the program studied at both times should be commended for the fact that the positive attributes identified in the earlier study have apparently been embedded in this field-based program and that they are still evident. Logically, the organizers will also need to be diligent in maintaining these strengths in their future practicum offerings; and yet, at the same time, they will also need to acknowledge the presence of deficiencies of the practicum, which appeared to have persisted over that same time period.

17.   Lingering Concerns

It must be noted that these present results and those of previous research from other jurisdictions have also confirmed the phenomenon that practicum programs simultaneously manifest both positive and negative characteristics. Such findings emerged in studies of Clergy Education (Foster et al., 2005); Engineering Education (Sheppard, 2006; Silva & Sheppard, 2001); and Teacher Education (Clift & Brady, 2005; Levine, 2006; Lortie, 1975).

In our data analysis, we made three other rather troubling observations concerning students' views of the weaknesses of the program in which they participated. We summarize these observations and their implications below.

A pervasive problem. One observation was that many of our findings were consistent with the overall conclusions reached previously by prominent researchers regarding chronic problems that have been identified in teacher education programs over the years. It appears that little has changed. For instance, Lortie (1975) reported that although student teachers relished this "learning-by-doing" type of apprenticeship, they were also critical of: (a) parts of their campus-based program and some of their professors, as being too theoretical or impractical; and (b) some of their practicum experiences, in that students were sometimes mismatched with supervisors who were

not sympathetic or congenial to their protégés, or who may not have been selected for their ability in assisting novice professionals in the formation of a sound decision-making rationale (p. 71). Levine (2006) and Whitcomb, Borko, and Liston (2007) recently reached a similar conclusion: the practicum in teacher education still often seemed disconnected from broader program goals.

A particular program. Our second observation may be most disturbing to the home faculty of the students we surveyed. We observed that many of the current deficiencies that the respondents delineated in our present study had apparently been in existence for several years (Author, 1994, 1994-1995).

However, we were encouraged to observe that the senior administrators in this faculty are not only aware of the persistent problems mentioned above, but that they have been recently engaged in implementing major initiatives designed to enhance their entire undergraduate program. To their credit, they have reported that they are currently engaged in program re-structuring efforts, such that: (a) the pre-service coursework and its underlying theoretical frameworks are being re-aligned to relate to the latest research in teaching and learning; and (b) the field-experience operations are being re-vamped to deal with the weaknesses that had been identified.

Practical solutions. A third observation we made was connected to this *re-vamping* process, in that the program administrators were beginning to implement specific initiatives to remedy the concerns. Three specific improvements were:

- arranging for field-based personnel to do more teaching of the pre-service coursework, either on campus or at the school site (thereby reducing the proverbial theory/practice gap, and demonstrating that *all* members of participating groups are vital team-players in the pre-service program);

- embedding shorter, pre-internship field experiences within the education methods courses (thereby promoting an early connection for teacher candidates between university coursework and actual teaching in the schools) , and

- having practicum supervision conducted by personnel who were well-trained in the mentoring process, who have established a positive rapport with teacher candidates, and who have built a mutual trust-relationship with them (thereby alleviating the anxiety sometimes created by the unproductive *us vs. them* stance).

18.   A Concluding Comment

Although this study focused on the practicum in teacher education, we believe that the findings have implications for the practicum/clinical phase of pre-service preparation in other professions (Authors, 2007). We concur with Ward Schofield (1990, pp. 208-226), who asserted that a search for the *transferability* more than the *generalizability* of findings, should be the appropriate goal of qualitative research. In the case of this study, other practicum program organizers would recognize that students' views provide valuable insights for leaders interested in maintaining the positive aspects and ameliorating the negative ones.

Even though each professional discipline is unique and contextually situated, we suggest that there are certain principles/practices/experiences in practicum programs

across the professional disciplines that can be examined by program organizers from other fields. We argue, in concert with other researchers (Ehrich et al., 2004; Neville et al., 2005; Ward Schofield, 1990) that the purpose of such an "inter-disciplinary examination process" is to *inform* program leaders' deliberations and decisions regarding the mutual objective that they all seek. This common objective is to enhance the experiential-learning portion of our respective professional preparation programs. Why not learn from one another as we pursue this goal?

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