

Field practicum in the times of a pandemic

Context

The period of time that student teachers spend combining theory and practice i.e., the practice period in schools, is known to be a highly valuable period. At the University of Helsinki, the curriculum of primary teacher education entails two compulsory practice periods during the study program. The emphasis of the second practice period is collaborative learning within the school. The two practicum periods involve Basic Practicum, 10 ECTS (5 weeks in year 2) and Advanced Practicum, 10 ECTS (7 weeks in year 5). The Advanced Practicum contains observation, co-teaching, individual teaching and tasks in relation to professional development.

The essence of teaching practice is precisely in the practical experience to be gained, but as the pandemic has shown, teacher education institutions have had to rethink practice during restrictions and due to concerns over individuals' health. While field practice is to be preferred, we present examples of activities that were included in non-field practice when this was the only viable option. As we had not implemented non-field practice before, experimenting with this was a novel exercise for us. We developed learning activities which the vision that they can be implemented in the current teacher education curriculum under circumstances that prevent traditional field practice.

The activities in the e-learning task were divided into independent work and pair-based collegial (E)-learning (within same group). Here we describe two of the learning activities, namely observation of teaching in the "[Lärportalen](#)" platform, and enhancing international collegiality virtually in the form of an international seminar. The activities, especially observation of teaching virtually, can be used in the context of practice teaching but also in other courses in teacher programs, for example in

various subject-related courses. To support the observation, there are different observation tools that can be used. It is beneficial to discuss what can be observed and how, and also the importance of focus when one cannot observe everything that goes on in the class.

Implementation

The student teachers participated in the practicum on distance. A major part of the e-learning tasks was designed with a special focus on collegial learning. The learning goals for the advanced practice period include, for example,

- to independently take responsibility for the learning process as a whole,
- to gain advanced knowledge on how pupils in special education learn and the process of how to plan the support for pupils needs,
- to enhance social justice and to use multiculturalism and multilingualism as resources both in teaching and in co-operation with pupils, parents, colleagues and other professionals in the school community
- to reflect on the role as a pedagogical leader

Literature within the advanced practice period consists of four research articles, the Practicum handbook, developed at the University of Helsinki, and the Finnish National Core Curriculum. All instructions and documents could be reached digitally. In addition, the teacher educator at the university gathered a list of research articles and information about current online seminars and workshops related to teaching in the school context. For example, seminars arranged by stakeholders outside the university or workshops arranged by, for instance a parents' associations.

Learning activities

The first two-three weeks of the practice period the student teachers did pair-work while they observed teaching modules via the Swedish virtual platform “Lärportalen” with digital teaching resources. The student teachers watched videos of teaching and did analyses of teaching and texts connected to the exercises directly on the platform. Reflections of the modules they did in pairs were documented in their teaching diaries.

As a final exercise the student teachers planned and conducted, together with teacher educators, a virtual international seminar. During two intensive seminar days 40 student teachers from three universities discussed together the ethical dilemmas in the teacher’s profession and phenomenon-based learning. The students planned, implemented, and hosted the program, and they also participated in the presentations and group works.

Reflection with peers and in a portfolio

At the beginning of the practice, the student teachers completed a self-assessment task including 3-4 primary areas they wished to develop. They

were instructed to write their own professional development goals for the non-field practice.

The student teachers met as a group with the supervising teacher educator from at university in Zoom meetings at a minimum once a week to discuss current tasks. The group formed during the seven weeks a community for reflecting on practical matters in teaching, the teaching profession, and probing more personal matters. The student teachers shared experiences on how to combine distance learning with private life and how to enhance their own wellbeing when studying at home.

The student teachers documented their learning through a portfolio that reflects their professional development as a teacher. The final portfolio had the aim to support the student teachers’ professional teacher identity development. The students were instructed to report insights related to their professional development through their work that they had done, and their reading during the practice.

As a practical tool supporting their reflections and final portfolio the students were also asked to keep a logbook.

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