

Working with Tensions: Weaving Practicum Learning Environments

S. Mayne Devine

Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, Guelph,
Ontario

What is Practicum?

Practicum courses are a unique component of the Bachelor of Science degree for students in the **Child Youth and Family Major**. Students enroll in practicum courses in both their third and fourth years of study. Third year students spend 12 hours a week for 12 weeks in the placement setting, while Fourth year students spend 16 hours a week for 12 weeks. Students are in the field in both the fall (Sept- Dec) and winter (Jan- Apr) semesters.

Student Contributions

The practicum experience provides students an opportunity to work along side professionals, receive ongoing feedback and supervision. It is this experience that enables students to integrate what they learn in the classroom with professional practice. Students contribute to the school through direct contact with students and the completion of a project.

Examples of School Projects

- Create a resource binder
- Conduct a literature search on a particular area
- Create an evaluation form.
- Students can also provide one on one student support and co-facilitate groups
- Design and implement lesson plans

familyrelations & appliednutrition

Science in Practice

Placement Contributions

The placement supervisor provides on-site supervision for the student and is vital to the success of the placement and learning for the student. The placement supervisor provides an environment that supports student learning and, in collaboration with the course instructor, provides feedback to the student to enhance skill development.

School Practicum Supervisors

- Support student's orientation to the school
- Provide student with opportunities to participate in routine work activities
- Assign specific tasks/activities that the student will be responsible for such as plan, implement, and evaluate activities
- Meet with student to discuss progress and complete practicum evaluation form



School Partners

Some of our school partners that provide placements to the Students in our Child Youth and Family Majors.



Wellington Catholic District School Board
75 Woolwich Street Guelph, ON, CAN N1H 6N6 TEL - (519) 821-4600 FAX - (519) 824-3088

We have Faith in Education...



- Holy Trinity Catholic School
- St. John Bosco (Alternative education)
- Holy Rosary Catholic School
- Sacred Heart Catholic School
- St. James Catholic High School
- St. Joseph Catholic School
- St. Patrick Catholic School
- Mary Phelan Catholic School



Upper Grand District School Board



- Sir Isaac Brock Public School
- Fred A. Hamilton Public School
- Give Yourself Credit Program (Alternative education program)
- King George Public School
- Willow Road Public School
- Tytler Public School
- Waverly Drive Public School
- Westwood Public School
- Priory Park Public School
- Brant Avenue Public School
- Taylor Evans Public School

Strengths and Challenges

There are **3 tensions** that contribute to successes and challenges of the practicum experience: **flexibility, priorities, and expectations**. These tensions speak to the competing needs of the practicum student, school placement, and the university. Balancing these tensions are, ultimately, in the service of the practicum student's learning and the needs of the children and youth within the school community, who, ideally, are the greatest benefactors of the practicum.

Flexibility

Timelines

- School communities and the University work on different time lines. Each has different start and end dates for their semesters. Because of University Senate rules, practicum students can not be required to be in their practicum beyond the start and end dates of the 12 week semester. Students will often volunteer to stay on beyond the required time to see projects to an end.

Scheduling

- Practicum students must fit their practicum hours (12/16 hrs) within the school schedule. This may create conflicts with the practicum student's class and work schedules. Practicum students may have to limit their work hours or put off taking

Priorities

University Program Requirements

- Practicum students with an emphasis in child are required to work with children in the primary division while students in youth are required to work with children in the junior/intermediate/senior divisions.

Identified needs within a school community

- Based on the demographics in a school community, principals identify areas of greatest need in their school. These areas may not correspond to the students interest or program requirements. Needs within the school can also change quickly and therefore can not always be anticipated at the time of matching.

Student interests

- The students interest may be different from their program requirements and the identified needs of the school community that they are placed within. These interests may not be accommodated and may cause disappointment for the student.

Expectations

Independence and initiative

- While students take the same required courses, there is a wide range of skills and abilities. Some students show high levels of initiative and can work independently very early in the practicum. Others struggle and become fearful of their skills and abilities.

Supervisor Availability

- Practicum supervisors often take on a student as an additional responsibility. Given the many demands on their time, some supervisors may be challenged to provide the support the student needs or requests.

Liability

- School boards and the University are each responsible to ensure the safety of their students. Policies and procedures of each institution can limit the opportunities available to students. At times, practicum students may want opportunities that are not available to them given these constraints.

Balancing Tensions within the Practicum

The "balancing tensions" graphic to the right represents the ideal practicum experience. Here, tensions are balanced and/or there is compatibility in the priorities and requirements of the 3 partners. The needs of the university, practicum student, and placement supervisor are in alignment and both the practicum student and school community benefit from the collaboration.

However, **when these tensions are not balanced, challenges occur** making for less satisfactory experiences for both the practicum supervisor and the student. More time and effort by the course instructor may be required to support the practicum. Sometimes a shift may occur in the view or attitude of one person bringing things into quick alignment.

Practicum is a dynamic partnership, ever changing from week to week, semester to semester.

Balancing Tensions within the Practicum

