



Education in crises times: Lessons from an online practicum from the experiences of preservice early childhood teachers

Nada Zal AlWadaani 

Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, AlKharj, Saudi Arabia.

Email: nada.alwadaani@hotmail.com

Abstract

The world is witnessing increased crises affecting education worldwide, such as health and natural crises. Recently, the world was challenged by the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused national and international closure. Thus, learning and teaching shifted quickly to online teaching and assessment. The impact of this sudden shift on preservice Early Childhood (EC) teachers' practicums still needs to be discovered, especially with the insufficient preparation for online learning. This study aimed to explore the experiences and listen to the voices of preservice EC teachers about online practicum. There is little known about how preservice teachers experienced online practicums. How did they feel about them? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Were there any challenges faced? Thus, the study objectives focused mainly on shedding light on preservice EC teachers' experiences and bringing their voices to the forefront. This qualitative research study focuses on three preservice EC teachers who were suddenly forced into online practicum. The results showed that, despite the advantages of online practicums, participants experienced a mix of negative feelings. A primary recommendation was made to draw the attention of education policymakers that teaching is a social practice and emphasized the importance of providing an interactive and engaging online learning environment.

Keywords: Creativity, Crises, Engaging learning, Isolation, Online practicum, Preservice early childhood teachers, Social practice.

Citation | AlWadaani, N. Z. (2023). Education in crises times Lessons from an online practicum from the experiences of preservice early childhood teachers. *Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Management Studies*, 10(4), 142-149. 10.20448/ajssms.v10i4.5154

History:

Received: 31 August 2023

Revised: 18 October 2023

Accepted: 2 November 2023

Published: 20 November 2023

Licensed: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) 

Publisher: Asian Online Journal Publishing Group

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The Ethical Committee of the Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia has granted approval for this study on 18 January 2021 (Ref. No. 202015).

Transparency: The author confirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

Contents

1. Introduction	143
2. Methodology	144
3. Results and Discussion	145
4. Conclusion and Recommendations	148
5. Limitations	148
References	148

Contribution of this paper to the literature:

This study will enhance online learning and practicum by emphasizing the importance of providing interactive, rich, and engaging online environments. It proposes a need to allow preservice teachers to develop their thinking, teaching skills, and understanding of incorporating technologies for learning in the twenty-first century.

1. Introduction

The world is witnessing an increasing number of crises that affect education worldwide, such as health and natural crises. These crises raise an urgent need to research education in crises and emergencies as they may threaten education for all and everywhere. Education is a fundamental human right regardless of any circumstances, and the fourth goal of the sustainable development goals states that "education is one of the most powerful and proven vehicles for sustainable development" (United Nation, 2023) and, thus, it is vital to ensure comprehensive equitable and quality education for all. However, despite the importance of education, health crises such as COVID-19 affect education and cause significant disruption. According to the UNESCO (2020), the pandemic affected billions of learners. Indeed, during the pandemic, many learners from different levels of education suffered from partial or total interruption of education for varying periods. Many also have turned to distance or e-learning, which created a state of tension among learners, teachers, and families about the quality of education. What many learners and teachers have been exposed to during the pandemic necessitates researching education during crises for enhancement and discovering alternatives.

The pandemic challenged education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and many other countries (Bao, 2020; Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020). Many educational programs, including teachers' programs, shifted quickly to online teaching and assessment (Bao, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020; Moyo, 2020). Programs requiring a practicum were affected as a result of the closure. Practicums in kindergarten contexts were prohibited entirely, leading to what Kidd and Murray (2020) called a "practicum vacuum" (p. 543), in which practicums were replaced with new teaching methods, such as online practicums. The sudden closure of schools thus created challenges and confusion for teacher education programs about the practicums of preservice teachers (Moyo, 2020). As a result, many early childhood (EC) preservice teachers could not practice teaching in actual classrooms and kindergarten settings.

The practicum is a crucial aspect of teacher education programs (Ersin et al., 2020). According to Ulvik and Smith (2011), "practice teaching is regarded as a key component of teacher education and often highly valued by student teachers" (p. 517). The main aim of a practicum is to provide preservice teachers with opportunities for face-to-face experiences in which they gain knowledge, link theory, and develop their thinking and teaching skills based on real complex context situations (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Hands-on experience is essential for developing preservice teachers' teaching skills and enriching their professional knowledge (Ersin et al., 2020; Ulvik & Smith, 2011).

The practicum also plays a crucial role in preparing and supporting the entry of preservice teachers into the profession (Ulvik & Smith, 2011). Teaching practice experiences influence and shape preservice teachers' views of the teaching profession. According to Smith and Lev-Ari (2005), "the practicum does not only serve as a bridge between theory and practice in the learning of teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop a personal teaching competence" (p. 291). Being involved in relationships with different people and real, complex contexts gives preservice teachers the necessary teaching skills to help build confidence and deal with unique situations professionally (Ulvik & Smith, 2011). Teaching experiences prepare preservice teachers for the future; thus, ensuring and offering good-quality practicum experiences is crucial.

Given the shutdown of schools and universities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden transformation to online practicums and teaching, and the importance of practicums in real and complex contexts, studies about preservice teachers' experiences are needed (Kidd & Murray, 2020). This qualitative research focuses on the experiences of EC preservice teachers at the College of Education at Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University (PSAU) in the KSA. It aims to explore the experiences and listen to the voices of preservice EC teachers about online practicums. There is little known about how preservice teachers experienced online practicums. How did they feel about them? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Were there any challenges faced? Thus, this research aims to shed light on preservice EC teachers' experiences and bring their voices to the forefront.

To contextualize this research, it is important to explore the nature of practicums at PSAU. As a result of the abrupt closure of schools and universities and the belief in the importance of practicums, we at the Department of Kindergarten Education at PSAU had many discussions about what practicums should be like during the online education period. We worked quickly to ensure that we engaged all the preservice teachers in their practicum in ways that compensated for the loss of onsite practicums. The initial response was to move online. The practicum shifted suddenly from attending EC classrooms in kindergarten settings for 13 weeks, four days per week during the last semester of the EC teachers' program, to a complete online practicum without access to real EC classrooms.

The online practicum plan divided learning into weeks. The first week was dedicated to providing the preservice teachers with specialized theoretical workshops and seminars conducted through apps such as Zoom and Blackboard. Then, for two weeks, the students were required to attend practical workshops at the college, applying precautionary procedures such as social distancing and working in small groups of eight students each. For the next seven weeks, students learned and practiced online writing and implementing lesson plans, preparing and creating age-appropriate activities, producing creative learning materials, analyzing hypothetical situations, and creating proposals for initiating community partnerships. Learning evaluation and assessment occurred during the semester's last three weeks. Students were divided into small groups and then required to present their teaching skills in person at the college. Each week presented a different aspect of the kindergarten program schedule, such as circle time, learning corners, and outdoor play.

Like many other educational institutions across the world (Daniel, 2020), we had a very short time "to prepare for a remote-teaching regime" (p. 92). As a result of this unprecedented situation, questions about the quality of online learning have been raised, particularly in practicums where students are moving on to employment. This is

particularly important, as the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions in education and students' lives in many ways (Daniel, 2020; Kidd & Murray, 2020). So, despite all the efforts, little is known about the quality of education provided and students' experiences during online education. Thus, this research focuses on how EC preservice teachers at PSAU experienced online practicums.

This study aimed to explore the experiences and listen to the voices of preservice EC teachers about online practicums. There is little known about how preservice teachers experienced online practicums. How did they feel about them? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Were there any challenges faced? Thus, this research aims to shed light on preservice EC teachers' experiences and bring their voices to the forefront.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

This study used a qualitative approach to collect and analyze the participants' experiences with online practicums. This study aimed to explore preservice EC teachers' experiences and gain a deep understanding of them. Thus, a qualitative research design was chosen. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), "qualitative research provides an in-depth, intricate and detailed understanding of meanings, actions, non-observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors" (p. 219). It also allows participants' voices to be heard and explores hidden issues and factors that underlie action and behavior (Cohen et al., 2011). In addition, it addresses questions of 'what' and 'how' and involves an understanding of the context and social milieu "by allowing the researcher to enter the world of others and to attempt to achieve a holistic understanding" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Before conducting the interviews, the preservice teachers were informed about the purpose and aims of this study. Information sheets and consent forms were distributed to all preservice teachers in the eighth level of their studies, which is the last semester of the program. The information sheet clearly explained that participation was voluntary, their privacy would be protected, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

2.2. Research Methods

Based on the aim of this study, interviews were chosen as the primary research method, as they would be the best strategy to understand and explore teachers' experiences. It helps the researcher to build direct communication with participants easily and explore their feelings, perceptions, and knowledge through interactive talk (AlWadaani, 2019; Matthews & Ross, 2010), which produces knowledge by enabling "multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard" (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted because they offer important and valuable data due to their flexibility as open discussions.

Moreover, the researcher's ontological position acknowledges that participants' opinions, perceptions, experiences, understandings, and interactions are meaningful components of the social reality to be explored (AlWadaani, 2019). Therefore, interviews where it was possible to access the participants' social contexts and understand the "issues that lie beneath the surface of presenting behaviors and actions" (Cohen et al., 2011) were the most appropriate research method for achieving the aims of this research and reaching an understanding of the participants' experiences within this context. The interviews evolved around the following questions:

- Describe your experience with the online practicum. How did you feel about it?
- What did you like/dislike about the online practicum?
- What are the challenges you encountered during the online practicum?
- Would you agree to practicums being done partially online in the future?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving online practicums? What are they?

2.3. Sample and Settings

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research was conducted online through Zoom, a communication program that helps contact others through either an audio or a video conference, as a replacement for face-to-face interviews. Purposive sampling was used to collect data, meaning participants were chosen intentionally (AlWadaani, 2019). This approach is generally used with small-scale, in-depth studies (Matthews & Ross, 2010). The purpose is not to produce generalization or comparison but to present a unique case with its own "intrinsic value" (Cohen et al., 2011). Our case concerned exploring the experiences of preservice EC teachers undertaking their practicum online and enrolling in an undergraduate kindergarten education program.

The research included three female students who were doing their practicum online. All of the participants in this study were female because, in the KSA, only female teachers are allowed to study Early Childhood Education (ECE) (AlWadaani, 2019). The researcher tried to invite more preservice teachers to participate by communicating with them through their supervisors and distributing the information sheet several times during the study year. However, unfortunately, only three preservice teachers contacted the researcher and signed the consent forms. Although the researcher hoped to have more participants in this study, the three participants provided deep, rich, and interconnected data. There were similarities and differences in the data provided by the participants, but in some way, they reflected similar experiences with different emphases on some parts of those experiences. Therefore, the researcher believes that the sample size is suitable and sufficient to achieve the study's aim, as there seems to be saturation at which "the data collection process no longer offers any new or relevant data" (Dworkin, 2012).

As discussed previously, this study aimed not to generalize the results but to understand the experiences of EC preservice teachers, shed light on those experiences and the hidden issues within those experiences, and explore the practice of online education. Thus, qualitative research methods often use smaller than larger samples, as in quantitative research methods. According to Dworkin (2012), "qualitative research methods are often concerned with garnering an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon or are focused on meaning (and heterogeneities in meaning)—which are often centered on the how and why of a particular issue, process, situation, subculture, scene or set of social interactions" (p. 1319).

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were taken into careful consideration in this study. According to Matthews and Ross (2010), research ethics are “moral principles guiding research, from its inception through to completion and publication of results and beyond” (p. 71). Ethics are about being aware of and sensitive to the rights of the participants (Cohen et al., 2011). Considering this, in this research, specific steps were taken and ensured to protect the participants and their rights (AlWadaani, 2019).

For example, before conducting the research, an ethical review of the research and its purpose, aims, questions, and methods was completed at the University of Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz (PSAU). After obtaining official permission, I contacted the preservice teachers through their supervisors and distributed an information sheet about this study. Three preservice teachers agreed to participate in the study. They signed the informed consent form, which explained the study's purpose and assured them that their identities and information would remain anonymous.

Power relations were also taken into consideration in this study. It was explained to the participants that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time during the study without giving any reason. They were also informed that their participation would be of great value to the research field and would be highly appreciated (AlWadaani, 2019).

Ensuring the trustworthiness of this study was also highly considered to demonstrate the authentic experiences of the participants. According to Shenton (2004), trustworthiness in qualitative research consists of four main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. First, to ensure credibility, a few steps were followed. For instance, participants were invited to revise the interview scripts and to provide explanations; their engagement in the study was encouraged and welcomed. Moreover, establishing mutual and respectful relationships was a priority in this study. Thus, conversations were flexible, and positions and rights were explained explicitly, orally, and in writing.

Additionally, there were continuous opportunities for peer scrutiny of the study. Feedback on the study, the chosen methods, and discussions about the findings from colleagues and academics were welcomed during the study. Finally, this study examined previous similar studies to check the congruency of the results of this study with those of other studies (AlWadaani, 2019).

Second, transferability, in which the reader receives the whole reflection of the phenomenon under investigation, was considered by providing detailed information about the study's context and findings to allow checking its applicability to other situations and populations. Third, to ensure dependability, a detailed description of the process of the study was reported, including the research design and data-gathering process. Lastly, to ensure confirmability, in which the findings reflect the genuine experiences and ideas of the participants rather than the researcher, the ideas, explanations, reasons, and ontological position of the researcher underlying the chosen methods were acknowledged, and a detailed methodological explanation provided (Shenton, 2004).

2.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis and coding were used to pinpoint and explain themes, link different aspects of the data, and discover similarities (AlWadaani, 2019). Thematic analysis, according to Matthews and Ross (2010), is the “process of working with raw data to identify and interpret key ideas or themes” (p. 373). It helps to interpret and gain an understanding of the words and experiences of the participants. “It is not for purposes of generalizing beyond the case but rather for rich description of the case to understand the complexity thereof” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

3. Results and Discussion

This study aimed to explore the experiences of EC preservice teachers with online practicums during the pandemic. The findings indicated that preservice teachers had confronted many challenges, including a mix of negative feelings due to teaching remotely and the inability to see, teach, and engage actively with children. The participants' experiences have indicated that, despite the advantages of online practicums, they faced many challenges.

3.1. Anxiety, Fear, Sadness, and Uncertainty

“I was afraid, anxious, and unsure. I cannot say it was a good experience, I do not, I was suffering from the beginning. I was crying all the time the first two weeks, I did not know how to work, sitting only in front of the computer. Negativity was all over the experience.”

Participants spoke of fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty about what was happening, how long it would last, how they would work, and how they would be assessed. Participants constantly referenced their emotions during lockdown and how their emotions while teaching online have significantly changed from excitement to practice to anxiety, fear, stress, and frustration during the COVID-19 pandemic. One participant explained that the practicum, the way it was (face-to-face), was already scary, as it is the stage where preservice teachers are supposed to summarize and practice all of their theoretical preparation, let alone when it suddenly moved online. One participant felt uncertain about what was required from her and her ability to achieve it under the current circumstances:

“It was terrifying as it was unclear how I would practice online, provide children with learning opportunities remotely without meeting them, and have face-to-face experiences. I wondered if I would succeed or fail my practicum because I was uncertain about what I was supposed to provide, how I would provide it, and whether I could do it!”

According to Tipton and Schmitt (2021), uncertainty about what was expected from teachers and how they would achieve it while teaching children online was found among early childhood teachers who shifted suddenly from face-to-face to remote teaching. This could result from the nature of EC educational programs, which depend on direct contact and where learning happens through hands-on experience (Kim, 2020). According to Madsen, Habbestad, and Borch (2023), EC teachers had limited practice in some daily tasks during online practicums compared to physical practicums and, as a result, were unable to achieve the assigned learning outcomes. Therefore, in adjusting the program, the methods of teaching and learning online involved many challenges that caused the teachers to feel a mix of negative feelings, such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty (Kim, 2020; Madsen et al., 2023).

Participants also expressed anxiety and concern about the loss of the other "real" practicum space" (Kidd & Murray, 2020). As one participant said:

"The loss of direct contact with children during my practicum has made me unconfident about my teaching skills. I need more practicums, I need to see the children's progress in their engagement with activities and with me."

The practicum is a crucial aspect of any educational program (Ersin et al., 2020). According to Jin (2023), learning during a practicum happens through the transformation of experiences in which preservice teachers gain knowledge through direct contact and engagement. Hands-on experiences and direct contact with children, colleagues, and families are essential in teacher preparation programs. Authentic teaching experiences offer active collaboration and engagement (Jin, 2023; Kim, 2020). In this study, participants encountered several challenges that caused them to have mixed feelings of sadness, fear, and uncertainty as a result of the absence of real space, as described in the findings of Ersin et al. (2020); Kidd and Murray (2020) and Varea and González-Calvo (2020). Those mixed feelings toward their experiences indicated their realization of the importance of the practicum and its main elements and their feelings toward the loss of authentic practicum spaces.

Despite participants' negative feelings toward their experiences, they all agreed that those feelings were most intense at the beginning of the practicum. As time passed, those feelings changed slightly as they became accommodated to the online practicum. Likewise, Ersin et al. (2020) found that student teachers felt anxious at the beginning of their e-practicum "but then things happened spontaneously" (p. 120). This finding could be attributed to the need for more experience with online practicums and learning. In this study, participants had yet to gain experience with online practicums and teaching. According to Kim (2020), the nature of the EC educational program—with its insufficient focus on learning technology—and the nature of the practicum have affected the efficacy of EC teachers in utilizing technology actively, thus causing feelings of fear and uncertainty. It was found to be a factor that impacted the effectiveness of online practicums and learning (Kim, 2020; Murray-Harvey, 2001; Pappa, 2021).

3.2. Ill Preparation

"If I was sure that next semester would not be online, I would postpone my practicum. The online practicum did not qualify me to teach."

"It did not prepare me to deal with children, to manage classrooms, nor to deal with other teachers or school administration; we only learned to create activities and produce materials."

Similar to what was described by Kidd and Murray (2020), participants in the current study felt unprepared to work as teachers. According to them, online practicums did not equip them with the necessary teaching skills or authentic and hands-on classroom teaching experience. According to participants, the online practicum was:

"Ineffective, it is a solution for a situation like this but not as a replacement for a real practicum."

Participants attributed their feelings of ill preparation to the absence of face-to-face interactions with children and teachers. They could not see the children's progress and observe their learning, nor could they see other teachers' teaching skills and reactions to different situations. Similarly, Ersin et al. (2020) and Jin (2023) indicated that the absence of face-to-face experience was one of the challenges preservice teachers confronted during online practicums and caused them to feel unprepared. The participants in the current study experienced a gap between the lessons they prepared and the absence of observing children's learning and reactions to lessons and activities. This gap led them to feel insecure and insufficiently prepared. However, despite this challenge, the online practicum allowed them to recognize their challenges and pursue potential solutions. For instance, one of the participants said that she had to practice the activities with children from her surroundings to check the appropriateness of the activities and receive feedback. Another participant said that whenever she felt challenged, she searched for solutions through reading and consulting with other teachers. Although participants felt unprepared, their experiences with online practicums pushed them toward inquiry and understanding.

3.3. Lack of Motivation

One of the challenges that preservice teachers faced in this study was their lack of motivation. They said:

"Nothing pushed me to achieve; I wanted to see children's reactions and receive face-to-face feedback from my supervisors."

"It did not replicate the reality of classrooms; it was frustrating and unmotivating."

Özkanal, Yüksel, and Uysal (2020) reported that students experienced issues with motivation and attention. This could result from a lack of interaction between the participants, the children, the teachers, and the supervisors. According to Murray-Harvey (2001), limited support and ineffective communication with teachers and supervisors are considered critical components that affect the success of preservice teachers in their practicums. Preservice teachers rely on learning directly from teachers to overcome some of the difficulties they encounter. Those relationships, especially if they were positive, were found to be an effective strategy for coping with stress (Murray-Harvey, 2001).

Additionally, the participants had no prior experience with online practicums, so part of the problem could be their need for knowledge and skills to utilize technology to teach children. According to Al Malki and Al-Hattali (2022), creating collaborative learning and encouraging children's engagement were some of the issues that preservice teachers faced during online practicums, in addition to the need for more experience in using technology in learning and teaching. All of these issues affected their motivation and led them to feel unprepared.

3.4. Social Isolation

Participants expressed that they missed an important component in their practicums: interacting with others. They also explained that the absence of social interaction and real engagement caused them to feel that their learning was insufficient and unreal. This finding resembles the findings of Varea and González-Calvo (2020), Özkanal et al. (2020), and Kidd and Murray (2020). One participant said:

"It was unreal. I prepared activities, produced them, and used them by myself. The only one who practiced my activities was me. I missed interacting with children and getting feedback from them. I missed being in a real school where I could interact with children, teachers, and administration and exchange knowledge and learning with my friends."

According to Murray-Harvey (2001), the interaction between preservice teachers and their teachers and supervisors is a significant component of the success of a practicum. Preservice teachers found that social support networks were crucial for developing coping strategies to deal with a practicum's stress and challenges (Murray-Harvey, 2001). For the participants in this study, interacting with others (children, friends, teachers, and school administration) was a rich source of effective learning. Indeed, as Black (2020, as cited in Robinson and Rusznyak (2020)) explained, "effective teaching and learning is about *relationships*. Personal, professional, knowledge-rich, expertise-informed relationships between pedagogue and student" (p. 520).

In the current study, preservice teachers expressed their feelings of missing out on an essential part of their practicum experience due to the absence of direct contact with children and teachers and limited contact with supervisors. One participant said:

"It was not a practicum; it was only paper, pencil, activity, and computer, without interaction."

This finding indicates that learning to teach is much more than learning to prepare and conceptualize lesson plans. It also points to the importance for preservice teachers of gaining "insight, at l

east in a preliminary way, into the nuances of teaching in particular settings, with particular learners, and learning to engage with unpredictability and complexity" (Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020). Social interaction and support are essential in developing teaching skills and maintaining coping strategies for stress (Murray-Harvey, 2001). The findings of this study indicated the impact of online teaching and learning with no direct communication with others on preservice teachers' feelings, emotions, and readiness to enter the profession. The findings relate to sociocultural theory, which views learning as a social processes caused by people interacting with their society and surroundings. Social interaction allows the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Therefore, the immediate and sudden shift to online practicums might reduce preservice teachers' opportunities to fully develop teaching skills and capacity (Kaloo, Mitchell, & Kamalodeen, 2020). Preservice teachers went into their practicum experiences with no prior experience in teaching, utilizing technologies with no direct contact with children, teachers, and the context itself. These could be strong factors affecting their experience and the development of their interpersonal qualities. Interpersonal qualities are professional parts of early childhood education that require training and physical interaction with the kindergarten class, including the children and teachers (Madsen et al., 2023). Indeed, "the practicum not only serves as a bridge between theory and practice in teaching, but it is the context in which student teachers develop a personal teaching competence" (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Murray-Harvey (2001) mentioned that the novice status of preservice teachers, in which they have no prior knowledge, necessitates the need for social support in practicums. Relationships with teachers and supervisors were critical components of the success of practicum experiences as they provided the strongest support to preservice teachers (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005).

3.5. Advantages of Online Practicums

"The most amazing thing about the online practicum is that it developed creative skills and thinking in producing activities and materials."

The participants agreed that their experiences improved their creative skills and thinking abilities. They were able to produce safe, appropriate, and new learning activities. This finding is supported by Kidd and Murray (2020), who reported that online practicums provided participants with a sense of innovation despite their many challenges. Participants believed that, despite difficulties they encountered, which involved feelings of stress and fear, the online practicum encouraged them to seek new ways of learning and thinking regarding various ways to practice, such as creating electronic lessons, games, and plans to encourage children's participation in the future.

Moreover, due to the reality that preservice teachers had no access to physical practicums and face-to-face experiences with children, teachers, colleagues, and supervisors, the department constructed the practicum plan and added hypothetical situations. Those hypothetical situations aimed to increase preservice teachers' confidence and preparedness and widen their learning by offering various situations requiring implementing new strategies, finding solutions, and dealing with problems. All participants agreed that the hypothetical situations reflected the reality of schools and the possible situations they might encounter. According to the participants, those hypothetical situations helped to supplement the real physical practicum. One participant said:

"Hypothetical situations were the cornerstone of the online practicum. They provided us with ideas about children; we had to return to our course materials and books to find the best practices. Beautiful."

These hypothetical situations offered preservice teachers opportunities to rethink their pedagogies and ways to develop relationships with children. They also allowed different and new teaching methods, such as online lessons, assessment, search for resources (Al Malki & Al-Hattali, 2022), and reflection on classroom management strategies.

"It encouraged independence in learning through self-learning and research."

Moreover, participants expressed a sense of independence. Although they explicitly said that they missed the interaction, engagement, and exchange of knowledge with their friends, they still appreciated the opportunity for independence that the online practicum provided them. They valued the opportunity that the online practicum offered to discover new ways of teaching and learning. The feelings of independence might result from the level of control preservice teachers have over their context, time, and learning (Garrison & Baynton, 1987). Based on the nature of the practicum, preservice teachers had the opportunity to adjust their learning and practicum based on their own needs and ways of learning. This happened as a result of the absence of interaction with others. According to Garrison and Baynton (1987), individuals feel independent when there is no interaction, and there is freedom from others' influence.

"It saved time. We had sufficient time to prepare and create activities and had reduced travel. I worked from my room."

The lockdown caused the re-organization of working times and spaces. To the participants, the online practicum was time- and effort-saving. They could work at any time and for as long as they wanted. They also reported that they appreciated working from home rather than traveling daily to schools and the college. Kim (2020) reported a similar finding in which participants acknowledged that online practicums increased participation and decreased traveling.

3.6. Suggestions

During interviews, the preservice teachers were asked for suggestions to enhance online practicums in the future. One participant said:

“Even if the pandemic continues, the online practicum should not continue like that. We should join e-classes with young children so we can learn.”

Participants expressed their need to join online classes with young children. They did not want only to join but also to have opportunities to teach, interact, and provide activities for the children directly. This would enhance their learning by providing a context to refer back to. Indeed, according to Black (2020, as cited in Robinson and Rusznyak (2020)), “Teacher education thus requires that students understand how choices in teaching need to be both conceptually informed and contextually relevant” (p. 520). As mentioned earlier, due to the sudden closure of schools and universities, preservice teachers had their practicums online with the hypothetical existence of children. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were no collaborations between schools and universities, as they were all busy adjusting to the sudden changes and solving the unforeseen issues related to these changes.

“I would love to have a training program in a real school. I would be the first to enroll.”

All the participants shared their need for an onsite training program as it would complement their learning and provide them with opportunities to interact and receive feedback from children, teachers, parents, and administration. According to them, they need it, as they need to learn about their performance as teachers. They only mastered creating activities that cannot substitute the rich relational nature of real practicums in school contexts and “could never replace the kinds of human relationships that are so central to good teaching” (Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore the experiences and listen to the voices of preservice EC teachers regarding online practicums. Despite its complexity, the practicum is considered a crucial aspect of teacher education programs (Ersin et al., 2020). The findings of this study show that, despite the advantages the online practicum offers, such as encouraging independence, self-learning, creative skills, and thinking, and being less time- and effort-consuming, the challenges and unfavorable mix of feelings preservice teachers encountered outweighed those advantages.

The findings of this study have significant implications for practicums in higher education. They emphasize the importance of drawing attention to the issues preservice teachers encounter and finding solutions about how to provide interactive, rich, and engaging online environments that allow preservice teachers to develop their thinking and teaching skills and to develop an understanding of how to incorporate technologies for learning in the twenty-first century. Therefore, it is critical to think ahead about the possibilities we have right now and those we need to have in the future. Providing preservice teachers with opportunities and skills for online practicums is important, including interacting with children through different platforms and allowing them to reflect on how best to promote development and learning while maintaining engagement and effective interaction.

Despite our efforts to mimic the social and cognitive aspects of teaching face-to-face in a real classroom context, the findings indicated that it still could not match the complexity of the classroom context in interaction, engagement, and classroom management. Therefore, from the findings, teaching is a social practice. Indeed, as sociocultural theory highlights, learning is a social process enacted by people interacting with each other and their environment. It allows for acquiring knowledge and skills (Vygotsky & Luria, 1993). As Kalloo et al. (2020) explain, “there is also a need for fostering the skills of social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and effective communication, which form an integral part of the teaching process” (p. 9). Thus, there is a massive need to increase opportunities for interaction and engagement by allowing preservice teachers access to online EC classrooms.

Despite the limitations of the online practicum mentioned by the participants, the findings asserted the importance of integrating technologies and online teaching in practicums. Integrating technology into EC teaching is very important and, thus, still improving. However, future teachers must acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for traditional and online teaching (Jin, 2023). This is especially important when education is in crisis, and social distancing is needed. According to Madsen et al. (2023), there is a need for alternative methods to ensure collaborative learning when crises such as pandemics force isolation and individual learning activities. Creating alternatives means adjusting the original plan as best as possible and finding the best ways to do it Kim (2020).

5. Limitations

This is a small-scale qualitative study; thus, the findings are not generalizable. This study aimed not to generalize the results but to understand the experiences of EC preservice teachers and shed light on those experiences and the hidden issues within those experiences, as well as to explore the practice of online education. Therefore, the findings of this particular study show what happened in a particular context when the practicum was forcefully and suddenly moved to an online format, and “how with this ‘practical space of practice’ gone, the online informal spaces became the new sites of learning” (Kidd & Murray, 2020). However, reviewing the literature indicated similar situations globally; thus, these findings are hoped to generate new possibilities for reforming practicums and teachers' educational programs worldwide.

References

- Al Malki, M. A., & Al-Hattali, W. (2022). Practicum students' perceptions in the light of COVID-19: Challenges & opportunities. *English Language Teaching*, 15(7), 28-37.
- AlWadaani, N. (2019). *Exclusion inside of inclusion: The experiences and perceptions of eight Saudi early childhood education teachers of the inclusion of children With SEN*. PhD Thesis, University of Sheffield.
- Bao, W. (2020). COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, 2(2), 113-115.
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2016). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Daniel, J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects*, 49(1), 91-96.
- Dworkin, S. L. (2012). Sample size policy for qualitative studies using in-depth interviews. *Arch Sex Behav*, 41, 1319-1320. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-012-0016-6>

- Ersin, P., Atay, D., & Mede, E. (2020). Boosting preservice teachers' competence and online teaching readiness through e-practicum during the COVID-19 outbreak. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 2(2), 112-124.
- Garrison, D. R., & Baynton, M. (1987). Concepts: Beyond independence in distance education: The concept of control. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 1(3), 3-15.
- Jin, M. (2023). Preservice teachers' online teaching experiences during COVID-19. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51(2), 371-381. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01316-3>
- Kaloo, R. C., Mitchell, B., & Kamalodeen, V. J. (2020). Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Trinidad and Tobago: Challenges and opportunities for teacher education. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 452-462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1800407>
- Kidd, W., & Murray, J. (2020). The Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on teacher education in England: How teacher educators moved practicum learning online. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(4), 542-558. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2020.1820480>
- Kim, J. (2020). Learning and teaching online during Covid-19: Experiences of student teachers in an early childhood education practicum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52(2), 145-158. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00272-6>
- Madsen, S. S., Habbestad, H., & Borch, I. H. (2023). Valuable unintended learning outcomes when practicum for student teachers in kindergartens is carried out online. *Education and Information Technologies*, 28(1), 37-55. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-022-11135-z>
- Matthews, B., & Ross, L. (2010). *Research methods: A practical guide for the social sciences* (1st ed.). London: Pearson Longman.
- Moyo, N. (2020). COVID-19 and the future of practicum in teacher education in Zimbabwe: Rethinking the 'new normal' in quality assurance for teacher certification. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 536-545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1802702>
- Murray-Harvey, R. (2001). How teacher education students cope with practicum concerns. *The Teacher Educator*, 37(2), 117-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08878730109555286>
- Özkanal, Ü., Yüksel, İ., & Uysal, B. Ç. B. (2020). The pre-service teachers' reflection-on-action during distance practicum: A critical view on EBA TV English courses. *Journal of Qualitative Research in Education*, 8(4), 1347-1364.
- Pappa, S. (2021). A case study of three Finnish pre-service teachers' emotions and understanding of CLIL during an online practicum. *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*, 14(1), 41-68.
- Robinson, M., & Rusznyak, L. (2020). Learning to teach without school-based experience: Conundrums and possibilities in a South African context. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 46(4), 517-527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2020.1800408>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63-75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/efi-2004-22201>
- Smith, K., & Lev-Ari, L. (2005). The place of the practicum in pre-service teacher education: The voice of the students. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(3), 289-302.
- Tipton, S., & Schmitt, V. (2021). Preparing preservice teachers in the midst of a pandemic. *School-University Partnerships*, 14(3), 94-115.
- Ulvik, M., & Smith, K. (2011). What characterises a good practicum in teacher education? *Education Inquiry*, 2(3), 517-536.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Education: from school closure to recovery*. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/en/covid-19/education-response>
- United Nation. (2023). *Goal 4: Quality education*. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/sustainable-development-goals/quality-education?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6KunBhDxARIsAKFUGs9_LINpXOAERvMjc_kYTN7kGGdeB0EYrvefG5n7qN-D3QjPdRdVItMaAgBtEALw_wcB
- Varea, V., & González-Calvo, G. (2020). Touchless classes and absent bodies: Teaching physical education in times of Covid-19. *Sport, Education and Society*, 26(8), 1-15.
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Luria, A. (1993). *Studies on the history of behavior*. In Knox, J., & Golod, V. (Eds.). Hillsdale, New Jersey: Psychology Press.