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Author(s): Meriläinen, Merja; Valli, Päivi; Valli, Raine; Piispanen, Maarika

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The Best On-Line Guidance Experiences in Finnish Primary School Teacher Education Practicum

Merja Meriläinen [1], Päivi Valli [2], Raine Valli [3], Maarika Piispanen [4]

[1] Education Department,
Kokkola University Consortium
Chydenius, Finland
merja.merilainen@chydenius.fi

[2] Education Department,
Kokkola University Consortium
Chydenius, Finland
paivi.valli@chydenius.fi

[3] Education Department,
Kokkola University Consortium
Chydenius, Finland
raine.valli@chydenius.fi

[4] Education Department,
Kokkola University Consortium
Chydenius, Finland
maarika.piispanen@chydenius.fi

ABSTRACT

Finnish primary school teacher education is built on master level studies since the late 70's. Teachers' profession and pedagogical skills will grow not only during university studies but also in guided training practicums in Finnish primary schools and special training schools. Never the less, Finnish school system is not problem free - approximately ten percent of new teachers will change their career in the first five teaching years. This is a strong signal about the challenges connected to teacher's profession nowadays also in Finland despite the great success in international student achievement tests (PISA). In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in supporting and mentoring just graduated teachers during the induction period. Could this be done already during the studies? This paper will focus on the final practicum period in Kokkola University Consortium's primary school teacher education program. The purpose of this paper is to seek modern ways to guide and support pre-service teachers during their first working months in Finnish primary schools already during the late studies. In this essay we will highlight both student's and teacher's experiences concerning on-line guidance and support system in the final practicum period shortly before graduation.

Keywords: *Teacher education, on-line-guidance, mentoring, pre-service teacher, practicum*

INTRODUCTION

The Finnish education system offers every child an equal opportunity for education. Basic education is completely free of charge, including the teaching, all the school materials, and special needs education as well as health care and healthy school meals. According to basic education act (1998) basic education lasts nine years and caters for all children between 7 and 16 years. Schools are not allowed to select their students – this is what we call territorial or neighboring school principle i.e. every child can go to the school of his or her own school district. The Finnish educational system has also been celebrated elsewhere: for example, in 2010 Newsweek declared Finland to be the best country to live in the world. One of the key components of a good life, according to Newsweek, is education. In Finland education was ranked best in the world in this universal comparison. (Väljörvi & Heikkinen 2012, 31.)

Finnish teachers are highly qualified in all school levels. Master's degree has been a requirement since 1978 and the practicums are built in various ways than even in other Scandinavian countries. The class teacher's education in Finland is popular; the applicant numbers every year in the common entrance examination of the teacher training of Finland's universities have been approximately 5000-6500 applicant, as Meriläinen and Valli (2010) reminds us. Väljörvi (2012) points out, that teachers' professional status is still high in Finland (see also Väljörvi & Heikkinen 2012, 32). Although the salaries of Finnish teachers are according to OECD (2008) internationally only average, young people, especially young female students, find teacher's profession like a good option. In his review of the history and present of the Finnish education system, Väljörvi (2012) mentions that the students seeking to teacher training usually

make up an extremely motivated and selected group of young people.

Kokkola University Consortium Chydenius is an independent university-level teaching and research unit located in the western Finland. Kokkola University Consortium in co-operation with the Faculty of Education at the Jyväskylä University arranges primary school teacher education, leading to the degree of Master of Education. These courses are particularly aimed at persons studying through the Open University, those contemplating a change of career and those changing the emphasis of their studies in education. Following the principles of life-long learning, the courses are constantly being developed to match to the needs of individual students and the changing demands of society at large as Meriläinen and Valli (2008) highlights in their earlier studies.

Teacher education in Finland is facing a situation in which it is necessary to develop new ways to organize education according to the needs of the students and society. As Jyrhämä (2006) mentioned in her earlier study, there is an increasing demand for a more flexible teacher study program that would make it possible for students to connect theory and practice and make it visible at the same time. Wang, Odell and Schwille (2008) emphasizes in their article, how the way teacher students are prepared to teach is not always sustained by their school cultures. Ferguson-Patrick (2011) draws our attention to the fact that pre-service teachers often needs to consider the compromise between their university training and that of their school context.

According to Jokinen and Sarja (2006) the more complex, open and multiple working environment will often look really difficult and challenging to an inexperienced teacher. The new demands of work and the skills one have achieved during the studies don't always meet in authentic situations. Even how well the teacher training system has planned, it can never give to teachers all the knowledge and skills needed in teachers profession. The novice teachers are still learning the teacher profession and they need to get support and guidance to build up their professional identity. (Look also Odell & Hulling 2000.)

So far there has been discussion about induction period in Finnish teacher education and the first working years in Finnish primary schools (see Välijärvi 2012; Almiola 2008; Kiviniemi 2000). One of the key questions for Finnish teacher education in the future is according to Välijärvi (2012) how to integrate pre-service and in-service training more effectively so as to support teacher's professional development throughout their work careers. Another important point he adds, relates to support for newly graduated teachers entering the working life. Research has shown that this induction phase, as it is called, includes many problems. (Välijärvi 2012, 8.)

LEARNING IN AUTHENTIC CONTEXTS

In Kokkola University Consortium pre-service primary school teacher education issues mentioned above are also well known. Because of that we are constantly developing all the five practicums, which belong to primary school teacher studies, to prepare students to face the teachers' profession as authentic as possible already during the studies. This paper will focus on the final practicum, The own class practicum, where pre-service teachers begin to work in authentic school contexts. The practicum is supported, guided and mentored right to the needs of pre-service teacher; the help is pointed directly to daily issues from planning to teaching and learning as they rise from the context.

The aim of this paper is to describe in what way the practicum is organized, how the support system is built as well as analyze both student's and teacher's experiences concerning the guidance and support at the time of the first working months as primary school teachers. The data has been collected during the years 2010-2012 Research material (N=48) consists of:

- real time taped recordings
- practicum evaluation reports
- learning diaries
- questionnaires

Surveys such as that conducted by Kiggins (1999) have shown that after graduation, teacher students leave university with feelings of being under-prepared for life in classrooms and confused by what confronts them when they arrive at schools. Almiola (2008) find out some of the most common reasons for a professional field exchange as

follows: heterogeneous pupil material, the demanding parents and bad employment. Recent discussion in the field of education in Finland has also concerned class level group sizes, which has been seen one of the reasons for behavior and left behind problems. As Almiala (2008) states the increasingly challenging pupil material makes working pressure even challenging to teacher students in the beginning of teachers career. This view is supported by Armour and Booth (1999) who found that most schools who worked with final year primary education students felt that they needed more experience with the day to day operation of schools, and how the daily work of teachers relates to the culture of schools and classrooms.

The final practicum (extent of 8 ECTS credits) is possible to perform as a distance practicum in the municipal comprehensive schools around Finland. As a precondition to this practicum students will work full-timely as primary school class teachers and as legally competent members of the working community for at least one term lasting time period. The final practicum is the latest from five practicums carried out during the studies and performed in the end of teachers studies. The practicum lasts 2-3 months depending on how the student will schedule practicum tasks on his/her daily routines (Meriläinen & Valli 2010). This practicum is built to prepare students for authentic and contextual conditions in classroom and to meet real life challenges already during the studies when support is available not only from other teachers but also from the university.

One of common challenges emergence from the research material was the lack of collaboration among teachers. *"I've missed communality, collaborative planning and in generally sharing ideas and experiences. As an Early childhood educators I'm used to work as a team member and I really miss it."* Unlike other professionals who work in teams, teachers usually work alone, often as the only adult in the classroom. Even though the working culture is slowly changing, the findings show clearly that there is not enough pedagogical support available in the first working months as a teacher. This is why we have seen important to contextualize the delivery of instruction and link the instruction as closely as possible to the contexts and settings to which it applies, i.e. develop the practicum tasks as they exists in authentic conditions.

"I found the tasks really reasonable. Every task was connected straight to my work. In addition, none of the tasks seemed useless – the other way round, I felt I grew as a teacher with these tasks."

"Fist I found the tasks themselves irrelevant – as the practicum went further I understood the meaning of them more clearly."

"The term plan was maybe the most useful to me. I also found the short term plan (transdisciplinary planning via phenomenon) and the more detailed week level plans as well as tasks connected to these, useful to understand the big picture of planning."

Despite of the supported planning process, students will soon understand that schools are more than a conglomeration of buildings, people and in this case planning. As Bullough (1987) states, every school has a culture which has evolved as a response to wider cultural values. There is a huge need to shorten the gap between the university studies and the reality of everyday school life.

COLLABORATION IS THE SCHOOL AND ONLINE

According to Teacher training curriculum the aim of the Own class practicum is to develop

- larger entity of planning and teaching
- creative and meaningful pedagogical decisions concerning teaching
- assessing skills as well as differentiating skills

During this practicum, we guide, advice and support them at the time needed and make his/her operation modes as visible as possible by using online monitoring as a tool for reflecting ones procedure as a teacher.

"Sometimes I find myself anxious, because I notice that in the beginning of my career I can't pay enough attention to issues an experienced teacher can. And the feeling that I don't understand or know what my pupils really not need nor how I can support them." In this kind of discussions online taped monitoring in real time has been rewarding and reasonable as one of the university lecturers argues: *"From my point of view this has been the most reasonable in online real time monitoring. Using the tapes later in guidance discussions helps students to mirroring his/her learning believes towards his/her operation culture, behavior in the class and learning tasks given to kids. This has been a great tool for develop and deepen his/her ability to reflect and make believes visible."* Unlike other professionals who work in teams, like mentioned above, teachers usually work alone in circumstances that deprive

them of an opportunity to learn from one another. Online monitoring, recordings and discussions connected to these, encourages students to look deeper ones believes and improve the quality of daily choices in teaching and guiding.

The emotional load will be the biggest naturally at the beginning of the school year in which case everything is new to the teacher: school, work, work community, pupils, parents, learning environment and physical setting of the work. In this loading situation the teacher should be able to find his/her place in the working community which has the stiff traditions. The transition to the working life requires an excellent ability to adapt oneself psychically simultaneously to very different situations of the teacher. The transition succeeds if the teacher's expectations, the realities of the job and the features of the personality agree well enough together. (Blomberg 2008, 211-212.)

The own class practicum will be fulfilled in the beginning of a new school year and a bit before that. Like Blomberg (2008) argues, the beginning of the school year is the most challenging to a new teacher. "There are so many things to keep in mind..." "I see so many lacks in my knowledge –it feels that especially in the first year I have to reread everything I've learned..." The practicum begins two or three weeks before the school begins – this is the time when students will orientate to the future – both theoretically and practically. The first seminar is held on-line – so that every student is prepared also technically to overcome the practicum. The lack of collaboration is said to be a common characteristic also in Finnish schools. In this practicum we have also created strategies to support collaboration to permit.

Online guidance, online discussion areas, mentoring and online seminars are places, issues and habits that will make collaboration possible and visible. Every student has a named mentor at school. The mentoring process begins in the beginning of August, when students and mentors participates together the first on-line seminar organized by university. Mentor teachers are aware of the tasks students will accomplish during the practicum. He / she will act as a role model, teacher, real time support and experienced colleague as well as one who is aware of the schools traditions. "I had a real close relationship with my mentor – our discussions have been rewarding...", "My mentor deserves a big thank you – it was important to me to know there is a person who is there for me..." In addition to mentoring, planning and sharing in teams will come true online in special discussion areas accomplished to support first working months at school. These discussion forums mirror real life net based discussion forums – although the discussion contents and guidelines are focused more detailed to practicum aims.

"Many of these tasks were helpful in planning process. Especially these two forums in net were meaningful and I felt I learned a lot from others when sharing thought and ideas. It was interesting to hear others thoughts about their students and environments. When I shared my pupil case I got lots of ideas and educational information how to deal with it. When we put our clever heads together the solutions and ideas were more unique than if I'd done it alone."

Even though some of the students as well as earlier studies (Almiala 2008; Blomberg 2008; Kiggins 2009) shows that teachers work still is mainly working alone, this practicum is built to make collaboration and its possibilities visible to teacher students. Isolated in the classroom is not the only option – using online possibilities can change the whole school culture more open and support pre-service teachers academical growth during the practicum in authentic contexts.

ONLINE GUIDANCE AND MONITORING – BENEFITS TO BE NAMED

Besides mentoring, learning tasks, online discussions and reports, there is a real time, online monitoring day included in the practicum. The student is responsible to build a monitoring area with two cameras in his/her classroom as well as to ask someone to stay in his/her class helping with the cameras during the monitoring day. Before the exact day the student and university teacher will discuss about the day, make the camera plan and test the connections. During the testing there is a lot of collegial discussion about daily issues that has risen during the practicum. This non-official discussion creates a safe and confidential atmosphere between the student and the teacher. One of the university teachers felt that online monitoring prepared her beforehand satisfyingly to orientate herself towards becoming day. *"I found it important to discuss beforehand what kind of material and how is it going to be used during the day. When my student showed me all the materials, introduced games or webpages she was going to use, I was truly in to her thoughts. This was new to me – it didn't happen the same way when I went physically to monitor students."*

One of the most important benefits in real time online monitoring and guidance is the possibility to record discussions and monitoring. The student as well as the teacher is able to return alone or together to the taped material and reflect activities and operations later. The university teacher is able to point concrete certain issues from the recordings to make student aware of these.

During the on-line guidance developing process, there were discuss about issues that we might miss without physical attendee in the classroom as well as face to face contact when discussing with students. The research results surprised us positively: with on-line guidance system we could get benefits we couldn't get when sitting physically in the classroom. The teaching situations were more natural, both teacher student and pupils forgot totally the monitoring and the behaviour remind the same as in normal school days. This observation made us realize more concrete the daily issues and tasks a pre-service teacher will face during his/her first teaching months and years.

The other benefits that we also found interesting and important where economical – there were a huge saving in both time and money. There was no need to travel around Finland during the practicum period any more. The save of time and money could be pointed to the guidance process which made the support system even deeper.

SYNTHESIS

During the developing process of on-line guidance in this practicum, there were discuss about issues that we might miss without physical attendee in the classroom as well as face to face contact when discussing with students. The research results surprised us positively: with on-line guidance system we could get benefits we couldn't get when sitting physically in the classroom: the teaching situations were more natural, both teacher student and pupils forgot the monitoring and the behaviour remind the same as in normal school days. This observation made us realize more concrete the daily issues and tasks a pre-service teacher will face during his/her first teaching months and years.

Even though the growth as a teacher is a long process, we hope that our students will have at this stage an experience of the teacher profession, which is strong enough and will grow even stronger with successful teaching experiences and in-service training. When understanding the connection between the theory and one's pedagogical way to act in one's own class, the teacher is able to estimate her own work and is able to mirror it and its significance in the middle of different choices (see Kiviniemi 2000, 77-79).

The developing process of the practicum will still go on. The good experiences from on-line guidance as well as real time authentic monitoring will be further developed. The focus will be on how to re-use even versatile ways the taped monitoring material in guidance discussion as well as adding even more monitoring periods during the practicum.

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