

**BEGINNER PRE-SERVICE SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' LEARNING EXPERIENCE DURING PRACTICUM****Karen P. Nonis****Tan Sing Yee Jernice***Nanyang Technological University*

*In Singapore, training for pre-service special education (PSSE) teachers is supported by a ten-week special education teaching (SET) practicum process in special school setting. In the first four weeks of SET practicum PSSE teachers are familiarized with their pupils, class routines, school culture and administrative processes within the school. The PSSE teachers were guided in lesson preparation and delivery by way of written and face-to-face feedback. Following this handholding, the PSSE teachers are observed by supervisors and cooperating teachers in the school and the University supervisors and they are graded for their overall performance of the SET practicum. This study focuses on the learning experiences of the PSSE teachers during the ten-week SET practicum in their respective special schools. The PSSE teachers completed a survey the week following completion of their practicum experience in school. Thirty-three (Male = 3; Female = 30) PSSE teachers participated in the survey. The survey instrument used a 4-point Likert scale which included two sections: (a) Teachers' Response to the Practicum Experience their Learning Experience and (b) The process of the SET Practicum. The overall findings indicate that the PSSE teachers had positive experiences. Although the majority of PSSE teachers indicated that they enjoyed the SET practicum, their reasons varied. They felt that their supervisors both within the school and the University understood and the SET practice process and also conveyed the correct SET practicum process to them. The findings of this study are discussed in the light of recommended improvements to the SET practicum process for the PSSE teachers in special schools.*

**Introduction**

A beginner teacher's first experience in a classroom setting can be very daunting. It is for this reason that courses that offer foundation in education with a practicum component is valuable (Ogonor & Badmus, 2006). Studies on occupational stress have also revealed that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations (Boyle, Borg, Falzon & Baglioni Jr., 1995; Hui & Chan, 1996; Schonfeld, 2001). Teachers working in the field of Special Education experience stressful work situations (Antonioni, Polychroni & Kotroni, 2009; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Forlin, 2001; Williams & Gersch, 2004). Practicum for pre-service special education (PSSE) teachers is especially important. Teaching practicum forms a critical part of the teacher training of the beginning teacher's first experience in a real school setting. It is a time where pre-service teachers are able to test out new or different strategies and apply what they have learned in their lectures to classrooms situations. It could also be a time to experience and learn to cope with occupational stress while they are having practicum.

Studies have also suggested that for PSSE teachers in mainstream schools which include teaching children with special education needs (SEN), lectures and discussions are insufficient (Kraayenoord, 2003). Instead, teachers should be encouraged to reflect and discuss thoughts and new innovative ideas for inclusion would be most suitable in the classroom environment. While the literature on beginner teacher's experiences in regular classrooms is well documented, that of beginner PSSE teachers in mainstream or special education classrooms is limited (Conderman, Katsiyannis & Franks, 2001; Conderman, Morin & Stephens, 2005; McIntyre, Bryd & Foxx, 1996).

*The Value of the Practicum Experience*

Practicum experience help beginner teachers remain in teaching, develop skills and competencies in classroom management and progress in their teaching profession (Cameron, Lovett & Berger, 2007; Heppner, 1994; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). Cameron et al. (2007) tracked teachers in both primary and secondary schools from their third year between the years 2005 and 2008. The authors wrote that quality leadership and organizational commitment and practices, collegial support and opportunities to continue to learn about teaching collectively assisted beginner teachers in their classrooms. Further, these factors kept teachers longer in the teaching profession. Specifically, at the class level, beginner teachers indicated that they were supported in classes with pupils of less behavioral challenges. In this way, beginner teachers, Cameron and colleagues (2007) said, could concentrate better on the teaching rather than managing the pupils' behaviors. In addition, when beginner teachers taught in subject areas they were qualified in and having a lower number of subjects to teach added to the support they needed at the start of their careers in teaching.

Interestingly, Cameron et al. (2007) reported that beginner teachers had Provisionally Registered Teacher (PRT) time allowance which protected the time of the teachers from covering duties such as teacher absences and or the *kitchen manager*. Although the authors did not provide an explanation as to the role of the *kitchen manager*, one would assume this would mean duties other than classroom teaching. Creatively, beginner teachers were encouraged to use their PRT time to locate resources and increase their awareness of their school and community and observe other teachers in classroom teaching (Cameron et al., 2007).

*The School Culture as Support to the Practicum Experience*

Beginnings in any new job can be stressful; some take it at their stride while others have problems settling in. The teaching profession, in particular has been ranked as a high stress occupation by many researchers (Beer & Beer, 1992; Borg, Riding & Falzon, 1991). Practicum forms part of the most stressful component in teaching and managing pupils' behavior as this is one area where beginner teachers are challenged (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999). Managing challenging pupils' behaviors not only affects beginner teachers but even qualified teachers tend to feel stressed as well (Head, Hill & McGuire, 1996). Toren and Iliyan's (2008) study of 146 beginner teachers, five mentors and five advisors using open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, reported that beginner teachers faced adjustment to the schools' culture, overload with work and individual differences amongst pupils.

In Lee, Walker and Bodycott's study (2000) exploring the perceptions and expectations of Principals, pre-service teachers did not expect to receive assistance from their Principals during their first month of teaching. However, some of these pre-service teachers expected their Principals to be receptive and supportive to innovative teaching. The study further revealed that the pre-service teachers either wished for more support from their teaching colleagues or they believed that they should depend on themselves during their teaching practicum (Lee et al., 2000). Adding to this, Cameron et al.'s study (2007) reported that beginner teachers felt better when the school understood that it was not easy for a new teacher to adjust to a new environment. Consequently, irrespective of the type of profession, a positive, warm, welcoming and supportive environment combined with collegiality certainly help settle beginner PSSE teachers a little better.

Mentoring forms a critical part of the practicum process which could also affect the level of stress of a beginner PSSE teacher. However, this would depend on the experience and ability of the mentors (Roehrig, Bohn, Turner & Pressley, 2008). The authors wrote that experienced mentors had more to offer to their mentees and that effective beginner teachers communicated more with their mentors (Roehrig et al., 2008). Good mentorship is reflected in mentor ability to work with beginning teachers, developing strong and positive interactions with openness to discussions between mentor and mentees and teaching competence of the mentor (Evertson & Smithey, 2000). Mentors feedback to beginner student teachers during practicum has shown to affect their performance (Heppner, 1994). Heppner's study (1994) involving five doctoral student teachers (four male, one female) found that the self-efficacy beliefs of these five student teachers were significantly enhanced under a structured teaching practicum system. This was seen through pre and post test ratings of prospective faculty of teaching whereby these five student teachers achieved significant differences in 21 out of 22 learning objectives during the course of the practicum. Some of these significant findings included learning objectives such as *how to set the norms and expectations for my class, how to use learning objectives to guide my teaching strategies, developmental issues college students go through, factors to consider in leading a discussion, how to conduct a peer consultation and how to develop a teaching portfolio* (Heppner, 1994, p. 503).

In addition, Heppner's (1994) study also emphasized the need to have more varied forms of feedback for the student teachers to maximize the development of prospective faculty members' self-efficacy. Typically, the common form of feedback from the instructor to the student teachers was through standard teaching evaluation questionnaires administered at the end of the semester. As Heppner's (1994) study suggests, feedback can come in different forms such as instructor or peer observations, videotaping, peer consultation, or more traditional teaching evaluations. Further, the student teachers could also be introduced to a variety of activities during the teaching practicum such as peer support, discussion in teaching methods and techniques.

Other studies have supported the importance of having a mentorship programme during practicum (Boz & Boz, 2006, Hastings & Squires, 2002; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). For example, in Boz and Boz's (2006) study, student teachers indicated that they either did not like the teachers they were attached to or felt that they did not get enough practice in their teaching experience. Smith and Lev-Ari (2005) study of 480 student teachers with a 68 closed-item questionnaire on their evaluation of various components of teacher education programmes identified University supervisors as providing the strongest support next to their peers and school-based mentors during practicum. In Hastings and Squires' (2002) study in which the role of mentorship was tasked to an experienced school-based teacher educator over a three-week period (rather than to the University Supervisor), the authors suggested that such new teaching practicum model allow opportunities for more collaboration which could potentially benefit every stakeholder in the practicum process. Examples of collaborative opportunities include sharing of ideas and understanding of ideal models of effective teaching among the different stakeholders and recognizing the new teaching practicum as a discussion platform for University mentor/supervisors and school-based mentors to develop the university course material incorporating their practical professional knowledge (Hastings & Squires, 2002).

Others studies have reinforced the need for teaching institutes to take a larger role in fostering and enhancing communication between mentors and student teachers while also providing on-going support to mentors while in the practicum process (Bradbury & Koballa Jr., 2008). Bradbury & Koballa Jr. (2008) explored the tensions between two pairs of mentor student teachers using border crossing as a theoretical framework. In this study, tension is defined as a strain or source of anxiety in the relationship. Border crossing framework involves a negotiation channel of transitions and expectations between mentors and the student teachers in order to develop a successful working relationship. This study revealed that the tensions between mentors and student teachers include different perceptions of mentoring, difficulty in communication and relationship development and different beliefs in teaching.

Conderman et al. (2005) surveyed faculty members of special education programme from 100 institutions in the United States of which one of the surveyed areas included supervision practices. The authors reported that between 94% and 98% of special education University supervisors provide feedback either verbally or written to their student teachers (i.e. PSSE teachers). Further, that 80% of University supervisors made four visits for student teachers on a quarter system while 33% and 28% made four and six visits to student teachers on a semester system respectively. The duration of the visits varied for supervisors as well. For example, 60% of each visit lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, 32% of each visit lasted for 30 minutes or less, 6% of each visit lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and 2% of each visit lasted for over 90 minutes (Conderman et al., 2005). When the respondents (i.e. PSSE teachers) were asked to specify what were the most student teaching challenges, the top three most frequent responses were getting appropriate and adequate resources in terms of time, travel and other university resources (Respondents: 29%), selecting and retaining qualified cooperating teachers who shared same teaching philosophy of teacher preparation programme (Respondents: 25%) and finding appropriate teaching placements for student teachers (Respondents: 19%, Conderman et al., 2005). Finding appropriate teaching placements was especially an important factor influencing the learning experiences during SET practicum (Conderman et al., 2005). Although not part of the most significant factors, 7% of faculty members of special education programme of various institutions indicated that the student teachers (i.e. PSSE teachers) themselves were the greatest teaching challenge. The PSSE teachers were socially and emotionally unprepared to teach and had the impression that they would receive an A grade from their mentors or that they would be posted out to schools in their home districts for SET practicum (Conderman et al., 2005).

Lewis, Hatcher and William (2005) study investigated 263 pre-doctoral psychology graduate students through a survey on their practicum experience. The study highlighted problems in communication between practicum sites and education programme taken by student teachers and that they hoped to have

more information about the practicum. Similarly, Tarquin and Truscott (2006) surveyed a national sample of 139 school psychology students to better understand their practicum experiences. Although these students were generally satisfied with their practicum experiences and their supervisors, many knew little about the whole range of activities which they were supposed to do after they graduated. The authors suggested that training should be provided to supervisors to set clear expectations to provide appropriate activities for practicum students and to ensure that practicum students be exposed to a range of potential professional functions. In addition, supervisors should understand the importance of modelling as these practicum students may look to them as role models. Thus, supervisors should also be aware of the specific strategies they can use to provide support, feedback, and apprentice-type learning opportunities.

Caires and Almeida (2007) explored the student teachers' perception about their practicum. Specifically, Caires and Almeida (2007) conducted a survey based on the reflections of 224 student teachers about their cooperative teacher's and university supervisor's performance. Generally, the study concluded the way supervisors interacted with their supervisors in terms of involvement, proximity, respect and support contributed to a positive practicum experience. Further, the study also emphasized that the university supervisors' interpersonal skills was crucial to the student teachers' positive practicum experiences. Rajuan, Beijard & Verloop (2008) study involving 10 cooperating teachers and 20 undergraduate student teachers of an Israeli academic teachers' college reported that student teachers can learn about personal characteristics essential for creating positive teacher-pupil relationships through the interpersonal relationships between student teachers and cooperating teachers. In general, student teachers viewed the practicum experience as the most significant aspect of learning to teach of which they regarded the relationship with their cooperating teachers as the most important part of the fieldwork experience. In another words, the supervisory relationships are important to the personal and professional development of the prospective teachers (Caires & Almeida, 2007). A view shared by other researchers (Rajuan, et al., 2008).

#### The Practicum Process for Pre-Service Special School Teachers (PSSE) in the 1990s to 2004

In the past, the PSSE teachers in special schools underwent a two-year part-time Diploma in Special Education (DISE) at the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore's teacher training hub for all teachers in both mainstream and special schools. At the time, the training involved two teaching practicums over a two-year period, Teaching practicum I (TP I) – which was seven weeks and Teaching Practicum II (TP II) – over a ten-week period. During both TP I and TP II, the PSSE teachers returned to their respective special schools that sponsored their teaching training for their SET practicum experience (Quah & Jones, 1996). The processes for TP I and TP II required a strong partnership between the NIE, the School and the PSSE teachers in training. The TP I was equated to that of the handholding session in which the teachers learned about the school environment, the pupils in the class, the culture of the school (the administrative processes) while observing other teachers in classrooms and learning to prepare and deliver lessons. The uniqueness of the special schools was that most of the PSSE teachers were experienced in working with pupils with special needs without formal training as they had on-the-job training and or *in-house* training. Anecdotal observations indicated that in the years from 1990 to 2004, majority of the PSSE teachers had at least three years and up to ten years of formal teaching in special schools.

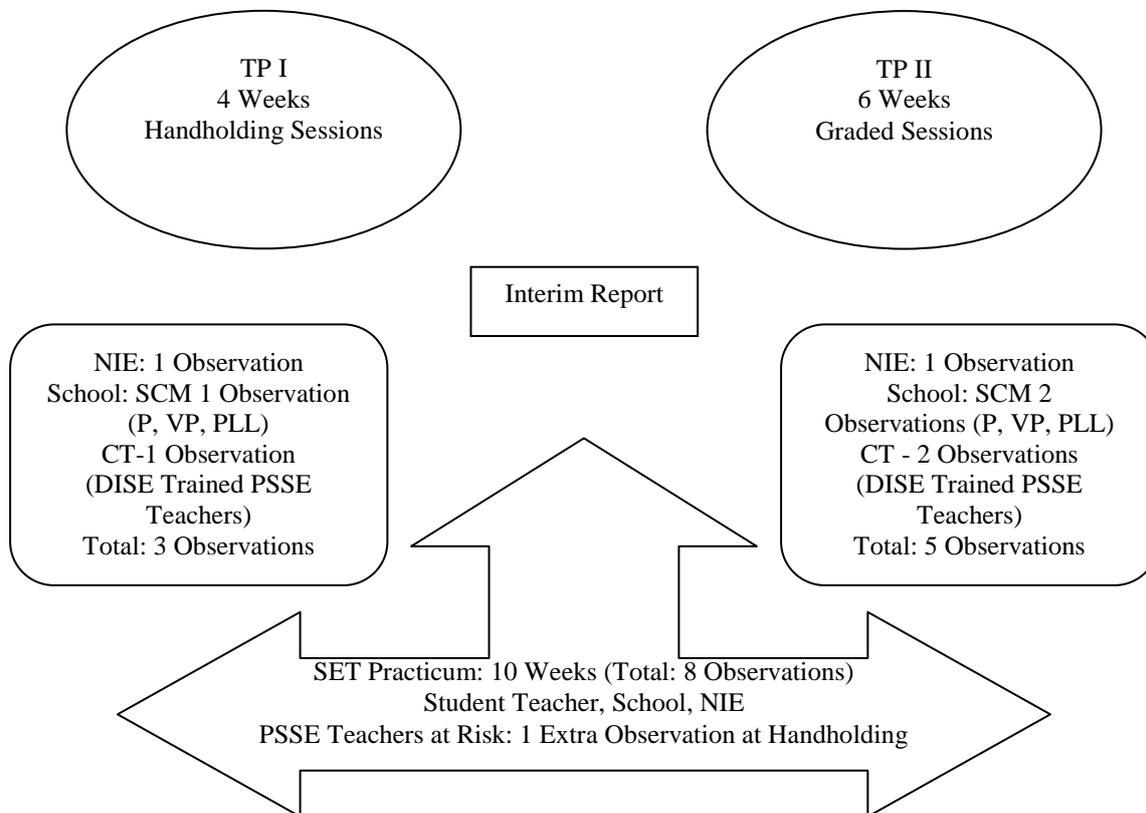
Consequently, while the initial TP I allowed the PSSE teachers the time to *get to know their special school*, majority of the PSSE teachers were well established in their schools. The PSSE teachers were observed in both TP I and TP II but TP II carried a greater weight on the final grade and which the PSSE teachers had to pass in order to graduate as fully-trained special education teachers (Quah & Jones, 1996). The TP I handholding session served as a means of identifying and counseling the PSSE teachers at risk whereby measures were taken to assist them further into TP II. Further, it was at TP I where the PSSE teachers' negative attitudes would also be addressed with the PSSE teachers prior to the TP II. In the more serious cases, the PSSE teachers would be recommended to repeat the TP I.

#### The New Practicum Process for Pre-Service Special School Teachers (PSSE) from 2005 to Present

Beginning in 2003, a taskforce was formed within the NIE, Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group (ECSEAG) to review the DISE programme for PSSE teachers in training. The taskforce recommended changes for the two-year part-time DISE to be reduced to a one-year full-time programme for the DISE. Inclusive in this change was the SET Practicum process which would be aligned to that of pre-service teachers in mainstream teacher training. With the two-year part-time compressed into a one year, the SET practicum was compacted to a ten-week practicum. Unlike the

earlier TP process, TP I and TP II which comprised of a total of 17 weeks (spread over the two years) was now a ten-week SET practicum (see Figure 1). The PSSE teachers completed all their courses in the DISE prior to the SET Practicum. The *new* SET practicum for special schools comprised of the School Coordinating Mentor (SCM) and the Cooperating Teacher (CT) and the University Supervisors. The Principal (P), Vice-Principal (VP) and or Programme Level Leader (PLL) could be the SCM in the schools while the teacher working with the PSSE teacher on a day-to-day basis in classroom planning and delivery of lessons and co-teaching was usually the CT.

Given that both *handholding* and *graded* SET Practicum was compressed into one ten-week period, the rationale was to have *handholding* session within the new ten-week SET Practicum for special schools. The process of ten-week SET practicum for the PSSE teachers was further divided into TP I and TP II. In TP I, the SCM, CT and University Supervisors had to complete one observation each within the first four weeks of the start of the practicum with the submission of a Summary Interim report (see Figure 1). However, in cases where there were weak PSSE teachers, an additional observation could be done after discussions between all partners in the process. The Interim Report is unique to the SET practicum process and transparent to the PSSE teachers involved in the process prior to entry to the second phase of the TP II. The Interim Report would highlight a summary of the either a PSSE teacher at risk of failing and or with a negative attitude towards teaching and or a potential A grader in the SET practicum.



**Figure 1. SET Practicum Process for Special Schools**

Specific guidelines would be written in the Interim Report and made known to the student teacher in preparation for the TP II. For example, where a PSSE teacher has been performing extremely well and where both the school and the University supervisor were in agreement that the PSSE teacher was observed to be consistently performing at a high level which would be highlighted in the interim report. The expectations required for a *potential A* grade would be discussed with the University supervisor and the School. This interim process would give the PSSE teacher a clear and guided opportunity to view the expectations towards a potential A grade in the TP II. The TP II comprised of the remaining six weeks in which the SCM completed two observations, the CT had two observations and the University supervisor had one observations adding to a total of five out of eight observations for this period (see Figure 1). In the event that the school and the University supervisor unanimously agreed after completing the total of

eight observations, that the PSSE teacher was either a fail or an A grade then an independent observation would be done by a moderator from the University.

Given the importance of practicum to PSSE teachers' learning experiences and the change in the SET practicum process for special education teachers in Singapore, this study focused on the following questions raised as a result of the change to the SET practicum for special schools during the ten-week SET practicum in their respective schools. These included:

1. What were the PSSE teachers' experiences during the SET Practicum?
2. From the PSSE teachers' perspectives, was the *new* process in-place and understood by all those involved in the SET Practicum?
3. What were the factors that helped the PSSE teachers have a positive experience during SET Practicum? And what were not?
4. What were the difficulties faced by the PSSE teachers during the SET practicum?
5. What would the PSSE teachers like to see more of in the SET Practicum?

## Method

### *Participants*

The total cohort of PSSE teachers enrolled in the Diploma in Special Education (DISE) participated in the study ( $N= 33$ ; Male =3, Female = 30;  $M$  Age = 30.8 years old, Age Range = 23 – 44 years old). The PSSE teachers completed their ten-week special education teaching (SET) practicum as partial fulfillment of the DISE. On average, the PSSE teacher's teaching experience ranged between four months and seven years, five months (Mean Years in Teaching Special Education = two years, ten months).

### *Test Instrument and Training of the PSSE Teachers, School and University Supervisors*

A 4-point Likert scale which included two sections: Section (A) PSSE Teachers' Response to the Experience of SET Practicum to their Learning Experience (16 items) and Section (B) PSSE Teachers' Response to the process of the SET Practicum (15 items) was used in this study. In addition, in Section A, where the PSSE teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement *I enjoyed my teaching practicum*, they were asked to elaborate what made their experience enjoyable. However, where there was disagreement with the same statement, they were to provide reasons for their responses. In the event that the PSSE teachers provided two responses to an item question, their response was coded as *unsure*. The survey also asked the PSSE teachers to write about the three most important difficulties they faced and three most important changes they would like to see take place in the SET practicum process.

All PSSE teachers, school and University supervisors were briefed about the new SET practicum process prior to the start of SET practicum. During the briefings, the first author encouraged discussion of potential problems based on past experiences in relation to the new SET practicum process. In addition, PSSE teachers, school and University supervisors could revert back to the first author to make further clarifications of the new process throughout the ten-week SET practicum.

### *Administration of the Survey Instrument*

The PSSE teachers completed a survey at the National Institute of Education (NIE) the week following the completion of their SET practicum experience in special schools. The PSSE teachers took 30 minutes to complete the survey and they could opt out of the survey participation if they choose to.

### *Data Reduction and Analysis*

Initial and Overarching Themes were formed from the raw data collected (Barber & Turner, 2007). Specifically, from the Overarching Theme in Section A – *PSSE teachers' response on the Experience of SET Practicum to their Learning Experiences during Practicum*, the responses to the five questions (Questions 5, 7, 9, 10 and 15) formed the theme *Understanding Child's Needs*. The responses from the questions 1 through to 4, 6 and 11 through to 14 and 16 formed the theme *Classroom and School Related Matters*. For the overarching theme in Section B – *PSSE teachers' response to the Process of SET Practicum* in Section B, the four themes included were (1) School & Supervisors' Understanding of the Practicum Process (Questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 7); (2) Conveying Correct Information about the Practicum Process (Questions 4, 6, 8); (3) Support from School and University (Questions 9, 11, 13) and (4) Rapport with Teacher (Questions 10, 12, 14, 15). The percentage frequency of responses were calculated for each item and based on the total sample of 33 participants.

## Results & Discussion

### *The PSSE teachers' learning experience during SET practicum*

The overall findings indicate that the PSSE teachers had positive experiences (see Table 1). These positive experiences were reflected in the themes of *Understanding Child's Needs* and *Classroom and School Related Matters*. For example, about 91% of the PSSE teachers felt that the SET practicum had helped them better understand the educational needs of their pupils (see Table 1). In addition, the PSSE teachers agreed that with the SET practicum they were able to identify problems that pupils faced in class and had helped them developed a better understanding of pupils' social needs (88% respectively; see Table 1). A component of understanding their pupils in special education is essential in developing student teachers Individual Educational Plans (IEP) which would affect the delivery of the lessons. Cameron et al. (2007) highlighted that teachers in their study were stressed when they could not focus on the teaching when they had to attend to pupils' behavioral problems during teaching practicum.

In relation to the theme of *Classroom and School Related Matters*, the SET practicum provided the PSSE teachers a link between theory and practice in classrooms, real situations and provided hands-on experience (91%, 88% & 91% respectively; see Table 1). The PSSE teachers were positive as they could try out different teaching strategies and reflect on the delivery of their lessons (91% & 88% respectively; see Table 1). Further, the majority of the PSSE teachers found the SET practicum helped them to understand Diagnostic Summaries and Individual Educational Plans (IEP) and to write and improve their lesson plans (see Table 1). A small percentage of the PSSE teachers disagreed that the SET practicum helped them understand their school culture (30%; see Table 1).

Although the majority of PSSE teachers indicated that they enjoyed the SET practicum, their reasons varied. They also felt that their supervisors both within the school and the University understood the process of the SET practicum. Supervisors conveyed the correct process to the PSSE teachers during the SET practicum.

**Table 1**

**Percentages of teachers' responses of SET Practicum and their learning experience (N=33)**

Question	Strongly Disagree & Disagree % (n)	Strongly Agree & Agree % (n)	Unsure % (n)	No Response % (n)
<u>Understanding Child's Needs</u>				
1. The practicum helped me to identify problems that my pupils faced in class (qs 5)	12.1 (4)	87.9 (29)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
2. The practicum gave me an insight into teaching children with special needs on a daily basis (qs 7)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
3. The practicum helped me better understand the educational needs of my pupils (qs 9)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
4. The practicum gave me insights into the needs of the family's of my pupils (qs 10)	39.4 (13)	60.6 (20)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
5. The practicum helped me developed a better understanding of my pupils' social needs (qs 15)	12.1 (4)	87.9 (29)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
<u>Classroom and School Related Matters</u>				
1. The practicum provided a link between theory and practice in a classroom (qs 1)	6.1 (2)	90.9 (30)	3.0 (1)	0.0 (0)
2. The practicum experience help me to translate theory to practice in a real situation (qs 2)	9.1 (3)	87.9 (29)	3.0 (1)	0.0 (0)
3. The practicum gave me the hands-on experience I needed in my field (qs 3)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
4. The practicum helped me to try out different strategies in teaching (qs 4)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)

5. The practicum gave me time to reflect on my lesson delivery (qs 6)	12.1 (4)	87.9 (29)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
6. The practicum gave me a picture of what a special education teacher's life is like on a daily basis in school (qs 8)	21.2 (7)	78.8 (26)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
7. The practicum helped me understand Diagnostic Summaries (qs 11)	15.2 (5)	84.8 (28)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
8. The practicum helped me understand Individual Educational Plans (qs 12)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
9. The practicum helped me understand how to write lesson plans (qs 13)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
10. The practicum helped me improve on writing my lesson plans (qs 14)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
11. The practicum helped me with understanding my school culture (qs 16)	30.3 (10)	69.7 (23)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)

*The PSSE Teachers' Perspectives of the new process of SET Practicum in-place*

The percentages of PSSE teachers' responses in relation to school and supervisors' understanding of the new SET practicum process were generally positive (see Table 2). For example, the PSSE teachers felt that the school's supervisors and cooperating teachers and the University's supervisor understood and conveyed the correct process of teaching practicum to them (Percentage Range of Responses: 82% - 94%; see Table 2). This result suggests the importance of the support that the PSSE teachers need from both the school and the University during the practicum which has been supported in other studies (Hastings & Squires, 2002; Lee et al., 2000; Rajuan et al., 2008). The results showed a marginally larger percentage of the PSSE teachers understood the SET practicum better when they experienced it in schools than when they were briefed during lectures (Percentage Difference: 91% & 82%; see Table 2).

The PSSE Teachers responded that they their supervisors both at the school and the University gave good support throughout their SET practicum experience (see Table 2). Where the rapport between the PSSE Teachers and their respective supervisors were concerned, an average of 90% had good rapport. However, by comparison, although still a large percentage, 70% indicated they enjoyed their SET practicum experience. Others studies support the positive relationship that the PSSE teachers have with their mentors and supervisors influence the learning experience of student teachers during practicum (Boz & Boz 2006; Caires & Almeida, 2007; Conderman et al., 2005; Lewis et al., 2005; Roehrig et al., 2008). Based on the findings, it is suggested that careful consideration must be given when matching supervisors both at the schools and the University and the PSSE teachers. The authors in this study would go a step further to suggest that potential school and University supervisors have opportunities to meet to discuss supervisory roles prior to confirmation of supervisors. This would give both supervisors and PSSE teachers a chance to select whom they could best work with during the SET practicum.

**Table 2**  
**Percentages of PSSE teachers' responses of the process of SET Practicum (N=33)**

Question	Strongly Disagree & Disagree % (n)	Strongly Agree & Agree % (n)	Unsure % (n)	No Response % (n)
<b>School &amp; Supervisors' Understanding of the TP Process</b>				
1. I understood the process of practicum when I was briefed during lectures (qs 1)	18.2 (6)	81.8 (27)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
2. I understood the process of practicum when I experienced it in schools (qs 2)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
3. My school's Cooperating Teacher understood the process of practicum (qs 3)	9.1 (3)	87.9 (29)	0.0 (0)	3.0 (1)
4. My school Supervisors understood the process of practicum (qs 5)	6.1 (2)	93.9 (31)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
5. My University Supervisor understood the process of practicum (qs 7)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)

Conveying Correct Information about the TP Process

1. My school's Cooperating Teacher conveyed the correct process of practicum to me (qs 4)	12.1 (4)	87.9 (29)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
2. My school Supervisors conveyed the process of practicum to me (qs 6)	18.2 (6)	81.8 (27)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
3. My University Supervisor conveyed the process of practicum to me (qs 8)	15.2 (5)	81.8 (27)	0.0 (0)	3.0 (1)

Support from School and University

1. My Cooperating Teacher provided good support (qs 9)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
2. My University Supervisor provided good support (qs 11)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
3. My school Supervisor provided good support (qs 13)	6.1 (2)	93.9 (31)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)

Rapport with Teacher

1. My Cooperating Teacher and I had good rapport (qs 10)	9.1 (3)	90.9 (30)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
2. My University Supervisor and I had good rapport (qs 12)	6.1 (2)	93.9 (31)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
3. My school Supervisor and I had good rapport (qs 14)	6.1 (2)	93.9 (31)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)
4. I enjoyed my teaching practicum* (qs 15)	21.2 (7)	69.7 (23)	6.1 (2)	3.0 (1)

*Factors that helped the PSSE teachers have a positive experience during SET Practicum*

The PSSE teachers wrote that they enjoyed their SET practicum experience when their supervisors supported them with good techniques and strategies in organising and delivering their lessons (see Table 3). The PSSE teachers were also receptive to constructive feedback from both their school and the University supervisors, a finding supported elsewhere (Heppner, 1994). Cooperation, mentoring and rapport that the PSSE teachers received from their supervisors were also highlighted as reasons for teachers enjoying their practicum experience (see Table 3). Other studies conducted to investigate teaching practicum of pre-service teachers claim positive associations of their practicum experiences to factors such as having good relationships with their supervisors, support and guidance from supervisors (Boz & Boz, 2006; Caires & Ameida, 2007; Tarquin & Truscott, 2006).

**Table 3**  
**Top three most common responses as to why the PSSE teachers enjoyed TP (N = 33)**

\*If you Agree / Strongly Agree with *I enjoyed my teaching practicum*, tell us what made your experience enjoyable.

% (n)	
27.3 (9)	Provided me with good techniques and strategies in organizing and delivering lesson plans well
27.3 (9)	Obtained constructive feedback from both school and University supervisors to improve my lessons better
21.2 (7)	Received affirmative support such as cooperation, mentoring and rapport received from cooperating teacher, and both school and University supervisors

By contrast, the PSSE teachers who did not enjoy their SET practicum experience cited handling too much paperwork, feelings of stress as a result of being *watched*, *sticking to lesson plans* and *setting* too many objectives (presumably by the supervisors), and not having opportunities with their pupils before commencement of the practicum as reasons. Similarly, Toren and Iliyan (2008) reported that student teachers were stressed as a result of heavy workload during their teaching practicum. This study also showed that a small percentage highlighted that they received limited support from their CTs and schools which led them to have a less enjoyable SET practicum experience (see Table 4).

**Table 4**  
**Top three most common response as to why the PSSE teachers did not enjoy TP (N = 33)**

\*If you Disagree / Strongly Disagree with *I enjoyed my teaching practicum*, tell us what made your experience not enjoyable.

% (n)	
12.1 (4)	Needed to handle too much paperwork for Practicum.
9.1 (3)	Felt stressful during Practicum having being watched, sticking to lesson plan and setting too many objectives but not having enough opportunities with pupils beforehand.
9.1 (3)	Received limited support from school and cooperating teacher to prepare well for Practicum.

Teaching Practicum in Special Schools requires teachers to read, prepare and make sense of the diagnostic summaries of the pupils in their class. In many challenging pupil cases, the PSSE teachers need to discuss with school therapists and parents to get a better understanding of the needs of their pupils. Only after having a better understanding of their pupils, the PSSE teachers will be able to plan the IEPs and lesson plans effectively. Although a relatively small percentage of teachers (12.1%,  $n = 4$ ) were unhappy, it should not be ignored as we consider that the number of pupils and the type of disability could vary for each teacher. For example, schools may have as many as up to 16 pupils in a class which may be co-taught with a Teacher Aid or Teacher. To assist PSSE teachers with their workload, it is recommended that supervisors limit the number of pupils based on the level of support needs assigned to the PSSE teacher undergoing the SET practicum. Given that the results showed that 9% ( $n = 3$ ) were stressed when observed (*being watched & sticking to lesson plans*), the authors recommend that the supervisors convey a feeling of comfort and openness during the classroom observations with the PSSE teachers. The research suggests that when beginner teachers experienced openness with their supervisor and or mentors, it helped them in their practicum experience (Evertson & Smithey, 2000). Rapport with teachers is critical to set the pace and the atmosphere of the teaching practice. The results indicated that overall, the PSSE teachers had good rapport with their supervisors.

*Difficulties that the PSSE teachers faced during their SET Practicum*

The PSSE teachers responded that time to both observe their pupils and also develop an understanding of pupils' educational needs in order to prepare for the appropriate lessons plans was a challenge for them during the SET practicum. In addition, it was difficult for the PSSE teachers to handle pupils who were uncooperative or had diverse educational needs. Of interest, some 22% ( $n = 7$ ) responded that the transition from learning (at the NIE) to SET practicum was a difficult adjustment they had to make which influenced their SET practicum experience (see Table 5). Currently, the PSSE teachers complete their final year of courses in the DISE in Semester II over 6 weeks followed by the ten-week SET practicum attachment in Special Schools. This process has raised concerns about the difficulties that PSSE teachers faced in the transition from a full-time course into the Special School and which warrants further investigation.

**Table 5**  
**Top three difficulties faced by the PSSE teachers during their SET practicum (N = 33)**

Tell us about 3 difficulties you faced during the practicum

% (n)	
64.5 (20)	Inadequate time to observe pupils to know their educational needs and prepare appropriate lesson plans.
38.7 (12)	Challenge to handle pupils with diverse educational needs as well as uncooperative pupils as they were not used to being observed during Practicum.
22.6 (7)	Disorientation faced in transiting from learning to teaching (working) once returned from NIE to school

*Changes that the PSSE Teachers would like to see in new SET Practicum*

The PSSE teachers wanted pre-briefings on the expectations of the practicum prior to entering the schools while also allowing for informal observations of their delivery of lessons (57.6%,  $n = 19$ ; see

Table 6). In addition, the PSSE teachers required time to assess pupils' needs and prepare suitable lesson plans. They also asked for guidance and improved support from both the school and the University in terms of preparation of IEPs and other resources (see Table 6). While pre-briefings in reference to the practicum and preparation of lessons were part of the DISE course, the results suggests that it was not enough for the PSSE teachers and warrants further review. In addition, the overall findings suggests that a review of the SET practicum process in view of the importance of gelling theory with practical experiences within the programme for teacher preparation in Special Education, the authors propose a continuous SET practicum process (see Figure 2).

**Table 6**

**Top Three changes the PSSE teachers would like to see in 'new' SET practicum (N = 33)**

Tell us 3 things you would like to see take place during the practicum

% (n)	
57.6% (19)	Pre-briefings on the expectations of us and also allow informal observations as a discussion platform to give feedback or suggestion to reflect and improve.
41.9% (13)	More time to assess pupils' needs and prepare appropriate lesson plans.
35.4% (11)	Clearer guidance and better support from school as well as NIE in preparing IEP, lesson plans and other resources.

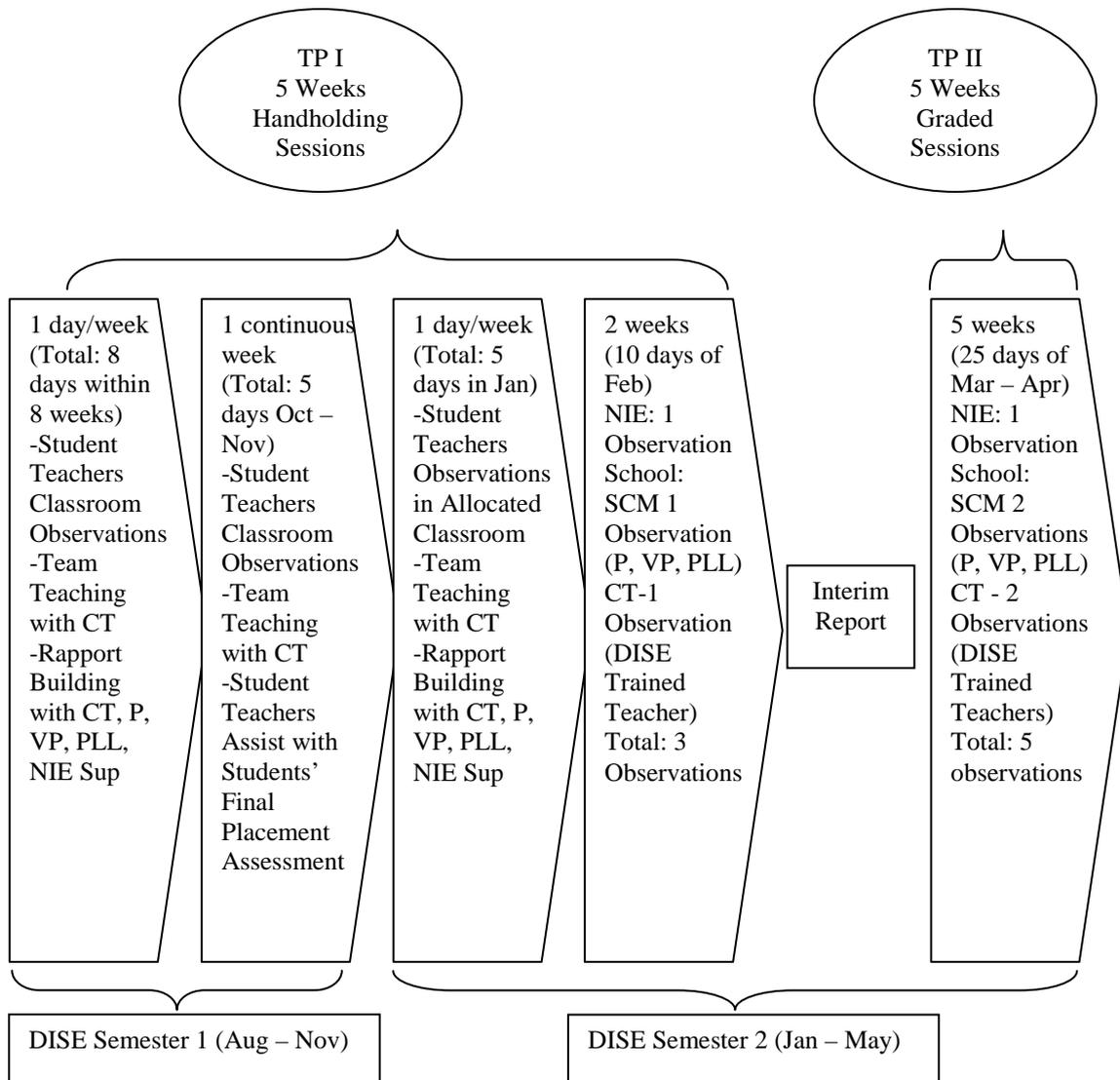
In reference to Figure 2, the revised SET practicum process for PSSE teachers should spread over the one year full-time DISE course instead of the current compacted 10 weeks. The PSSE teachers will have the opportunity to explore different classroom teaching with their respective CTs while also assisting with the assessment of pupils in the TP I. The PSSE teachers will then be able to observe and get to know their pupils in the class in the Special Schools which they helped assess. The PSSE teacher would then be able to know the pupils better and could also take this class in Semester 2 - TP I (see Figure 2). This process will assist schools to better match pupils, class and level type with the PSSE teacher and CTs thus reducing the stress of all those involved in the revised SET practicum. The PSSE teachers will be able to settle better into the revised SET practicum as they will be at their respective schools on a continuous basis through their training and not only at the end of their courses. It is hoped that this continuous practicum process will help diminish the stress of transition anxiety from a full-time course into SET practicum. In addition, given that the PSSE teachers will be in contact with their respective schools throughout their training, they will be able to share and discuss the problems in relation to observations made in the classrooms with their course mates, brainstorming on effective teaching strategies for classroom management in relation to different disabilities both at the school and University.

### Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that the majority of PSSE teachers had a positive experience during the *new* SET practicum. These positive experiences were related to the fact that they were better able to understand their pupils' needs, they were able to link what they learned in their courses to the SET practicum, they could write IEPs and deliver their lessons to the pupils and they had overall good rapport with both their school and University supervisors. The new process of practicum, as indicated by the PSSE teachers, was understood by all involved in the process and this was also conveyed clearly to the PSSE teachers during the ten-week SET practicum. The findings highlight the importance of a quality mentorship programme reported in other studies (Cameron et al., 2007; Conderman et al., 2006; Evertson & Smithey, 2000; Roehrig et al., 2008).

While the overall process was clearly understood by the school and University supervisors, the study showed that a small percentage of teachers were somewhat unhappy during their practicum. These PSSE teachers cited unhappiness due to stresses of being overloaded, being watched and having poor rapport while others as problems with understanding the needs of their pupils given that they had a very short time in the schools (8 observations within ten-week SET practicum). Williams and Gersch (2004) reported the lack of time to spend with individual student as one of the stressors experienced by SEN teachers in their studies. In this study, a small number of the PSSE teachers cited transition from the full-time course work at the NIE followed by the immediate ten-week SET practicum at the school was difficult for them.

In view of these challenges faced by the PSSE teachers and to enhance the quality of the PSSE practicum, the authors in this study recommend a continuous SET practicum experience throughout the 1-year full-time DISE course (see Figure 2). This continuous practicum will allow the PSSE teachers a better match with their supervisors in schools and classrooms while also reducing the stress faced in the current SET practicum as PSSE teachers will be able to better understand the needs of their pupils. In addition, given that the PSSE teachers would be in the school throughout the DISE course, better rapport could be built between the school, the school supervisors, pupils and the PSSE teachers. While recommendations to enhance the quality of the PSSE practicum are made, PSSE teachers may need to realize that occupational stress experienced by teachers is common as reported in other studies (Antoniou et al., 2009; Boyle et al., 1995; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Forlin, 2001; Hui & Chan, 1996; Schonfeld, 2001). It is further suggested that educators could use the practicum experience to prepare PSSE teachers cope with the challenges encountered in real classroom settings.



**Figure 2. Revised SET Practicum Process for Special Schools.**

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