

Reflection on the Teaching Practice Experience of Students of Teacher Education Programmes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine in detail the reflections on pedagogical practice of undergraduate student teachers. The intention is to explore students' reflections on their pedagogical practice at its various stages, the factors influencing these reflections and students' self-reflection in the context of their future teaching profession. A qualitative research methodology was employed. Data were obtained through content analysis of written reflections of pedagogical practice experiences. Data analysis was conducted using the grounded theory method, which involved three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The study population consisted of 143 students of teacher education programmes at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava, who carried out their pedagogical practice in the academic year 2023–2024. The analysis of reflections revealed key concepts and their interrelationships in students' thinking about pedagogical practice. This paper contributes to the understanding of the impact of reflective pedagogical practice on students' thinking about their future profession. The results suggest that reflective pedagogical practice is important for the professional development of student teachers and the linking of theoretical knowledge with practical experience. The study highlights the role of supervising teachers as role models who significantly shape the professional identity and motivation of future teachers.

Keywords: Pedagogical Practice, Self-reflection, Pre-Service Training, Professional Development of Teachers, Supervising Teacher

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1 Introduction

Pedagogical practice can be seen as an activating and motivating factor in the process of undergraduate preparation of future teachers, also as a self-realization factor for the discovery of individual personalities and at the same time as an environment suitable for the application of theoretical education, in which the relationship with pupils, future colleagues and the teaching profession is developed (Čelinák, 2007).

According to the research of several authors (Eraut, 1994; Pířová, 2005; Kasáčová, 2005; Korthagen, 2011; Kosová, Tomengová 2015), from all their theoretical knowledge, teachers actually use only a certain part of it, it is the knowledge that has been sufficiently integrated with their personal experience and through reflection has become the dominant theoretical interpretations of practice. The research-supported theory of the interrelationship between theoretical and practical knowledge demonstrates that the condition for their interconnection and the gradual transformation of students' professional action and professional thinking is the reflective nature of pedagogical practice, which is based on the socioconstructivist theory of knowledge and learning (Korthagen, 2011; Petříková et al., 2021). This places a demand on both pre-service and in-service teacher education to place practical training through reflection at a new qualitative level (Kosová, Tomengová, 2015).

The competence to reflect on one's own practice and teaching, which is considered a core competence for professional growth, is part of the professional standards for the teaching profession in many countries (Spilková, Tomková, 2010), while the concept of reflective practice is simultaneously becoming the most widely used model for designing the practical preparation of future teachers in higher education (Petříková et al., 2021).

2 Context of the Research and its Objectives

Reflective pedagogical practice is crucial for student teachers as it enhances their professional development, bridges the gap between theory and practice and promotes a deeper understanding of the educational process. Reflective practices, such as journal writing and the use of other reflective tools, enable student teachers to critically analyse their experiences, develop competence in dealing with challenging situations and shape their professional identity. As a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983; 1987), the student engages in reflective thinking, which often has its origins in doubt, hesitation, and embarrassment, in situations that lead to new inquiry, through recalling relevant experiences (Spalding, Wilson, 2002). Key benefits of reflective pedagogical practice include:

Professional development: completing a reflective practice placement is an important step for student teachers in their professional development journey. It is an opportunity to develop new knowledge and competencies in teacher candidates by encouraging critical reflection on their experiences in a real school setting. Taking a reflective approach to pedagogical practice

as a fundamental starting point, the constructivist model of teacher education considers the student as the main actor in their professional growth and co-creator of their professional identity (Vermunt, Verloop, 1999; Slade et al., 2019; Boris, Ekiugbo, 2021).

Improving reflective skills: The ability to reflect on one's own actions is an essential competency expected of future teachers. It is a competence related to personal growth, self-development, and self-improvement of the future professional within the educational process. Tasks such as reflective journals in teacher education programmes support the development of reflective habits in future teachers (Barber, 2020). Teachers are expected to be able to implement reflective teaching, the essence of which is that they return to what has taken place in the classroom, review it, and based on this, suggest strategies for optimising elements of the educational process.

Forming teacher identity: Reflective pedagogical practice also helps students of teacher education programmes to form their professional identity. It provides an opportunity to develop a relationship with the teaching profession (Segalo, Dube, 2022; Anand, Gangemi, 2023).

In addition, reflective competence as a metacognitive competence also promotes students' awareness of their own process of becoming a teacher (Kasáčová, 2004).

Collaboration and mutual learning: reflective practice often involves sharing experiences with classmates, which can lead to shared learning. This mutual interaction is beneficial for the development of new knowledge and approaches to the educational process (Velasquez et al., 2023).

Linking theory and practice: Reflective practice serves as a bridge between theoretical knowledge and practical application, allowing student teachers to apply what they have learned in their college studies to real-world classroom settings. This helps them to understand the complexities of the educational process and thus to recognize the needs and characteristics of students, as well as the difficulties they may encounter in the future (Smith, Lev-Ari, 2005; Anand, Gangemi, 2023).

Improvement in teacher competencies: Engaging in reflective practices allows students to improve their competencies essential to the educational process, such as communication, lesson planning, and assessment (McDuffie, 2004; Zahid, Khanam, 2019).

3 Methodology

The aim of the research was to map in detail the reflections of the pedagogical practice of students of teacher education programmes at the bachelor's degree level. We continuously defined the focus of our analyses by formulating the following research questions.

What are students' reflections on pedagogical practice at its various stages?

How and what determines students' thinking before, during and after the pedagogical practice? What are students' reflections on themselves as future teachers in the context of reflecting on their experience of pedagogical practice?

For this study, a qualitative methodology was chosen. Content analysis of written texts, specifically selected parts of students' teaching practice portfolios—namely, written reflections on teaching practice experiences—was used as the method of data collection. We followed the grounded theory method for data analysis, and the process of analysis, in accordance with this theory, consisted of three phases, namely concept formation (open coding), searching for theoretical relationships between concepts (axial coding), and selecting a central concept and formulating a theory (selective coding) (Gavora, 2007; Řiháček et al., 2013).

The study employed a closed sample, consisting of students of teaching study programmes at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava ($n = 143$; 113 women, 30 men), who carried out their pedagogical practice in the 2023–2024 academic year. The practice was observation-based, conducted in primary or secondary school settings under the guidance of a supervising teacher, comprising 20 precepting lessons followed by methodological analyses of the observed lessons. The object of the observed-oriented type of pedagogical practice was structured observation of school reality and subsequent methodological analyses of the observed lessons with the supervising teachers. The pedagogical observation was more narrowly focused on the educational aspects of the educational process. The output was a portfolio of pedagogical practice, one of the components of which was the students' reflection on their pedagogical practice. A homogeneous purposive sampling design was used, with the criterion for selecting participants being their similar experience of pedagogical practice (Gavora, 2007).

4 Results

The following text focuses on the key themes and their interrelationships that emerge from analyses of student teachers' reflections on pedagogical practice at each stage of its progression, namely the entry, progression and exit phases.

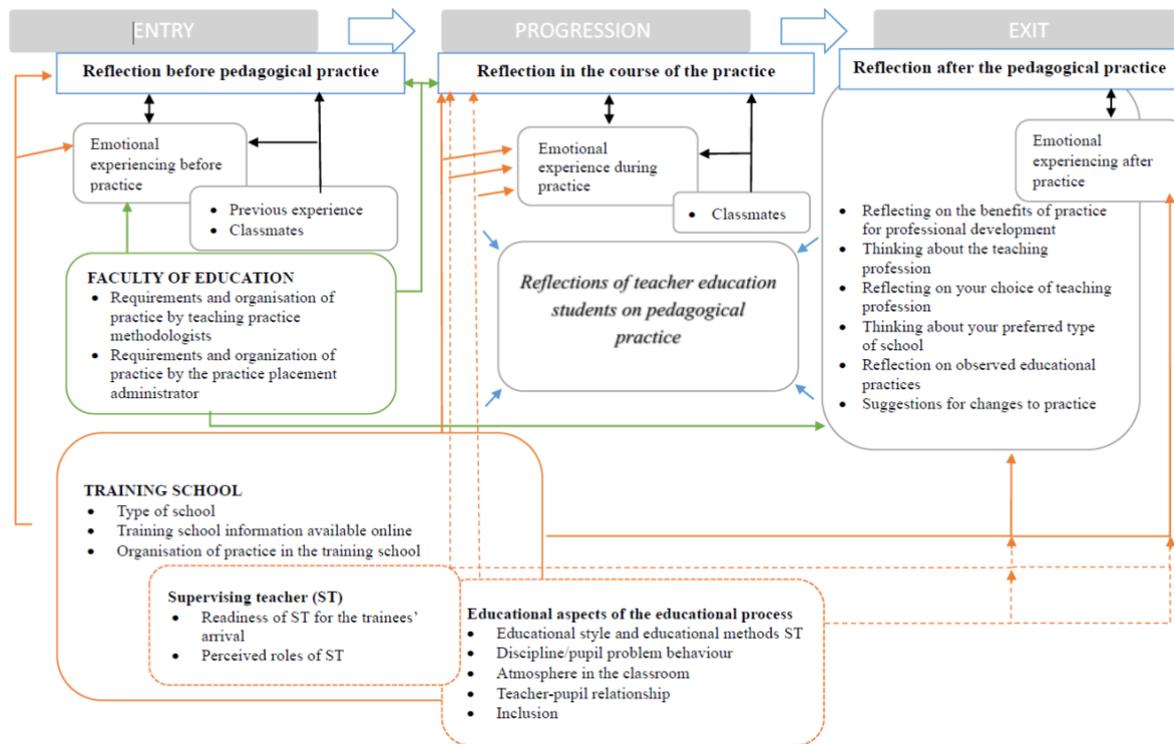


Figure 1: Map of concepts and their contexts in the context of student teachers' reflections on pedagogical practice.

How and what determines students' thinking about teaching practice in its different phases is graphically illustrated by Figure 1. Thinking about practice before it was undertaken was based on a variety of sources. Initially, students formed their ideas about what to expect through a briefing session with the practice methodologists and the practice administrator at the Faculty of Education, where they were familiarised with the requirements for successful completion of the practice. Reflection was further saturated by information available online about the training school, previous pedagogical practice experience and information conveyed by upper year students. Expectations were also notable determined by the prevailing discourse about 'today's' children: *"...before the placement I had expectations that it would be a week full of chaos and shouting..."*; *"...before first arriving at the school I was full of expectations and fears about whether a week at school would put me off the teaching profession"*; *"...what the children and teachers would be like and whether it would put me off a profession I was still unsure about"*.

Initial thinking about practice was in a mutually conditioning relationship with the emotional experience of the impending experience. The relationship between emotions and cognitive processes is reciprocal, that is, it is not only cognitions that influence emotions, but emotions also influence cognitive processes (Zibrínová, Birknerová, 2015). Before and at the beginning of the practice, in retrospect, students described different emotional experiences of positive or negative valence, often involving ambivalent experiences of the incoming experience (fears, uncertainty, curiosity, positive expectations...).

The organisation of the practice in the training school notably determined the students' experience of the practice at the beginning but also throughout its course. At the beginning of the practicum, students often reflected on the need to be welcomed and accepted in the school. The personal welcome, introduction to the school and the initial organisational instructions to the practice from the school management proved to be particularly important. The SUPERVISING TEACHER occupied a special place in the organisation of the practice. Supervising teachers were a central category in the reflections, significantly determining not only the students' emotional experience of the practice, but also their overall reflection on it. Supervising teachers were identified at the beginning of the practicum as those who, through their helpful, empathetic, and friendly approach, helped students to reduce experienced tensions, fears, or stress. Students particularly praised the preparedness of the supervising teachers for their arrival and the welcoming way they were received.

Within the context of the category of supervising teacher, the perceived role of the supervising teacher was identified as a significant sub-category. Based on the students' thoughts from the portfolios, we consider the following perceived roles of the supervising teacher:

Supervising teacher as support. Students perceived the supervising teachers primarily as emotional support, not only at the beginning of the practice, when many described experiencing slight tension, uncertainty, fears about the upcoming experience, but also during the whole experience. They were often perceived as those who, with their empathic approach, were able to alleviate possible fears and insecurities and promote an overall positive atmosphere during the practice. The supervising teacher is the one who facilitates the whole course of the practice, accompanies and supports the student during the practice, is ready to answer questions, to help him/her..., is friendly, helpful, receptive, empathetic towards the students...

Supervising teacher as a role model, inspiration. One of the most frequently reflected benefits of the practicum was the opportunity to observe teachers with different educational styles, applying different educational methods, which many students perceived as an inspiration for their future teaching practice.

Supervising teacher as a source of information. The supervising teacher was reflected by many as the one who conveyed the necessary information about the course of the practice, was the person who "guided" the students into the practice with the necessary information and provided a lot of other information related to the teaching profession during the following days.

Supervising teacher as a consultant. The opportunity to have conversations with teachers after class helped them to better understand some of the phenomena observed during the educational process. The mutual conversations were deeply inspiring and motivating for some in the context of their future profession.

Supervising teacher as a facilitator of pedagogical thinking. This role was perceived by some students who had the opportunity to interview a supervising teacher about how they

perceived their profession as a teacher. Which inspired and motivated many on their future career path as a teacher. In the context of the educational aspects of the educational process, the DISCIPLINE of the students emerged as a significant theme in the reflections, the very occurrence and manifestations of which were interesting for the students, as it emerges as a significant theme in their reflections on their profession in the future. Reflecting on this - "What will my pupils be like?" - emerges in the reflections even before the actual practice: "...what the children will be like and whether it will put me off a profession I was still unsure about." In addition to the phenomenon of problem behaviours themselves, students observed and analysed the teachers' educational approach in managing them, which, based on their own reflections, became a role model or, on the contrary, a negative example.

The concepts obtained and their interrelationships allowed us to pursue further analyses in several directions. In the next step, we decided to narrow the analysis to how teaching practice influences students' thinking about themselves in the role of future teachers - ME AS A FUTURE TEACHER. Based on the previous analyses, we chose thinking of oneself as a future teacher after the internship as a central concept that can be easily linked to the other concepts. Thus, we formulated a more specific research question: *What are students' reflections about themselves as a future teacher in the context of reflecting on their pedagogical practice experience?*

Reflecting on oneself as a future teacher featured prominently in the students' reflections after the placement. The students confronted their expectations and previous ideas before starting the internship with their current ones after the internship. For some, the new experience was a confirmation of the expected and of their previous ideas, an encouragement and motivation on the path to teaching, for others it was an opportunity to reflect on whether to stay on the path of teaching, and for others it was even a source of change in thinking about themselves as a future teacher. From the reflections, it appears that thinking about oneself as a future teacher was determined by observations of the supervising teachers during the education process and subsequent interviews with them. Do I want to be that kind of teacher too? Reflections on the teaching profession and on oneself as a future teacher were also influenced by observations of pupils' behavioural manifestations and their interactions with teachers. Even before entering the practice, students asked themselves the question - "What are today's pupils like?" The issue of discipline appears to be significant in their reflections on teaching, it is one of the concerns regarding the teaching profession that they perceive even before the actual practice. Also evident in the reflections is the link between the theme of discipline and that of trainee teachers as role models for managing undesirable pupil behaviour. Reflecting not only on whether I too want to be such a teacher, whether the model presented is worthy of emulation, but also on whether I want to work in that type of school. Do I want to be a primary school teacher where managing pupil behaviour appears to be more challenging than in a secondary school? Not only previous attitudes towards the teaching

profession, but also the immediate experience of the observed pedagogical realities determined the students' thinking about the teaching profession, and this thinking about the teaching profession is immediately reflected in the thinking about themselves as future teachers (see Figure 2).

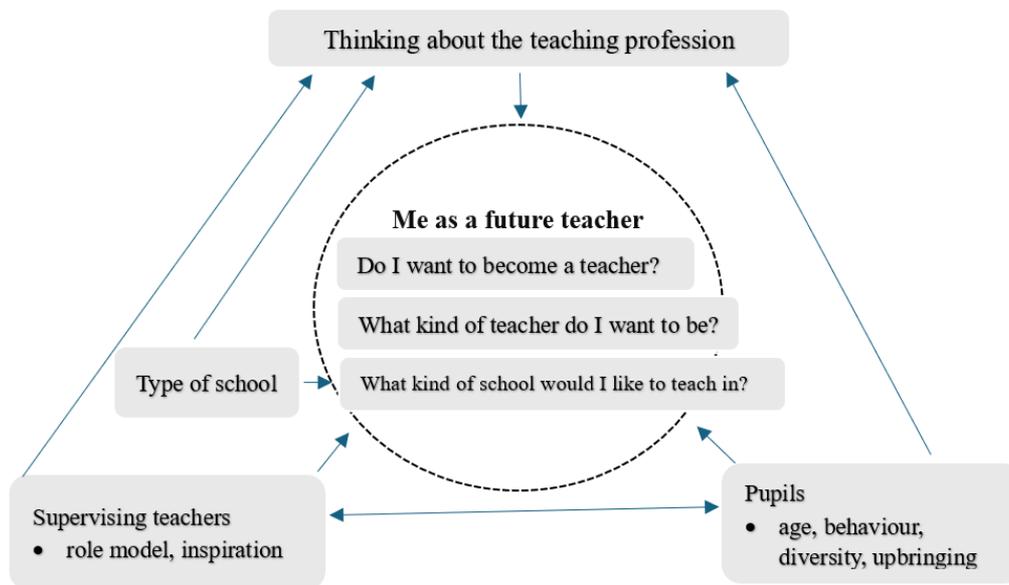


Figure 2: Students' consideration of themselves as a future teacher as a central concept.

Identified key themes arising from analyses of reflections on the central concept – self as a future teacher:

1. *Reflecting on the teaching profession is the starting point for reflecting on oneself as a teacher. The following lines of reflection emerged from the reflections.*

- The difficulty of the profession: students perceive teaching as a psychologically demanding profession, often justifying this by the fact that teachers are often confronted with unpredictable situations in their work, they are faced with a difficult task in the context of the diversity of pupils, their specific behaviours or needs.
- The responsibilities and challenges of teaching: it is a profession of great responsibility. Teachers are not only transmitters of knowledge but also shapers of the personalities of new generations. It is not just a profession but a mission.
- Respect and admiration for the profession: after completing their internship, students express greater respect, some even admiration, for the teaching profession and recognise its importance in educating future generations. "...I now have even more respect for the teaching profession, also based on the situations I have witnessed"; "After the internship, I perceive the profession with even more humility and admiration for anyone who chooses to pursue it."

Reflecting on the choice of teaching profession.

- Confirmation of the decision to become a teacher: many students were confirmed by practice in their initial decision to become teachers. Despite the awareness of the difficulty of the profession in contact with the reality of pedagogical practice, this group of students still feels motivated to pursue a career as a teacher. "Although there was a lot of negative student behaviour, it did not deter me from becoming a teacher." This sense of affirmation emerged repeatedly, with students often pointing out that the experience had given them a clearer picture of their future profession. Supervising teachers appear to be notable in the affirmation of career choice. "This teacher's approach motivated me personally to persevere in my decision to become a teacher."
- Increased motivation and enthusiasm for the teaching profession: for several students, the practice even further strengthened their initial conviction to
- "My attitude towards the teaching profession is even more positive and stronger". For several students, the practical experience has even aroused enthusiasm for teaching.
- Decision support: a smaller group was represented by students who, although attending a teacher education programme, are not yet firmly convinced of their choice to study teaching, describing their choice of university and future profession ambivalently. For some, the field experience has tipped the scales of decision-making towards the teaching profession, while for others it has further deepened their ambivalent feelings. "I am not sure that my choice of college is the field I want to pursue. Because through this experience, I have come to realize that the job of a teacher is really demanding and carries a huge responsibility for children."

Thinking about preferred type of school.

- Preference for type of school: experience also determined the preferred type of school in which students would like to work in the future. Several preferred to work with older pupils in secondary school, while some felt more motivated to work with younger children. "The practice has made me sure that if I am going to teach, it will be only in secondary school. I'm not saying I couldn't do it in primary school, but it would be more mentally challenging for me".
- Change of opinion: the practice has influenced the opinions of several students who had previously rejected the idea of becoming a primary school teacher, but after positive experiences with younger pupils are considering this option, which was a surprise for them themselves. "Although I thought I would never want to teach in primary school, this experience has made me open to the possibility," one student remarked; similarly, another said, "My attitude has changed slightly. I think that even with younger pupils, it's all possible." In this way, the internship opens the door to new possibilities and perspectives that might otherwise remain undiscovered by the students.

- Primary school is more about upbringing: another interesting aspect arising from reflections on practice in the context of preferred school type was the reflection that pedagogical activity in primary school is much more focused on upbringing than many had previously realised. This view of the educative aspect of the educational process is fundamental to the formation of future teachers, who are not only transmitters of knowledge but also educators of future generations.
- Finally, students' reflection on the overall contribution of teaching practice to their professional development as a future teacher cannot be omitted. They described the experience of the observed pedagogical reality as:
- An enriching practical experience: the internship was perceived as an opportunity for professional growth, a chance to gain valuable experience from the observed educational reality.
- Opportunity for linking theory with practice: the practice helped to link theoretical knowledge with real situations in schools, which is considered by the students to be very important for their future practice as teachers.
- Awareness of the importance of college preparation for the future profession: the practical experience fostered students' understanding of the college for their future profession as teachers.

A source of motivation for further study.

- Source of inspiration and role models: students were inspired by the approaches of the supervising teachers and gained new ideas on how to deal with educational situations in the context of pupil diversity. The practicum allowed them to observe, compare and evaluate different educational practices of several teachers, which enabled them to reflect on their own educational practices that they would prefer in their future practice.
- Overall, it appears that supervising practice has a major influence on student teachers' thinking about their future profession and their decision to become teachers. At the same time, it has also fostered an awareness of the importance of theoretical preparation at university and its connection to practice. For further professional growth, it was reflected by many students as an enriching practical experience, inspiration and motivation for further studies, the source of which was primarily named by the supervising teachers. Supervising teachers appear to have the potential to notable support and motivate practising students on their professional development journey.

5 Discussion

At a time when teaching practice is an integral part of the preparation of future teachers, it is essential to pay attention to the processes that shape their professional development. An analysis of student teachers' reflections on their pedagogical practice reveals that this process has a profound influence on their reflections on their own professional identity and their future profession. Reflections, as part of teacher education, also provide valuable information about how students think about the challenges facing the teaching profession.

One of the key findings of the analyses is that reflective pedagogical practice helps students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical experience. Our findings support the research findings of other authors who suggest that reflective practice serves as a bridge between theory and its practical application in the real-world conditions of a particular school classroom; it is an opportunity for students to apply what they learn, mostly theoretically, during their undergraduate preparation. Linking theory to practice helps them better understand the complexities of the educational process (Smith, Lev-Ari, 2005; Anand, Gangemi, 2023).

Students' reflections also suggest that pedagogical practice is an opportunity for them to self-reflect and develop their professional competencies. Students learn to critically analyse their experiences, which enables them to identify areas for improvement and thus develop their teaching competences. According to Barber (2020), reflective journals and other reflection tools are effective means of promoting the development of reflective habits in future teachers. In this way, students become active participants in their learning process and take responsibility for their professional growth. Reflective teaching practice has the potential to develop the reflective skills of teacher trainees, which, given the dynamics of the school environment and the ever-changing needs of students in the future teaching profession, are essential; it is a competence that will enable them to adapt and respond effectively to the challenges that await them in their professional lives. As Korthagen (2011) confirms, the ability to reflect on one's own practice is a core competency that enables teachers to adapt to changing conditions in the school environment.

The issue of professional identity and professional decision-making was also an important topic of reflection. Our findings show that students ask questions about their professional preferences after completing their internships. They consider to what extent the internship has affirmed or, on the contrary, "discouraged" them from the teaching profession. These reflections are in line with the ideas of several authors, according to whom reflective pedagogical practice helps students of teacher education programmes to shape their professional identity and is an opportunity for forming a relationship with the teaching profession (Segalo, Dube, 2022; Anand, Gengmei, 2023).

Supervising teachers have emerged as important actors in the professional development of teacher trainees, contributing to the formation of their professional identity. Their empathetic approach, ability to provide support and willingness to share their professional experiences contributed to creating a positive atmosphere during the practicum, resulting in students feeling accepted and motivated. According to several authors, role models and mentoring are particularly significant in teacher education (Segalo, Dube, 2022; Anand, Gengmei, 2023). Students who had the opportunity to observe and interact with supervising teachers who were an inspiration to them were more likely to be affirmed in their decision to become teachers.

Ultimately, pedagogical practice is not only an opportunity to develop professional competences, but also to shape the personal and professional identity of future teachers. Support from supervising teachers, as well as opportunities for reflection and critical evaluation of their own experiences, are key to successfully linking theoretical education to practical teaching activities. The practical experience of pedagogical practice contributes to teacher students becoming motivated, competent and self-reflective professionals who are prepared to meet the challenges of a changing educational environment.

6 Limits

Although quality researchers often select their research participants "purposively", i.e. based on their chosen criteria and availability, as we did in our selection, it is more typical for the grounded theory method to follow the principle of theoretical sampling. Where the researcher gradually expands his or her selection of participants based on emerging concepts during the analysis. However, due to the nature of the research material and the impossibility of re-entering the field, we worked with a closed sample. At the same time, we are aware that the data obtained would have been more valid had it been obtained through the application of multiple research methods of data collection. In this paper, we present only the results of the content analysis of the written products, but our broader analyses of reflections on pedagogical practice included analysis of interviews with research participants in the colloquia. The interviews conducted support the theory derived from the content analysis of the written products. However, the scope of this paper did not allow inclusion of these interview analyses in the results.

7 Conclusion

The process of student teachers reflecting on their teaching practice is essential for the personal and professional growth of future teachers who are trying to find their place in the dynamic and challenging environment of education. These reflections are particularly

important for students as they gradually form their ideas about their future profession, reflecting on their own professional aspirations and preferences.

Analysis of the reflections shows that pedagogical practice strongly influences student teachers' decisions to become teachers. For many students, pedagogical practice has reinforced a positive attitude towards teaching and strengthened their determination to face the challenges inherent in the profession. They see teaching not only as a profession but also as a mission that requires responsibility, empathy and commitment. Supervising teachers occupy a substantial place in the reflections. Their empathetic approach to students, support and willingness contributed to creating a pleasant atmosphere during the practice. Their approach and role models have been an inspiration to many students, and for many it was the approach of the supervising teachers that was the source of affirmation of their decision to become a teacher.

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