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## First experiences in a school-based practicum: Pre-service teachers' emotion and perceived benefits towards the program

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### ABSTRACT

*School-based practicum is an inseparable part of Indonesian teacher education. The aim of the present study is to explore initial experiences of pre-service English teachers (PSETs) on a school-based practicum program. Under a qualitative case study, four first-year PSETs of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia were purposefully selected as the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interview, the handbook of the program, and the PSETs' reflective journals. The results suggested that the PSETs underwent positive emotion during the practicum. Factors contributing to the emotion and benefits the PSETs perceived were also reported. At last, implications on future implementation of school-based practicum were addressed.*

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## 1. Introduction

Teacher education is a fundamental element in shaping the characters of a nation and its future generation. Through a good quality of teacher education, qualified and competent future teachers who will shape the face of future education can be generated. This idea can be put into realization by providing appropriate programs and courses in teacher training institutions which instil teacher competencies. One of the programs which is an imperative aspect of teacher education is practicum (Tülüce & Çeçen, 2016). Through practicum, pre-service teachers' professional development can be gained as they can bring theoretical training into practice (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016), and obtain real-life experiences as teachers. In Indonesia, practicum is regulated in the Regulation of Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education No. 55 of 2017 on Standard of Teacher Education paragraph 9. Given the regulation, it is mandatory for teacher training institutions to provide practicum programs which are implemented in two main programs: microteaching and

school-based practicum. The latter program is known as *Pengenalan Lapangan Persekolahan (PLP)* in which pre-service teachers joining the program will be placed in some school partners.

The implementation of the school-based practicum (to refer to Indonesian *PLP* program) in general is regulated under the *PLP* guidebook (Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education, 2017). However, each teacher training institution has flexibility to bring the guideline into a more specific program which matches the objective of the program. As the unique case in the present study, since 2017, the English Department of Sun University (pseudonym, further abbreviated as EDSU) has been implementing a school-based practicum program to facilitate its pre-service English teachers (PSETs) to grow their competencies as teacher candidates. The practicum offered in EDSU is unique in a way that it offers longer duration of the program compared to other institutions. While the others commonly require their PSETs to do practicum in their last years of study, that in the EDSU expects the PSETs to gain experiences in a school-based program from their first semester to the sixth one. The practicum ranges from an observation as an introductory program to teaching practicum as the end goal. The early exposure on school-based experiences the EDSU applies resonated the findings of Tülüce & Çeçen (2016) and Sulistiyo, Mukminin, Abdurrahman, & Haryanto (2017) which emphasized the needs of earlier and longer practicum program to prepare PSTs to become efficient teachers. Although the program seems promising for the PSETs' professional learning, empirical studies on it are necessary to conduct.

Prior studies on school-based practicum have been conducted in various contexts, such as Vietnamese (Vo, Pang, & Lee, 2018), Turkish (Tülüce & Çeçen, 2016), Chinese (Teng, 2017; Zhang, Clarke & Lee, 2018), Austrian (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016), and Indonesian (Sulistiyo, et. al., 2017; Kuswando, 2017) context. By involving different groups of participants, such as the fourth-year students (Vo, et. al., 2018; Tülüce & Çeçen, 2016; Teng, 2017; Zhang, et. al., 2018; Yangin Eksi & Gungor, 2018), novice teachers (Sulistiyo, et., al., 2017), and mentor teachers (Kuswando, 2017), the prior studies have brought deep understanding on school-based practicum programs from different perspectives. Nonetheless, the author identified a gap which should be filled with the expectation that it would provide better understanding. While other studies focused on the implementation of teaching practicum (Vo, et. al., 2018; Tülüce & Çeçen, 2016; Teng, 2017; Yangin Eksi & Gungor, 2018), explored the process of non-teaching practice, such as school observation PSTs have gone through is noteworthy. By examining the non-teaching practice, empirical studies on how non-teaching practices contribute to PSTs' professional learning can be gained and future actions can be taken. In addition, prior studies mostly involved senior year students even in-service teacher, while other institutions, like EDSU, might expose their PSTs to school-based practicum in earlier year of study. This phenomenon requires investigation as PSTs in early year can possibly hold different views on school-based practicum which should be taken into account. Lawson, Çakmak, Gündüz & Busher (2015) suggested that more attention on PSTs thoughts and attitudes toward the process of practicum should be given. Given the gaps identified above, the present study aims at exploring how the first-year PSETs experienced school-based practicum, particularly the school observation as their first experiences.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Design

The present study is a qualitative study under a descriptive case study design. The design was selected since it suits the nature of the study which is to explore a program (school-based practicum) which is relatively new in its implementation. Merriam (1998) asserted that a descriptive case study is suitable to be used to investigate "innovative programs and practices" (p.38). Under a descriptive case study design, the present study can provide thick and descriptive understanding on the school-based practicum implementation.

A case study is suitably used to describe a case which is bounded by a context. A case can be a person, a group of people, an institution, a policy, a program, and the like (Merriam, 1998). In the context of the study, the case is a school-based practicum program offered to the first-year students in an English language teacher training institution in the English Department of Sun University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The program was implemented in academic year 2019/2020 in two semesters: the first semester focused on exposing students to school environments and school observation, while the second semester emphasized on exposing students to pedagogical knowledge, such as introduction to curriculum and developing teaching instruments (lesson plans, teaching materials, teaching media, and assessment) without teaching practice. The practicum program was conducted in a state elementary school in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

## **2.2 Participants**

The participants of the study were four first-year female students who joined the school-based practicum program. The four participants were purposefully selected due to their satisfactory achievement on the program as seen from the grade given by the mentor teachers and their well-written reflective journals. The consideration behind selecting PSETs with high achievement was made to ensure that the selected participants were actively engaged and participated in the practicum, so they could describe their experiences during the program clearly. The names of the participants were changed into pseudonyms – Ursula, Andrea, Sandra, and Imelda - to maintain their privacy. Of the four participants who consented to participate in the study, Sandra was the only participant who strongly expressed her interest to be a teacher in the future.

## **2.3 Data collection**

Data of the study were collected through a semi-structured interview and documentation. The interview was equipped with an interview protocol which mainly focused on two major question: (1) how the PSETs felt during their participation in the program, and (2) the benefits they perceived from the program. Besides an interview protocol, two documents, i.e. the PSETs' reflective journals and the practicum handbook were also used to gather some information on the implementation of the practicum. The one-on-one interview was carried out online through Microsoft Teams for roughly 30 minutes for each participant and was audio-recorded under the consent of the participants.

## **2.4 Data analysis**

The obtained data were analyzed through several steps. The interview was transcribed and coded to find themes which emerged regarding the program and the PSETs' experiences on the program. The interview excerpts of the coded themes were then translated from Indonesian language to English without changing the essence of the meanings shared by the participants. To ensure the credibility of the findings, the author member-checked the findings and triangulated the data from multiple sources. Member checking is done by sending the main findings or themes back to the participants of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The author sent the themes of the findings to the four participants and asked them to check whether the themes were accurate. The results of the member checking showed that all participants agreed with the findings and no revisions were needed. For the triangulation, data from the interview, students' reflective journals, and the handbook of the program were used to analyses the findings.

### 3. Results and discussion

The present study was aimed at exploring how the first-year students in a teacher training institution felt when they were experiencing a school-based practicum program and what benefits they perceived from the program. The results are presented as follows.

#### 3.1. PSETs' emotion and factors shaping it

When the participants were asked to express their emotion towards their first experiences joining the school-based practicum, the positive and negative emotion emerged. **Positive Emotion.** For the positive emotion, the keywords such as *good*, *happy*, and *glad* were mentioned. When recalling her experience on the practicum, Ursula said "When I was at school, I felt happy because I could meet students. The teachers were also friendly. I was also glad because I could buy things at canteen like I used to do at school." She further added, "There was time when a teacher had another errand to do, I was asked to supervise a class along with my fellow intern. Thank God! The task was successfully accomplished." Besides Ursula, Sandra also expressed her positive feelings toward her first experience doing a practicum at school. She asserted,

*The way I see it, [this program] is good. Starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester, students were introduced to lesson planning. It will be very useful for me in the future because I want to be a teacher. From this program, I know how to handle children when I become a teacher. (Sandra - Interview)*

Andrea also positively viewed the program as a "sweet escape" from her busy routine at campus. She stated "I felt happy because with this program, I got a recess from my busy schedule at campus. [I felt happy] seeing children [at school]. It was something new to me."

The presented interview excerpts showed that all participants expressed positive emotion towards their participation in the school-based practicum as their first experiences joining the program. The finding echoed prior studies which reported that the PSTs showed positive emotions like feeling excited (Vo, et. al., 2018), interested and enthusiastic (Hascher, et. al, 2016), as well as enjoyable, and grateful (Zhang, et. al, 2018) towards the practicum. It is a good start for them when they view school-based practicum as a positive experience as by having positive attitude towards practicum; the possibility to learn more and to succeed tend to get higher. PSTs who had positive attitude toward practicum in the beginning of the program will find the program rewarding and beneficial (Zhang, et. al, 2018). Meanwhile, those who are not emotionally involved in the practicum tend to perform less satisfactorily in the practicum (Kuswandono, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to help PSETs create positive emotion during the process of school-based practicum.

To be able to help PSETs feel positive emotion, the factors shaping the emotion should be identified so that the factors stimulating the positive emotion can be maximized. From Ursula's experiences, it suggested that support from people at school, such as teachers, mentor teachers (Mena, Hennissen, & Loughran, 2017), and students can lead to positive feelings. When people around school in which the PSETs are placed for the practicum program can cooperate and welcome them, they tend to show positive emotion during the practicum. Not only from teachers at school, support from students will influence PSETs' emotions as well. When they get recognition from students, negative emotion tends to reduce (Teng, 2017). Contradictory, findings were found from prior studies conducted by Teng (2017) and Zhang et. al. (2018) who reported that the PSTs underwent negative emotion during the practicum. Teng (2017) found that the participants felt that they were treated like an outsider which eventually created negative emotion. Meanwhile, in Zhang et. al.'s study, mentor teachers' lack of support led to PSTs' negative emotion. From the two opposing findings, there is a connecting line which should be taken into account, i.e. support from the environment as an influencing factor which shapes PSETs' emotion. To have positive



emotion, PSETs should be supported by people in the school environment as well as embraced as a part of the school, not an outsider.

Besides support from people around PSETs, the study reported that involvement or contribution the PSETs can give during the practicum also plays a role in creative positive emotion. With contribution PSETs can give to school, they may see that their presence at school is important and useful. This finding is different from that of Teng (2017) which reported that the PSTs felt negative emotion due to less contribution they were offered. They felt marginalized at school and their voices were less heard. The discrepancy on the findings of the two studies can possibly appear due to different nature of the program. In the present study, the nature of the practicum was school observation in which the PSETs were required to experience some non-teaching tasks as a requirement to accomplish the program. Meanwhile, in Teng's study, the PSTs were required to have teaching practicum which might not emphasize non-teaching tasks. It finally reduced the opportunity of involvement they could get as the tasks focused more on teaching. Although the nature of the practicum is different, ensuring PSTs get the opportunity to take parts in plentiful and meaningful tasks and activities in-service teachers are responsible with during their participation in the school-based practicum is crucial.

Another factor which may shape PSETs' positive emotion during school-based practicum is awareness on the importance of the program for their future career. PSETs can see practicum as a positive experience when they realize the importance of the program for their future. As in Sandra's case, she believed that the program will be useful for her future career as a teacher. Her awareness on the need of the program leads to positive emotion. This finding resonates those of Hascher & Hagenauer (2016) and Sulisty, et. al. (2017). In the former study, the student teachers viewed that the practicum was not only practice, but also theoretical training which was imperative for their professional development. In the same vein, the latter study suggested that practicum served as a helpful program to bring theories into practice. The findings of the three studies showed that when PSTs realize the importance of the program, they will tend to have positive emotion towards the school-based practicum. When PSETs know the meaning of activities they should involve into, they will be motivated in doing it.

Lastly, two interesting factors which led to positive emotion also emerged. The study indicated that the program can also help the PSETs recall her childhood memories when she was an elementary school student. This memory of hers might be so memorable that finally she felt happy to be at school doing her practicum. Not only recalling childhood memories, being at school can also be a refreshing experience for the PSETs as they can find something new among their busy routine at campus.

**Shifted Emotion: from Negative to Positive.** Besides positive emotion the participants had toward the school-based practicum, they also showed negative feelings at first. The keywords such as *nervous*, *shocked*, and *less motivated* were used when they were asked to express their reaction knowing that they would have a practicum in their first year of study. However, as they experienced more, their negative feelings changed into positive ones. Ursula retold her initial response when she heard that she had to do a practicum as follows:

*The first time I heard that I would have a practicum, I felt nervous, because I was still in the first semester. I was wondering how there would be a practicum for a first semester student, while in other universities, they usually offered a practicum in the last year of the study. I had not got any materials as a basis to teach. However, after I had got explanation from the university supervisor, I knew that it would be a mere school observation.*  
(Ursula - Interview)

Ursula further added that she felt less motivated to do the practicum when she had other errands to do simultaneously. She stated, "When I had other things to accomplish, I felt less motivated to go to school to do the practicum." Other participants, Sandra, Andrea, and Imelda also showed their negative feelings at first when they knew that they would do a

practicum at school. They used the same word which was *shocked* to express their first reaction.

*At first, I was shocked. I knew nothing and I would be asked to make a lesson plan. I had just graduated from a high school, so I knew nothing. Yet, I finally knew that it would be an observation, so I felt fine. As the time went by, I felt it as a great experience because I knew how to teach children. (Sandra - Interview)*

*At first, I was shocked because I got a practicum in the beginning of my study, but finally I felt excited because I meet children [at school]. (Andrea)*

*At first, I was shocked, because it was the second week of my first semester when I got socialization on the practicum. My friends from other departments were also wondering on the program. However, when I joined the program, I felt fine. (Imelda - Interview)*

The above interview excerpts indicated that at first, the participants had somewhat negative feelings as their reaction knowing that they would be deployed to a school to do a school-based practicum. They were shocked as they realized that they were only freshmen who might not have sufficient knowledge on pedagogy, content (English), and experience. It shows that when the PSTs have lack of perceived competence or knowledge, they will tend to have negative feelings towards practicum. This shifted feeling was also reported by Tülüce & Çeçen (2016) in their study with Turkish PSTs. When it came to teaching practicum, at first, they felt nervous, particularly when they were informed that their performance would be recorded. However, when they experienced the practicum, the negative emotion gradually diminished. This feeling might appear as they did not have an idea on what the activity would be or whether they would perform the practicum well. A different finding was reported by Yuan (2016) who found that the PSTs underwent shifted feeling in the opposite direction. At first, they had positive emotion as the PSTs held positive views towards teachers and teaching; nevertheless, the experience they had during practicum shifted their emotion into negative one. The opposing findings have one aspect in common which is experience. University supervisors and mentor teachers need to ensure that PSETs experience activities which enrich their knowledge and boost their self-confidence as well as meeting their expectation, so that PSTs can have positive emotion.

The negative emotion the PSETs initially had was also triggered by the inadequacy of knowledge on the nature of the program. It might be detrimental if further actions are not taken to solve the problems. The excerpts also show the power of socialization on the program which may shift their views from negative to positive. With socialization by the university supervisor who explained the nature of the program, the PSETs understood the tasks they should accomplish which eventually eased them and shifted the negative feelings to positive ones. Prior studies emphasized that lack of guidance from mentor teachers and university supervisors makes practicum less effective (Vo, et. al., 2018) and reduce the quality of the practicum program (Sulistyo, et. al., 2017). It shows that mentors and supervisors' role is pivotal during practicum as through their guidance, PSETs can understand what is expected from and what they should do during the program. Lastly, fun experience they have while doing the school-based practicum also play a role in shifting the negative feelings to positive ones. It can be concluded that giving socialization on the program as a form of university supervisors' guidance and creating fun experiences may help PSETs avoid having negative feelings towards school-based practicum and shape positive ones.

### **3.2. The perceived benefits on the school-based practicum program**

The study has shown that the school-based practicum program for the first-year students is beneficial to build pedagogical knowledge and soft skills. For the pedagogical

knowledge, four themes emerged: understanding teaching preparation, understanding students' different characteristics, and knowing various teaching strategies. Meanwhile, for soft skills, the emerged themes were teamwork, punctuality, independence, responsibility, and self-confidence. The results will be discussed as follows.

**Building Pedagogical Knowledge.** From the interview with the participants, it was found that in general, the program can help them build pedagogical knowledge, one of which is understanding teaching preparation a teacher should have before teaching. Ursula said, "I know how to analyse a lesson plan and its components. Making a lesson plan is not easy; it must suit the class." In addition, Sandra explained, "After doing the practicum, I got an overview on what it is like to be a teacher. It was not easy because a teacher had to prepare materials and other files." Before joining the program, the participants had no idea on the long preparation a teacher should go through before teaching, such as making a lesson plan, taking into account several aspects for the teaching, preparing materials, and the like. After joining the program, they knew what to prepare before teaching. Similar findings were found from Vo, et. al. (2018) that the PSTs in their study expected to learn how to be teachers and have experiences in doing teachers' tasks, such as designing lesson plans. The findings suggested that PSETs were aware of teaching preparation a teacher should make. This experience can help them build their sense on pedagogical knowledge as it is an important knowledge they should have as a PSTs.

Another benefit the participants perceived from the program is understanding students' different characteristics. Ursula asserted, "I knew that a teacher must understand his students, so that they could understand materials [given by the teacher] easily." Similarly, Imelda stated, "Perhaps I learnt about students' characteristics. If the student has a specific characteristic, I should know how to deal with him or what approach I should give." Sandra also reported that she learnt how to deal with students from this program. She argued, "Dealing with students with different characteristics need to be 'eyes-to-eyes'." The interview excerpts indicated that the school-based practicum program contributed to raising the PSETs' understanding that students may have different characteristics which require different treatment from the teacher. These results corroborate with one of the aims of the program as written in the handbook of the school-based practicum program which is to introduce the PSETs to different characteristics of students (2019, p.8). In a prior study, Vo et. al. (2018) also found that the PSTs had expectation that they could obtain an opportunity to solve real problems in the classroom. One of the common issues a teacher deals with in the classroom is managing students with different characteristics. Without appropriate treatment, handling students with different characters might lead to a chaos. Therefore, having awareness on students' different characters in initial school-based practicum may help PSETs prepare and anticipate typical problems they can possibly deal with in their future teaching.

The study also showed that by joining the program, the participants are exposed to various teaching strategies and the importance of applying suitable ones. Sandra explained, "I knew how a teacher started a lesson, and how to handle students. Every teacher has a different style. During the observation I knew how handling the first graders differed from handling the sixth graders." Andrea gave an example on how teaching strategies may differ depending on the grade. She said, "For instance, for the first graders, the teacher applied storytelling to create a fun learning atmosphere, while for the sixth graders, the teacher focused on giving detailed explanation." The results resonate the objective of the program as written in the handbook of the program (2020, p.4). It is written that through this program, the PSTs are expected to know how to teach, including what strategies to apply. The excerpts showed that the participants had understanding that a teacher should apply suitable teaching strategies and that some considerations need to be taken into account when selecting ones. Although gaining knowledge on various teaching strategies employed by teachers is a good input, Yuan (2016) reported a contradictory finding. Yuan found that the PSTs were discouraged during the practicum since their expectation on the ideal teaching strategies they would apply did not align those allowed by the mentor teacher to apply. While the PSTs preferred a more communicative teaching strategy, the mentor teacher required them to apply a more traditional one. The discrepancy on the teaching strategy to apply finally led to negative

emotion. The opposing findings of the two studies can happen due to the existing knowledge the PSTs have. In the prior study, the participants were senior year students who may have got pedagogical knowledge from the university courses, one of which is teaching strategies. However, their beliefs might not be in line with school practices they found during practicum. The discrepancy finally brings disadvantages to them. On the contrary, the PSETs in the present study were the first-year students who have not got pedagogical knowledge. They were exposed to various teaching strategies directly from the teachers; therefore, the knowledge they got from the school-based practicum is in line with teachers' actual practices. The findings indicated the importance of exposure on teaching strategies which represent strategies applied by teachers in real teaching.

**Building Soft Skills.** The results of the interview have shown that besides pedagogical knowledge, the participants also get benefits from the program in terms of soft skills building. Sandra reported that she learnt how to work in a team with people whom she did not know before. "In the first semester, we were grouped with students from another class and we did not know each other, but we had to work in a team. So, we learnt to cooperate." Besides teamwork, Sandra and Andrea also learnt how to be a more punctual person.

*My house is far from the school, and by 06.30 AM I had to be at school to greet students. So, I left for the school before 05.00 AM in order not to be late. (Sandra - Interview)*

*The tutoring teacher got used to being punctual, so we also got used to it. (Andrea - Interview)*

Sandra also pointed out that she became more independent during her participation in the program. "When the teacher explained the materials, I did not really understand, so I tried to learn them by myself by browsing on the internet and found some typical lesson plans to learn from." In addition, Andrea felt that this program helped her build responsibility and self-confidence in public speaking. She stated, "If the supervising teacher gave me an assignment, I did it because I know it was my responsibility. This habit applies until now." The study showed that the school-based practicum program enables the participants to build their soft skills. As Andrea reported that the practicum molded her responsibility; from her reflective journal, Ursula also indicated that she became a more responsible person through the program. Her responsibility was portrayed from her willingness to come to school in an extreme pouring rain.

*Another experience is when I had to leave for school in an extreme pouring rain. Seeing the teachers who went to school although it was pouring, I learnt that I had to be responsible as well. Pouring rain or hot weather should not be an excuse to come late or to skip the practicum. (Ursula – Reflective Journal)*

Besides responsibility, Andrea further added, "I usually got stage-fright. However, through this program, I got used to explaining things to students in front of the class, so I feel more confident now. Now, when I have a presentation before my classmates, I do not feel nervous." This finding indicated that self-confidence can also be built through school-based practicum. In their study, Vo, et. al. also found that soft skills building was one of the benefits the PSTs obtained from the practicum. Through the ample experience of speaking in front of the class, self-confidence in public speaking was gained.

#### 4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The school-based practicum program which is a compulsory one is found to lead to different emotion felt by the participants of the program ranging from negative emotion at first to positive ones. The negative emotion which were triggered by the inadequacy of



knowledge on the nature of the program and the PSETs' perceived lack of individual competence indicated that socialization of the program done prior to the meeting is imperative to do. By understanding what to expect from the program, it is expected that the participants of the practicum can have positive emotion which may contribute to the success of the program they will experience. The study also showed some factors which lead to positive feelings the PSETs have during their participation in the program, such as support from people at school and awareness on the importance of the program for their future. Therefore, it is recommended that all parties should cooperate to succeed the program. Teachers and students should welcome and provide assistance for the PSETs doing the practicum, while the PSETs should actively involve in school activities and understand the need of accomplishing this program as a milestone of their journey as teacher candidates. Better and effective relationship among parties involved in the school-based practicum program, i.e. PSETs, mentor teachers, and university supervisors, should be established so that it can facilitate the development of the PSETs in the practicum program (Sulistiyo, et. al, 2017). Lastly, the study reported that the school-based practicum program offered in early year of study brings benefits to the practicum participants; therefore, it is noteworthy that the program is continued.

This study is a small-scale study which involved few participants; therefore, generalization on the results should not be made. The scope of the studied program is also limited into school observation and do not include teaching practicum, while investigating how PSETs experience teaching practicum is also worth studying. Despite the limitation of the study, the present study has given insights on aspects which need to consider in the implementation of practicum in teacher education program and the benefits of school-based practicum, particularly when it is implemented in early year of study. Further studies on practicum in English Education context are suggested to seek for deeper investigation by having a larger scale of participants, exploring how teaching practicum is experienced, or how English is explored or studied during the implementation of practicum program.

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