
**PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE: REACTIONS, REFLECTIONS AND
TEACHER'S ROLE PERCEPTION**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the experiences, thoughts, emotions and reflections about practicum of the students of the School of History and Ethnology of the Democritus University of Thrace are recorded and discussed. The study conducted during the Spring Semester 2017-2018 with the participation of 49 pre-service secondary teachers, who taught at schools of Thrace during their pedagogical practicum. For research purposes, qualitative research was carried out and in particular an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This research was conducted in order to examine the candidate students' reactions and experience from their practicum in a constantly changing social and educational environment.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, practicum, teacher's role, professional development

1.0 CANDIDATE TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PRACTICUM

Since the end of the 20th century, the university departments that prepare the candidate primary and secondary education teachers have focused through appropriate reform and planning on organized pedagogical practicum programs. Practicum is also considered to be one of the most basic and fundamental elements for improving the (pre)professional role of pre-service teachers and for adopting their appropriate teaching practices and strategies. The efforts which are being attempted in this field focus on linking theory with teaching practice (Allen & Wright, 2014) and, at the same time, on the constructive cooperation of schools with the universities (Zeichner, 1992; Allen, 2011). Some of the multiple benefits of participating in practicum programs refer to time management, critical situation management in classrooms, critical decision-making, the selection of appropriate and innovative teaching methods (Wheatley, 2002). Practicum also has an impact on improving the communication skills of prospective teachers (discussion and collaboration with students and mentors), further professional motivation, stress reduction and job satisfaction (Goddard, Hoy & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2004).

The content of the practicum usually includes the observation made by prospective teachers in their own teaching and in the experience of collaborating with mentor teachers and teacher educators in a logic of apprenticeship and continuous enrichment of knowledge and strengthening their professional development. In such a context, pre-service teachers, during this process, applies to their teaching the knowledge they have acquired during undergraduate studies. In their teaching candidate, teachers make little use of the relevant theory regarding teaching under the traditional model. On the contrary, it is noted that prospective teachers, based on this model, teach on the basis of the strategies and practices of each teacher-mentor, with whom they cooperate (Ure, Gogh & Newton, 2009).

The modern view of the practicum is sifted from the above approach, criticizing the previous "isolated" and linear model. Based on this reformed model, practicum is research-based and argues that the teaching carried out by the prospective teachers is only the beginning of their professional career. Students-teachers in order to improve their educational practices should be involved in a constructive process of reflection, through the observation of teachings and reflection on their own teaching (Clarke, 1995). At this stage the role of mentoring is crucial, especially in other universities and not so much in Greece. What seems to be happening in practicum based on the new-model approach, is the preparation for future teaching in the context of the continuous reshaping of the modern teachers' professional identity.

Shön (1987) illustrates that practicum is a process by which pre-service teachers are actively involved and acquire knowledge of specific teaching techniques in order to be prepared for their career development. It is stated, more specifically, that the practicum is linked to self-regulation processes, and the university students are between the knowledge and skills they receive from the academic context and in real-world when asked to teach. Future teachers in this optics create a teaching plan on the basis of which they choose the appropriate methods and the necessary means of teaching, depending on the relevant educational circumstances (Shön, 1983).

In modern educational reality, teaching is characterized as a complex process which is "emotionally charged". As Hargreaves (1998) refers feelings are also taken into account in the teaching profession. In modern research, the issue of teachers' feelings is taken into account when they teach and for this reason, the feelings of prospective teachers are explored and discussed through their participation in teacher training programs (Hastings, 2004). The factor of feelings is important because it is often found that teachers' feelings of fear and anxiety, which contradict the "strong" position that the teachers must have in their classrooms (Jeffrey & Woods, 1996).

2.0 REFLECTION ON PRACTICUM

Practicum can also act as a challenge in cases where students from different cultural backgrounds, with special learning difficulties, mental disorders and with problems adapting to the school environment attend school. In these learning environments the role and contribution of the practicum and the effective preparation of candidate teachers based on modern requirements is considered even more imperative, in the light of so-called contextualized learning (Myles, Cheng & Wang, 2006).

One factor that is measured in professional development is the pre-service teachers' efficacy (Atay, 2009). The teachers' effectiveness seems to be closely linked to their sense of self-confidence, to their mobilization, to the introduction and support of innovations in education, to their enthusiasm during teaching, and to their teaching commitment (Gurvitch & Metzler, 2009). Teachers' sense of effectiveness can be further enhanced through up-to-date practicum programs and by attending courses in which the prospective teacher is actively involved in teaching, engaging with other fellow students, observing, simulating teachings and reflecting (Clift & Brady, 2005).

Bibliographically, great emphasis is placed on the so-called reflective model of practicum (Dobbins, 1996), under which the prospective teachers design, teach and evaluate in the light of the objectives they have set, in the context of an interactive process (Ottesen, 2007). Candidate teachers based on this model are actively involved in the educational process and reform their (pre)professional identity as they become researchers. Prospective teachers observe, evaluate, reflect, and intervene in the educational process with long-term benefits, such as enriching their knowledge, preparing them well for the teaching profession and by raising awareness of their professional role and scientific assumptions about teaching (Levin & Martin, 2007).

3.0 THEMATIC AREA

Through the pre-service teachers' experiences from their participation in teacher training programs, issues related to their professional identity and reflections are raised before, during and after the end of their teaching. It is noted that prospective teachers stress the need to focus on their students and to exploit effective and sometimes innovative teaching methods. They also express their satisfaction and enthusiasm by participating in the practicum and in the preparation of their teaching. They notice that is extremely important they are given the opportunity to reflect on teaching, on their students and on the learning process (Mule, 2006).

However, through the reflections of prospective teachers, the difficulty of responding to the "reality" of the educational act is noted. This is because, as recorded, they have been taught the pedagogical and didactic theory but they do not have the appropriate flexibility to adapt it to the appropriate educational conditions and the student potential of the classrooms in which they teach. As a result, pre-service teachers are unable to hear the "voices" of their students, their interests and needs (Furlong & Maynard, 2012). The above are interpreted in the light of the "shock" of the first contact with the teacher's profession. This may also be exacerbated by a lack of relevant teaching experience, resulting in elements of anxiety and stress (Bell & Mladenovic, 2013).

The deep-rooted first practicum model mentioned above is often the cause of the lack of pre-service teachers' readiness to meet the requirements of their practicum. In other words, there is a divide between the theories that prospective teachers have learned during their undergraduate studies, the views of their supervisors for teaching and learning, their own assumptions about the teaching profession and the conditions they have to face in a classroom. This situation makes it difficult for future teachers to reflect effectively at all stages of their practicum (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

4.0 THE MODEL OF PRACTICUM IN THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND ETHNOLOGY

This pedagogical-oriented model includes an hour's discussion with the school's headteacher, in which the teaching takes place, one hour of follow-up of the teaching of the mentor-teacher with relevant discussion and feedback, a meeting for the preparation of the teaching process, personal study and search of material by the pre-service teachers and one hour teaching. The practicum concludes with a discussion with the supervisor teacher after the end of the teaching, with constructive feedback and evaluation comments.

5.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

This research aims to analyze the experience of the candidate teachers of the Department of History and Ethnology of the Democritus University of Thrace in Greece from their participation in the practicum, which is part of the pedagogical program. More specifically, the experiences and reflections of 49 undergraduate students (last year of their studies) who attended the course "School Pedagogy" and participated in the practicum program during the spring semester 2017-2018 will be presented, analyzed and discussed. It is worth noting that the pre-service teachers had no previous teaching experience. A key question to be answered through this survey is "How is the experience of prospective teachers reflected by their participation in the practicum program?".

Minor questions, which are being investigated and discussed, are as follows: "How do pre-service secondary teachers perceive their professional role in modern educational reality?" and "What assumptions about teaching and learning appear and/or are latent through their reflective diaries?"

6.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis will be the method of analysis of qualitative data, through which the encoding of the participants' quotes in the study will take place. In particular, once the summary table with major and minor themes has been created, the university students' experiences and reflections will be analyzed by "invading" the researcher in their own "world", first from a phenomenological perspective and then from a more interpretative point of view, the analyses will be attempted (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Willig, 2013).

7.0 ANALYSES

7.1 The first reaction: emotions

The pre-service teachers note that the experience of teaching through the practicum was unique and positive: "Regarding teaching I have to say that it was one of the best experiences and gave me a taste of the profession I would like to pursue in the future (4) ", "(...) I have to say, it was an unprecedented experience for me, but also one of the most beautiful experiences throughout my life (5)".

In particular, despite the stress that was evident especially in the first few minutes of teaching, this experience was very important and constructive, as it gave them many positive elements, mainly for their future professional role: "My teaching in the high school was an unprecedented experience and at the same time a valuable and useful tool for career development (24)", "When I was given the opportunity to do my practice in the minority school of Komotini, mixed feelings were born. Initially, there was the "beautiful" anxiety, as it was an unprecedented process in which I would test my limits (...). When the teaching was completed I felt it was an unimaginable and special experience and I felt happy, proud and certainly filled with beautiful memories (2)".

Mixed seem to be the emotions of participants in the practicum process. They refer that when they started teaching there were signs of anxiety and insecurity, but they were quickly eliminated and their position was succeeded by enthusiasm to achieve their goal; to carry out effective teaching: "First time's the hardest. It's true that my first experience at school as a teacher will be indelible in my memory. A special day, filled with intense feelings. I will not forget first my enthusiasm and then the insecurity and anxiety about whether I will make it (...). Entering the classroom my feelings mixed: joy, impatience and fear. I saw 24 students all smiles, eager to welcome me. In the first few moments, no matter how many rehearsals I had done, I was possessed by a riot and I lost my mind (10)", "(...) we started teaching with feelings of anxiety dominating (6)".

It is also stated that stress and insecurity in their first contact with the teaching profession are due to their sense of responsibility: "So when it came time for our teaching the feelings were mixed, anxiety and joy at the same time. Being in this position certainly makes me doubt at that moment, whether I will communicate to my students, what I have planned to teach them and more or less I am nervous about the way I will do it (21)", "Entering the classroom I saw twenty-four students. I immediately began to be overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility to give in to everything I would tell them. I thought I wasn't going to make it, after all, it was my first time in a classroom to teach (19)".

7.2 Teaching experience: student participation, classroom climate and theoretical background

Prospective teachers are found to have experienced, on the one hand, strong feelings of anxiety, insecurity and, on the other hand, feelings of joy and excitement. In their teaching experience, they also note issues relating to the participation of students during their short teaching experience, the factor of active learning, the school climate, as well as, the theoretical background of the students conducted by their practicum. In particular, prospective teachers report that the students responded in the best possible way to their teaching: "I would like to point out that I was surprised that almost all the students in the classroom participated during the discussion (4)".

They contrast the students' participation when they attended the teaching of the supervisor teacher with the participation in their own teaching: "Impressive was the fact that students who during the supervisor's teaching did not participate at all, to us dared to express their opinions and answer our questions (6)", "The children showed interest in the lesson, they answered our questions. Also, as we learned from the teacher, students who did not

participate in her teaching showed a greater willingness for ours, which pleased us very much (8)".

Issues related to the interaction and positive image gained by prospective teachers during their teaching are therefore highlighted, as participation was high and students showed an exemplary willingness to discuss and engage during the teaching: "During the teaching, I was struck by how quickly the embarrassment between my group and the students was overcome, the children were willing in their entirety to participate in the discussion and followed the rules of discussion, even when they disagreed with the opinion of one of their classmates, let him complete his thought and then expressed with arguments their own opinion (11)", "Our interaction with the students was exquisite. There was participation from all over the classroom and the children showed a strong interest (13)".

Students' enthusiasm for participation also seems to be linked to the teaching method. It is mentioned that when knowledge is combined with fun and play, then learning and pedagogical outcomes can be quite positive. Students self-act, collaborate and learn through participation and play: "We separated the children into five groups of four and the course became a quiz. The students built their own teams and gave them special names. Their willingness and active participation made me glad! (18)".

Pre-service teachers expressed their concern about their teaching, as they had to respond to a difficult and demanding role. However, the positive and supportive school climate seems to have worked as a counterbalance. It is stressed, in particular, that despite the fact that pre-service teachers expected to face difficult situations, in terms of student behaviour this was disproved, as a pleasant surprise: "The classroom climate was a factor that affected my anxiety. In my first contact with the children, I encountered a restless, disobedient section dominated by anarchy. I was scared I thought I wouldn't be able to achieve any of the goals I had set. But, lucky for us, the students were calm, active and willing to participate in the educational process (9)".

Such a reading, given by the candidate teachers, relates to the fact that it moves the interest of the student's something different; a novice teacher in the classroom: "Something that struck me is the fact that the teaching time has passed very quickly and although I expected the whole process to be much more difficult in the end it was much simpler. This is also due to the fact that the climate in the classroom was very good, with students participating in the lesson. Of course, all this positive climate may have been due to the fact that they probably knew that we would visit their classroom (31)".

There are also issues of self-images, as one pre-service teacher was afraid, as she says, of her first teaching, because she was thinking about the possibility that the students would ridicule her and not behave decently: "The climate of the classroom was calm and friendly. Although I expected the children to be a little more detached, fearing that they would not take us seriously and start commenting, but in the end, it was the opposite (39)".

With regard to the students' cognitive background, the views are quite different. In some schools, the candidate teachers met students with a very high level of knowledge, while in other schools, particularly intercultural and minority schools, the situation was different:

"What struck me beyond the participation was the high level of the classroom and the educational level of the children. It could easily correspond to older ages (13)", "One issue in the educational process I had at the Minority School was that some of the children did not know the language well and did not understand what I was saying many times (20)".

7.3 Role perception

In the practicum, candidate teachers are usually not yet aware of their professional identity and role. They also realize their role through the behavior of their students during their teaching. This is also a first step in the constructive reflection process: "All the eyes of the children were on us (...). It was also impressive that even though they saw us for the first time as teachers I felt that they were treating me as if I was already one, something I had not realized until that moment (27)".

Switching roles is something that helps prospective teachers understand the multi-level and complex teacher role. In particular, it is understood that the participants in the practicum, through their teaching, understood the elements that the teachers must have in order to be able to adequately respond to their role: "If there is anything left for me, this is the strange feeling of switching roles. That from where in the first hour of the practicum I was at the desk and I was just watching as a student and suddenly the next hour I found myself on the bench teaching students. I experienced the feelings of two opposing roles in such a short space of time (30)". It should be noted that the teachers' role is certainly difficult, because in addition to their competence in the subject-matter of knowledge, they also have to be equipped with pedagogical knowledge: "(...) As a future teacher I found that the teacher profession, in addition to knowledge, needs to be equipped with love for students and an appetite for the world of education (13)", "What I have found is that the teaching profession is complex, as it comes into a close and deep relationship of interaction with children and assumes the role and responsibility of learning and acquiring social and pedagogical skills (3)".

Elements of reflection are therefore strong and obvious, especially after the end of the teaching of pre-service teachers. In particular, the question arises at this point: 'who is ultimately the effective teacher and what elements make up the effective teacher?': "Finishing the practicum in which I was assigned by an inexperienced student to take on the role of teacher, I gained the most special experience of my life, which certainly changed my way of thinking on pedagogical issues, but also made me realize that what I do should be done with love and zeal if I want to be effective in my profession (8)".

The (pre)professional identity of prospective teachers is enriched through their reflections on teaching and through the ways in which they manage critical situations in the educational process. Issues such as flexibility and readiness during the lesson, when a problem arises, contribute to a better understanding of their role: "Because there was a problem connecting the computer to the video projector, I took the initiative to draw a timeline, as I was the first to present and in this way to draw students' attention to make a recap and link of events (16)", "The main problem I encountered was that of vocabulary. In many cases, I had to simplify what I said, as they were not perceived by the whole classroom. I have had to adapt the teaching method to the needs of my students (14)".

In the context of the professionalization, reflections are considered to be extremely important. In this case, candidate teachers reflect on their teaching and note that some points needed further improvement. They are reflecting on improving their teaching practice, taking into account various factors, either encouraging or inhibiting their teaching: "Certainly at a second glance we had room for improvement, but in relation to the short time, embarrassment and stress of the first time I consider that we have carried out this experience that the course of "School Pedagogy" offered us (21)".

Some pre-service teachers think that they should implement different teaching methods and strategies to make their lesson more attractive to their students: "After my experience, I thought about what I would change in my teaching. I'd put the students in the last task to participate in groups. I would separate them in groups (...). So through all this process, in addition to what the students had already taken, they would have known about teamwork (33)". Candidate teachers are also reflecting before conducting their teaching, expressing their anxiety and fear of the unknown, but also trying to simplify it: "After all, no one was born a ready teacher. It was something so simple, but in my mind, it seemed monstrous (30)".

In such a reflective approach it is found that pre-service teachers successfully combine the theory they have been taught during their university studies with the teaching practice. They reflect on the teaching method they adopted and link it to specific pedagogical and educational theories: "I would like to set my teaching based on constructivism, having taken into account the previous experiences of the students, their active role, the collaborative autonomous contextualized learning and the creative interaction, both between the students and the teacher and between the students themselves (...) (33)".

Satisfaction in teaching seems to be perceived not only by the experience gained by the pre-service teachers but also by the attitude of them and by the support and guidance they had throughout their practicum: "(...) I felt pleased, as we prepared was in response to the classroom we took, while the students seemed to enjoy the process. Moreover, the feedback of the supervisor teacher was equally positive as he told us that he enjoyed our teaching (25)".

8.0 DISCUSSION

Undoubtedly, the prospective teachers' pedagogical practicum during their studies is a key element in strengthening their epistemological beliefs and shaping their professional identity (Tsafos, 2009). Through their preparation for the teacher profession, the future teachers receive influences from their studies, practicum, and from the "significant others" (mentors, supervisors, fellow students). These effects appear to be decisive in creating either positive or negative perceptions of teaching (Lowery, 2002).

During this creative process, the candidate teachers preparing their teaching, working with the supervisor teacher and facing the challenges of a classroom, acquire a teaching perception, collect information and reflect on their knowledge, skills and beliefs. For this reason, the practicum stage is considered to be the bridging period of preparation for teaching at the beginning of the teacher's professional career (Stanulis & Russell, 2000). This

experience seems to be a key element in shaping the teacher's profile and sense of effectiveness for teaching.

"The bell rang and my pulses suddenly rose. I never thought the sound of the bell would sound so scary to my ears. We remained in our seats and waited anxiously for the moment when we would go up to the "stage". So after the bell rang and the children returned to their seats, we immediately headed to the seat without wasting any time (...). My legs were shaking, but I confessed my anxiety. The first few minutes were quite awkward, but soon my anxiety slowed down and I started to enjoy the whole process (30)". This quote by a pre-service teacher can be a trigger in the discussion regarding the reflections of prospective teachers when they are going to teach for the first time. The teaching experience cannot often be described, but some suggestions can be a point for further reflection and research in the field of teacher education.

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