

MONTESSORI APPROACH PRACTICUM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION: A COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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***Abstract:** Practicum denotes periods spent in school settings where the student teachers engage in a developmental process of observing and experimenting with teaching practice and learning about the professional teacher's skills, knowledge, philosophies, and attitudes (Walkington, 2005). Practicum is an essential component of early childhood teacher preparation programs. In this paper, we used collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Longman & Franco, 2014) as a qualitative research method to explore the personal experiences of two early childhood teacher educators during the practicum organized by an International Montessori Training Institut. The preliminary results indicate their positive and valuable experiences related to the professional development of early childhood student teachers. We showed the effectiveness of the Montessori practicum in three aspects: (1) the plan and assignment of tasks for student teachers during the practicum are apparent and specific, (2) the importance of classroom observation, (3) the prominent role of the supervisor in putting theory into practice. Our research findings provide a different perspective on the practicum, which promotes innovative practices in early childhood teacher education in Vietnam.*

***Keywords:** practicum, Montessori, early childhood teacher education, collaborative autoethnography.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Practicum is an essential component of early childhood teacher preparation programs. It takes place through kindergarten school placements and involves the student teacher, the teacher educator, and the cooperating teacher. The partnership between student teachers, teacher educators, and cooperating teachers will create a meaningful experience for student teachers' professional learning (Trent, 2014; Guevara, 2020).

Dr. Maria Montessori developed the Montessori education method in the early 1900s. It is a specific child-centered method of education that involves child-led activities, classrooms with children of varying ages, and teachers who encourage independence among their pupils. This method assumes that children learn better when they are choosing what to learn.

The purpose of the practicum module of a Montessori teacher education program is to offer student teachers opportunities for practice with the information and insights acquired during the academic phase. During the practicum, the student teacher must establish relationships with children, follow

the development of the children, present activities, and participate in the various aspects of planning, classroom management, and parent communication. The student teacher works under the daily guidance of a qualified Montessori teacher (the cooperating teacher) and must pass a minimum of three on-site evaluation visits by a Field Consultant (a teacher educator). The partnership between student teacher, teacher educator, and cooperating teacher during the practicum ensures that the theory learned in the coursework is fully integrated with the experience of working with young children.

This paper aims to explore teacher educators' experiences during the practicum in a Montessori setting. We used collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Longman & Franco, 2014) as a qualitative research method for exploring the personal experiences of two early childhood teacher educators (the first and the second authors) during the practicum organized by an International Montessori Training Institute in Hanoi.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Practicum in Early Childhood Education

Practicum is an essential component of early childhood teacher education. Many researchers agree that practicum experiences provide a platform to examine the connection between theory and practice in teacher training. In a review of research on practicum in early childhood teacher education, Matengu, Ylitapio-Mantyla, and Puroila (2020) found that researchers focused on the following four themes in the internship: the position of the student teacher in different relationships, competence and ethics supervision, faculty lecturers as practicum designers, and building collective spaces to support the teaching and learning during the practicum. The study of Matengu, Ylitapio-Mantyla, and Puroila (2020) confirmed the need to provide student teachers with a supportive and authentic real-world environment to practice their profession. The role of supervisors (teacher educators) and cooperating teachers in this process is vital. Therefore, it is necessary to set out criteria for selecting supervisors and cooperating teachers. Matengu, Ylitapio-Mantyla, and Puroila (2020) emphasized collaborative work and dialogue between supervisors and cooperating teachers to assist student teachers in completing the practicum. That work is crucial to overcome the theory-practice gap in teacher education.

A positive and productive partnership between the university and the school sector is crucial in preparing teachers for the future. The success of professional experience for preschool pre-service teacher learning is valued and based very much on the relationship developed between all stakeholders. What motivates the preschool-based teachers and how they see their role in this relationship is integral to achieving effective outcomes for themselves and the pre-service teachers (Walkington, 2005). Based on data collected from preschool teachers, Walkington (2005) indicated a need to understand further the personal and professional motivation of the mentoring teachers (preschool teachers) when establishing and maintaining early childhood teacher education programs.

According to Zeichner (2010), a central problem in teacher education in general for a long time has been the disconnection between the university and schools. The dominant role of teacher education universities is apparent in the construction and dissemination of knowledge, and schools remain in the position of practice fields where student teachers are expected to experiment with the practices suggested by the university. Student teachers are thus supposed to learn theories at the university and then go to schools to apply what they have learned. Furthermore, mentoring teachers in schools tend to know very little about the specifics of the methods and foundation courses their students have completed, whereas the university teachers often know very little about the specific practices used in schools (Zeichner 2010; Jónsdóttir, 2015).

Jónsdóttir (2015) examined the aims of the workplace-based learning of prospective preschool teachers in Iceland, as presented in policy documents, and how the forms of cooperation between the University of Iceland and preschools are designed and practiced to fulfill those aims. The author confirmed that a “third space” (Zeichner, 2010) needs to be developed in teacher education which involves equal and more dialectical relationships between academic and practitioner knowledge to support student teacher learning. Nevertheless, cooperation between the university and the preschools could be more diverse and creative. For example, hybrid projects with boundary crossing where academic and practical knowledge are treated with equal respect are necessary and need to be many. According to Jónsdóttir (2015), some challenges remain for the cooperation between the university and the preschools related to the practicum. First, it seems necessary to change the structure of the field practice and make the placement periods longer so that student teachers, together with their mentoring and university teacher educators, can deepen their knowledge and reflect on their actions in a more concentrated way. Secondly, it might be possible to offer a part-time university position to a competent teacher in the field, a ‘boundary crosser’ (Zeichner 2010) who establishes cooperation between the university and the field.

Montessori Education Approach

Montessori is an early education method developed by Dr. Maria Montessori, intending to raise children to become independent, responsible citizens and passionate about learning. Montessori is one educational method that has overcome differences in nature, territory, conception, and religion to spread worldwide quickly. Maria Montessori made many discoveries throughout her life, but perhaps the most significant discovery she has left us today is the discovery of an inner world – inside a child’s soul. Maria Montessori saw in every child the ability to learn, develop, and make themselves. The characteristics of the Montessori method of education are: prepared environments, freedom of choices, focus on the individual, no reward and no punishment, respect for the child, going from simple to complex and from concrete to abstract, mixed-age classrooms, learning through the senses (Gettman, 1987; Gutek, 2004; Feez, 2010).

Maria Montessori was the one who pointed out the role of the teacher as a helper and supporter with a spirit of love, respect, and concern. A Montessori teacher must be the caretaker of a specially designed environment for the child, supporting the child to achieve independence through lessons and patiently observing the child’s efforts and changes. A Montessori teacher is also a collaborator who helps children interact with their environments. Today the Montessori method of education has had a significant influence on the design and implementation of children’s educational programs in countries worldwide.

In Vietnam, the Montessori education method has been recently used in international or private preschools. Some studies on the application of this educational method in preschool education have also been carried out (Ngoc Thi Thu Hang, 2014; Vu Thi Hong Hanh & Vu Thi Thanh Huyen, 2017; Dinh Thanh Tuyen, 2018). For example, Ngoc Thi Thu Hang (2014) gives an overview of the methods, activity corners, and teaching aids used in the Montessori classroom. The author believes that the Montessori method of education is modern and suitable with the orientation of reforming early childhood teacher education in Vietnam. Using the Montessori method, Dinh Thanh Tuyen (2018) built systematic lessons for teaching and learning the Vietnamese language to help children develop language skills in their sensitive stage. However, to date, no research in Vietnam has addressed the practicum in Montessori teacher education programs.

3. METHODOLOGY

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is an emerging qualitative research method in which a researcher uses self-reflection to explore their personal experiences and connect this autobiographical data to broader cultural and social meanings and understandings (Chang, 2008). This method allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experiences to extend understanding about a sociocultural phenomenon (Wall, 2006). Autoethnography recommends understanding a self or some aspect of life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (Ellis, 2004). This type of qualitative research does not allow generalizations. Instead, it gives an in-depth view of several nuances involved in overcoming certain personal obstacles that may inhibit one's role as a researcher, which is rarely seen in the scientific literature.

According to Chang (2008), autoethnography as a method should be ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation. Using autoethnography, we can use our personal experiences of being in a culture, institution, or another social context to better understand and critically appraise that context.

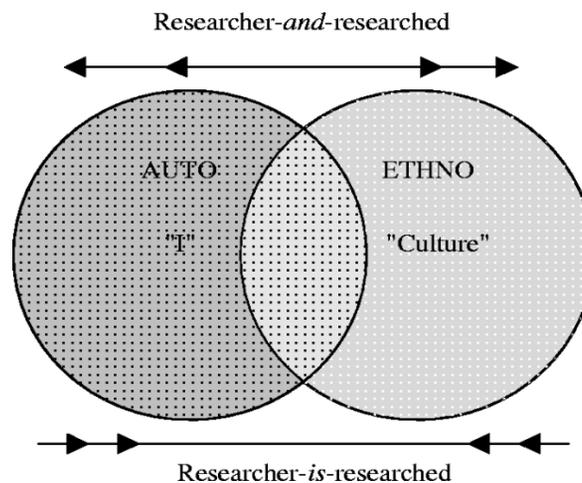


Figure 1. Different auto-ethno relationships in an autoethnography (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009)

The essential difference between ethnography and autoethnography is that the researcher is not trying to become an insider in the research setting in an autoethnography. He or she, in fact, is the insider. The context is his or her own (Duncan, 2004). Autoethnography is a helpful vehicle for including personal knowledge into a field of expert voices, resisting dominant discourses, or promoting dialogue (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Collaborative Autoethnography

Collaborative autoethnography is a methodological variation of autoethnography in which two or more researchers share their autobiographical materials related to an agreed-upon topic of social phenomenon, analyze and interpret the collective data to interpret the meanings of their personal experiences within their sociocultural contexts (Chang, Longman & Franco, 2014). According to Chang et al. (2012), collaborative autoethnography is described as an iterative process of interweaving self-reflexivity with group exploration:

In a collaborative autoethnography, each participant contributes to the collective work his/ her distinct, independent voice. At the same time, the combination of multiple voices to interrogate a social phenomenon creates a unique synergy and harmony that autoethnographers cannot attain in isolation. (p. 24)

As reported by Chang, Longman, and Franco (2014), collaborative autoethnography combines the benefits of autoethnography (addressing the connectivity between self and society), multi-participant studies (involving voices of multiple participant-researchers), and collaborative work (drawing upon interactive and corroborative energy of researchers).

In this research, we adopted a collaborative autoethnography for data collection and analyses. We first wrote individually autobiographical data separately. Then we met several times for (online) interactions to share and discuss personal experiences. Finally, we used qualitative data-coding techniques to identify emerging themes from the collected data.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Our autobiographical stories

The first author

In 2004, I studied for a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Teacher Education in Vietnam because I love children. I briefly worked at an international preschool after graduating from university. After that, I continued to study a master's program in Early Childhood Education in Hanoi. Here, I have studied more deeply about children and methods of children's education. Moreover, it was here that I came to know the Montessori method.

I was very interested in exploring this Montessori method of education, but unfortunately, at that time, this method was not popular in Vietnam. No kindergarten has yet chosen Montessori as the primary educational method. Therefore, I mainly only studied this method of education through early childhood education literature. Nearly ten years on, I have been still full of enthusiasm as a teacher in early childhood education. During this time, I founded a system of high-quality private preschools in Hue city. Therefore, I had the opportunity to work regularly with children. However, I always think of a classroom environment filled with materials, order, peace, and most importantly, an environment where children can be themselves and are respected.

After that, I decided to find a place to study and experience the Montessori method in depth. I went to the Canadian Montessori Teacher Training Institute in Vietnam and signed up for the international Montessori Teacher training program. I joined the training program enthusiastically. My previous knowledge and experience with children are renewed by the interesting lectures from teachers who are international Montessori coaches. I feel happy because, during the training program, I was guided to explore this method methodically and scientifically. Mainly, I have had wonderful practicum experiences, very different from my previous practicum in traditional preschools.

The second author

I studied Early Childhood Teacher Education in Vietnam, at the same university as the first author. After graduating from university, I had the opportunity to experience a year in the Singapore International Kindergarten system. Here, I had the opportunity to approach the methods of educating children and compare them with the methods of educating children of public preschools.

Next, I became a lecturer on Early Childhood Education at a University in Central Vietnam. Here, I taught early childhood education methods to college students majoring in early childhood education. During this time, I realized that the education methods to which I introduced students are still not active and influential. I have been very interested in active and popular early education methods in the world. That is why I decided to come to the international Montessori teacher training program of the Canadian Montessori Education Institute in Vietnam.

4.2. Plan and assignment of tasks for student teachers before practicum

Our Montessori Method training program (of the first and second author) lasts for one year and includes theoretical and practical modules on materials. In particular, the internship is divided into three phases, with a total time of 200 hours. Before going to the internship, we meet with an expert from the training institute to implement all the tasks that we need to do. We were informed very carefully about the time and location of the practicum, the 25 specific tasks, how to make the reports, the things to keep in mind during each stage of the practicum, and the specific time for the supervised sessions. Thanks to this exchange, we clearly understand our duties during the practicum.

The Practicum Assessment Manual (for supervisors) is also publicly available with very detailed, precise, and scientific evaluation criteria. We are allowed to read those criteria in advance. That way, in addition to having to report all of our internship assignments, we know what we will be assessed for and how. Sticking to the evaluation criteria helps us to be much more proactive during the practicum.

Regulations on ethical standards for Montessori teachers during the practicum are also provided and clearly explained by the training institute. Each teacher must carefully read 15 specific ethical standards and sign a commitment to comply with those 15 standards. This helps us understand our responsibilities, what to do and what not to do. This code of ethics is significant to each student like us in our future Montessori teacher journey.

“Careful preparation is always an important factor to bring success to each person when doing anything. The same goes for preparing for an internship according to the Montessori method. The internship program of each student is prepared by the Training Institute in the most thoughtful way. That preparation helped me understand that I needed to work and study professionally” (the first author).

Visiting the preschool before the start of the teaching internship is mandatory for all students. It was an opportunity to meet the teachers, get acquainted with the venue, and confirm the Training Institute’s arrangement for the first day of internships. With a completely new internship environment compared to other preschools we had experienced, visiting the school before the internship day gave us more confidence when starting the internship process afterward.

4.3. Importance of Classroom Observation

On the first day of class, each student teacher needs to perform the first task: prepare personal information with a photo in the form of a letter to parents and paste it on their class bulletin board. In that letter, each student teacher must clearly state who she/he is, where she/he is trained, why she/he teaches in this class, how long the internship is, and commitment to the internship process. That work surprised me (the first author). I never did it during my undergraduate internship. I think such a letter of recommendation from a student teacher is very polite and necessary. Parents of kids will know information about the student teacher with whom they can coordinate during the internship.

“In the Montessori classroom, in order to perform well the role of a “guide” for children, the teacher’s observation skills play a vital role. So, out of twenty-five practicum tasks, there were ten that helped me practice these observation skills. Observation tasks are particular and clear. I had to choose the most convenient location for careful observation. I was not allowed to guide the child in any activities and did not have to take care of the child during the first days of the first internship. My assignment for the first week was just to observe” (the first author).

The observations in the first days were as follows: observing the daily work of the classroom, observing the arrangement of the activity corners, observing a teacher teaching about practical life. I then had to write a summary of the sequence in which the observed activities took place. I have to assess whether the activities fit into the daily schedule I was taught and explain what I have learned from the cooperating teacher and the children in the classroom.

On subsequent assignments, I was required to observe the cooperating teacher during the essential Montessori hours of activities such as circle time, physical education or music and movement activities, activity hours with materials. Specifically, I had to observe a child’s movement for an hour and report what the child did during that time with a graph. This work is something in which I am very interested. Through these observations, I learn a lot from the children, teachers, and myself as an observer. My observation skills improved. I have much more confidence to prepare to interact directly with children through specific lessons.

4.4. Role of Supervisor in Putting Theory into Practice

Teaching children is vital work in the practicum period. I (the second author) had to organize activities for children in the corners of practical life, senses, math, language, culture, and science. I interacted directly with children and attempted to apply what I had learned. I did not see much difference between theory and practice. Children were relatively normalized (concentration, order, cooperation, and independence). I tried to properly implement the lessons learned at the Montessori Institute into the classroom, and the children learned very quickly. I must respect children when they are no longer interested in activities and must orient them according to each child’s ability. I felt that the class was very light and peaceful, the Montessori teacher was not too hard.

During my practicum, I was always helped by the cooperating teachers in my class. In addition, the training institute has sent an expert teacher to supervise and support each student teacher. The relationship between the cooperating teachers and the supervisors is cooperative and positive. They can communicate, discuss and work together in harmony in teaching children and helping student teachers. I feel delighted because of the close connection between the training place and the preschool. This helps student teachers see the consistency in training, the unity between theory and practice.

“I had to go through three rounds of internship supervision. My supervisor comes from the training institution (Montessori Institute). The supervisors are Montessori experts who are experienced instructors of the training institution. I was informed about the specific time in each supervised internship batch. Tasks and evaluation criteria for each supervised internship batch are also clearly communicated. The results of these supervised internship batches will serve as the basis for graduation” (the second author).

During the first supervised session, I was assessed only as an observer and in collaboration with other teachers in the class. The classroom controller is still the main (cooperating) teacher of the class. In the second supervised session, I acted as the principal teacher. In the last supervised session, I acted as

an assistant teacher. In particular, after each supervised session, I was commented on by the supervisor. I had been allowed to self-evaluate according to the excellent questions that the training institute has put forth. I had no difficulty in self-assessments. Then the supervisor gave comments on my work. Each comment is carefully analyzed, and there is always a solution to the problems based on respect for the student teacher. The restrictions have been gradually reduced through the sessions of supervision. I was much more mature, confident, and stable.

The last thing I did during the practicum was to write a practicum report. My report focuses on solving 25 practicum tasks. Each task helps me complete an aspect of myself as a future Montessori teacher. I am very excited to write such a report because it represents all the knowledge, skills, and things that I have learned through that internship. I have to submit a report to the training institute, and this report is also a basis for graduation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that taking a collaborative autoethnography to explore the Montessori practicum has proved very interesting and valuable. This study can be considered the first study in the Vietnamese context on collaborative ethnography to explore the Montessori practicum model. This method helps other researchers who have not had the opportunity to experience the Montessori educational environment, to better understand the model, characteristics, and values of the Montessori educational philosophy through practicum experiences.

Through a collaborative, proactive self-reflection on the Montessori practicum of the first and second authors, we characterized the advantages of Montessori practicum through three themes: plan and assignment of tasks for student teacher before practicum, the importance of classroom observation, the role of the supervisor in putting theory into practice. These three themes make a big difference between the Montessori practicum and traditional practicum in early childhood teacher education.

One limitation of this study is that both the first and second authors participated in the same Montessori teacher training program in Vietnam at the same time. Therefore, each author's personal experiences may not be vibrant and specific in terms of contexts and cultural experiences. Regarding the generalizability of the research results, we share Ellis (2004)'s point of view that "a story's generalizability is always being tested – not in the traditional way through random samples of respondents, but by readers, as they determine if a story speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Readers provide theoretical validation by comparing their lives to ours, by thinking about how our lives are similar and different and the reasons why" (p. 195).

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