

A Mixed Method Investigation of the Impact of Practicum Experience on Mathematics Female Pre-Service Teachers' Sense of Preparedness

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Abstract : The practicum experience is a critical component of any initial teacher education (ITE) course. As well as providing a near authentic setting for pre-service teachers (PSTs) to practice in, it also plays a key role in shaping their perceptions and sense of preparedness. Nevertheless, merely including a practicum period as a compulsory part of ITE may not in itself be enough to induce feelings of preparedness and efficacy; the quality of the classroom experience must also be considered. Drawing on findings of a larger study of secondary and intermediate level mathematics PSTs' sense of preparedness to teach, this paper examines the influence of the practicum experience in particular. The study sample comprised female mathematics PSTs who had almost completed their teaching methods course in their fourth year of ITE across 16 teacher education programs in Saudi Arabia. The impact of the practicum experience on PSTs' sense of preparedness was investigated via a mixed-methods approach combining a survey (N = 105) and in-depth interviews with survey volunteers (N = 16). Statistical analysis in SPSS was used to explore the quantitative data, and thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative interviews data. The results revealed that the PSTs perceived the practicum experience to have played a dominant role in shaping their feelings of preparedness and efficacy. However, despite the generally positive influence of practicum, the PSTs also reported numerous challenges that lessened their feelings of preparedness. These challenges were often related to the classroom environment and the school culture. For example, about half of the PSTs indicated that the practicum schools did not have the resources available or the support necessary to help them learn the work of teaching. In particular, the PSTs expressed concerns about translating the theoretical knowledge learned at the university into practice in authentic classrooms. These challenges engendered PSTs feeling less prepared and suggest that more support from both the university and the school is needed to help PSTs develop a stronger sense of preparedness. The area in which PSTs felt least prepared was that of classroom and behavior management, although the results also indicated that PSTs only felt a moderate level of general teaching efficacy and were less confident about how to support students as learners. Again, feelings of lower efficacy were related to the dissonance between the theory presented at university and real-world classroom practice. In order to close this gap between theory and practice, PSTs expressed the wish to have more time in the practicum, and more accountability for support from school-based mentors. In highlighting the challenges of the practicum in shaping PSTs' sense of preparedness and efficacy, the study argues that better communication between the ITE providers and the practicum schools is necessary in order to maximize the benefit of the practicum experience.

Keywords : impact, mathematics, practicum experience, pre-service teachers, sense of preparedness

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