

***Pre-service Teachers Undergoing a Second Teaching Practicum:
Thoughts, Perceptions and Impacts on Future Careers as Early Childhood Educators***

Menn Sze Chua, HELP University, Malaysia

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Abstract

As part of graduating requirements, the Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE) and Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (BECE) require all students to undergo 12-16 weeks of practicum training for each program. While most students enter into the BECE with a pre-university qualification, some students choose the route of undertaking both the DECE and BECE, thus they undergo the practicum twice. This study focused on the experiences of 4 pre-service teachers and investigated if the practicums played a role in ascertaining decisions to become Early Childhood Educators. 3 research questions were formulated to meet the study's aims; who were the pillars of support to the pre-service teachers throughout their journey, what were their perceptions of the teaching profession and how did the practicums impact on their intentions to pursue a career as a preschool teacher. Using the qualitative approach, data comprised individual reflective entries throughout their practicums and a focused group interview carried out after the practicum. Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice's provided the theoretical framework while a thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected. Findings showed that the students found the practicum challenging and trying despite having prior experience in DECE. However, having their pillars of support such as peers and the community at the practicum centre helped make their practicum experiences bearable. Finally, results showed that most of them do not intend to pursue a career in becoming a preschool teacher.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Teaching Practicum, Teacher Education, Community of Practice

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Introduction

Teaching Practicum

Teaching practicum has always been a part of teacher education programme. It provides pre-service teachers with a glimpse of what a teacher's job entails, and it is an opportunity for them to put theory into practice (Buckworth, 2016).

Pre-service teachers often experience a transition from theoretical learning to practical application during their practicum, which is central to their training. It is usually perceived as intimidating as they need to be responsible for many stakeholders - the children, colleagues (teachers), school principals, parents of children they teach, as well as practicum supervisor from the university. They are also responsible for themselves, because their grades depend on it. Moreover, teaching practicum is also a time for employers to recruit teachers when they are placed at their nursery or preschool (Johnson, et al., 2019).

Overview of Early Childhood Diploma and Degree Programmes in Malaysia

There are generally two pathways to becoming a Degree Holder in Early Childhood Education in a private university in Malaysia (see Figure 1). Students must first obtain a Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) or O-levels equivalent certificate. After which, they could continue with a Diploma in Early Childhood Education (DECE) and proceed to the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Hons) (BECE) programme. Alternatively, they could continue with any Pre-University equivalent programme and proceed to do their BECE.

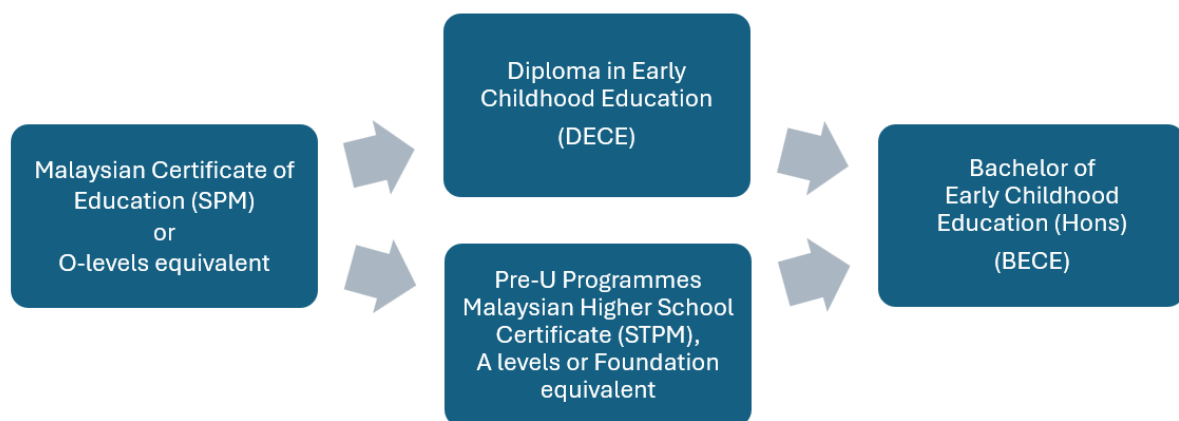


Figure 1: Pathways to Becoming a Degree Holder in Early Childhood Education in Malaysia

As part of graduating requirements, the DECE and BECE programme require all students to undergo 12 to 16 weeks of practicum training. While most students enter the BECE with a pre-university qualification, some students choose the route of undertaking both the DECE and BECE, thus, they undergo the practicum twice.

The practicum experience in DECE and BECE is mostly similar. Pre-service teachers have to plan 20 lesson plans for nursery children aged four and below, 20 lesson plans for preschool children aged between four to six. They are graded twice by their supervisor at the practicum centre and supervisor from the university. The difference lies in the duration of the practicum

experience, which is a total of 12 weeks and 16 weeks for the DECE and BECE programme respectively (see Figure 2).

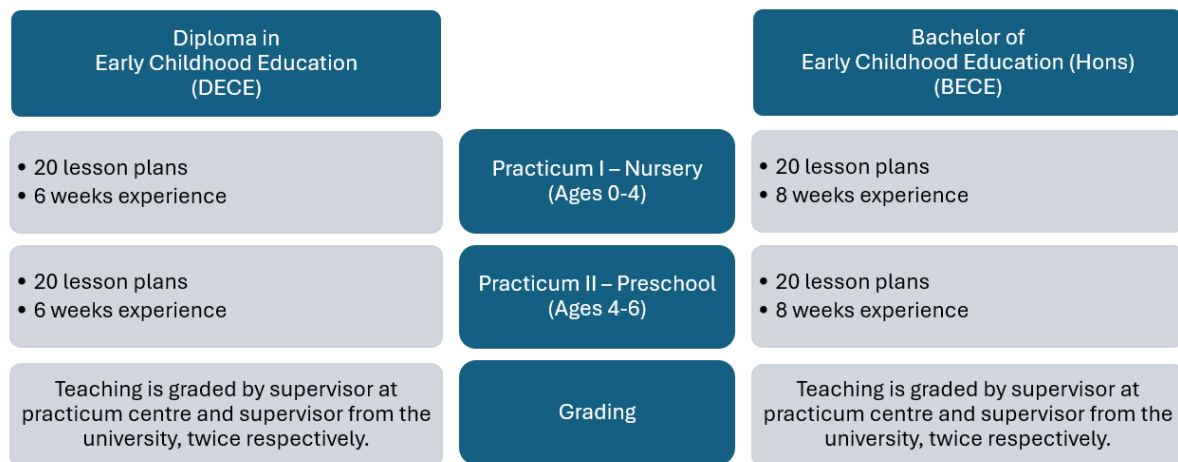


Figure 2: Overview of the Practicum Experience for DECE and BECE

Studies on teaching practicum has always been done and often revolves around pre-service teachers (Lawson et al., 2015; Matengu et al., 2020). They investigated how the school and university supervising staff perceive teaching practicum (Allen et al., 2013), the support pre-service teachers receive during practicum (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005), the identity of pre-service teachers from learner to teacher (Trent, 2012) and how practicum could affect student retention in early childhood (Kirk, 2018).

A simple search on “Community of Practice in Malaysian school” would deliver many results (Ismail et al., 2020; Thang et al., 2011). But the focus on early childhood education (ECE) were limited. Additionally, pre-service early childhood teachers going through a second teaching practicum is not commonly investigated as well. As such, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What were pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the teaching profession?
2. Who were the pillars of support to the pre-service teachers throughout their journey?
3. How did the practicums impact on their intentions to pursue a career as a preschool teacher?

Literature Review

Teaching practicum offers pre-service teachers insight into the realities of workplace practice in schools. While the importance of theoretical knowledge is acknowledged, many believe practicum experience is even more valuable than university classroom learning (Allen & Wright, 2014).

Research on teaching practicum is extensive. According to the systematic review research done by Lawson and colleagues, it appears that pre-service teachers are most researched on with a focus on teacher competency development, relationships with practicum supervisors, linking theory and practice, shifts in perceptions of the profession, and the significance of pillars of support. Matengu and colleagues’ (2020) semi-systematic literature review too, produced similar results.

Pre-service teachers face a range of personal and professional challenges during their practicum. These include finding their teacher identity, aligning with societal expectations, staying true to their educational philosophy, and managing time and documentation requirements (Buckworth, 2016; Friães et al., 2018; Trent, 2012). These challenges can sometimes negatively impact their experience, leading to doubts about their commitment (Kirk, 2018).

Support for pre-service teachers varies across studies. Key sources include school-university partnerships (Allen et al., 2013), cooperating teachers (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009; Johnson et al., 2019), and peers or university supervisors (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). However, principals were often not seen as supportive (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005).

Lindsay and Lindsay (1987) noted the undervaluation of early childhood teachers, a problem that persists. It is saddening to see how wages are not keeping up with today's inflation even after thirty years (Coffey, 2022). Teacher shortages and high turnover rates worsened post-pandemic, with many teachers leaving due to burnout, lack of support, and better career opportunities elsewhere (Pendola et al., 2023; Johnson, 2006).

Underpinning Theory

Community of Practice (CoP), introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991), is a social learning model where learning occurs within a cultural and historical context. CoP is defined as a group of individuals sharing a concern or passion, who learn to improve by interacting regularly (Omidvar & Kislov, 2013; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). CoP serves as the framework for this study, as the stakeholders work collaboratively to equip pre-service teachers with essential skills.

CoP has three key structural elements: domain, community, and practice (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger-Trayner et al., 2023). The domain refers to the shared domain of interest within the community. In the context of this study, shared interests are knowledge and skills to care for and teach children up to age six and the ability to plan and implement developmentally appropriate lessons for diverse learners. The community in the CoP are members sharing the same interest (domain) that would interact with one another for knowledge sharing or to help each other improve. In this study, the community encompasses the principal of the practicum centre, colleagues in the practicum centre, practicum partners from the university (pre-service teachers as well) and practicum supervisor from the university. The practice in this context refers to the members of CoP learning from and with each other, building on their collective wisdom. These shared practices include problem solving, seeking advice and experiences, as well as engaging in discussions.

Methodology

Research Design

The aim of the study is to investigate the pre-service teachers' who have undergone both DECE and BECE practicums on their perceptions of the teaching profession, their pillars of support, and how the practicums impact their intentions to pursue a career as a preschool teacher. Qualitative research method was employed as it provides an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, attitudes, intentions and behaviours to the study (Gonzales et al., 2008 as cited in Cohen et al., 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was conducted as it enables researchers to select participants based on the characteristics sought to meet the study's specific needs (Cohen et al., 2018). This study included four pre-service teachers, who had successfully completed practicums in both DECE and BECE programmes at the same tertiary institution. Coincidentally, all four participants are female.

Data Collection

Qualitative researchers collect data by themselves through various channels. The multiple sources of open-ended data allow the researcher to have a rich set of data to review, make sense of and organise it into themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 257). The source of data for the present study includes focus group interview and transcript, as well as reflective entries throughout the pre-service teachers' practicum.

Focus group is an interview for a small group of individuals formed by a researcher (Barbour, 2008 as cited in Lune & Berg, 2017). In this study, the interview was done after the students have completed both their DECE and BECE practicums. The researcher took on the role of a moderator to initiate a discussion within the set of interview questions prepared. The interview was recorded, and conversations were transcribed. One of the basic ingredients of an effective focus group interview is to ensure that the atmosphere and environment is a positive one (Lune & Berg, 2017). This was done by assuring them that their information would remain private, as protected through the promise of confidentiality. Hence, only pseudonyms were mentioned, namely BS, XT, EP, and NC.

Journal entries provide readers insights to the writer's thinking (Taylor, 1995). Pre-service teachers undergoing practicum were required to submit a weekly reflection, reflecting on their thoughts, feelings and opinions throughout the course of the practicum as part of their submission requirements. The reflective entries of the four participants were extracted, compiled and analysed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a "method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p.57). The thematic analysis done for the current study was applied to both the interview transcript and the reflective entries using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phases of conducting thematic analysis. In which are familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and lastly, producing the report.

Findings

Perceptions of the Teaching Profession

All four pre-service teachers expressed a positive view of the teaching profession, describing it as a noble and important career. For instance, BS noted that she initially expected teaching to involve only classroom activities, but was surprised by the other responsibilities, such as diaper changing and attending to children's physical needs. XT, who completed her

practicum at a school with a different curriculum, described her experience as more focused on teaching than caring, highlighting the varying demands of different educational settings. EP previously worked as an enrichment class teacher for public speaking with children aged 7 to 12 and speech and drama for children aged 3 to 6. She finds the job exciting and was eager to start the practicum, as she already has a strong liking for children. NC on the other hand, sees teaching as a very professional role, equating it to writing a "paper" that students then learn from. She expresses concern about the possibility of teaching something incorrectly, fearing that children may adopt the wrong information.

Importance of Pillars of Support

The participants emphasised the importance of having pillars of support during their practicum. It acts as a safe space for them to express their thoughts and feelings. Family, friends, and practicum partners were identified as key sources of emotional support, providing reassurance and encouragement when challenges arose. Moreover, it also allows them to exchange and reflect on ways to help improve their teaching. NC described how she valued feedback and constructive criticism, as it helped her improve her teaching practices. The participants also valued the opportunity to reflect and exchange ideas with their practicum partners and mentors, which fostered a sense of professional growth.

Pillars of Support and Community of Practice (CoP)

The practicum journey involves both growth and challenges. The pre-service teachers were invited to rank their pillars of support throughout the journey (See Figure 3). They ranked their pillars of support, with family, boyfriends, and university practicum partners at the top, followed by the principal, colleagues, and university practicum supervisor.

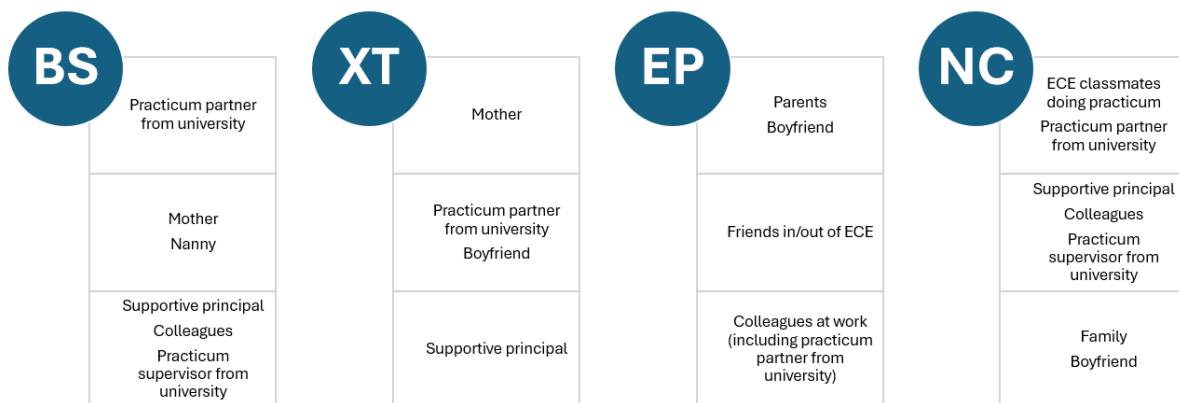


Figure 3: Pre-service Practicum Teachers' Ranking of their Pillars of Support

These pillars align with their Community of Practice (CoP), in which are principal of the practicum centre, colleagues at the practicum centre, practicum partner and supervisor from university.

The practicum centre principals organised workshops on lesson planning, classroom management, and parent communication. This support created a positive, encouraging environment where the pre-service teachers felt a sense of belonging. They also learned management skills, such as conflict resolution, and gained insights into the principal's role.

Colleagues at the practicum centre played a key role in building trust and supporting the pre-service teachers. Through daily interactions, they shared teaching ideas, strategies for managing diverse children, and tips for lesson planning.

The pre-service teachers BS and XT are practicum partners at one practicum centre, while EP and NC are partners in a different centre. The practicum partners shared the same experience, creating camaraderie and mutual support. They exchanged ideas and helped each other improve.

The practicum supervisor, visiting eight times during the practicum, provided moral support, feedback, and guidance on refining lessons. Their interactions also helped the pre-service teachers manage workload boundaries. For example, XT and BS learned to assertively discuss workload reduction with their principal, resulting in a better focus on their practicum reports and other tasks.

Impact on Practicums on Future Career Intentions as Preschool Teachers

Most pre-service teachers do not plan to pursue a long-term career as preschool teachers.

BS realised during her DECE Practicum II that she prefers being a carer over a teacher, especially for children aged four and below. She values the personal interactions and attachment she forms with the children, preferring the nurturing role over formal teaching.

XT expressed a willingness to stay in preschool teaching but is concerned about the salary not aligning with her future expectations and lifestyle. She would remain in the field only if the salary is adequate for her future needs.

EP, who has been teaching since 18, is uncertain about continuing in the field long-term. She enjoys teaching but worries about her knowledge and the high living expenses in Malaysia. She would only stay in preschool teaching if the salary package were sufficient to support her lifestyle.

NC, after a challenging DECE practicum, doubted teaching was for her but found renewed support and hope after the BECE practicum. She is seeking a supportive, non-toxic school environment. However, if she cannot find an ideal school or the job does not offer adequate compensation, she may leave teaching to work in her family's business.

The pre-service teachers were asked if they would still enrol in DECE then BECE if given the chance to turn back time. Only one said yes, two said no, and one was undecided.

BS is the only one who firmly said yes. Initially interested in management, she ended up in DECE due to her family's influence. Despite uncertainties during her studies, she does not regret her decision and values the experience over certification.

XT believes the practical experience gained is more important than the certification. While she appreciated the learning from DECE and BECE, she would have chosen a different undergraduate programme and returned to early childhood education (ECE) later, even without the certification.

EP, who originally wanted to be a teacher, would have preferred to do a Foundation (pre-university) programme to explore other areas before committing to DECE. She feels it would have given her more exposure and clarity about her long-term career path.

NC is undecided. After completing her BECE practicum, she questions whether teaching is the right career for her. She is torn between staying in the teaching profession, where she feels underpaid, and working in her family's business for better financial stability. She values the reflections and personal growth DECE and BECE provided but is concerned about the financial challenges in teaching. If no changes occur, she may leave the profession.

Discussion and Conclusion

All four pre-service teachers have generally positive perception towards the teaching profession. They perceive the teachers as a professional and in fact, a noble profession.

The findings from this study align with previous research by Allen and colleagues (2013), Ferrier-Kerr (2009), Friães and colleagues (2018) and Johnson and colleagues (2019), who highlight the importance of having a supportive CoP during the practicum. The pre-service teachers in this study found that their family, practicum partners, and mentors provided crucial support that helped them navigate the challenges of their training.

The study also reveals that while the participants viewed teaching as a noble profession, they did not see it as a long-term career. While three would leave the field if not adequately compensated. One teacher is willing to stay if she explores other areas and the salary package meets her lifestyle needs. XT's perspective aligns with Allen & Wright's (2014) study, as she values practical experience over the theoretical knowledge gained through DECE or BECE certification. Salary concerns were raised by three teachers, who feel current preschool salaries may not support their long-term lifestyle. This reflects findings by Coffey (2022) and Pendola and colleagues (2023) as well.

The pre-service teachers had mixed opinions on re-enrolling in the DECE and BECE programmes. Two would not choose to study DECE again, one is undecided, and only one has no regrets. The practicum experience allowed them to experience the daily life of a preschool teacher and provided clarity on their long-term career decisions, either pursuing or abandoning the profession.

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the complex factors that influence pre-service teachers' perceptions of the profession and their career intentions from a private university in Klang Valley, Malaysia. While the practicum plays a pivotal role in shaping their views, external factors such as support systems and financial considerations also play a significant role in determining their long-term commitment to the profession. Future research could explore the experiences of male pre-service teachers and expand the sample size to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing career intentions in early childhood education.

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Contact email: mennsze.c@help.edu.my