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Impact of students' prior work experiences on their perceptions of practicums as support for their professional development

Previous research on early childhood education (ECE) preservice practicums has provided insights into students' practicum experiences. However, little research exists regarding ECE teacher students with prior fieldwork experience and their perceptions of practicums as part of their professional development. Participants of this study were ECE students (N = 234) from two Finnish universities; data were collected through a questionnaire. Questionnaire responses were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The results show that experienced students have different expectations than novice students about the roles and responsibilities of supervising teachers and teacher educators. Whereas experienced students viewed teacher supervisors as a primary source for guidance and support on pedagogical issues, they viewed university teachers as facilitators with responsibility for practicum quality assurance.

Keywords: practicum; work experience; experienced students; professional development; professional expertise

Introduction

Teacher training programs prepare teacher students for their work life by building their professional development (Urban et al. 2012). Students' professional development progresses faster and more intensively during teaching practicums than during any other stage of the teacher education program (Caires, Almeida, and Vieira 2012). In Finland,

these programs, offered at universities (Karlsson-Lohmander 2015), cover a range of developmental, pedagogical, and organizational aspects of the teaching profession. In addition to theoretically oriented content, they include teaching practicums, during which students practice and reflect upon the knowledge obtained from professional courses (Brown and Danaher 2008; Caires, Almeida, and Vieira 2012; Tynjälä 2008).

Students are often novices with limited ECE work experience (Foong, Nor, and Nolan 2018), but not always: some students have extensive experience from the field. While such field experience helps students set theoretical issues into context, it can also be a view-restricting burden. Engaging with teacher studies can be problematic for students familiar with the ECE environment (Burrige, Hooley, and Neal 2016) when those studies require the acquisition of new knowledge that challenges or conflicts with their established ways of teaching (Tate 2016). Conversely, being familiar with the context in which they plan to work can protect students from unpleasant contradictions between their expectations of quality teaching and the demanding teaching environment (Pedergast, Garvis, and Keogh 2011). Moreover, a recent study suggested students with previous field experience seem to integrate better to work life (Kantonen et al. 2020).

Given prior research on the supportive and detrimental aspects of ECE practicums (Brown and Danaher 2008; Kim and Danforth 2012; La Paro et al. 2019; Loizou 2011), this study contributes by focusing on students with previous fieldwork experience, specifically investigating and comparing experienced and novice students' views about issues that support successful practicums. Existing related research is lacking, limited mainly to examining students' backgrounds and starting points for practicums (Maynard, La Paro, and Johnson 2014), assessing the maturation of teacher self-efficacy (Pedergast, Garvis, and Keogh 2011), and focusing on students' willingness to work as ECE teachers after graduation (Kantonen et al. 2020). Also,

existing studies on practicum experiences lean mainly toward qualitative methods (Lawson et al. 2015), but this study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, thereby extending the literature.

Multiple terms are used in the literature to describe teachers and other practicum actors. This paper follows Matengu, Ylitapio-Mäntylä, and Puroila (2020), using “students” to refer to preservice ECE teacher students and “supervising teachers” to refer to mentoring in-service teachers from the practicum site. “Teacher educator” is the university organizing teacher, and “ECE teacher” is a qualified teacher of ECE. Students with substantial ECE fieldwork experience are “experienced,” while “novice” students have little or no prior ECE work experience.

Practicum as part of teacher education

Practicums, usually coursework learned in day care centers or preschool classrooms, are important to teacher preparation programs (La Paro et al. 2018; Urban et al. 2012). In the practicum, the student, the supervising teacher, and the teacher educator form a relationship, each with specific roles and responsibilities (La Paro et al. 2018; Loizou 2011). During practicums, students work under the guidance and supervision of experienced supervising teachers who give students feedback on their day-to-day teaching activities (Kim and Danforth 2012). The teacher educator also provides feedback and organizes practical issues for the practicum (Toom, Husu, and Partrikainen 2015).

Professional development through theory–practice reflections

One component of professional development in education is enhancement of the educator’s professional expertise (Tynjälä 1999, 2008). Professional expertise consists of three closely integrated elements: theoretical knowledge (universal, formal and

explicit), practical knowledge (experiential and intuitive in nature, often referred to as procedural knowledge or skills) and self-regulative knowledge (ability to reflect on one's own practice) (Tynjälä 2008, 144–145). Professional expertise development requires the integration of these multiple types of knowledge and interaction between theory and practice (Elvira et al. 2016; Tynjälä 2008). The gap between theory and practice in teacher education has long been discussed (Ribaeus, Enochsson, and Löfdahl-Hultman 2020). Indeed, teacher education programs are often organized into two “learning arenas”: university courses and practicums at ECE sites (Karlsson-Lohmander 2015).

Students who are not supported in connecting research-based theoretical knowledge to practices occurring in the field are at risk of emphasizing practice over theory, which tends to maintain the status quo and reproduce existing practices (Tate 2016). Evidence indicates even teacher educators emphasize practical issues during practicum discussions (Ribaeus, Enochsson, and Löfdahl-Hultman 2020), despite their obligation to direct students' focus to theoretical and research-based teaching. In Finland, every university organises its own practicums; moreover, in every university, practicums include theoretically oriented academic tasks that support students' reflective skills and aim to narrow the theory–practice divide. These guiding tasks and discussions (Toom, Husu, and Partrikainen 2015) influence students' theory–practice reflections, especially when structured and supported. The practicums are a particularly important venue for enhancing theory–practice reflection (Stenberg, Rajala, and Hilppö 2014) because it is during the practicum that students must address countless everyday educational situations (Elvira et al. 2016; Tynjälä 2008).

During practicums, students create and reform their frames of practice. Burridge, Hooley, and Neal (2016) referred to these frames as the ways people engage in different

situations (e.g., teaching, child group activities). Through experience, teachers become aware of more frames of practice that can help them during the workday. For example, procedures and practices related to pedagogical use of play are more familiar to experienced teachers. Thus, novice students approach practicums with different frames of practice than their more experienced counterparts, while experienced students may have more practical awareness of typical ECE routines (Burrige, Hooley, and Neal 2016). Thus, it is important to investigate, how do experienced students' and novice students' views regarding successful teaching practicums possibly differ.

Research questions

RQ1: How do experienced and novice students view successful practicums?

RQ2: How do experienced students' and novice students' views regarding successful teaching practicums differ?

Materials and methods

Participants

Data were collected in spring 2019 from participating ECE teacher students (n = 234: Mdn age = 23 years, 94% female, 4% male, 2% I don't want to answer) from two Finnish universities. Most participants had completed their upper secondary level education before entering the ECE teacher education program (see Table 1). At the time of data collection, participants were finishing or had just finished a practicum course in their second or third year of the program. To answer RQ2, participants were divided into two groups based on their reported prior ECE fieldwork experience (none, >1year, 2–5 years, 6–10 years, <10 years). Students with more than two years' experience were categorized as “experienced” (n = 55: 23.4% of participants, 28 attending University A /

27 attending University B), and students with less than a year were categorized as “novice” (n = 179: 76.6% of participants, 107 attending to University A / 72 attending University B).

Table 1. Students’ education and ECE fieldwork experience prior to ECE teacher education

Education before studies n (%)		Fieldwork experience n (%) before studies	
Upper secondary level	174 (76.3%)	None	100 (42.7%)
Bachelor’s degree: social services (polytechnic)	26 (11.4%)	>1 year	79 (33.8%)
Bachelor’s degree: education (university)	4 (1.8%)	2–5 years	34 (14.5%)
Master’s degree: education	24 (10.5%)	6–10 years	10 (4.3%)
		<10 years	11 (4.7%)
Total	228 (100%)*		234 (100%)

*There is missing data regarding education prior studies

Data collection

Information on students’ views was collected through a questionnaire, which was part of a larger project aimed at further developing practicums. University A students responded to the questionnaire in a peer group meeting at the end of an ongoing practicum. University B students received the questionnaire via email because, at the time of data collection, the practicums for that semester had ended. The questionnaire included background questions, Likert-scale questions, and open-ended questions. The Likert-scale questions (58 total) were divided into five themes aimed to grasp students’ views about various aspects of practicums. The themes were a) practicum practices/procedures, e.g. ‘Practicum instructions are clear,’ b) supervising practices/procedures, e.g. ‘Guidance from the supervising teacher has been useful for my professional development,’ c) supervising practices/procedures of the university, e.g. ‘Guidance from the teacher educator has deepened my understanding of theoretical aspects of ECE,’ d) meaningful issues regarding practicums, e.g. ‘Opportunity to work

in a child group with art emphasis,’ and e) formal and informal interactions during practicums, e.g. ‘Informal interactions have allowed me to share my feelings and experiences.’ Two open-ended questions were asked: ‘Name three things that guarantee a successful practicum’ and ‘Name the main challenges regarding practicums.’

Description of university practicum processes

University A’s and University B’s teacher education programs both seek to tie theoretical academic work to practical practicum experiences. Both universities include three practicum courses throughout the three years of the bachelor’s degree program.

Table 2 presents the practicums’ structures and a learning goal example from each.

Table 2. Structure and learning goal for practicums at two universities involved in study

University A	University B
<p>First year: Orientation, 1 week, part performance in a course of teaching and guidance course, 5 ECTS. Learning goal example: <i>“The student learns about the work tasks of an early education teacher and the practicalities of institutional early education at a day care center.”</i></p>	<p>First year: ECE as a Pedagogical Environment, 4 weeks, 10 ECTS. Learning goal example: <i>“Knows ECE related theories, curricula and other documentation. Can plan and implement pedagogical activities in small groups based on observation.”</i></p>
<p>Second year: Pedagogy of ECE and Preschool, 4 weeks, 5 ECTS. Learning goal example: <i>“Can plan, implement and evaluate pedagogical processes by utilizing observation, documentation and curricula formed at different levels.”</i></p>	<p>Second year: Pedagogy of ECE and Preschool, 6 weeks, 10 ECTS. Learning goal example: <i>“Can apply ECE and preschool documents and curricula in practical educational and teaching work.”</i></p>
<p>Third year: Advancing Expertise in Early Childhood Education, 7 weeks, 10 ECTS. Learning goal example: <i>“Develops and reflects his/her professional identity and pedagogical thinking as an ECE teacher.”</i></p>	<p>Third year: Developing Professionality of ECE Teacher, 6 weeks, 10 ECTS. Learning goal example: <i>“Evaluate own teacherhood through ethical and theoretical foundation of ECE and from the perspective of own pedagogical skills.”</i></p>

As depicted, students complete a practicum every academic year at both universities. The main goal for the first-year practicums is for students to become acquainted with the ECE sites and the work culture. The second-year practicums, which take place in a preschool/child group setting, aim for students to take responsibility for individually planning pedagogical activities based on national curriculum guidelines (FNAE, 2018). Preschool is a one-year preparation program before children enter school, and it is compulsory for every child. The third-year practicum goal is for students to work as a leading ECE teacher in a child group, including planning pedagogical activities and taking a pedagogical leadership role in the educator team. For both University programs, the supervising teacher must be a qualified ECE teacher.

Responses from University A and University B students differed in some areas. These differences, examined via cross tabulations, were natural because the procedures of the programs varied. For example, responses to the question about completing a practicum in a private day care center naturally differed because only University B offers that option. This study was not intended to compare the views of students of different universities; nevertheless, statistically significant differences in responses between the two universities' students are indicated for the relevant questions in the results section. These differences are further addressed in the discussion.

Analysis

Questionnaire responses were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. A *qualitative* data-driven content analysis was first completed for open-ended responses using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software. Content analysis is widely used in qualitative research and is particularly useful when the researcher aims to describe the data (in this research, inductively) by distilling the words or phrases into fewer content-related

categories (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Hsieh and Shannon 2005). An approach was selected for this study that Hsieh and Shannon (2005) named ‘conventional content analysis’. Thus, analysis of the data started with becoming familiar with the students’ responses to the two open-ended questions, which uncovered that the responses were intertwined. More specifically, participants first addressed what makes a practicum successful, and then when responding on the main challenges, they mostly added commentary on the same issues addressed in their response to the first question. For example, if a qualified supervisor and quality feedback were mentioned as important for a successful practicum, then the challenge responses also addressed supervision and feedback but from a negative perspective. Consequently, these two questions are not sensible to report as separate in this article since mostly the responses were discussing the same topic from both sides of the coin. For the clarity and readability, in this article the analysis and results of the question “Name three things that guarantee a successful practicum” is presented. Some data were missing, as only 213 students responded to this question. Table 3 provides an example of how the data-driven content analysis proceeded.

Table 3. Example of data-driven content analysis for open-ended questions

Response	Condensed expression	Subcategory	Main category
“Clear instructions to both student and to the supervising teacher. There is especially need to emphasize the importance of discussions because, for many, there is no ‘let’s sit down and talk’ – discussion during the teaching practice.”	Clear instructions to all stakeholders, importance of discussion and feedback	Clear instructions Feedback discussions	Practical arrangements Feedback given during the practicum

In the first phase of the qualitative analysis, students' open-ended answers were read through multiple times to create an initial understanding of the content. Next, the researcher drafted the condensed expressions, which summarize the main content of the initial responses. In this phase, vague expressions, such as answers that contained one or two words (e.g. 'motivation') and, thus, were difficult to analyze and interpret, were excluded. However, response brevity was not a criterion for exclusion if the meaning could be interpreted (e.g. 'motivated supervisor').

Condensed expressions were further categorized into clusters that contained expressions the researcher considered similar. The researcher then began the process of naming the clusters, during which the content of the clusters was compared, and expressions were regrouped so each fit into a category. After each expression was placed in a cluster with others of similar content and the clusters were named, they were treated as subcategories, which were then grouped, and then main categories were created. Categories were not mutually exclusive, so one answer could be coded to two categories, as shown in the Table 3. This phase of the analysis resulted in 481 condensed expressions. The final coding scheme included 8 main categories and 20 subcategories. In the results section, the categories mentioned most often are described.

Descriptive methods—frequencies, graphs, and cross tabulations—were used in the *quantitative analysis*. Chi square (χ^2) was used to test significance. For RQ2, the five-point scales were regrouped to combine strongly and partly disagree/agree responses; do not agree/ disagree responses were unchanged. Thus, the results present three answer categories for the Likert-scale questions.

Ethics

Ethical considerations related to confidentiality were considered and institutional

approval obtained for this research. Participation was voluntary; the consent form and data protection plan were presented on the first page of the questionnaire. Students completed the questionnaire anonymously, so responses cannot be connected to individual respondents. Finally, data were stored and processed securely and will be deleted upon completion of the project.

Results

The results are presented according to the research questions. RQ1 focused on experienced and novice students' views regarding successful practicums. In Table 4, the frequencies (mentions per subcategory) and proportional percentages of several categories are presented. For readability, only frequencies over 10 mentions are included; less meaningful categories are omitted. Table 4 includes a column in which the frequencies of the experienced students' responses are presented separately. These differences are discussed with other results regarding RQ2.

Table 4. Frequencies of coded open-ended questions

Category	Subcategory	Frequency and proportional % Novice students		Frequency and proportional % Experienced students	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Student–supervising teacher relationship	Qualified and committed supervising teacher	60	17.8	21	19.3
	Fit of the student and the supervising teacher	8	2.4	2	1.8
Feedback	Feedback given to student	55	16.4	32	29.4
	Enough time for discussion	13	3.9	8	7.3
	Peer feedback	20	6	2	1.8
Work environment	Supportive environment	39	11.6	9	8.3
	Student’s clear role	21	6.3	1	0.9
Practical arrangements	Clear instructions	71	21.1	15	13.8
	Organizing placements	11	3.3	4	3.7
	Working interactions between student, supervising teacher, and teacher educator	27	8	8	7.3
Student-related issues	Student’s own motivation	11	3.3	7	6.4
		Total	100	Total	100
		336		109	

The relationship between students and their supervising teacher was considered a key prerequisite for successful practicums. The students viewed a qualified and competent supervising teacher as most important to guaranteeing a successful internship. Students stated that supervising teachers who are not up-to-date or familiar with developments in the discipline may create contradictions between course content and the work culture at the practicum’s ECE site. Students also noted supervising teachers’ commitment to guiding the practicum as important, meaning if supervising teachers are not committed to supporting and guiding the students, the students will not receive the required amount of supervision during the practicum. Responses to the Likert-scale questions also reflected students’ belief in the importance of qualified

supervising teachers for successful practicums: 95% of students indicated a qualified supervising teacher as very important (71%) or somewhat important (24%) for successful practicums. For professional development, students indicated the supervising teacher has a responsibility to be up-to-date with current trends in ECE and must be committed to supervising and guiding students.

Related to supervising teachers being qualified and competent, feedback given to students was seen as an important factor for successful practicums. This concerned both the supervising teacher and the teacher educator; however, feedback from the supervising teacher regarding student's teaching or other activities was considered more important. Students responded that adequate and regular feedback through "weekly and pre-arranged tutoring with the field teacher" would best support their ability to meet the practicum learning goals. Moreover, students believed enough time for discussion should be worked into schedules. In other words, students want the supervising teacher to provide feedback in pre-arranged situations rather than providing it "on the fly" while engaged with the children. This was confirmed in the questionnaire data: students responded that they had had pre-arranged mentoring discussions either never (24%) or occasionally (38%). Additionally, 57% of students stated supervising discussions had taken place during daily activities. The students indicated the teacher educator's responsibility regarding feedback is to provide feedback on written work.

The practical arrangements, which included tasks such as arranging placements and taking care of practicum meetings, were seen as a major responsibility of the teacher educator. However, the subcategory that mentioned most often as necessary for a successful practicum was clear instructions. The clarity of instructions primarily related to the need for precise written instructions. When asked about the teacher educator's role in informing students about ECE research, only 60% of students found it

somewhat or very important. This indicates students do not expect the teacher educator to contribute significantly to the practicum content or professional development but do expect them to handle practical arrangements and help if problems occur. This is reflected in the following: only 43% of students believed the teacher educator can support them with pedagogical activities in the child group (difference between universities, $p = 0.011$), and only 59% believed the teacher educator can deepen students' understanding about the relation between theory and practice (difference between universities, $p = 0.026$).

To answer RQ2, respondents were divided into two groups based on their previous ECE fieldwork experience. In Table 4, responses to the open-ended questions for the two groups are compared. The main differences between the groups related to the supervising teacher's feedback, clear instructions, and the student's own motivation concerning the practicum. The experienced students placed more importance on feedback than the novice students did, possibly because, as experienced students are already familiar with the ECE context, their main goal for the practicum is to receive guidance and insights into the teaching profession to challenge previous ways of working, rather than to become familiar with everyday routines and practices, which may be more important to novice students. Experienced students noted students' own motivation as important for successful practicums is also interesting.

The data indicate the supervising teacher can bring new insights to experienced students' practices. This suggests that the work assignments of a teacher are associated with many tasks for which even students with previous ECE fieldwork experience need support. An example is the support that supervising teachers give to students on work with the curriculum (Figure 1.).

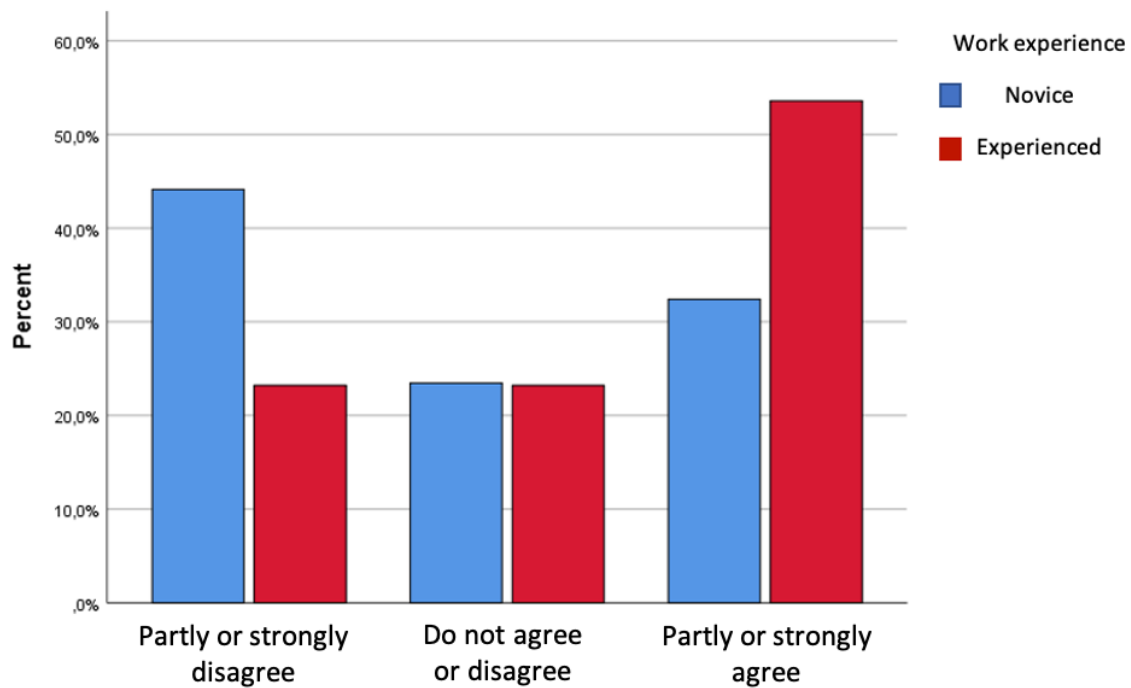


Figure 1. Supervising teacher has supported me in curriculum work ($p = 0.018$).

A little more than half of the experienced students (53.6%) partly or strongly agreed that the supervising teacher supported their professional development related to curriculum work, whereas novice students (44%) did not indicate receiving such support to the same degree. This means that experienced students perceived supervising teachers as guiding them on planning teaching and activities based on the curriculum or creating group level or individual curricula. One explanation for the experienced and novice students' different perceptions of the support they receive from their supervising teacher on curriculum work could be that the experienced students are more familiar with the ECE context and, thus, can focus on issues broader than everyday teacher work. For example, where novice students may focus their practicum specifically on issues related to group management, these aspects are familiar to experienced students, so they can spend time on such topics as curriculum work.

Previous work experience appears to have made students critical toward support offered by the teacher educator. For example, as illustrated in Figure 2, one in three

(32.1%) experienced students (novice 17.9%) thought the teacher educator had not enhanced their understanding of the theoretical aspects of ECE (difference between universities $p = 0.049$).

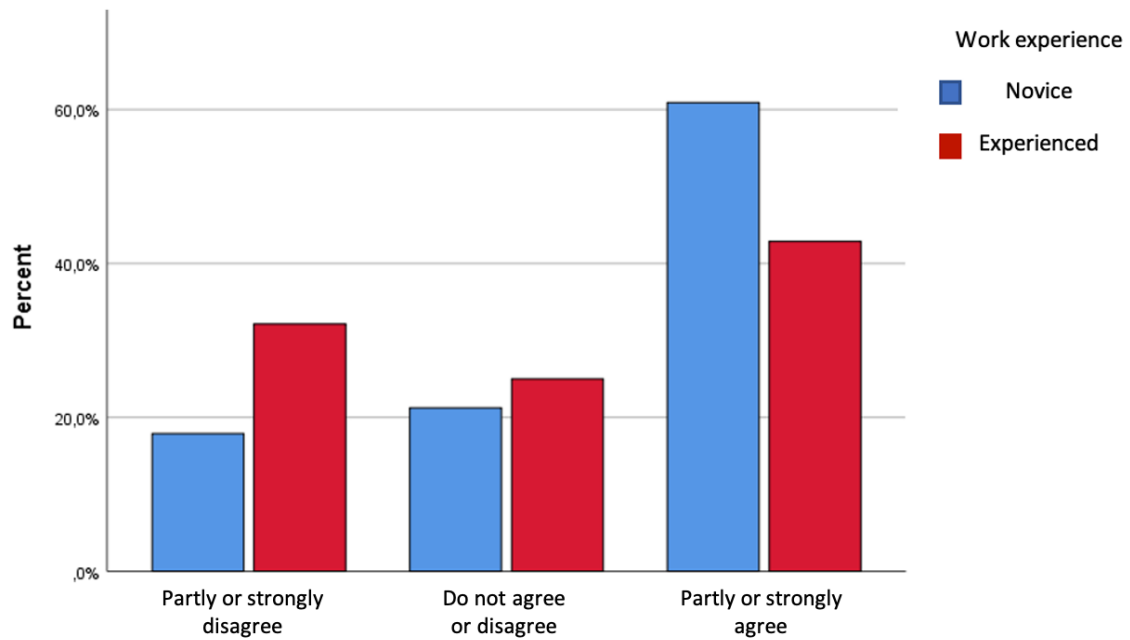


Figure 2. Guidance from teacher educator has deepened my understanding of theoretical aspects of ECE ($p = 0.024$).

The same phenomenon was also observed with the teacher educator's support for students' professional competence (see Figure 3, difference between universities $p = 0.025$).

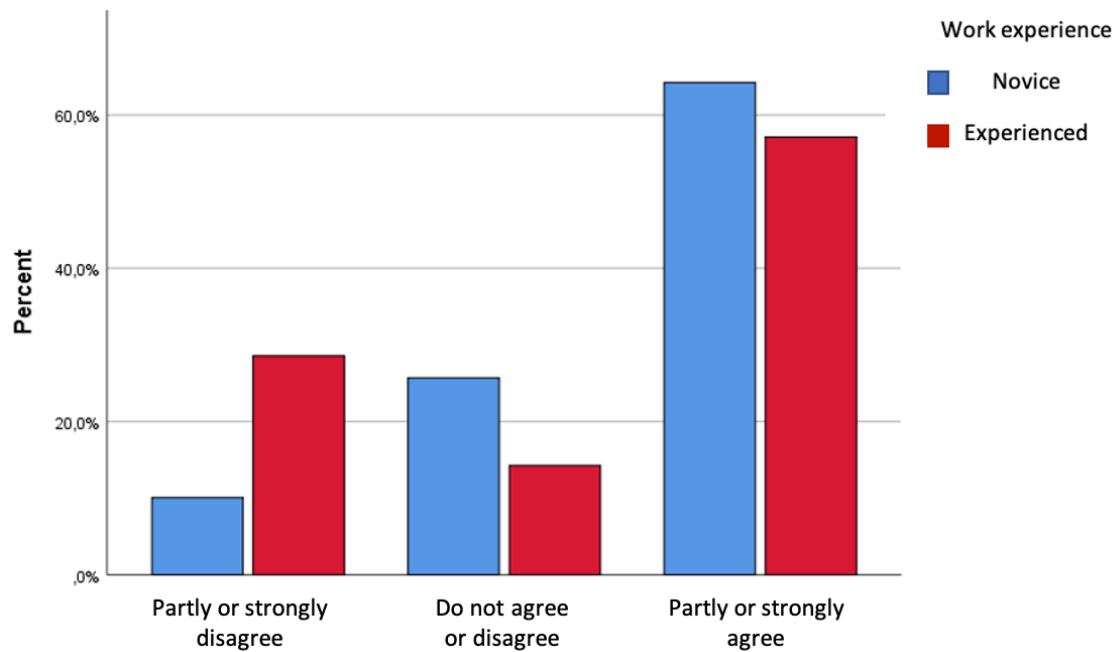


Figure 3. Guidance from teacher educator has been useful for development of my professional competence ($p = 0.007$).

Notably, as indicated in Figure 3, experienced students were especially critical regarding the teacher educator’s role in the development of their professional competence, as 28.6% of experienced students partly or strongly disagreed that the teacher educator’s guidance had been useful for this purpose. Experienced students expected support for developing their professional identity from their teacher educator, but some felt they had not received this support during their practicum. The discrepancies between students’ experiences and expectations are noteworthy.

Discussion

This study aimed to clarify the differing views on teaching practicums held by students with prior fieldwork experience and those of their novice student peers. The results related to RQ1 mainly agree with the findings of previous studies on factors that promote successful practicums (Brown and Danaher 2008; Kim and Danforth 2012; La Paro et al. 2018;2019; Loizou 2011). However, some results in this study—namely,

those related to experienced teachers—contradict previous research findings. Prior studies have shown that previous ECE fieldwork experiences do not necessarily affect the student practicum experience. In a study by Caires, Almeida, and Vieira (2012), students' prior work experiences did not impact their views about learning and supervision, professional and institutional socialization, emotional and physical well-being, or teaching as a profession during the practicum. These results partly contradict the results of the current study, which indicate that experienced students differed to some extent from those who had enrolled in teacher education straight from high school or with little or no prior work experience in the ECE field.

The views of novice and experienced students did not differ regarding the fundamental aspects of practicum. According to the data, both considered support from the supervisor paramount to their professional development, although experienced students valued this even more highly in their open-ended responses, in which they raised issues such as qualified and competent mentorship and supportive feedback as prerequisites for successful practicums. Previous research strongly supports these findings, reporting that issues related to the relationship between the in-service teacher and the student (La Paro et al. 2018) and adequate and encouraging feedback from the in-service teacher (Kim and Danforth 2012) are the most essential aspects of the practicum for the student.

Experienced students were more critical, especially toward the teacher educator, than novice students; these views were noteworthy, if not alarming. Students expected teacher educators to predominantly handle practical issues and provide information, rather than build students' understanding of the link between practice and theory, for example. Previous research supports these expectations of university teachers as responsible for practical issues, such as 'logistical and technical backup of their

supervisors' (Caires, Almeida, and Vieira 2012; Matengu, Ylitapio-Mäntylä, and Puroila 2020). Introductory practicum materials were noted as important for building a shared understanding between the student and supervising teacher (Brown and Danaher 2008); however, this view does not support the structure in which the teacher educator is a meaningful part of the student's guidance (Toom, Husu, and Partrikainen 2015).

One central issue is that experienced students enter the practicum with a background of frames of practice (Burrige, Hooley, and Neal 2015). Especially in teacher education, these frames should be shaken and rethought (Tate 2016). This means students need to recognize their underlying frames of practice and be able to justify them according to theoretical, research-based premises. If experienced students believe teacher educators have little to offer regarding their professional development, what does this mean regarding those frames of practices? Burrige, Hooley, and Neal (2015) noted that, depending on students' previous teaching experiences, their frames of practice should be exposed to a discourse with other frames of practice. The results of this study indicate that teacher educators do not necessarily participate discourses in which the frames of practice are challenged and reformed.

The perception that teacher educators are mere facilitators of the practicum indicates that, for students, the practicum is located somewhere other than in the university environment, and thus, the practicum content differs from the university course content (Karlsson-Lohmander 2015). This structure of two "learning arenas" (Ribaeus, Enochsson, and Löfdahl-Hultman 2020), in which practical knowledge is seen as a primary knowledge that needs to be addressed, may lead students to uncritically adopt the current practices of the practicum placement, thereby maintaining the status quo of the teaching culture (Tate 2016). This is especially supported by the skepticism of students in this research toward teacher educators' role in bridging the theory–

research gap. Previous research indicates a need of theory-oriented and structured practicum discussions (Stenberg, Rajala, and Hilppö 2014) in which teacher educators and students create a continuous dialogue that views theoretical knowledge through the practicum experiences can best support students' professional development (Ribaeus, Enochsson, and Löfdahl-Hultman 2020). Tynjälä (2008, 145) argued that the development of professional expertise must be viewed as a holistic process in which theory cannot be separated from practice and vice versa. Further, students need to be provided with conceptual and pedagogical tools that enable them to integrate theoretical knowledge with their practical experiences when they are solving real life problems in their authentic working lives (Elvira et al. 2016). Moreover, participating in real life situations is necessary, but not sufficient, for the development of high-level expertise: only deep integration of theoretical, practical and self-regulative knowledge creates expertise. Based on this study's findings, whether teacher educators' lack of input to professional development is due to the practicum procedures (i.e., feedback the university teacher gives students, how practicum meetings are organized with peer groups, topics covered) or results from the view that supervising teachers offer "all that is needed" for the teaching profession cannot be determined. This issue needs further clarification.

Study limitations

Study participants attended two universities with different curriculums, which may have affected their responses. In the results section, items on which student responses from the two universities differed are indicated. For example, responses regarding teacher educators' guidance on theoretical aspects of ECE were statistically significantly different, and experienced students from University A were more critical in the responses regarding teacher educators' role in the practicum. Based on these data,

identifying the main reason for these differences is difficult. In future studies, this limitation needs to be addressed more clearly. Also, the different ways that the questionnaire was delivered to participants in the different universities – namely, collecting data in peer group meetings and by email – may be considered another limitation. In the peer group meetings, teacher educators were only asked to provide students with the link to the questionnaire; thus, no additional instruction was presented that would have better engaged participants in responding. The analysis gave no indication that the responses to the open-ended question would have been more thorough at University A.

The question that asked respondents to name three aspects of successful practicums may have led some students to provide short, sparse answers rather than longer, more descriptive responses. However, given the number of students participating, the actual issues were codable from the data, regardless of these responses not being accompanied by rigorous explanations or real-life examples. This is also supported by the agreement between many findings in this study and those of previous studies. Future research on this topic should involve more rigorous qualitative data that can shed light on some of the needs that experienced students' have regarding practicums since this group varies not only in years of ECE fieldwork experience but, also, in the positions they held and work cultures they experienced, all of which affect frames of practice (Burrige, Hooley, and Neal 2016) and, therefore, what they need from practicums to meet their personal goals. Additionally, Likert scale questions for themes b and c focused on positive aspects (the wording 'useful' and 'has deepened my understanding' were used). The results of this study indicate that the students used the whole scale, regardless of the positive choice of words. Future studies should address this issue so that, for example, creating sum variables would be possible.

Another limitation relates to the definition of experienced students. This study used descriptive statistics to explain experienced students' differences regarding practicums. The nominal scale used to ask about fieldwork experience was insufficient in that it limited the possibilities for quantitative analysis. The chi square tests were done for cross tabulations to clarify statistical significances; however, this research topic needs to be further scrutinized, and the results need to be verified with stronger statistical evidence because the methods used in this study were descriptive in nature.

Conclusions

This research contributes to the ECE practicum literature by focusing on ECE students with prior fieldwork experience. Most ECE students are novices (Foong, Nor, and Nolan 2018); nevertheless, experienced students have not received sufficient scholarly attention, although benefits have been indicated for targeting additional or re-training to experienced students (Kantonen et al. 2020). This research raised the possibility that students who are already integrated in the ECE field may have different starting points and needs regarding how practicums are organized and executed. Being familiar with the context of the field can protect students from an unpleasant contradiction between their own expectations of quality teaching and the demanding teaching environment (Pedergast, Garvis, and Keogh 2011); however, these students are at risk of not challenging their previous ways of working (Tate 2016). The results of this study suggest, because of their previous experiences, these students may also have different expectations than novice students. The challenge for teacher educators is to determine how to address these differing demands as teacher education also must adapt to students with different work histories.

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