

PRACTICAL LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS: THE ROLE OF PRACTICUM

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Nowadays is recognized that practicum has a key role in the initial education of teachers and preschool teachers, being considered as a fundamental axis for the professional development of these professionals. It is acknowledged that this period of supervised, reflected and experiential learning acts as a wedge between the academic and theoretical training and the one that occurs in practice contexts, being practicum pointed out by research as a crucial space and time to promote the preschool teachers' awareness of the profession and the acquisition of human skills and qualities of practical thinking and professional knowledge. This study is part of a research project that aims to understand the role of practicum for preschool and 1st and 2nd cycle of basic education teachers.

The objectives of the study are:

- (i) to identify the contributions of practicum for preschool teachers' professional development;
- (ii) to learn about the challenges and difficulties experienced by student teachers at practicum; and
- (iii) to understand the critical factors that have greater or lesser impact on preschool teacher education.

The data collection had the express consent of the participants and their anonymity as well as the anonymity of the training institutions was guaranteed. The data resulting from the analysis of the questionnaires applied to student teachers and cooperating teachers are presented. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was used to analyze data. Results confirm the unquestionable role of practicum for practical learning and professional development of prospective preschool teachers. The main contributions of practicum are the awareness of what is in fact the profession of preschool teacher, development of the capacity for reflection, questioning the practice, the articulation of theory and practice and the development of observation, documentation and planning skills. The major difficulties are focused on time and group management, educational planning, children and educational environment assessment, definition of intervention priorities, reconciling beliefs and perspectives of the child, and developing research on practice. The relationship with the actors of the practicum, namely the cooperating teacher, the institutional supervisor, the children and their families, the educational team, the support and guidance of the cooperating teacher and the institutional supervisor, and the collaboration and sharing that occurs at supervision meetings stand out as critical factors for preschool teachers' professional development.

keywords: practicum, preschool teachers' education, professional development.