

Pre-service secondary teachers reflect on their pedagogical practicum experiences

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Abstract

Through pedagogical practicum programs pre-service teachers understand the multiple and multi-level role of the teacher and are gradually led to the acquisition and enrichment of knowledge and skills, through observation, teaching, discussion, reflection, feedback, thoughts, experiences, research and engagement with the teaching profession. Through critical reflection candidate teachers become aware of their educational practices, reinforce and understand their epistemological assumptions. This paper presents and discusses the practicum experiences and reflections of Greek undergraduate students of the Department of History and Ethnology in Thrace. The study was conducted during the spring semester 2016-2017 with 46 graduate students who taught in schools in Komotini area, with the contribution of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The analyses illustrate that pre-service teachers experienced strong feelings of anxiety, joy and satisfaction from their first contact with the teaching profession. Issues of career development and professional identity arise.

Keywords

Practicum, pre-service secondary teachers, experiences, reflection

1. Introduction

Teaching is a complex and multi interpretation concept, depending on the social, cultural and ideological background of each era and society in which it is studied (Gay, 2018). In modern educational environment the meaning of teaching is taking a more broad and flexible form, which includes the transmission of knowledge through cross-thematic approaches, the concept of apprenticeships (Felce, 2019), the skill building, the development of critical thinking, the concept of metacognition (Mahdavi, 2014), as well as the concept of learners' social adaptation to the modern socio-educational situation (Tharp, 2018). In all the above, the important factor is the number of skills that the modern teachers possess from their initial teacher education programs (Poth, 2012).

It is therefore of particular concern that the teachers is prepared for the teaching profession and what this entails. Research shows that the "bridge", which links effective teaching with the teacher and the student, in the context of modern teaching, is the pre-service teachers' training (Bruinsma & Jansen, 2010). Consequently, through their education, account is taken of the subjects taught in their studies, as well as the opportunities to enrich their teaching and pedagogical knowledge (teaching and pedagogical competence) in the context of their practicum (Hart, Whatman, McLaughlin & Sharma-Brymer, 2012).

Teacher education is also inextricably linked to the career development concept (Day & Sachs, 2004). The effective teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond, Hylér & Gardner, 2017)

undoubtedly puts at the heart of the discussion issues of acquiring and enriching knowledge, skills development, pedagogical expertise, professional role-reframing, and research issues (Brookfield, 1995; Hargreaves, 2000; Moore, Walsh & Risquez, 2007). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been reporting since the end of the 20th century that our teachers are the *'heart of the educational process'*, in the context of modernizing education and their best professional development, taking into account the challenges and demands of the modern era (OECD, 1998; Scheerens, 2011). On this occasion, many seem to be the questions that concern these further studies regarding the adequacy of the pre-service teacher education and the subjects with which they come into contact during their training (Brookfield, 1995).

Specific questions, such as *'What is the role of a modern tertiary institution preparing teachers?'*, *'what content should the education of modern teachers have?'*, *'with what teaching methods and techniques should pre-service teachers be trained'*, *'how is the concept of professional development defined?'*, *'what is the importance of practicum in teacher education?'*, *'what are the perceptions and experiences of university students from their participation in teacher education practicum programs?'*, attract the interest of researchers and are constantly researched in the field of modern teaching (Darling-Hammold & Bransford, 2005).

What has been mentioned above is of great importance, because on a daily basis the teacher is called upon to respond to multiple roles; to take decisions, to deal with difficult manageable situations, to teach the citizens of tomorrow and to interact in the context of a holistic approach to learning and teaching (Hargreaves, 2000; Tirri, 2011). The modern teachers' preparation therefore weighs on academic institutions, which include courses in their curricula that are not only related to the teaching subject-matter, but also to teaching methods and means, as well as to practicum. The aim of these courses is to raise teachers' awareness of teaching issues, strengthen their cognitive shapes, social skills and raise awareness of their multiple professional roles (Casey, Fink, Jaynes, Campbell, Cook & Wilson, 2011).

At international level, the focus on the all-round preparation of candidate teacher is also on the issue of expertise, which does not translate solely as the acquisition of a basic network of knowledge and skills (Day, 1993). The concept of teachers' expertise leads in a direction of continuous acquisition and enrichment of knowledge in their initial education, through discussion, reflection, thoughts, experiences, research and engagement with the teaching profession, with the contribution of practicum (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Ulvik & Smith, 2011).

In such a demanding context, the candidate teachers should acquire the ability to think synthetically, critically and reflectively (Zhu, 2011), while at the same time they can evaluate their teaching. Modern teachers by forming the concept of teaching and the characteristics that make up it through a mental epistemological map, they will be able to think about the teaching profession, to reflect and link pedagogical theory and teaching methodology with their own practices, with their individual professional profile, as well as in the future, and with the needs of their students. In such a transformative learning environment (Mezirow, 1997) the teacher will gradually be practiced in the concepts of reflectivity and self-assessment (Zhu, Iglecia & Wang, 2020).

2. Practicum as a reflective process

Shön (1987, p. 37) quite aptly states that practicum is an 'environment' designed in such a way that those involved acquire knowledge of specific techniques and methods in order to cope with their profession. In particular, it is noted that in the context of practicum, apprentices are involved in the

principles of so-called 'learning by doing' (Roberts, 2012), but are at an intermediate stage; between the "real" world of a profession and a "protected" academic world. In the practicum, the pre-service teacher is invited to draw a mental map in order to reach the desired goal, choosing the appropriate teaching methods, as well as the necessary means and materials.

The meaning of teacher training has gone through various stages and approaches and has been thoroughly studied by researchers. In the literature, three main stages of the teacher education development are identified (Shön, 1987). The first stage, or otherwise the first approach, refers to a linear-tool-mechanistic model of teacher education on the basis of which the learner is considered detached from educational reality and is equipped with knowledge and skills for the teaching profession, exclusively at a theoretical level (Darling-Hammold & Bransford, 2005). Such an approach leads the pre-service teacher to reproduce -without taking into account the wider social and educational context- the learned teaching practices, without the possibility of control, evaluation and reflection.

The second model focuses on the so-called apprenticeship that the learner receives from an experienced/full-equipped teacher. In this context, scientific theory is degraded as the student-teacher is guided solely by an experienced teacher. Gradually, the apprentice from the observation stage of the teaching of the experienced teacher then assumes the duties of teacher (Shön, 1987). In the above two cases, the candidate teacher is invited to apply a prescribed teaching model with predefined steps.

Since 1980 there has been a shift in interest in more interactive, interpretative and constructive approaches to initial teacher education (Elliott, 1993). Since the end of the 20th century, it has been understood that practicum in the context of teacher education must take an alternative and more modern route (Lai & Grossman, 2008; Purdy & Gibson, 2008). The candidate teachers with their previous knowledge and experience, the stimuli from their studies and from the social, cultural and educational context attempt to shape and implement their own teaching model (Adler, 1991).

In such a reflection approach, the question arises of the evaluation of the educational process by the pre-service teachers in the context of their practicum. After all, the concept of self-assessment seems to be central to modern research and gives elements as to how the teachers can approach the educational process. In the logic of self-assessment, the teachers, through experimentation, will gradually be able to create their own teaching theory, to examine more critically the methods and techniques they use, to realize their potential, but also to constantly try to improve their teaching and pedagogical strategies (Banks, Conway, Darmody, Leavy, Smyth & Watson, 2015).

Candidate teachers, based on this reformed and transformative model of teacher education, are gradually involved in the educational process in a different role; that of researcher, with the aim of shaping their (pre)professional identity. Candidate teachers are guided, observe, evaluate, discuss, reflect, and intervene in the educational process, operating more interactively and functionally with dual targeting; recognition and awareness of their epistemological assumptions and the enrichment of the theoretical background (Levin & Martin, 2007).

In the light of the above, the concept of mentoring in the context of practicum (Evertson & Smithey, 2000) also seems to be fundamental. The concept of teaching and pedagogical guidance, or otherwise mentoring, emphasizes the interactive relationship between an experienced teacher and a candidate teacher. In such a creative relationship the active teacher discusses with the future teacher and takes action through common decisions and actions. Such a metacognitive process contributes significantly to the better planning, conduct and evaluation of teaching by pre-service teachers (Townsend & Bates, 2007).

Research in this field give important data on both the role and identity of the modern teachers and their epistemological assumptions. In particular, data from quantitative and qualitative studies illustrate an image by which candidate teachers, when invited to teach for the first time, usually focus on the teaching of the subject and the achievement of cognitive objectives, in particular, and not so much on pedagogical issues and interaction in the classroom.

It is also noted that university students find it difficult to adapt to the educational process and reflect in practice (second stage of reflection: during their teaching), thus insisting on their initial choices and their initial teaching design, regardless, ultimately, if it seems to have an effect in the classroom. Pre-service teachers often, by their difficulty in reflecting during their teaching, do not focus on the interests and needs of their students (Furlong & Maynard, 2012). At this point there are issues of lack of professional and teaching experience, as well as issues of anxiety from the so-called "practice shock" in pedagogy (Bell & Mladenovic, 2013).

To the personal reflections of the university students is added the question of the difference between the theory taught and the pedagogical principles, with which they come into contact during their studies on the one hand, and the management of a subject within the classroom, on a practical level, when they are invited to take on the role of teacher, on the other hand. The above is linked to the first model of teacher education, which emphasizes theory, without having a sincere connection with the teaching practice. As a result, the candidate teachers are unable to reflect effectively on their teaching and on the teaching-pedagogical techniques they use in practice (Hatton & Smith, 1995).

3. The study

3.1 Purpose of the study

This study aims to contribute to the scientific debate on the pedagogical training of pre-service students and especially in the field of their pedagogical practicum experiences in schools. In particular, issues related to the university students' experience from their first contact with the educational process and teaching, thoughts raised by the whole process, as well as issues related to their reflection on teaching in modern school will be presented.

The main questions to which the study is called upon to answer are:

- *How did participants experience teaching (reflection after teaching)?*
- *What are their thoughts on teaching and the teaching profession?*
- *What critical reflection issues appear or are latent in their recordings?*

3.2 Research design

The purpose and nature of this research guide the researcher in the selection of the so-called 'Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis' (IPA) for data analyses. Based on this method of qualitative data analysis, the researcher motivated by the naturalistic approach, attempts to discuss and analyze the participants' words in an authentic context of empathy, deepening in the material, without taking into account issues of generalization, confirmation and disprove of initially formulated theories (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

In particular, through the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis emphasis will be placed on the participants' words, their experiences, their thoughts, "listening" to each "voice" individually and the way in which participants interpret their "wor(l)d", and in this case the experience of teaching for the first time, through their reflective diaries. Through specific stages of analysis-coding (Willig, 2013), which for obvious reasons will not be presented in detail in the context of this short publication, major

and minor themes will be created on the basis of which the quotes and thoughts of the pre-service teachers in this sample will be presented.

3.3 Participants

This research was carried out in the context of the course "School Pedagogy" of the Department of History and Ethnology, at Democritus University of Thrace in Greece during the academic year 2016-2017. The sample of the study consisted of 46 graduate students, who during the spring semester attended the course "School Pedagogy" and taught a teaching hour a high school literature course at a public school as part of their practicum. Their personal reflective diaries, which they kept throughout their practicum -before, during and after their teaching- were the material of the analysis. These axis-based diaries, given during the six-month academic course, were intended to record all stages of the experience by the pre-service teachers from their practicum. It is worth mentioning that this experience was short and specifically the students attended-observed an hour of teaching of the teacher-mentor and one hour conducted their own teaching, mainly in pairs.

4. Analyses and discussion

4.1 The teaching experience

The first major theme, which was created on the basis of the data in this survey, refers to the experiences of pre-service teachers from teaching in a high school in Greece, in Komotini area. The pre-service teachers, in their reflective diaries, refer to their experiences of participating in the practicum of their Department and, in particular, note their thoughts regarding this experience, which they describe as very positive and constructive: "*It was really an unprecedented and very enjoyable experience in my studies, getting into a classroom and becoming the teacher, even for a while (1)*"; "*The practicum at first made me nervous, but it proved to be a unique experience, which I would repeat if I were given the opportunity again (7)*".

Although the duration of this process is considered by them to be very short, however it is perceived as an impulse for further thought, discussion, reflection and perception of their future role as teachers: "*I was quite nervous during the lesson, as it was the first time I was in front of so many students, having to play the role of teacher. But I think everything went smoothly and the teaching experience will help us a lot in our later follow-up as teachers (4)*".

Pre-service teachers refer to feelings of joy, excitement and satisfaction, after the feelings of insecurity and anxiety created among the participants and especially at the beginning of the whole process, when, as they say, they were at the beginning of teaching in front of a large number of secondary school students: "*Finishing our teaching, I was delighted and pleased that our goals were achieved, that almost all students fully understood the lesson, that there was a very good collaboration and finally that I overcame myself leaving behind the stresses that had been created for me. It was a special experience for me. I have never been in the school field as a teacher and not as a student and I am proud that the educational process has been successfully fulfilled, in front of such a large number of pupils (42)*".

Personal reflections, thoughts, feelings and more generally the experience of the participants at the end of their practicum, raise issues related to the first contact with both the classroom and the students and the subject matter they were asked to teach. Feelings of excitement and satisfaction from teaching seem to be linked in the literature to a fuller understanding of their future professional role (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). Often, these studies note that practicum contributes to a high sense of self-

¹ Related to the coding of the responses given by the university students.

confidence and awareness, so that pre-service teachers can choose the teaching profession in the future (Pfitzner-Eden, 2016).

In this effort it is also apparent that the undergraduate students wanted the support of both the entire class they taught and the experienced teacher, who acted as a mentor during this process: *"The children were excellent. They were cheerful and helped us overcome any stress we had before we started (40)"*, *"The experience of being in a classroom, this time not in the role of student, but of the teacher, was unprecedented at first, but then, with the contribution of the students, my colleagues and the teacher-mentor, evolved into a very beautiful and unique experience (21)"*.

However, this beautiful experience can have other consequences, which are discussed in the international literature. It should be noted in particular that the mentor can discuss in a different way and on another theoretical background what is relevant to the teaching profession and otherwise discuss this issue in the academic context. As a result, students are sometimes not able to link their experience in practicum with the content of the academic course they attend (Ulvik & Sunde, 2013). For this reason, it is proposed to set up cooperation and communication networks between schools participating in practicum and university departments (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton & Doone, 2006).

Cooperation and communication networks are also considered necessary in the context of intercultural and minority education through specific actions and programs. Such a political initiative begins in 1997 in Greece, with the Program "Education of the Muslim Minority Children in Thrace" (<http://www.museduc.gr/el/>) within the framework of equality. By extension, despite the fact that university departments have been set up in Thrace, preparing teachers (Greek Philology, History and Ethnology, Pedagogical Department of Primary Education, Early Childhood Education Sciences, Physical Education Science and Sport), there seems to be not yet the appropriate institutional framework and the necessary networks to support the practicum of university students in schools in this region.

It should also be mentioned that it is of particular concern to the candidate philologists, at first contact with the teaching profession, the question of their teaching, in particular, proficiency, which is why they constantly refer to the lesson plan, which they had prepared, to issues of achievement of cognitive objectives, and less to the way in which they interacted with their students, at least at an early stage: *"The lesson plan played a decisive role in the conduct of the lesson. I believe that with this we have successfully covered the whole of the prerequisite range of the most useful information for the lesson (5)"*, *"Our teaching was successful, as we saw from the children, but also as we understood and through the discussion with the teacher it was quite understandable the historical subject we dealt with (2)"*, *"The lesson plan contributed catalytically to the smooth conduct of the teaching. I believe that with this we have been able to gather all the elements that were necessary in order not to face any problems during teaching (6)"*.

From the above, there is also a perception of their role in relation to the emphasis placed, primarily, on the teaching subject and the preparation of the course. Moreover, the above finding also concerns the perception that pre-service teachers form during their studies, that the effective teacher is the one who is familiar with his/her subject and then can interact effectively with his/her students (Ng, Nicholas & Williams, 2010).

There are also some graduate students, who seem to have focused on the issue of communication with their students and how they could gain, as they typically say, their confidence with the aim of a

positive climate of cooperation and communication: *"Although quite stressed but also very excited at the same time, I mainly tried to gain the trust of the students and then their participation (24)"*.

Some researchers combine teacher education with professional development issues and with the future of pre-service teachers when they finish their initial studies (Kagan, 1992). In particular, one university student states that her experience of participating in the practicum is considered very important, above all, for her career when she should think about the teaching profession, and about how she will be able to "survive" in the educational field: *"I was first given the opportunity to adopt the role of teacher in a classroom. This process was full of excitement and anxiety (...). In conclusion, this practice was a remarkable effort and unique experience, useful and valuable for my future (11)"*.

It is important for participants to have had the opportunity to teach in school classrooms, where children from different social-cultural backgrounds and minorities were located (Tambyah, 2019). Characteristically, as a group of university students refer, they consider themselves particularly fortunate, because they were able to understand their (pre)professional role in a school of intercultural education and in addition to teaching issues of the subject, they had to deal with issues of language, culture and classroom management: *"We can say that it was a beautiful and enjoyable first teaching experience inside the school. In particular, we had the opportunity to be practiced in a school of intercultural education, where we ourselves experienced pluralism, multiculturalism and diversity among students and found ourselves in the position of teacher, who must manage these characteristics of these students (19)"*.

Another pre-service teacher points out the above, referring to the teacher's challenge to come into contact with students of different cultures, noting the teacher's difficulty in such contexts: *"The main impression by this experience is the contact with students of another culture, with difficulties, but an experience that remains unforgettable (38)"*. The difficulty of (candidate) teachers in acquiring the so-called intercultural capacity and in coping with a multicultural educational environment may also be related to their incomplete or fragmentary and non-systematic information on diversity and intercultural education in the curricula of their schools (Pohan, 1996; Karousiou, Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2019).

Another minor theme created by the qualitative data refers to the *'practice shock'*; to the feelings and thoughts of the participants, related to their readiness and their effectiveness in teaching (Gürbüz, 2006), when for the first time they are called upon to respond to a demanding and multiple role, that of the teacher: *"As we mentioned in the classroom is the "shock" of the first teaching, as from a school student or even a university student you are called to give the knowledge and experiences that you have in a way understandable to "small" people, which shape their identity and character in a way that is as understandable as possible to all students (1)"*. Despite the fact that this pre-service teacher previously mentioned that the teaching experience was unique to him and experienced unprecedented emotions, however, it is found that it was expected to appear difficulties in the first contact with the students.

Another pre-service teacher has the same impression: *"It was the first time I was going to enter a real classroom and carry out the educational process with my fellow students. As expected I experienced the "shock of first contact", anxiety about the unknown and whether we will be able to implement the lesson plan and the whole process (39)"*. For the shock that the pre-service teachers and, by extension, the newly hired teachers seem to experience, research data show that the factors that may exacerbate its appearance are related to the lack of readiness and knowledge in their initial education, to the issues of misperception of their pre-professional role, as well as to the fact that the teaching profession is extremely demanding and multidimensional. By insisting, therefore, on the factor of the initial teacher

education, it is important that pre-service teachers come into contact in a systematic and methodical manner, with the school environment and by university students taking on the role of teacher, with the aim of preventing this phenomenon, which is related to issues of anxiety, job burnout and confusion regarding their professional identity (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003).

A very important issue also relates to the connection between theory and teaching practice (Atta, 2012). Pre-service teachers reflect and note that it is very important to effectively "bridge" the theory (from their academic courses) with practice (practical teaching in school): *"The course related to practicum has given me the opportunity to move from theory to practice (6)"*. In particular, it is clear that in their curricula there must, as they say, have courses that are more discipline-oriented and that pair what is taught in a "protected" environment with the "real" world of the profession: *"Undoubtedly, practicum is considered one of the most important course for us, as there is familiarity with the working environment and the requirements of the school place. This smooths the transition from the field of preparation to the field of secondary education (16)"*. This is also the basic principle of practicum; the effective link between theory and teaching practice, as evidenced by the findings of relevant research (Moore, Walsh & Risquez, 2007). In particular, it is noted that at international level academic institutions that prepare teachers invest in practicum, with the aim of continuously and effectively linking theory to practice, with long-term benefits of strengthening the professional role of pre-service teachers and enriching knowledge, skills and practices (Allsopp et al., 2006).

A university student of this sample thinks that through the practicum she was able to link pedagogical issues discussed in the university course and understand how these can be applied to the educational process: *"Initially, this unprecedented "test" gave me the opportunity to discover the positive elements, but also the difficulties of teaching at a practical level. I also appreciated the concept of new education and the modern school, as I was given the opportunity to implement, but also to observe their positive elements, not only in theory but also in practice (10)"*.

University students, through such an active process of engagement and reflection on pedagogical issues, stress that they derive multiple teaching and pedagogical benefits: *"(...) "School Pedagogy" (the university course) was the way from which I was first taught how to manage the various educational issues at the theoretical level, and in the second phase I came into contact with the school environment, in which working with my two fellow students, we applied in practice what we learned in theory, creating our own lesson plan (18)"*. The above assumption is linked to the models of teacher education and to the modern view, according to which the pre-service teacher as a researcher and scientist is involved in the educational process, reflecting and choosing solutions, linking theory to practice in a context of critical reflection (Allsopp et al., 2006; Heck, Willis, Simon, Grainger & Smith, 2020).

The above seems to be related to the change of their role from university students to teachers: *"For the first time we saw what it is like to sit on the other side in a classroom and have the role of teacher (1)"*. This different view of the teaching profession creates anxiety, pressure, many thoughts, as well as issues of excitement and further reflection. It is therefore important the issue of the different role of pre-service teachers in their practicum, and 'from the seats be to the seat': *"It's been four years since I stopped sitting on desks, so the experience is not entirely distant. However, the role of the teacher proved to be very different from the one I had theoretically structured in my mind (17)"*. For this reason, thoughts relating to the teaching profession are recorded in an experience that ultimately seems to enrich their view of teaching and, in some cases, is far from the original, theoretical and different picture that candidate teachers had of the role of teacher: *"When you see the classroom from the point of view of the teacher and not the student, it is something unprecedented and at the same time unique."*

Before we started teaching, those memories of school passed through my mind and how I was towards the teacher (20)".

However, when we refer to candidates and/or newly hired teachers, it is found that their perception of their professional role is more focused on themselves and not so much on their students. Pre-service teachers through teaching experience describe their own role in teaching, the actions and methods they have used, despite the actions of students during the practicum experience. As stated in the relevant literature, the novice teacher thinks about how effective he/she was in his/her teaching, while, on the contrary, the experienced teacher reflects and thinks about how effective his/her students were during the lesson (Hoy, 2000). Consequently, such a situation creates problems in the way in which a pre-service teacher can, at an early stage, identify and manage situations in the school context (Kagan, 1992).

Moreover, a participant, focusing on his role, thinks that through such an experience and by changing the perspective of the teaching profession, you get a clearer picture of what characteristics a teacher should have in the modern school and how easy or difficult it becomes to teach in a classroom. He also noted his anxiety about how difficult it is for a teacher to handle different situations in his classroom: *"Through this experience, I understand that teaching is not a simple thing, because students will have questions about every new thing, and each of them wants a certain way to handle it (...)" (41)".*

One undergraduate student felt something unprecedented, as she realized, even from this very brief contact with the school field, that practicum can be linked to the question of the perception of her professional role, since she notes that will probably follow the teaching profession in the future: *"Coming close to the student is a feeling I did not expect to "shake" me and so I found that becoming a teacher is something I will probably try in the future (24)".*

Also, through the practicum you understand the role of the modern teacher: *"Through this process we faced difficulties that we did not know a teacher was facing, and so we understood the multiple role of the teacher (25)".* A particular impression is given to the thought of the following pre-service teacher, who begins to understand issues of professional development and role perception, as she believes that her experience of teaching leads her to a "path" of seeking the teaching profession: *"(...) But what was deeply in my thoughts and sparked my dreams was something unexpected. In this class where everything was so different, there was a special education student, a child a little more different than the others. He was a child with developmental disorder on whose side stood a special education teacher, which helped him to clarify possible ambiguities. It was the best moment of my experience, because I realized that my goal is to teach and help these children (45)".*

Another minor theme, which relates to the experiences of pre-service teachers from practicum, concerns the mandatory nature of this process in the context of teacher education (Hargreaves, 2000). The strengthening of the pre-professional identity of the modern teacher and the acquisition of further stimuli through practicum are considered important elements by the participants: *"Finally, I would like to point out that the practicum has contributed significantly to the embrace, dedication, and appreciation of the profession of historian-philologist that I will follow in the future. In my view, for those who wish to work as teachers, this experience should be considered necessary (10)".* Moreover, as Shön (1987) states, reflection is a basic prerequisite for teachers' vocational learning, which is reinforced through practicum.

Practicum can also help to better address issues related to the professional orientation of university students and to a fuller understanding of the skills that modern teachers must have in the postmodern school (Correa, Martínez-Arbelaiz & Gutierrez, 2014). As one pre-service teacher of the sample says,

the teaching profession will be more understandable to the candidate teacher through his practicum, because on top of that he will reflect on the skills he will have to possess in order to successfully cope with his professional role: *"I realized through this process that teachers must be patient, cultivate skills, have visions for their students and above all emotional balance. Practicum is very important and necessary (46)"*.

4.2 Reflections on teaching

Another major theme, which was created, refers to the reflections on teaching of university students of the Department of History and Ethnology. The reflections of the pre-service teachers, after the experience of teaching, include issues of teaching quality. In particular, participants through their reflective diaries consider that teaching can be defined in a variety of ways. It is noted that the process is simply perceived as a behavioral process, where on the basis of which the teacher is the main transmission of knowledge and the student passively accepts this knowledge: *"The teaching process is the teachers' attempt to pass on their knowledge to their students*. This thought is complemented by the point of view of another undergraduate student, who places teaching in a purely behavioral context, in which the student acquires knowledge given exclusively to him by the teacher: *"If I could characterize the educational process in one word, I think I would call it "scary". The teacher is exposed in front of several students, who rely entirely on him in order to taste knowledge (5)"*. This thinking relates to the epistemological assumptions of teachers and, in particular, to the perception that teaching is not interaction and participation, but a process of communicating containers (banking concept of education), under which the teacher transfers knowledge to the student (Freire, 2018). For this reason, the involvement of pre-service teachers with teaching and practicum in the context of their initial education can play a major role in reframing the entrenched perceptions that university students have of the teaching profession as a result of their previous experiences, assumptions and standards (Murphy, Delli & Edwards, 2004).

This linear, one-way course of knowledge does not seem to be supported by the other pre-service teachers, who through their personal reflection focus on teaching, which is based on constructive approaches: *"For these reasons I conclude that by adopting constructive approaches, a teacher can succeed in making students the real subjects of the educational process, which will act in their interest and the course process itself will focus only on them (18)"*, *"After we have detected and evaluated its characteristics, in terms of how functional or not it is, after attending a teaching hour by the teacher with whom we worked, we added a touch of our own to the canvas called "teaching" with the presentation of our own model, which was based mostly on the constructive theory (19)"*.

Pre-service teachers place the concept of teaching in more student-centered and group-centered approaches, which take into account the needs, interests and experiences of students: *"To sum up, in my view the educational process could be described as student-centered. We have tried to act according to the standards of new education and the modern school, as well as to develop knowledge through interaction and discussion. That is, on the basis of constructive theory (8)"*. At this point, pre-service teachers are also reflecting on the theory they have learned regarding construction and socio-cultural approaches, they consider it appropriate to apply the theory in practice and adopt an early, "unripe" and incomplete teaching model: *"Supporter and I of modern/liberating pedagogy, I tried for the first time as a candidate teacher to apply it to my teaching, a teaching starring the student (student-centered) and with the teacher's role as a mentor (34)"*.

The constructivism, therefore, and the basic principles of both Piaget and Vygotsky, are evident through the quote of the participants' reflections from their teaching. Their epistemological assumptions include the principles of modern teaching and pedagogy, where on the basis of which the

teacher acts from the background (guide of the side and not sage on the stage) (Morrison, 2014), creating a pedagogical and collaborative teaching climate (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005).

Taking all this into consideration, the teacher is characterized as scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978); as the "captain" of a ship, which is learning and within it wants to integrate more and more students-sailors and lead them to new paths of knowledge, thought and reflection: *"Through this experience, I would say that teaching is a journey of knowledge. The teacher starts with a few students usually for fellow travelers and the goal is gradually at each stop to draw more and more. Teacher has the compass, but on the map everyone is charting routes (28)"*.

4.3 Critical reflection

Through critical reflection, the pre-service teachers of this sample refer that teaching is more part of the principles of constructivism and can be described as communication, as an interaction between the teacher and the students, but also among the students: *"I believe that during the time we were in the classroom the students learned some things from us and also from them, as teaching is a relationship of interaction (3)"*. Pre-service teachers see interaction as 'conditio sine qua non' for effective teaching in modern school; which is also consistent with findings of related research. In particular, unfolding their thoughts note that verbal and non-verbal communication can make a catalytic contribution to the learning process and create a favorable learning environment: *"We have emphasized communication (verbal and non-verbal) between teachers and students, which is a key feature of interaction in the context of the pedagogical relationship, thus managing to create a communication framework in which students were able to express and exchange with us opinions, ideas and to ask questions (30)"*.

Through interactive and exploratory teaching methods, the candidate teachers of this research believe that they can achieve their teaching and pedagogical objectives. Also, one university student notes that by comparing the teaching of the teacher-mentor with their own teaching, the difference in the participation of all students was identified, using modern methods of teaching: *"The interaction with all students in the class has been amazing as well as successful. One point that baited my interest from the practicum was the fact that the students who during the lesson of the in-service teacher were passive and created a fuss, during our lesson participated actively expressing questions, as well as answering questions we asked them (6)"*.

Teachers' epistemological assumptions about teaching are evident through the following quote. A pre-service teacher notes how she taught: *"When we explained how the lesson would be done, the question was clear to the majority of the class, as they had never experienced a similar way of lesson before. The groups were separated and invited to work together to make the worksheets. The majority of children automatically stopped dealing with "irrelevant" issues and focused on the task. The teaching time passed much more creatively and perhaps faster than usual, while at the end of our teaching the children expressed their preference in our teaching approach and method (17)"*.

This mention is considered very important and characteristic for the teachers' reflection on issues of teaching theory, good practices in their teaching and also on issues related to their self-assessment and the cultivation of metacognitive skills for themselves and their students. Moreover, the epistemological assumptions of pre-service teachers are a key factor in further improving the teaching and pedagogical handling of modern teachers (Ng, Nicholas & Williams, 2010). In this direction, research shows that it is considered highly necessary to involve candidate teachers in the practicum process (Brownlee, 2004).

On the other hand, self-assessment issues can stimulate unpleasant thoughts with the aim of further improving teaching practices. A university student, in the context of his reflection, evaluates the

intervention made by his team by using interactive methods in his teaching. It considers that their teaching was not successful, due to the lack of experience, and, above all, preparedness in situations that they could not predict: *"In the teaching process we tried to follow a student-centered approach, but without any particular results as the students did not show the necessary response (...). At the level of interaction with the students we encountered difficulties and we had not taken the necessary measures in this case to implement an alternative method (38)".* As can be seen, this is also one of the objectives of self-assessment; identifying and recording teachers' weaknesses in teaching. Through such critical thinking efforts, teachers can gradually and in the long term improve their educational practices.

5. Conclusion

Acquiring a (pre)professional identity through teacher education seems to be a key prerequisite for cultivating a culture of professional development and learning. Through their training pre-service teachers can shape and transform their epistemological assumptions, understand teaching and educational issues and reflect with the ultimate goal of self-realization and self-determination. By transferring and adapting the phrase of the French philosopher, René Descartes *"I think, therefore I am"*, in modern teaching and pedagogy we could argue that *"I think, I reflect, therefore I exist in the teaching profession"*, is a reality and a basic prerequisite for the change of educational practice in the modern school.

This seems to be a reality, as the relevant theory and research in the field of teacher education focuses on the role of tertiary educational institutions, which prepare teachers and, at the same time, their practicum in schools. It is therefore argued that effective teacher education, which focuses on the third model, under which the pre-service teacher operates reflectively, with multiple roles, can contribute in the long term to improving the school and educational strategies.

This seemed to echo the experiences of the participants of this study regarding the role of practicum in the modern teachers' education. To sum up, it was found that pre-service secondary teachers expressed strong feelings of joy and enthusiasm during the preparation and conduct of their teaching as part of their practicum. The candidate teachers expressed feelings of satisfaction combined with feelings of insecurity and anxiety, through this experience. However, they stress that the role of the teacher-mentor, as well as of the students in a classroom, is extremely important in strengthening their (pre)professional identity.

Issues of experience related to the role of the teacher in modern school, which must possess both teaching and pedagogical-socio-emotional skills, were also raised. Issues of identity perception and role were also addressed, as some pre-service teachers took the view that this experience was an important milestone in their subsequent course in the teaching profession or even in their thoughts of following such a career path. A major issue that has emerged relates to the connection of theory with practice. Participants emphasize that the experience of teaching during their initial education has helped them to understand the difficulty in applying any theory. This is a central issue in the relevant scientific debate in the field of the modern teacher education.

The reflections of the pre-service teachers of this research relate to their epistemological assumptions, whether explicit or inextricable, about the teaching model that a teacher must implement. In particular, candidates are presented that approach the behavior and logic of the teaching-centered form of lesson, as well as approaches related to the construction and exploitation of interactive and exploratory teaching methods and group-centered forms respectively. The distinction between university students' experiences in teaching and how to approach learning can be a starting point for

reflection and further research on the pre-service teachers' assumptions regarding teaching and the epistemological example, which they will adopt in the future.

Wider reflection on the role of practicum in the curricula of the universities that prepare teachers and its contribution to the cultivation of professional, cognitive and social skills leads to new reformed approaches. These approaches focus on the critical reflection of students, on research issues, the effective connection of theory with practice and on issues of epistemological assumptions and strengthening the role of modern teachers. The pre-service teacher has the role of researcher, who shapes the educational reality with his/her opinions, thoughts and reflection (Katsarou & Tsafos, 2013).

The above point of view constitutes an ideal ground for action research, on the basis of which this research could be enriched at a next stage. Through action research, students intervene in the educational environment and strengthen their professional identity, while contributing to the enrichment of existing theory in this field of science (Tsafos, 2010). In such a context, teachers as reflective practitioners through positive and constructive experiences of teaching and practice can accept new theories and reframe their multiple professional role.

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