

Policy Brief

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A Call for Action: Practicum Placement in Diverse Contexts as a Measure to Prepare Pre-service Teachers for Inclusive Classrooms



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The Issue

The increase in diversity of learners, including those with special needs, socioeconomic, linguistic, gender, ethnic minorities has informed the importance of integrating pedagogic responsiveness to diversity in pre-service teacher education programs^{1 2}. In contexts like the USA, co-teaching arrangements between general teachers and those with expertise in special needs education work together, sharing responsibilities for planning, delivery and assessment of learners³. Through co-teaching, students with additional learning needs remain in regular classrooms and gain access to both mainstream as well as specialized teaching and learning. However, this remains elusive in resource-constrained contexts especially in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), given budgetary and infrastructural limitations. Practicum placement of student teachers in diverse contexts provides an opportunity for them to gain inclusive pedagogical skills⁴, especially in developing contexts such as SSA, where resource limitations necessitate that general classroom teachers provide access to learning for all learners in the class, without the support of special education specialists. South Africa's teacher education policy for example, requires pre-service teachers to be exposed to wide-ranging and dissimilar contexts of schooling to learn to teach inclusively⁵. Indeed, studies from South Africa have confirmed that indeed, practicum placements in diverse contexts support the preparation of student teachers for inclusive education⁶.

The evidence as regards the efficacy of practicum placement of pre-service teachers in diverse contexts was generated from a systematic literature review informed by 65 research papers. While the review revealed four other effective approaches (school-based mentorship; communities of practice; peer-observation of teaching; reflexive practice) towards shaping successful practicum teacher professional development (TPD) in SSA, practicum placement in diverse contexts was particularly efficacious in inculcating pre-service teacher competences for inclusive classrooms. The findings of the systematic

¹ Black-Hawkins, K., & Florian, L. (2012). Classroom teachers' craft knowledge of their inclusive practice. *Teachers and Teaching*, 18, 567-584.

² Florian, L. (2015). Inclusive pedagogy: A transformative approach to individual difference but can it help reduce educational inequalities? . *Scottish Educational Review*, 47, 2-14.

³ Solis, M., Vaughn, S., Swanson, E., & Mcculley, L. (2012). Collaborative models of instruction: The empirical foundations of inclusion and co-teaching. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 498-510.

⁴ Beylefeld, A., & Le Roux, A. (2015). Guided group reflections of first-year pre-service teachers: Moving beyond the rhetoric of "go and reflect". *Perspectives in Education*, 33(3), 1-19.

⁵ Rusznyak, L., & Walton, E. (2017). Could practicum placements in contrasting contexts support the preparation of pre-service teachers for an envisaged inclusive education system? A South African study. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 64(5), 463-482.

⁶ Walton, E., & Rusznyak, L. (2014). Affordances and limitations of a special school practicum as a means to prepare pre-service teachers for inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8(9), 957-974.

review are documented in a report titled ‘Modeling Practicum-based Teacher Professional Development Programs in Africa and Moving them to Scale’ [link].

A Call to Action

This policy brief message is intended for policy makers and organizations interested in the promotion of inclusive education, including international and national development actors who support education research, programming, and financing across Africa. The brief presents high-level findings followed by practical policy messages and ends with a conclusion.

Lessons from the Systematic Literature Review on Practicum Placement of Pre-service Teachers in Diverse Contexts

We summarise the key findings from the systematic review, with a focus on the strengths of Practicum Placement of Pre-service Teachers in Diverse Contexts as a viable measure for preparing them for inclusive classrooms.

Understanding of learners’ special needs

Studies confirmed that pre-service teachers gained an understanding of learning difficulties, including those related to disabilities, which they had previously had little or no previous experience, given their limited contact with students with disabilities.

Empathy and sensitivity for learners with special needs

The student teachers also demonstrated awareness and sensitivity toward disability and special needs, and, gained the capacity not only to recount the types and relative severity of disabilities, but also identify children with learning disabilities and engage them appropriately.

Pedagogical responsiveness for inclusive classrooms

Practicum placement in contrasting rural and urban schools prompted pre-service teachers’ consideration of the pedagogical implications of student diversity. Student teachers were more convinced of the feasibility of inclusive education by building support into their overall planning.

Consciousness towards exclusionary and/or marginalizing practices

Pre-service teachers became more attentive towards exclusionary and/or marginalizing practices in both special and mainstream schools, strengthening their resolve to teach inclusively. Indeed, the level of knowledge and feelings of self-efficacy were highest among pre-service teachers who had had the experience of supporting children with special education needs during their practicum.

Aspirations for collaboration, research, and continuous professional development

Practicum placement in special schools motivated pre-service teachers’ aspirations for collaboration and continuous professional development, particularly in relation to research and capacity development in inclusive education. This promises to develop the field of inclusive education.

Openness to possibilities for future deployment in disadvantaged locations

Teacher deployment and/or placements in rural and disadvantaged schools remains problematic in SSA as teachers especially women often resist such placements refusing to accept them or transferring to preferred locations. Student teachers generally showed preference for placement in schools with specific quality of life factors such as access to water, transport, mobile phone networks, electricity, and adequate teacher accommodation. The higher likelihood of female rejection of rural placements, which has implications as regards the presence of female role models in such locations, can be addressed through this approach.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

- Pre-service teacher training programs should ensure the enhancement of capacity to address barriers to learning and support all learners especially those with special needs and vulnerabilities.
- Pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive education should include practicum placement in diverse schools, as part of the training towards inclusive education.
- Pre-service teachers, especially the women as well as those with vulnerabilities such as disabilities, should be incentivised to facilitate their practice in diverse contexts, especially remote and/or hard-to reach resource-constrained settings.
- Support teacher training institutions and pre-service teachers to access special education institutions to gain experience in working with diverse learners.
- Invest in formal partnerships and working arrangements between teacher training institutions and schools of practice that have the capacity to support the fostering inclusive pedagogies through engagements with diverse learners.

Conclusion

Practicum placement of pre-service teachers in diverse contexts as a measure to foster pedagogical competences that leave no child behind, is aligned to the right to quality and inclusive education as articulated in global, continental, and regional policy frameworks, including the African Union's Agenda 2063, the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (2016–2025), and the Sustainable Development Goals, among others. It is also specifically anchored in policies such as the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994), which proclaims every child's right to basic education and maintains that all children, including those with disabilities, should learn together while their diverse learning needs are accommodated through the provision of appropriate support.

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