PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE IN THE ERA OF NEW-NORMAL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the whole world, has caused great changes in social, cultural and economic life. All sectors had to adapt to the new conditions called new-normal. Schools were also completely or partially closed during this period. Education services have begun to be provided at all levels with distance education tools. Practicum, an important component of teacher education, has also been moved to the digital environment. This study aims to delve into the experiences of preservice teachers who took the practicum course online during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was designed as phenomenological research and the data were collected through in-depth interviews with 13 preservice teachers. The phenomenological analysis yielded three themes in explaining participants' experiences of online practicum: adaptational gaps, fruitful challenges and realization of potential improvements. Implications of the findings with regard to planning of practicum process considering the next-normal were shared.

INTRODUCTION

Announced as a pandemic in March, 2020 (WHO, 2020), COVID-19 spread the whole world except for a few island countries in a short time. The pandemic imposed certain restrictions and hence regulation of a different lifestyle has emerged all over the world. This was named as new-normal. Unfortunately, schools have been closed as part of these restrictions over 180 countries. 1.64 billion students around the world have been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2021). The number of days schools were closed varied depending on the quality of distance education and class levels. Yet, according to the OECD Report, (OECD, 2021) schools were closed for an average of 60 days across all education levels. In Turkey, however, the duration of school closure exceeded 100 days, going well beyond the reported average. School closure resulted in academic, social and economic side effects at a global level. According to the human capital index, for instance, students are expected to experience a learning loss of 0.3 to 0.9 years. Furthermore, it is predicted that approximately 6.8 million students will drop out of schools, leading to an increase of 2% in out-of-school population (TEDMEM, 2020). Finally, the World Bank estimates the impact of school closures on the economy to be around $10 trillion (UNICEF, 2021). In order to mitigate the impact of all these negative effects, each country took certain measures to manage the crisis

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Detection of the first case on March 11, 2020, led to the suspension of face-to-face instruction at all school levels in Turkey. Education at K-12 levels continued synchronously and asynchronously via Education Information Network (MoNE, 2020a). In higher education institutions, programs moved to the digital platforms and theoretical courses continued with online tools for synchronous and asynchronous teaching. For the applied courses, Higher Education Council (HEC) approved the intensification of the lessons with evaluations through assignments, projects or any other assessment tools deemed appropriate (MoNE, 2020a; HEC, 2020a; HEC, 2020b). As a result of the consultations between HEC and Ministry of National Education (MoNE), it was decided to continue preservice

teachers' practicum experiences on digital environments. Against this background, this study aimed to delve into preservice teachers' experiences with online practicum courses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Wide-scale health epidemics such as the Black Death (1350), Cholera (1817), Spanish Flu (1918), HIV/AIDS (1981) resulted into social epidemics. In the wake of AIDS/HIV crisis, Philip Strong (1990) has written about epidemic psychology. Strong (1990, p. 250) argues that the early response to deadly epidemics with large, unexpected, or particularly devastating consequences produces a peculiar psycho-social form, and he calls this epidemic psychology. He mentions three consecutive and overlapping stages describing this psycho-social form: fear, explanation and action. This model also provides a useful tool to talk about the state of education services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Opening or closing the schools creates a fear on stakeholders in that there is infection risk when schools kept open or learning loss when closed. In the second stage, policymakers make decisions on the basis of recommendations from the health boards and provide explanations to justify their decisions. Finally, in the third stage, there comes the act of school closure. This unexpected and unprepared situation has pushed educational institutions to develop new alternatives to continue education services.

The search for alternatives is not new in epidemics. For example, the first open-air school movement, isolated from the city, started in Berlin in 1904 during the tuberculosis epidemic (Pruitt, 2020). Similarly, with the closure of schools in the COVID-19 pandemic, education services were provided in different ways. Alternatives such as distance, hybrid or small-size face-to-face education have been used in different countries depending on, for instance, intensity of COVID-19 cases, the age and needs of students, access to technological tools and human resources. During the first period of the epidemic, many countries also implemented measures such as suspending extracurricular activities, extending the holiday periods, and allowing students to return to classes gradually, for example, by age group. Strategies such as organizing students in shifts (alternating), combining face-to-face and distance learning were more widely adopted at K12 level (OECD, 2021). However, due to the fact that the epidemic lasted longer than expected and there was no hybrid or face-to-face education opportunity, especially for higher education, internet-based applications were used together with traditional communication tools such as television and radio in the distance education process both in the world and in Turkey (UNESCO, 2020).

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

The first obvious alternative among the options was distance education which did not require students and teachers to be located in the same physical space. The necessity of maintaining social distance as well as accumulated experience and familiarity gained over the years at higher education (see Falvo and Johnson, 2007) contributed to the adoption of distance education by many institutions. Experts in the field of educational technology have defined many concepts such as online learning, e-learning, m-learning, distributed learning, blended learning or homeschooling under the concept of distance education. However, education services provided in distance during the pandemic can be better described as 'emergency remote teaching' (ERT) (Murphy, 2020, p.492). This is because distance education is an optional, planned activity based on theoretical and practical knowledge that aims to minimize the operational/psychological distance in order to facilitate the continuity of teaching and learning. However, ERT is a compulsory, temporary and survival-oriented practice implemented in times of crisis, using all available resources, including synchronous and/or asynchronous tools

to ensure continuity of education (Bozkurt and Sharma, 2020, p.2). Became implemented in a revolutionary rather than evolutionary way, ERT was found to be a better description of distance education model adopted in Turkey, and in fact in many other countries as well.

Practicum

In Turkey, teacher candidates are prepared to the profession through 4-year undergraduate programs. During their studies, preservice teachers attend to courses clustered under three categories: educational sciences, general cultures and field-specific content and pedagogy. The programs include 141 credits for theoretical and 14 for applied courses. Practicum experiences constitute 12 credits of applied courses given in the last year as school replacement (HEC, 2018). As part of their practicum studies, preservice teachers are expected to prepare a portfolio based on their reflections and observations about the mentor's and students' one day at school, mentor's partitioning of the lesson, employment of teaching methods and techniques, classroom management, evaluation of student learning, duties of school principals and school relations with the close environment/society (HEC, 2010).

Practicum appears to be an indispensable part of teacher education programs around the world (White and Forgasz, 2016; Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). It plays a complementary role bridging between theory and practice in teacher education (Loughran and Hamilton, 2016, p.18) and hence considered as an important opportunity for preservice teachers to develop teaching competence (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Practicum is valuable for preservice teachers to experience the actual environments of their future workplaces (Flores, 2016). Pre-service teachers also learn from their observations of mentors. In addition, it helps develop teaching and reflection skills in associating the theoretical knowledge acquired in universities to experience-based learning at school (Becker, et.al., 2019).

The research, however, warns that expected benefits are not readily available through the practicum. For instance, Ryan et.al. (1996) investigated the purpose and structure of practicum. Their findings revealed certain difficulties including theory-practice gaps, lack of planning in practicum organization, problems with mentors and supervisors as well as field-specific application of theoretical knowledge. Similarly, preservice teachers in Hascher et.al.'s (2004) research experienced serious difficulties in terms of receiving feedback, planning and preparation, developing reflection skills on the quality of instruction as well as faced with hardships in their relations with other teachers and class. Therefore, planning, implementation and evaluation stages must be managed effectively in order for practicum experience to realize the expected benefits.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Practicum with an important place in teacher education all over the world has begun to be implemented as an ERT format during the COVID-19 pandemic. The practicum has become one of the most focused issues for teacher educators, education-planners and policy-makers in the era of pandemic. This study will contribute to our understanding of online practicum experiences from preservice teachers' perspectives. In addition, the study will offer suggestions for reshaping the practicum in the period called 'next-normal'.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study delves into preservice teachers' experiences of online practicum during the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly attends to the following research question: What are the pre-service teachers' experiences about online practicum?

METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to understand preservice teachers' online practicum experiences gained through ERT. To this end, the study adopted a qualitative approach and employed phenomenological research method. The phenomenological method is found to be useful to reveal the essence of the lived experience of the participants by approaching the obtained data from different angles and perspectives (Creswell, 2007). In this process, the researcher attempts to synthesize the meanings and essences from data of the lived experiences through intuition and reflection, which eventually leads to the creation of ideas, concepts, and understandings (Moustakas, 1994). This method was used to make sense of online practicum experiences of the participants in their own subjective realities and to make inferences relevant to research purposes.

Participants and Context

In this study, while selecting the participants, a purposeful sampling approach was employed. 13 preservice teachers taking part in online practicum were selected. The participants were enrolled in mathematics teacher education program in a large southeastern university in Turkey. The practicum continued for 12 weeks, and the participants followed the mentor's classes for 4-hours in each week. Mentor (mathematics teacher) was teaching at secondary level and conducted lessons online via Education Information Network. Preservice teachers' practicum works are evaluated by both mentor and supervisor from the university. Practicum works were assessed on the basis of 9 written reports of the participants as well as their attendance to the online classes with the mentor. The report topics were as follows: teacher's, students' and principal's one day in the school, mentor's teaching and partitioning of the lesson, examinations, the classroom management, the use of activities and evaluation of student work, school rules, relations with society and the organizational structure of the school. In order to prepare the reports, the participants were asked to observe, interview and research.

Data Collection Tool and Procedure

In this study, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Four aspects of educational programs (Tyler, 1949; Taba, 1962) guided the preparation of interview questions: goal, content, teaching approach and evaluation. The participants were asked to make evaluations about each of these aspects of online practicum that they experienced through ERT. These dimensions provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities associated with the practicum. While preparing the questions, the views and reflections of two experts from the field of "Curriculum and Instruction" on the items were obtained. Afterwards, data collection tool was piloted with two pre-service teachers to make judgements about the clarity and relevance. Interview questions were finalized by making necessary arrangements in line with the feedback received.

The interviews were conducted with 13 participants immediately after they completed the online practicum and submitted the expected reports for assessment purposes. Interviews were carried out on Zoom and recorded with permission. It was stated to all interviewees that the data obtained from the interviews, in line with ethical guidelines, will only be used for research purposes and will not be shared with the third parties.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological analysis requires a teamwork. The analysis team for the study consisted of three experts, two in education sciences and one in mathematics education. Transcriptions and video-records of the interviews were shared among the team members before data analysis. The analysis team had meetings periodically to work on the data and share their insights.

Data analysis was carried out in six stages suggested by Creswell (2007). The first stage is called Epoche/Bracketing. At this stage, the researchers noted their personal thoughts, experiences and perspectives about ERT and practicum. During the second stage, called horizontalization, analysis team made a list of significant statements relevant to the phenomenon under investigation, i.e., practicum experience via ERT. In the third stage, meaning units or themes have been designated by studying the significant expressions listed before. In the fourth stage, textural descriptions were created, that is, the most suitable verbatim quotes to reveal students' evaluations. At the fifth stage called structural descriptions, the "how" of the participants' online practicum experiences were examined. The last step of the analysis process, textural and structural descriptions are synthesized into a composite description in such a way that reflects the "essence" portraying the meaning of the experience.

Trustworthiness and Credibility Measures

Trustworthiness was enhanced through member check, conducting analysis with a research team specialized in their fields, eliminating biases at the beginning of the process, repeated collaborative work cycles, independent analysis and transparency. In the textual description phase of the phenomenological analysis process, the verbatim quotes obtained from the participants' evaluations are selected and shared with the reader in the findings for the purpose of credibility.

FINDINGS

The analysis yielded three main themes relevant to participants' online practicum experience: adaptational gaps, fruitful challenges and realizations of potential improvements. Explanations and necessary quotations on these themes are presented below.

1. Adaptational Gaps

It was clear from the data that the participants expected to experience a face-to-face practicum. They reported certain gaps between the expected face-to-face and actually experienced online practicum works. All these gaps were somehow related to the participants' adaptation to the online practicum. The reported adaptational gaps included planning, mentor roles and theory-practice balance. With regard to planning, the participants stated that they were not well-equipped to follow online courses as they were, at the beginning, illiterate of Zoom and other digital platforms. They mentioned that technical difficulties created obstacles to fully benefit from the practicum. Secondly, there were some uncertainties about the mentors' expectations and time schedules. Such uncertainties seemed to cause tension and discomfort. In this regard, P2 (i.e., participant 2) stated that:

> There were many deficiencies in the planning. It was not clear when I was going to join mentor's online lesson. We were not expected to teach this semester, but the mentor was texting a message at 11 pm, asking me to get ready for online lesson tomorrow morning. There were uncertainties. I learned a lot, but I wish it was systematic and well-planned.

Another important result is that mentor roles should be adapted accordingly in the ERT format. Preservice teachers and mentors communicate more easily during face-to-face practicum. Both parties could socialize and share professional experiences in various places at different occasions such as during the lessons breaks, at the end of the lessons, in the teachers' room and/or school yards. However, in the online practicum, the opportunities for socialization and professional sharing became restricted to the confines of online lessons after which their communications often had an end. In this respect, P10 stated that:

> The teacher (mentor) has followed her program. She didn't do anything extra for us. Maybe if we could hold meetings once in a while, we could focus on and talk about different things. If she had meetings with us, we could have asked what we didn't understand.

Participants also expressed their wishes to see how theoretical knowledge gained during teacher training period put into practice. During the interviews, they mentioned that they expected to achieve a pedagogical growth with regard to, for example, classroom management, material design, attention management, effective teaching methods and communications with students. However, they stated that their experiences during online practicum did not allow them to gain practical skills in all these areas. In this respect P3 stated that:

> My expectations were partially met. I don't know what the classroom management will be like. You do "mute all" in the zoom. We couldn't learn how to use teaching materials....the excitement in the first weeks later disappeared. We did the same things over and over again.

2. Fruitful Challenges

It has been observed that the ERT practicum experience challenged the participants, but these difficulties were instructive for them and offered meaningful development opportunities. This has been the case for many as they presumed that online teaching would be on the agenda even after the pandemic. In this regard P7 and P10 made the following statements respectively:

> It is not clear what the future will be like. Maybe I have to go through the same process (online teaching) in the future. It prepared me. Even teaching was done online with the cameras on, students joined the class-works. And I was also part of it.

> If we prepare in advance for the online course, we could use the time quite efficiently. Instead of writing fractions on the board, we can project them on the screen. I enjoyed and saw new things... but the teacher has to use technology very well. I have to improve myself in how to get student attention.

> All participants stated that they would prefer face-to-face practicum. However, they mentioned that well-structured online courses could also be efficient. In this respect, P8 commented that:

> I saw a positive relationship with students, care given to them individually… children expected encouragement constantly. The teacher did so. I observed and experienced how teaching could be done, how the authority secured…Even if online, I saw that the teacher could discipline and control the class. I got it now there's always a way for efficient teaching.

> Participants have experienced practicum in two separate groups at the same school with different mentors. It was observed that mentors had positive/negative effect on preservice teachers' experiences. P11 and P8 stated the positive contributions of the mentor as follows:

> In the beginning I was very excited and scared. But the teacher was very understanding. We all had difficulties, but she waited for every opportunity. She

even arranged her home for online education. She helped us in all matters. We always asked her while writing the reports. I gained confidence.

I had a low expectation for practicum. But the teacher was very diligent. Despite the busy schedule, she made us very active. She taught in different ways. She taught on board, with video and slideshows, many different ways.

3. Realization of Potential Improvements

The evaluations of the participants about the online practicum were generally that the best was done under difficult conditions in this extraordinary period. However, they made suggestions in terms of duration, timing, assessment method and content on the basis of their experiences regarding online practicum. P9, for instance, made the following suggestions:

Practicum could have included more than 4 lessons a week. Each lesson lasted for 25 minutes…We could have spent more time with the students. I would love to do teaching; I have insufficiencies but I learned a lot from the lessons.

P2 made criticisms about the timing of the practicum. She stated that if the practicum experience could have been provided in earlier years, it would have been more beneficial for their growth and professional preparation.

We are very stressed because of graduation and exams. Practicum could have been much more beneficial, had it been in our third year; it was our most relaxed time at the university.

Having the practicum assessment made by both the mentor and supervisor was considered appropriate. However, participants stated that the content of some assessment reports was not suitable for online practicum and that assessment should have been spanned over the semester and done formatively. With this regard P2 and P10 noted respectively that:

We prepared very generic reports. For example, there was a report about the school environment. I looked at google maps and tried to write something seemed relevant. We wrote reports about the school principals without ever seeing them.

The assessment could have been done through regular meetings. We could've met every 2-3 weeks with mentor, supervisor and internship group. The reports could've focused on whatever happened online lessons in the pandemic.

Students stated that practicum content should have been digitalized and that at the beginning of the semester, technology competency was not adequately addressed. In this regard P4 made the following comments:

Online practicum was very difficult at the beginning. I did not know how to use Zoom or z-book. Those who knew how to make a YouTube video and how to prepare an online exam were comfortable, but I had a hard time. It took some time for me to get used to all these.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study point to three emergent themes: adaptational gaps, fruitful challenges and potential improvements. The first theme was related to adaptational gaps. During the pandemic, many alternatives have been developed to conduct lessons at all levels. Delivered on digital environments, the conduct of theoretical courses was relatively less problematic. However, applied courses like practicum which requires real classroom experiences lead to unique challenges (Moyo, 2020). In this respect, the participants reported similar difficulties observed by Ryan et al. (1996) almost 25 years ago such as poor planning, problems with mentors and supervisors as well as field-specific application of theoretical knowledge (see also Hascher et.al., 2004). Hence it is apparent that the same difficulties continue to remain regardless of whether practicum is conducted online or face-to-face. Moreover, poor online teaching infrastructure, orientation gaps, lack of guidance and support, and insufficiencies in digital teaching competencies (Carrillo and Flores, 2020) seemed to have added up to the problems encountered during the online practicum experience. As the current situation of online practicum was, in a sense, a form of ERT experience, these problems were, to some extent, expected and even understandable. However, reported problems in this study indicate the necessity of a reconsideration for the readiness and preparedness of Turkish higher education institutions in terms of digital infrastructure and human resources (Çalıkoğlu and Gümüş, 2020). These reconsiderations could act as important triggers for the regulation of adaptational efforts to the new-normal.

The normal, new-normal, next-normal trilogy emphasized by Bozkurt and Sharma (2020) forces us to reconsider the truths we know in the context of education planning. Preservice teachers' difficulties in adapting to the online practicum were, in part, due to the fact that their preparational period (about 4 years) and all their previous educational backgrounds were shaped completely according to the old-normal. Their experiences in the era of old-normal instilled them with certain expectations which in turn influenced their evaluations, and hence gains, of the online practicum. While some of the participants found the online practicum useful, others expressed their expectations of a face-to-face experience. There were those wishing to perform a trial teaching in an online environment, but also those finding online lesson observations sufficient. It could be argued that preservice teachers, in different contexts with different influences, experienced a tide between the "real practice" and "ideal(ized) practice" (Flores and Gago, 2020) and hence oscillated between the two in their evaluations.

Despite the reported adaptational gaps, participants also found ERT practicum experience fruitfully challenging, that is, online practicum offered meaningful development opportunities. This was mainly related to the participant perception that even after the pandemic, online education will maintain its place in the education ecosystem as an alternative. However, the data suggest that in order to transform ERT into a practice of distance education, curricula should be carefully planned with the introduction of relevant and necessary changes in line with the next-normal with regard to four dimensions: goal, content, teaching approach and evaluation. The advantage of students exposed to ERT is that majority are digital natives and hence familiar with the technology. Before the pandemic, many students were active users of many digital platforms such as social media channels, online streaming services, video sharing websites and e-communication applets. Findings indicated that preservice teachers' digital backgrounds made a difference while engaging in online teaching. Findings also suggested that those lacking in certain digital skills quickly realized, and openly accepted the importance of those skills and stated to have compensated and hence adapted to the digital requirements during the online practicum. Hence this situation poses an opportunity for

policy-makers, decision-takers and content-developers to create an effective learning environment by taking advantage of youngsters' digital competencies and/or swift adaptational capabilities.

The third theme emerging from the analysis was concerned with potential improvements that could be introduced to online practicum. Participant suggestions made it clear that they expected a flexible structure in terms of duration, timing, assessment methods and mentor/supervisor selection. The preservice teachers in this study stated expectations to make their own choices and take the responsibility of their own learning. In many teacher education programs, the responsibility for the practicum is largely left to the mentors at the school rather than to preservice teachers. The quality of the gains from the practicum experiences hence depends very much on how the mentors organize the learning context (Hascher et al., 2004). In this study, it was clear that participants' satisfaction with the practicum was, to an important extent, determined by the mentor's approach. Therefore, depending on the available resources, providing alternatives for student teachers to work with different mentors and student-centered organization of the practicum schedule could help eliminate inequalities in terms of learning opportunities. Preservice teachers appear to get more involved into online practicum process when assessment and evaluation methods and criteria are adjusted by taking into account the nature of the activities developed within the scope of the practical components of the programs (see also Flores and Gago, 2020). With the implementation of such changes, preservice teachers believed to have better prepared to the demands and conditions of the next-normal.

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