A COVID-19 Re-envisioned Teaching Practicum Curriculum

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Abstract

The changes taking place in the schooling landscape because of the coronavirus are real and meaningful and have implications for the training of preservice teachers, especially the teaching practicum component of their initial teacher education programs. The havoc caused by COVID-19 forced many faculties of education into a state of 'panic-gogy' to ensure that student teachers could complete their teaching practicums. In this paper we argue that consideration should be given to core teaching practices and practice-based teacher education pedagogies (i.e., representations and approximations) that can be used in alternative "placement contexts" that will supplement and harness the authenticity of school-based experiences. We provide two conceptual tools, collaboratively developed by teaching practicum educators and mentor teachers, that can be used as heuristic by other university-school partnerships when considering teaching practicum redesign efforts.

Keywords: COVID-19; preservice teachers; teaching practicum; pedagogies of enactment; work-integrated learning; practice-based

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the daily business of faculties of education and schools in various ways. Teacher educators at universities and teachers at schools had to respond rapidly to a 'forced' transition from classroom contact teaching to emergency remote teaching (Flores & Gago, 2020; Nel & Marais, 2020; 2021). The changes taking place in the South African schooling environment are being experienced as significant and have implications for the training of preservice teachers, especially within the teaching practicum component of initial teacher education programs. The need to ensure that student teachers successfully completed their teaching practicum implied decisions and adaptations by most universities in order to comply with Department of Higher Education and Training policy and communiques, university program requirements as well as the conditions in which both faculties of education and

schools, sites of school-based teaching practice, had to operate (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Mpofu, 2020; Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020). Green (2020, p. 3) states that, "Schools are encouraged to work with universities to explore how the range of possibilities described in this document [Communiqué on the implementation of Teaching Practice/Work integrated Learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown] can be implemented practically".

Claim

We argue that COVID-19 induced decisions and adaptations to the teaching practicum can be leveraged to address important re-design issues. The purpose of this article is to describe a collaborative effort among teaching practicum educators and mentor teachers to re-envision a teaching practicum curriculum which provides more practice-based opportunities for student teachers that are aligned with the South African Council for Educators' professional teaching standards and emphasizes core practices such as, for example, digital competence and socio-emotional learning. We anticipate this description will be of use to others interested in moving away from the "panic-gogy" (Baker, 2020) brought on by facilitating the teaching practicum in an emergency remote environment to putting a greater emphasis on a more emergency-proof and sustainable practice-based teaching practicum. We provide two conceptual tools that can be used as heuristic by other university-school partnerships when considering teaching practicum redesign efforts. These tools are grounded in the theoretical perspective of situated learning that sees learning as a collective activity that takes place in the same context in which it is applied. The collective activity is mediated by institutional (e.g., university and schools) and individual perspectives (e.g., teacher educators, mentor teachers and student teachers) as well as conceptual and material tools (e.g., The Teaching Practicum Curriculum and the Core Practices and Teacher Education Pedagogies documents).

Contextualizing Teaching Practice in South Africa

In the Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015, p. 10) practical learning is defined as:

> Learning from practice includes the study of practice, using discursive resources to analyse different practices across a variety of contexts, drawing from case studies, video records, lesson observations, etc., in order to theorise practice and form a basis for learning in practice. Learning in practice involves teaching in authentic and simulated classroom environments. Work-integrated learning (WIL) takes place in the workplace and can include aspects of learning from practice (e.g., observing and reflecting on lessons taught by others), as well as learning in practice (e.g., preparing, teaching and reflecting on lessons presented by oneself).

The teaching practicum is regarded as an essential component of initial teacher preparation (Anderson & Stillman, 2013). Research conducted by Goldhaber and Ronfeldt (2020) indicates how foundational the teaching practicum is for the development of student teachers' teaching skills. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2015, p. 18), institutions are responsible for formally arranging school-based placement, in varied and contrasting contexts of schooling, and ensuring that "supervision, mentoring and assessment" takes place. Institutions are also required to ensure that newly qualified teachers have

developed a minimum set of competences which includes, amongst others, highly developed literacy, numeracy and information technology skills, and "the ability to reflect critically on their own practice, in theoretically informed ways and in conjunction with their professional community of colleagues to constantly improve and adapt to evolving circumstances" (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015, p. 62).

The large-scale Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) indicated that student teachers experienced the work-integrated learning[1] component of their BEd programs as being characterized by a lack of time spent on quality learning experiences, less than an hour a day was spent teaching and/or observing experienced teachers, they felt unprepared to manage large classes, very few received feedback from either teacher educators or mentor teachers, and they were "assessed by whoever was available (Deacon, 2016, p. 13). Similarly, Gravett, Petersen and Ramsaroop (2019, p. 2) state that, "The work-integrated learning (WIL) component of initial teacher education qualifications is however riddled with difficulties."

If you have driven a car before you will most probably have experienced it pulling to one side, which usually indicates that a wheel alignment is due; however, the problem is a little more complex and involves the link between the suspension and the steering system. Proper alignment is essential to the car's steering system. The challenges arising as a result of COVID-19 have played a major part in contributing to the current out-of-alignment between the steering system of initial teacher education programs, namely the coursework and the suspension of these programs, namely the teaching practicum.

Although the teaching practicum is a non-negotiable component of initial teacher education (ITE) programs (Clarke et al., 2014), research indicates that many of these programs do not provide practice opportunities where student teachers can learn to enact core practices (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; McLeskey & Brownell, 2015; Nel, 2018). To address these concerns, teacher educators are calling for a re-envisioning of ITE programs to improve the teaching practicum experience of student teachers (cf. Botha & Rens, 2019; Brownell et al., 2019; Ball & Forzani, 2010; Grossman, 2018; Nel, 2018). These scholars are recommending a turn to practice and a focus on a set of core teaching practices as well as pedagogies of enactment that can form a golden thread running through the teaching practicum curriculum while at the same time ensuring that the curriculum is emergency-proof. Maheady et al. (2019, p.356) state that "using high leverage practices as a common framework in partnership between schools and universities may help close the research-to-practice gap and improve the quality of candidates entering the field."

Although faced with many challenges (e.g., lack of access to devices and data by student teachers) most faculties of education were able to move their coursework components to emergency remote teaching and learning (Asma, 2020; Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020). However, the practical nature of the teaching practicum component makes it one of the more challenging forms of teaching and learning to adapt to an online or emergency remote environment (Burns et al., 2020). Developing an online teaching practicum experience was not on the radar of most faculties of education before March 2020, as the school-based component has always been

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1. In the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Qualifications (2015) the term work-integrated learning (WIL) is used to refer to school-based learning or teaching practice. We use these terms interchangeably in the article.

viewed as a necessary and untouchable aspect as required by the Revised Policy on the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015; Green, 2020).

At the time of writing this article there appears to be very little South African literature that examines the issue of what the teaching practicum can or should look like when faced with emergency or challenging situations (Nel & Marais, 2020, 2021; Reyneke & Botha, 2019; Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020). It became clear to the authors that we needed to learn from decisions and choices made during the COVID-19 lockdown period as well as the waves that are following and to make our teaching practicum emergency-proof and to ensure that we included elements that would help not only our student teachers, but also our teaching practicum partners (i.e., the schools and mentor teachers who provide mentoring during the school-based component) to respond to emergencies as well as address needs that arose, such as improving their technology readiness and socio-emotional wellbeing.

The Challenge for Teaching Practicum Partnerships

The teaching practicum relies on a partnership between the school, mentor teacher, student teacher, and university teaching practicum educator, who together provide an opportunity for the student teacher to teach under supervision, observe experienced teachers and be assessed (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent waves have called the integrity of this partnership into question. The pandemic served as a catalyst that highlighted the need for a previsioning towards a more practice-based and flexible teaching practicum that would best respond to the complexity and unpredictability of school-based placement options that reflect the fragile interconnectedness of university-school partnerships.

The challenges faculties of education faced during the pandemic involved all aspects of teacher training, including the management of the teaching practicum whilst keeping the best interests of all stakeholders and partnerships in mind. Teacher educators were also faced with moving to emergency remote teaching and learning (North-West University, 2020), anxiety about their own personal health and that of the student teachers, staying connected, and not knowing how to ensure that the student teachers would be able to successfully complete the teaching practicum to ensure compliance with Department of Higher Education and Training policy (Nel & Marais, 2020).

Schools across the broad spectrum of the South African educational landscape experienced similar challenges. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, referred to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schooling as a "generational catastrophe" (United Nations, 2020). Teachers within the schooling sector were faced with moving their teaching to an emergency remote, online or blended format, learning new technology skills, re-planning and implementing an adjusted curriculum, facing their own fears and anxieties, and supporting their learners (Dube, 2020; Liebenberg, 2020; Mpofu, 2020; Mukuna & Aloka, 2020). The challenges they faced lead to panic, exhaustion and virtual meeting fatigue (Skylar, 2020). Supporting student teachers during this time was, therefore, not seen as a priority (Choate et al., 2020).

The authors, as part of the faculty of education work-integrated learning team, were charged with developing teaching practicum opportunities that would not include a school-based placement component to ensure that student teachers could complete their studies successfully. The authors also gave due consideration to the statement made by Choate et al. (2020, p. 56) that:

> When in-person instruction and supervision resume, it seems prudent to continue to look for ways to incorporate online and hybridized models of education and student teaching supervision, both to expand student teachers' experiences with different forms of instruction and to expand the reach of teacher education programs.

During the lockdown, the three work-integrated learning team members got ethical clearance as well as gatekeeper permission from the university as well as from one province in South Africa to initiate a professional learning community and more sustainable partnership between the province, the faculty of education, one of the districts, selected schools in the district and mentor teachers in the schools to address the teaching practicum challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We began our conversations with the mentor teachers around how we could support one another during this challenging time and to ensure that we comply with Department of Higher Education and Training policy (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015), the communique directive (Green, 2020) and the Department of Basic Education (2020) requirements. In our conversations it very soon became apparent that we needed a "common language". We decided to use the South African Council for Educators' (2020) Professional Teaching Standards as a guiding document for our discussions. The professional teaching standards "describe in broad terms what an educator must know and be able to do to provide quality teaching and learning opportunities for all learners they teach in the diverse context of South African schools" (SACE, 2020, p. 4). In addition, the purpose is to "provide a common language and a vision of the profession that all teachers can use to define and develop their practice" and to "set standards for the providers of teacher education so that their programs are designed and delivered in a way that enables all pre-service and in-service teachers to meet the standards" (SACE, 2020, p. 5).

A Re-envisioned Core Practices And Practice-based Teaching Practicum

The result of our collaboration is two conceptual tools that guided our work during the COVID-19 lockdown period and continues to guide and inform the decisions that we must make as the pandemic continues to wreak havoc in the education sector. The first tool is a concise document entitled The Teaching Practicum Curriculum which is currently being implemented within the faculty of education and supported by our partnership schools and mentor teachers (cf. Table 1). In the first column we indicate the SACE professional standard which guides what student teachers should be able to do during the teaching practicum. Columns two to five indicate the teaching practicum activities required from year 1 to year 4 of the BEd program. The final column highlights the core practices that student teachers should learn to practice and implement with fidelity. The core practices correspond to the high leverage practices identified in the research literature (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman et al., 2009; McLeskey & Brownell, 2015; TeachingWorks, 2021). According to TeachingWorks (2021, para 1):

> High-leverage practices are the fundamentals of teaching. These practices are used constantly and are critical to helping students learn important content. The high-leverage practices are also central to supporting students' social and emotional development. These high-leverage practices are used across subject areas, grade levels, and contexts. They are "high-leverage" not only because they matter to student learning but because they are basic for advancing skill in teaching.

The activities are aligned with the core teaching practices and provide the student teachers the opportunity to receive targeted feedback by both teaching practicum educators and mentor teachers, namely "Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next?" (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 87). The design principles used by Henning et al. (2016, p. 29) were used to guide the re-design of the Teaching Practicum Curriculum document, "(1) standards-based, (2) organized in a developmental sequence, (3) simple and easily communicable and (4) stated in language universally familiar to practitioners." The Teaching Practicum document served as an explicit statement of the expectations of student teachers across their entire teaching practicum program from year 1 to year 4. This ensured that the conversations with the mentor teachers were far more meaningful and that everyone was on the same page in terms of what was expected. In the design of the document, we also tried to ensure that there was a developmental progression in terms of the complexity of the teaching practicum requirements (e.g., teaching small groups to teaching a whole class, planning single lessons to planning sequences of lessons, etc.). We also integrated digital competence and socio-emotional wellbeing components into the curriculum (i.e., lessons learnt during the COVID-19 lockdown period) to ensure that they would not be seen as add-ons, but core components of the teaching practicum curriculum.

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Table 1. Teaching Practice Curriculum

SACE Professional Teaching Standards	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Core Practices
Teachers collaborate with others to support teaching, learning and their professional development	Write a reflection on the development of a professional identity (i.e., Looking back, looking in and around and looking forward). Discuss SACE's Code of Professional Ethics. Demonstrate digital competences, (e.g., Use Excel to capture marks, schedule and join a zoom meeting, save a Word document in Pdf format, complete a Google Form, etc.)	Write a reflection on SACE's Code of Professional Ethics: Learners Assist with extra-curricular activities (where protocol allows). Interact with teachers/coaches and learners.	Discuss demands and challenges of teaching profession with mentor teacher. Assist with extra-curricular activities (where protocol allows). Interact with teachers/coaches and learners in a respectful manner. Collaborate with mentor teacher to improve teaching practice. Attend phase or grade meetings and ask to take minutes.	Discuss and reflect on the role that various subject associations, professional learning communities, etc. play in professional development. Conduct a practice parent meeting. Demonstrate digital communication competence (e.g., Use WhatsApp, etc. to communicate with groups or parents).	Communicate with professionals. Communicate with parents/caregivers. Identify professional development needs (e.g., digital competences) and access learning opportunities.

Teaching requires that well-managed and safe learning environments are created and maintained within reason. Teachers make thoughtful choices about their teaching that lead to learning goals for all learners	Observe and discuss emergency evacuation procedures and COVID-19 protocols. Observe and discuss classroom seating arrangements and the use of space in the classroom. Reflect on how diverse community, school & classroom contexts can affect teaching choices. Reflect on how technology access or lack thereof can affect teaching choices. Reflect on how learning and teaching support materials or lack thereof can affect teaching choices.	Observe and discuss school as community: ✓ Routines ✓ Learner behavior ✓ Teacher & Learner Code of Conduct Observe and discuss the classroom as community: ✓ Building relationships ✓ Behavior management ✓ Classroom rules and expectations ✓ Teacher's Action Zone Ask to manage a small group of learners. Develop own management system for small group.	Work with small group of learners: ✓ Positive social interactions Practice proactive and reactive management techniques (e.g., proximity control, cues, signals, etc.) Give instructions (both verbal and written). Explain procedure for classroom routine.	Plan and execute routines, procedures & transitions. Plan and execute a classroom management plan to handle misbehavior. Handle learner conflict or misunderstanding. Establish an engaged learning environment for a large group that supports individual and collaborative learning.	Implement organizational routines, procedures and transitions to support a learning environment. Set up and manage small group work. Build respectful relationships.

Teaching is based on an ethical commitment to the learning and wellbeing of all learners. Teachers support social justice and the redress of inequalities within their educational institutions and society more broadly	Reflect on learner diversity in South Africa. Reflect on how socio-emotional issues (family and learners) affect behavior and learning. Interact and engage with learners. Learn their names.	Observe/note different developmental stages of learners in a classroom (cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, physical) Analyze observed learners' work. Collect data on individual learner behavior - classroom and learner profiles)	Observe mentor teacher interaction with learners: ✓ Language development ✓ Special learner needs ✓ Differentiation of instruction Plan appropriate activities for a group of learners within a developmental level.	Create developmentally appropriate lesson plans. Implement instruction that is developmentally appropriate for a large group	Elicit and interpret individual learners' thinking and learning.

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| Teachers are able to plan coherent sequences of learning experiences | Analyze mentor teachers' year, term and weekly/cycle planning.

Analyze planning templates.

Analyze the CAPS curriculum | Discuss the planning approach with the mentor teacher:

✓ How to integrate CAPS
✓ Factors to consider when planning.
✓ Learning and Teaching Support Material to use (e.g., Lego Six Bricks; SOUNS manipulatives, etc.)
✓ Timetable for each day
✓ Predict how much time learners will need to complete activities

Create and implement a lesson for a small group.

Create weekly lesson plans for the phase or specialist subject(s). | Discuss how planning changes during times of absenteeism or crisis.

Choose, appraise and modify tools, texts and materials to optimize learning goals.

Co-plan for five consecutive days (weekly/cycle)

Use formative assessment data to adjust planning | Discuss how planning changes during times of absenteeism or crisis.

Plan for five consecutive days (weekly/daily, etc.)

Use summative data to adjust planning | Setting long- and short-term goals.

Planning single lessons and sequences of lessons. |

Teaching is fundamentally connected to teachers' understanding of the subject/s they teach. Teachers understand how their teaching methodologies are effectively applied	Become familiar with subject-specific curricula (CAPS) & resources. Observe blackboard work. Observe how technology is integrated in lessons. Explore subject-specific resources, manipulatives, etc. (e.g., Lego Six Bricks, etc.) Teach a small group of learners.	Model appropriate level content-specific vocabulary Co-teach part of a lesson with the mentor teacher. Teach a small group of learners. Demonstrate digital communication competence (e.g., Use WhatsApp, etc. as a teaching tool).	Choose appropriate and accurate representations of the content to share with learners. Provide accurate explanations of content to individuals/small groups. Observe and co-teach for five consecutive days: ✓ Content-specific questions ✓ Wait time ✓ Pacing ✓ Content-specific instructional strategies Model content-specific academic language Demonstrate subject-specific digital competences (e.g., Access and create a Powtoon)	Model the use of technology for accessing content references. Demonstrate subject-specific (content) digital competences (e.g., Create a PowerPoint with voice over to explain selected content, Use Active Presenter to record your screen, etc.) Teach for five consecutive days using explicit instructional sequences.	Explicit instruction. Lead a group discussion. Explain and model content. Check learner understanding during and after lesson. Analyze instruction for purpose of improvement.

Teaching involves monitoring and assessing learning	Analyze school-based assessment documents. Analyze learner workbooks.	Discuss assessment with mentor teacher. Become familiar and reflect on the school's, phase and teacher assessment systems. Capture and record marks	Analyze a small group of learners' written work. Analyze correction and assessment techniques. Discuss how school-based assessment should be implemented. Develop assessment activities (informal or formal) (whole class). Capture and record marks. Write a report on learner performance and indicate how instruction should be adapted.	Develop assessment tasks for the period of placement for all subjects. Implement assessment tasks. Do all marking and recording of marks. Document decisions that will affect future planning or instruction	Select and design assessments. Interpret the results of learner work. Provide oral and written feedback.

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Teachers understand that language plays an important role in teaching and learning.	Identify and analyze the CAPS (subject-specific) for language functions. Differentiate between two sources of academic language demands, namely texts and tasks. Identify a key language function and one learning task within your subject that allows learners to practice the function. Use resources (e.g., storybooks) and manipulatives (e.g., Lego Six Bricks) to enhance language learning for coding and robotics.	Differentiate between discourse, syntax and lexical (vocabulary) demands. Identify vocabulary and one additional language demand that relates to a language function and learning task. Identify and describe instructional and/or language supports to address language demands. Use resources (e.g., storybooks) and manipulatives (e.g., Lego Six Bricks) to enhance language learning for coding and robotics.	Formulate language objectives. Plan for academic language and content integration in lesson planning. Teach lessons with an explicit focus on accommodating academic language demands within a specific subject. Use resources (e.g., storybooks) and manipulatives (e.g., Lego Six Bricks) to enhance language learning for coding and robotics.	Teach lessons demonstrating academic language accommodation. Use resources (e.g., storybooks) and manipulatives (e.g., Lego Six Bricks) to enhance language learning for coding and robotics.	Facilitate academic language development for all learners.

Our second tool was a visual illustration that resembles the net of a square-based pyramid surrounded by a circle representing the diverse contexts in which the teaching practicum can be supervised, mentored and practice-based opportunities provided for student teachers (cf. Figure 1). This tool is based on the learning cycle for learning to enact core practices, developed by McDonald et al. (2013). Teacher education pedagogies are the practice-based instructional structures and routines (e.g., case studies, video analysis, etc.) that teaching practicum educators and mentor teachers can routinely use to support and scaffold student teachers' learning of teaching. Student teachers are introduced to representations (e.g., examples of what practice looks like by using modeling), approximations (e.g., opportunities to simulate and practice using mixed reality simulations like TeachLivE), the enactment of (e.g., practice and get feedback during co-teaching) and the reflection on practices (e.g., video analysis) during the practice-based learning cycle (cf. TeachingWorks, 2021). The base of the pyramid represents the foundation, namely the core practices that student teachers must learn to teach less rigidly and more thoughtfully. The practice-based opportunities (pedagogies of enactment) are represented in triangles to indicate that initially student teachers should be provided with a variety of practice-based opportunities, that are scaffolded by both teaching practicum educators and mentor teachers. As the student teachers move from being novices to advanced beginners there is a gradual release of responsibility. In the circle we have added the various contexts that can and should be considered, in addition to the traditional school-based placement, when developing teaching practicum practice-based opportunities. The school-based teaching practicum can be supplemented with practice-based opportunities presented online via a university's learning management system, via WhatsApp on mobile phones where the mentor teacher can provide feedback as well as participate in dialogic conversations with student teachers (cf. Nel & Marais, 2020), or via computer on an annotation platform such as Perusall where teacher educators, mentor teachers as well as peers can annotate student teachers' PowerPoint presentations with voiceover or videos (cf. Nel & Marais, 2021).
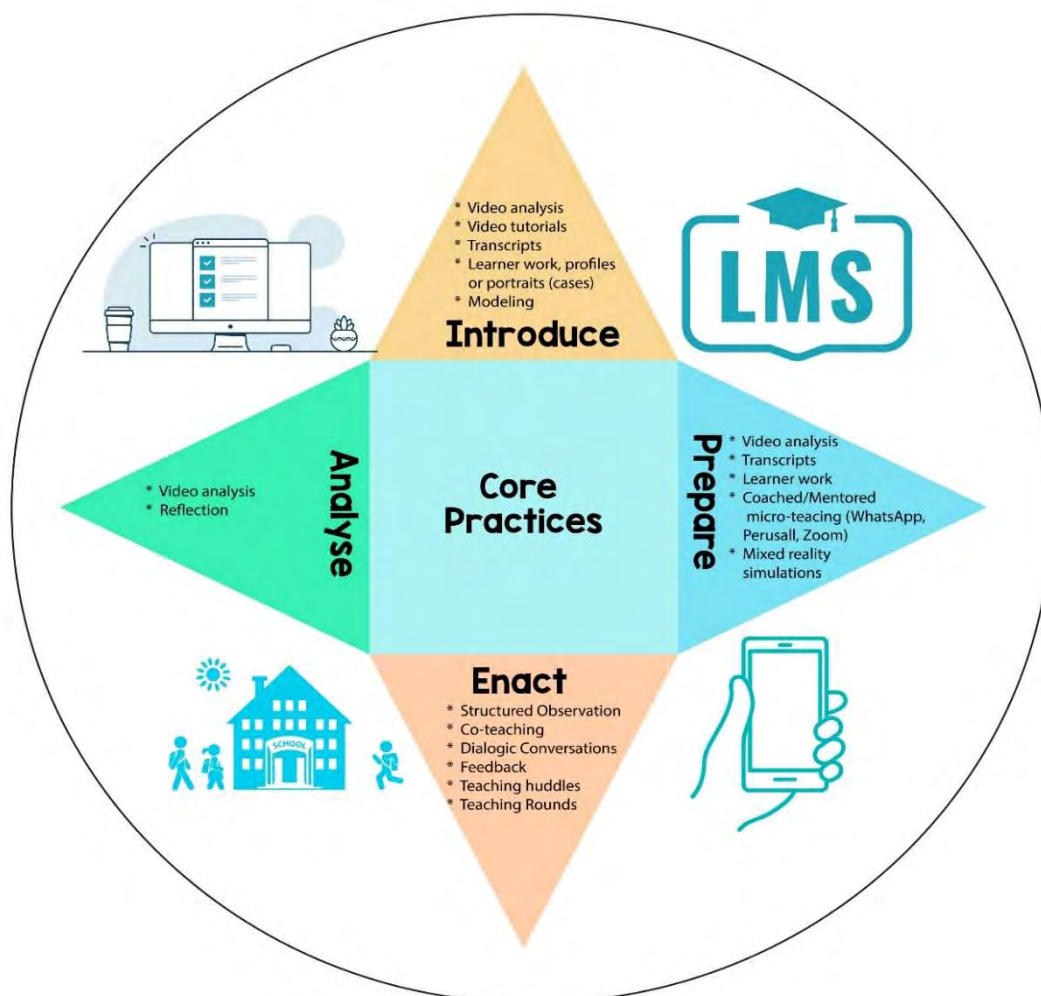
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Figure 1. Core practices and teacher education pedagogies

Conclusion

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and actions taken to protect public health, the way teaching and learning happens at schools and universities, as we use to know it, has been changed forever. That the teaching practicum should occur in a school-based setting remains largely unquestioned, but the COVID-19 situation has escalated the uptake and need for more practice-based and engaging supplements to the traditional school-based placement that should be seen as providing quality representations, approximations, enactment and reflection opportunities for student teachers. Working directly with learners in schools will always be the foundation of the teaching practicum, but it is a foundation that must now be expanded. Teaching is a complex job that requires various types of knowledge as well as the application of core teaching practices in highly demanding, challenging and constantly changing contexts. Benedict et al. (2016, p. 18) state that, "To reach a level of automaticity such that the practice can be implemented with fidelity takes consistent practice with feedback, reflection, coaching

and more practice". Teaching practicum educators and mentor teachers need to move away from being teaching practicum to ensuring that the teaching practicum steering system and suspension are aligned and that a safe, enjoyable and quality journey will lead to effective teaching and learning for all learners.

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