

Policy Statement regarding Practicum

(Approved January 12, 2021)

1 Introduction

To be able to practise safely, competently and professionally, prospective registered early childhood educators (RECEs) must acquire direct experience of practising the profession of early childhood education. Most often, prospective RECEs acquire such experience through practicum placements completed during their post-secondary studies of early childhood education.

1.1 Purpose

The College of Early Childhood Educators' (College's) mandate includes developing, establishing and maintaining qualifications for membership, approving programs for the purposes of the education requirement for registration and accrediting post-secondary programs in early childhood education. As part of this mandate, the College may make recommendations to stakeholders such as government and post-secondary institutions regarding the qualifications that individuals must meet to practise safely, competently and professionally in the public interest.

This policy statement outlines the College's definition of practicum and expectations of post-secondary programs in early childhood education with respect to their practicum requirements.

1.2 Context

Diploma programs in early childhood education offered by Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs) are required to adhere to a program standard set by the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU).¹ MCU's program standard identifies the vocational learning outcomes, essential employability skills and general education requirements that students of the diploma program are expected to achieve by the time of graduation from the program. CAATs have autonomy to design, develop and implement curriculum, so that students are enabled to achieve the vocational learning outcomes, essential employability skills and general education requirements set out in the program standard. To date, all early childhood education diploma programs offered by CAATs are designed with a combination of theory (i.e., courses) and application (i.e., field practicum) elements.

The *Policy Statement regarding Practicum* is intended to provide post-secondary programs with guidance about expectations for practicum. It also gives guidance to College staff when assessing applicants' practicum under the individual assessment of educational qualifications

¹ At the time of developing this policy statement, the most recent program standard for early childhood education diploma programs was issued in November 2018 and was available at <http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/audiences/colleges/progstan/humserv/51211-early-childhood-education.pdf>.

process² and when assessing programs' approach and requirements for practicum for the purposes of being approved by the College.³

2 What practicum is

Practicum is the learning and development of competencies for a profession through direct practice in the field. Focus is on the individual as a student learning how to practise the profession. The individual is developing the competencies to practise a profession and learns through direct observation and direct, supervised and mentored practice.

Practicum is designed as a formal course for credit in a post-secondary program. Practicum is intended as an opportunity for students to apply theoretical knowledge that they acquire into practice and develop the skills needed in order to practise the profession. Students are to engage in critical reflection on their practice and consolidate their knowledge of theory with the skills they develop in practice.

3 What practicum is not

There are other types of circumstances where individuals apply theory in practice and acquire experience practising a profession. These other types of circumstances, however, are different from practicum in significant ways, as outlined in the table on the following pages.

² At the time of developing this policy statement, the policy guiding the individual assessment of educational qualifications process was available at https://www.college-ece.ca/en/Documents/Policy_regarding_Assessment_of_Educational_Qualifications_of_Applicants.pdf.

³ At the time of developing this policy statement, the policy guiding the approval of education programs was available at https://www.college-ece.ca/en/Documents/Approval_of_Education_Programs_Policy.pdf.

Table 1. Practicum in comparison to other types of practice experience

	Description	Purpose or focus	Role of individual	Form of assessment	Supervision and mentorship
Practicum	An individual is a student in a post-secondary program and as part of the program, completes field placements in order to learn the practice of a profession	To learn the skills to practise a profession by directly observing and engaging in supervised, mentored practice and to apply theoretical knowledge acquired in courses in practice Usually multiple placements are completed with the student undertaking progressive responsibilities according to the scope of practice for the profession	The individual is a student in a learner role	Assessment is mandatory Assessment is based on the learning objectives set for the placement by the post-secondary program A student's individual learning goals for the placement are determined by the student in collaboration with the faculty advisor for practicum and supervisor at the placement site	Mandatory The student is supervised and mentored by a fully qualified practitioner of the profession Supervision is mandatory because the student is not fully qualified to practise the profession independently
Apprenticeship	An individual is employed in a learning-on-the-job relationship for an established trade The individual must successfully complete the apprenticeship, in addition to in-class courses and other requirements, in order to be able to seek authority to practise the trade independently	To learn the skills to practise a trade by undertaking lengthy, continuous and direct supervised practice	The individual is an apprentice	Assessment is mandatory The apprentice's work and development of knowledge and skills is assessed according to established competencies for the trade	Mandatory The apprentice is supervised and mentored by a fully qualified practitioner of the trade Supervision is needed, because the apprentice is not fully qualified to practise the trade independently

	Description	Purpose or focus	Role of individual	Form of assessment	Supervision and mentorship
Internship <i>When the term is not used synonymously with practicum</i>	An individual has graduated from their post-secondary program and is employed in a junior position in order to acquire experience practising a certain profession	To acquire experiences practising a certain profession as a stepping stone that must be completed in order to practise in the field further and/or acquire full certification to practise a profession	While there is an element of learning, the individual is considered to have the theoretical knowledge and competencies to practice the profession at an entry level	Where internship is required for certification, assessment is set out by the regulatory body for the profession; requirements are grounded in the scope of practice, competencies, and code of ethics and standards of practice for the profession	Supervision is needed to attest that the intern demonstrates the competencies for safe, competent and professional practice of the profession Supervision is also needed where the intern does not have full certification to practise the profession independently
Paid employment	An individual is employed by an employer to perform a particular job	To provide services for pay	The individual has the competencies, skills and designation required for the role; they are not a student or learner in their role	As determined by the employer Assessment is based on the job description and organizational policies	As determined by the employer
Volunteer placement	An individual donates their time and services to an organization on a voluntary basis	To provide services on a voluntary basis There are no learning objectives and practice is not related to registration requirements for a profession or to meet post-secondary course requirements	The individual is a volunteer with the competencies, skills and designation required for the role as determined by the organization	Informal to no assessment Assessment is based on the volunteer position description and organizational policies	Supervision as determined by the organization

4 The importance of practicum in post-secondary programs

Early childhood education is a care- and relationship-based practice. The legislated scope of practice for the profession states that the practice of early childhood education is the “planning and delivery of inclusive play-based learning and care programs for children” and includes “the delivery of programs to children...; assessment of the programs and the progress of children in the programs; and communication with parents or persons with legal custody of the children in the programs in order to improve the development of children”.⁴ Ultimately, the practice of early childhood education serves to “promote the well-being and holistic development of children”.⁵

In order to be able to promote positive child development, RECEs must not only have the requisite theoretical knowledge, including knowledge of child development and curriculum and pedagogy for the early years, but they must also have the skills to apply that knowledge in practice.

Practicum is important, because it is the mechanism by which students develop and acquire experience of practising the profession. Students:

- learn how to apply the theoretical knowledge they acquire in courses to the dynamic and complex realities of actual practice;
- learn how to carry out the scope of practice of the profession with children of different age groups and in different practice settings;
- learn how to apply relevant jurisprudence in practice, which is critical for being able to practise in the public interest;⁶
- have opportunities to engage with families, RECEs, other staff and professionals;
- develop the critical thinking, ethical decision-making, judgment, problem solving, interpersonal collaboration, communication and conflict resolution skills that are essential for practising the profession;
- are exposed to the work of experienced RECEs and learn from them through direct observation and supervised and mentored practice; and
- are exposed to the different settings and roles in which RECEs practise, which helps them make decisions about how they want to shape their future career as RECEs.

Practicum is important, because it helps students make the transition from post-secondary education to actual practice as RECEs. Without opportunity to learn how to practise the profession, graduates of post-secondary programs would be ill-prepared to face the dynamic and complex environments in which RECEs work.

⁴ s. 2 of the *Early Childhood Educators, Act, 2007*.

⁵ s. 2 of the *Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007*.

⁶ Jurisprudence is the governance framework for the profession and includes laws, regulations, College by-laws and the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, duty-to-report, etc.

5 The College's minimum expectations for practicum

Post-secondary programs in early childhood education are expected to include practicum as a mandatory component for graduation.

How practicum courses are integrated into the curriculum is up to the individual program to determine.

The College, however, has minimum expectations for what practicum must consist of in order for students to apply theory and develop competencies and skills in practice. These expectations are outlined in this section.

Importantly, the expectations address both quantity and quality aspects of practicum. Standards for quantity ensure that students do acquire some amount of practice as part of their educational preparation for becoming an RECE. Standards for quality are aimed to provide students with quality-learning opportunities.

While these expectations lay a solid foundation for designing practicum, post-secondary programs are encouraged to go beyond these expectations for their practicum requirements.

5.1 Hours

The total amount of time that students spend in practicum is at least 500 hours. This is an absolute minimum and programs are expected to require students to complete more practicum hours.

Regardless of how programs integrate practicum courses into the curriculum, students must spend a total of 500 hours in practicum at minimum.

- This total number of hours is for the time students spend at placement sites completing practicum. It does not include time spent in seminars, tutorials, etc. that may be required to be completed in conjunction with practicum placements.

Depending on how practicum courses are designed within a program, practicum may be completed for blocks of time or spread out over a number of months. Students may or may not attend practicum on the same dates and times of the day. Decisions about these matters are between the student, program and placement site to negotiate and agree upon.

5.2 Supervision and mentorship

Students must be supervised and mentored by RECEs (i.e., members of the College in good standing).

5.2.1 Supervision and mentorship at placement sites

Programs must ensure that practicum placements are supervised and mentored appropriately. This means that one or more individuals at the specific placement site is/are responsible for the supervision and mentorship of the student for the duration of the placement. The individual who supervises the student may or may not be the same person who mentors the student; these arrangements will depend on the organizational structure and staffing complement of the placement site.

Because of the important link between theory and practice, individuals who supervise and/or mentor students must be RECEs in good standing with the College. RECEs are best positioned to mentor, guide and give constructive feedback to students about their practice and the development of their knowledge, skills and judgment for becoming an RECE. Importantly, RECEs provide an early childhood education lens to their assessment of the student and the feedback that they give. Their actions and decisions are grounded in knowledge and application of the College's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* for the profession.

In exceptional circumstances, it may not be possible or appropriate for a student to be supervised and mentored by an RECE. In these cases, it is expected that programs be able to demonstrate that they undertook reasonable efforts to have all students supervised and mentored by RECEs at the organization at which the practicum placement is being completed. If that is not possible, programs must arrange for the student to be mentored by an RECE outside the organization.

5.2.2 Supervision and mentorship by program faculty and staff

Faculty and staff of the program who are responsible for placing students in practicum and supporting students through the practicum experience also contribute to the supervision and mentorship of students. Therefore, it is also expected that faculty and staff who are responsible for practicum placements be RECEs in good standing with the College.

5.3 Settings

Programs must:

- offer practicum placements in a variety of settings that reflect the range and diversity of early childhood education practice settings, and
- require students to complete practicum placements at different sites.

RECEs work in a variety of settings. Examples of types of settings include:

- Licensed child care programs
- Home visitors for licensed home child care programs
- EarlyON centres
- Child development centres

- Government ministries or agencies involved in early learning and child care (federal, provincial or municipal)
- School boards (e.g., kindergarten programs)
- Provincial associations for the profession
- Immigrant and refugee services
- Social services organizations serving children (e.g., community living, Children’s Aid Societies, public health units and hospitals)
- Museums or art galleries that offer children’s programming
- Indigenous early learning and care programs

5.3.1 Programs must offer placements in a variety of settings

Programs are expected to expose students to the variety of settings in which RECEs work. While the majority of placements will occur in traditional practice settings (i.e., licensed child care programs and kindergarten classes), placements must also be offered in other types of practice settings (such as those listed above).

Opportunities to provide placements in different settings will vary from community to community. They also depend on sites being willing and able to take on students for placements. Where diversity in placement settings is not possible, programs are expected to be able to explain why this is the case and demonstrate that they:

- undertook reasonable efforts to offer placements in different settings; and
- provided information to students about different practice settings through other means.

5.3.2 Students must complete their practicum at different sites

Programs are expected to require students to complete their practicum placements at different sites. This means that students are not to complete all of their practicum placements at the same site.

In exceptional circumstances, particularly in rural and remote regions, it may not be possible for students to complete their practicum placements at different sites. In these circumstances, programs may place the student at the same site, but are expected to undertake reasonable efforts to diversify the learning experience for the student.

5.4 Age groupings

Programs must:

- offer practicum placements among all three age groupings, and
- require students to have direct experience and contact with different age groupings through one or more of their practicum placements.

The early childhood education profession supports the learning and development of children 0-12 years of age. The College breaks down the age range into three sub-sets of age groupings.

- Infant/Toddler – 0 to 30 months
- Pre-school – 30 months to six years
- School age – 44 months to 13 years

5.4.1 Programs must offer practicum placements among all three age groupings

Programs are expected to offer practicum placements among all three age groupings.

- The exception to this is a post-secondary program stream or specialization that is specifically designed to address only a sub-set(s) of age groupings. For example, a program specifically designed for the infant/toddler grouping would only offer practicum placements that involve that group. Graduates of these programs who register with the College are subject to terms, conditions and limitations (TCLs) that restrict their practice to the specific age grouping.

Opportunities to provide placements among all three age groupings will vary from community to community. They also depend on sites being willing and able to take on students for placements. Where it is not possible to offer placements amongst all three age groupings, programs are expected to be able to explain why this is the case and demonstrate that they:

- undertook reasonable efforts to offer placements with different age groupings; and
- provided information to students about practising with other age groupings through other means.

5.4.2 Students must have direct experience with different age groupings

Students must be required to have direct experience and contact with different age groupings during their practicum. Students can acquire this experience in different ways.

In exceptional circumstances, particularly in rural and remote regions, it may not be possible for students to acquire experience with all three age groupings. For example, small, remote communities may not have infant/toddler care programs. In these circumstances, programs are expected to have students acquire experience with at least two of the three age groupings.

5.5 **Scope of practice**

Programs must require and ensure that the scope of duties that students carry out during practicum placements will relate to, and be consistent with, early childhood education practice.

In order to be ready for safe, competent and professional practice as an RECE upon successful completion of their program and registration with the College, students must have progressive responsibilities in their practicum placements building up to the full scope of practice for the profession of early childhood education.

5.5.1 Key experience to be acquired

Planning and implementing curriculum with children is critical experience to acquire during practicum placements. However, it is not the only experience that must be acquired.

The practice of early childhood education involves much more. For example, as part of their learning process, students must be expected to learn how:

- to practice and act in accordance with the College's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*;
- to plan, implement, document and assess child-centred inquiry and play-based learning programs in order to support children's growing interests and progress; and
- to engage with children's families and other stakeholders that RECEs interact with (e.g., other regulated professionals and representatives of community organizations).

Programs are expected to require students to acquire experience in all aspects of early childhood education practice. Students are ill-equipped for safe, competent and professional practice if upon graduation, they have not acquired experience that enables them to function according to the full scope of practice for the profession. Ultimately, children and families are at a disservice if new RECEs cannot perform to the full scope of practice.

5.5.2 Caveats to practising to the full scope of practice

There are important caveats to practising to the full scope of practice during a student's practicum placements. Notably:

- students cannot be left alone with a child or children;
- students cannot be counted as qualified staff for the purposes of ratios of qualified staff to children (e.g., in licensed child care programs). Students are completing a placement as a learning opportunity; their role is one of learning rather than one of ultimate accountability as an RECE. As learners, they are acquiring and developing the knowledge, skill and judgment to be able to practise the profession with full accountability; and
- students cannot be counted as unqualified staff for the purposes of ratios of staff to children (e.g., in licensed child care programs). It is a risk to children and quality of the practicum experience if students have dual roles of being a staff member with responsibility for supervision of children and being a student with responsibility for learning through observation, practice and reflection.

Other restrictions may apply under legislation for specific practice settings; these must also be adhered to as well.

In extremely rare circumstances, a student may be counted as unqualified staff for the purposes of ratios of staff to children (e.g., in licensed child care programs). In these circumstances, programs are expected to review such placements with utmost rigour, with consideration for factors including but not limited to:

- level of experience of the student;

- stage at which the practicum is being completed within the post-secondary program (e.g., placement completed during second semester versus the final semester of the entire program);
- nature of the duties of the student as a staff member counted in ratio;
- mechanisms and opportunities that the placement site will provide to support the individual's learning and mentorship as a student; and
- number of times that the student has completed a placement as a staff member counted in ratio.
 - It is expected that a student does not complete more than one placement while being a staff member counted in ratio. This ensures that the student acquires the full benefits of practice experience purely as a student.

5.6 Opportunity for reflection

Programs must design practicum, so that there are opportunities for students to reflect on their practice during their placement.

Professional learning and reflective practice are key components of the College's standards of practice for professionalism and leadership.⁷ As regulated professionals, a core responsibility of RECEs is to engage in continuous professional learning, including reflecting on one's practice.

Practicum is an opportunity for prospective RECEs to begin to develop the skills and appreciation for professional growth and development, self-reflection and the College's Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) program.

Programs are expected to support students with developing a reflective approach to their practice. Students must learn to reflect on how they practice the profession and how they integrate their knowledge of theory into their practice. Such reflection occurs during and outside of the practicum experience.

During the practicum experience, supervisors and mentors at placement sites should be expected to role model and support students with reflective practice in real-time, as appropriate for situations. In this way, students can co-reflect with RECEs about their observations and experiences regarding curriculum implementation, interactions with children, parents, families and colleagues, etc.

Outside of the practicum experience, students are to be expected to use their observations and experiences to reflect on the development of their knowledge and skills in practice. Because a reflective approach involves different methods, programs are expected to provide diverse opportunities for reflection.

⁷ See Standard IV of the College's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (2017), which is available at https://www.college-ece.ca/en/Documents/Code_and_Standards_2017.pdf.

5.7 Assessment and evaluation

Programs must design practicum so that students' performance is assessed and evaluated.

It is expected that programs have mechanisms in place to assess and evaluate students' performance for each practicum placement.

The way in which students' performance is assessed and evaluated is determined by programs individually.

However, there are several expectations for what assessments and evaluations entail.

- Students are to be assessed and evaluated during their practicum placements (preferably at the mid-point) in addition to at the conclusion of the placement experience. Students also require ongoing constructive feedback consistently throughout their practicum experience in order to learn, develop, improve and refine their knowledge and skills. Ongoing feedback also supports students in critically reflecting on their emerging practice skills.
- Expectations and learning outcomes must be established for each practicum placement, which are clear for students, as well as placement supervisors and mentors, in advance of the commencement of a practicum experience.
- Expectations and learning outcomes must relate to the scope of practice of the profession as appropriate for the stage at which the practicum is being completed within the post-secondary program (e.g., placement completed during second semester versus the final semester of the entire program).
- Students must be held accountable for meeting expectations and learning outcomes for the practicum placement appropriate for their level of program study.
 - Students who do not meet expectations or demonstrate learning outcomes in accordance with standards for assessment and evaluation criteria should not be given academic credit for that particular practicum experience. It is a disservice to students (e.g., lacks academic rigor, is not in line with quality assurance standards, etc.) and a risk to children and families if credit is awarded for practicum when there are reasonable, demonstrable concerns about the student's ability to practise the profession according to established expectations and learning outcomes.
 - In rare circumstances, incidents may arise where a student's performance is dangerous or egregious, placing children and families at serious risk of harm. Supervisors, mentors and faculty should ensure they comply with all reporting obligations.
- Faculty and/or post-secondary program staff responsible for coordinating and supervising practicum placements must be actively engaged in the learning experiences of students at all times. For example:

- they support students with connecting their experiences back to theory and positively reinforce students' growth in skills development.
- they must be prepared to support students in various circumstances, including when the practicum site is not the 'right fit' for a student's optimal learning and will therefore require re-assignment to an alternate site. They must also be prepared to advise students on duty-to-report protocols.
- Students are to be assessed and evaluated by faculty and their supervisors at the placement site.
 - Faculty and supervisors have complementary roles and responsibilities in the assessment and evaluation of students during practicum. Supervisors at placement sites provide insights about students' performance based on direct, first-hand observation of, and interaction with, students within the field placement setting. Faculty can complement supervisors' assessments with their own observations during visits to placement sites. Faculty also support supervisors and students with ensuring that actual practicum experiences provide students with opportunity to develop skills and demonstrate expectations and learning outcomes at the appropriate level.

5.8 Policies and quality assurance

Programs must develop and implement policies and/or guidelines that support quality assurance in the practicum component of the program.

Programs are expected to develop and implement policies and/or guidelines that support quality assurance in practicum placements. These must be provided to students, faculty, post-secondary program staff and placement site supervisors and mentors for review in advance of the commencement of a practicum experience.

Policies and/or guidelines are to address, but not be limited to, such topics as:

- requirements for eligibility to participate in practicum (including successful completion of prerequisite courses and submission of current clearance documents);
- selection, monitoring and evaluation of sites for practicum placements;
- selection and qualifications of practicum supervisors and mentors;
- tripartite roles and responsibilities of faculty advisors, practicum supervisors and mentors at placement sites, and students for before, during and after placements (e.g., maintaining confidentiality at all times and in all places);
- criteria for student assessment and evaluation;
- parameters, types and scheduling of practicum experiences;
- measures and protocols for students who may require modification and/or accommodation during practicum (e.g., reassignment to another site);

- processes to identify and remove barriers to full and effective participation in all types of practicum placements, especially those which may disproportionately affect students or groups of students based on the basis of grounds which are protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code;
- expectations of students and faculty advisors to review the practicum site's policies and procedures (e.g., health and safety, incident reports and duty-to-report protocols) prior to the commencement of placement;
- procedures for addressing complaints from placement sites about students; and
- procedures for supporting students and addressing complaints from students about placement sites, supervisors or mentors.

Additionally, programs must have mechanisms in place:

- to address and mitigate exceptional circumstances that may arise;
- to monitor and track the occurrence of exceptional circumstances if they arise, including documenting rationale for why the circumstances were unavoidable; and
- to evaluate and minimize the recurrence of exceptional circumstances over time.