



INVESTIGATING SCHOOL PLACEMENT AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REFLECTION FOR PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on documenting the reflections of undergraduate students in the early childhood education programme with regard to their experience with school placement in kindergarten. Their views on the importance of school placement, the implementation of activities they design, the teaching process and the interactions developed in the classroom are studied. A review of responses indicates that most students can attribute the importance of their school placement to a number of factors related, firstly, to the acquisition of experience, but also to more complex factors relating to communication and the interaction of the students themselves with kindergarten children, as well as the link between academic knowledge and its practical application. At the same time, it is highlighted the fact that, through the process of reflection, the students are willing to revise some of their choices while planning and implementing educational activities. In conclusion, it appears that the study of student reflection is a complex “mechanism” which nevertheless appears to be quite significant in preparing future teachers and can contribute to improving the operational framework of practical work experience (school placement), with a direct impact on the feedback to the knowledge they are provided.

Keywords: school placement, student-teachers, reflection, professional identity

1. Introduction

School placement comprises an important aspect of undergraduate education and training of prospective teachers, both in the Greek setting and internationally. By participating in such a programme, students are required to function as teachers themselves and to engage in the process and act of teaching.

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During their studies, and particularly in the University of Patras Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education (DESECE) where this study was conducted, participants in the school placement programme attended a number of courses while also visiting schools. These courses aim to familiarise the students with lesson planning, organising the learning environment and implementing organised activities at public kindergartens. Workshops were held in parallel where students could reflect on their experiences at all phases of their involvement in school placement (planning, organisation, implementation, evaluation).

As part of this programme, the importance of student teacher reflection on their school placement was an integral part of their courses, as it is generally accepted that it enhances their understanding of the link between teaching choices and classroom results, with future implications where it can help them improve their teaching performance.

2. The importance of empirical learning and critical reflection

The literature review highlighted a strong interest in cultivating critical reflection in higher education, particularly during teacher training. Dewey (1933, p. 9) defines reflective thinking as 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends'. In the current training framework, critical reflection implies a method enhancing the way student teachers learn when their reflective processing of a course of study takes place during practical application, as a way of linking knowledge to learner experience (Slade, Burnham, Catalana, and Waters, 2019). It should also be noted that student teachers begin their university course having already formed certain beliefs about learning and teaching. During the course of their studies, through academic knowledge they are taught and particularly in combination with the teaching experience acquired through their school placement, they have continuous opportunities to revise the initial beliefs with which they entered university. For such a process to be fruitful and in order that teachers' previous knowledge and experience be linked to the learning framework, it is necessary to employ critical reflection (Raikou, 2014b). This is a difficult and arduous process, because our beliefs are formed gradually starting in childhood and are deeply rooted within us; resistance on the part of trainees is to be expected (Raikou, 2019).

Nevertheless, according to Cranton, a person's experiences are very important because they influence the way in which they learn, even if they are not directly related to the object (2000). This means that both student teachers' previous experiences and the learning experiences they have during their studies are equally important (Mezirow, Taylor, & Ass., 2009). Consequently, the shaping of educational experiences contributes to the learner's development. We should keep in mind, however, that this is predicated on designing educational programmes which include methods of action to be followed by the students (Dewey, 1938/1980, p.18). And that is not all. It should be noted that the

application of experiences through methods of action is not sufficient, if it is not followed by a process to support critical thought and reflection on the experience. In order that teachers can learn from experience, they must have time to think about the experience. Richert says in this regard:

“To have an experience does not mean you learn something; but to have an experience and then to think about it, that is learning... Good teaching does not rest on a set of static, predetermined rules and techniques; changing conditions require teachers who think, who occupy themselves with the conditions of teaching and do not take them for granted, while they approach each case with an open mind, both that which is familiar and that which is not.” (Richert, 1991, p. 113)

In this way, the thoughtful teacher is in a position to adapt what he or she already knows to what is experienced in the modern, changing world and, as such, to create new meanings and revised actions - an aspect that Dewey had already examined in his work nearly 100 years earlier (1933). This kind of processing has a decisive impact on shaping teachers' professional identity, even during their studies, as will be analysed later.

3. The shaping of teachers' professional identity through school placement

It is worth noting that a school placement course in the education sciences, through its institutionally predefined role, is a decisive factor in developing the professional identity of student teachers and is integrally related and contiguous to its construction (Meyer, 2009, Yuan & Lee, 2016). At the same time, it offers undergraduate students the opportunity to function as teachers themselves in a real school environment and to experientially approach their profession (Fotopoulou, 2017).

Based on this premise, it is no accident that a significant point of reference for student presence in school placement is the act of teaching itself, which is not simply the conveyance of knowledge, but a process which, as mentioned above, presupposes critical thought and a critical approach to planning and organisation.

With regard to the effectiveness of their teaching ability, on the other hand, the students tend to find themselves in an ongoing metacognitive process in order to be able to redefine the teaching approach with an eye to improving or modifying it. In several cases, the improvement of their teaching approach is seen to impact on improvement in themselves as teachers (op.cit.).

It is obvious, therefore, that teaching experiences, knowledge and personal involvement and action by undergraduate students in a school placement in general are significant parameters which contribute, shape and add meaning to their professional identity during their studies (op.cit.).

4. The School Placement programme at the Department of Educational Sciences and Early Childhood Education (DESECE)

In focusing on the educational framework of this study, we would say that professional competency of students at the University of Patras DESECE is demonstrated by their successful participation in School Placement (SP)ⁱⁱ. The compulsory SP programme requires that all students take part in: a) 5 Compulsory School Placement (CSP) courses and b) 3 Elective School Placement (ESP) courses, which have been linked to School Placement.

Specifically, as regards the CSP courses on which this study was based, they include the following five courses:

- 1) "Early Childhood Education": a 3rd semester course. The course aims to familiarise students with the kindergarten environment and the operation of the class through systematic observation.
- 2) "Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Education: Planning Activities I": a 5th semester course. This course includes laboratories and aims to teach the process of designing and implementing activities in kindergartens participating in the School Placement Kindergarten Network.
- 3) "Planning and applying educational activities in kindergarten I", a 6th semester course. This course also includes laboratories and aims at implementing innovative pedagogical approaches based on theoretical streams offered through the Department courses in kindergartens participating in the School Placement Kindergarten Network.
- 4) "Teaching and Learning in Early Childhood Education: Planning Activities II": a 7th semester course which focuses on planning with a concentration on specific targets, selecting appropriate content for implementing the targets while taking account of the class context in kindergartens participating in the School Placement Kindergarten Network.
- 5) "Planning and applying educational activities in kindergarten II", in the 8th semester, the aim of which is to familiarise students with critical reflection in relation to the educational process.

As for the syllabus of courses in the school placement programme, an effort is made to highlight the need for planning and related scheduling of educational activities for the kindergarten class. To that end, the current detailed programme is studied and emphasis is placed on key structural elements which an organised activity should include. Laboratory courses focus on planning educational activities and faculty support for students focuses on suggesting methodologies for implementing organised activities based on the following axes:

- Preparing students to take part in the kindergarten programme;
- Understanding the structural elements of the daily kindergarten programme and incorporating them into teaching activities;

ⁱⁱSee <http://www.ecedu.upatras.gr/>

- Planning educational activities and inducting them into the daily programme;
- The role of teacher as researcher and thoughtful professional.

The specific study was designed and implemented after taking into account the theoretical approaches outlined above and the educational framework of school placement as described in this section. The research objectives we established related to:

- a) documenting students' views on their school placement, and
- b) identifying changes in student views with respect to school placement.

Specifically, with regard to the second research objective, factors that influenced potential changes in student views are investigated and the point in time at which students revised their opinions is determined.

5. Methodology

This study, which comprises a case study and part of a broader piece of empirical research, focuses on recording the reflections of a sample of 3rd and 4th year undergraduate students (n=116), with regard to their experience with school placement in a kindergarten classroom during the winter semester of the 2017-18 academic year. The study was conducted using a written questionnaire distributed to students after they had completed their school placement requirements. Specifically, the survey adopted a mixed methodological approach combining descriptive statistical techniques and methods from the qualitative example (content analysis) to enable in-depth exploration of the research questions emerging from the study and the presentation of theoretical issues related to student reflection.

A written questionnaire was designed and completed in reference to student reflection. One way to safeguard data collection instruments is for the researcher to prepare research tools specific to the purpose of the study (Cowie & Bell, 1999). The theoretical underpinnings presented above (Mezirow, Taylor, & Ass., 2009; Richert, 1991; Cranton, 2000; Dewey, 1933) were studied in preparing the research tool for this study (the reflection questionnaire). Open- and closed-ended questions were developed to prompt students to recall significant events from their school placement and to document how these may have changed their views regarding school placement. The questionnaire included 11 open- and closed-ended questions which were answered along the axes in Table 1. For the purposes of this paper, open-ended question 1 on the questionnaire, corresponding to axis 1, was used, along with closed-ended questions 7-11 corresponding to axes 2-4 on Table 1.

The students participating in the study responded to the questionnaire after they had completed their school placement requirements. A two-hour workshop was held with the students as part of collecting data and completing the questionnaire and was aimed at recording students' views on their school placement, and at verbalising the students' reflections on the planning and implementing of educational activities at the kindergartens.

Table 1: Axes in Student Reflection Questionnaire

Axis 1	Importance of school placement
Axis 2	Changes in views
Axis 3	Re-examination of views of previous decisions & behaviours
Axis 4	Revision of the meaning of the course

The data collected comprised the students' written responses regarding their school placement, their role as teachers, the relationships that develop at university and in kindergarten and the factors they believe influence the educational process. Qualitative analysis of the responses was applied in processing the data. The content of student responses from the questionnaire used during the reflection process was analysed specifically.

An analysis model in three successive steps was followed to analyse the data. The first step involved recording the students' views by creating original categories arising from the analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions on the reflection questionnaire. Through this analysis, categories describing the students' responses were developed for each question. All answers were then assigned to the appropriate resulting categories and the occurrence of each category per student was counted. Also in the third step, the students' responses to the questionnaire's closed-ended questions were counted. The students' responses are presented in aggregate in the next section, along with their interpretation.

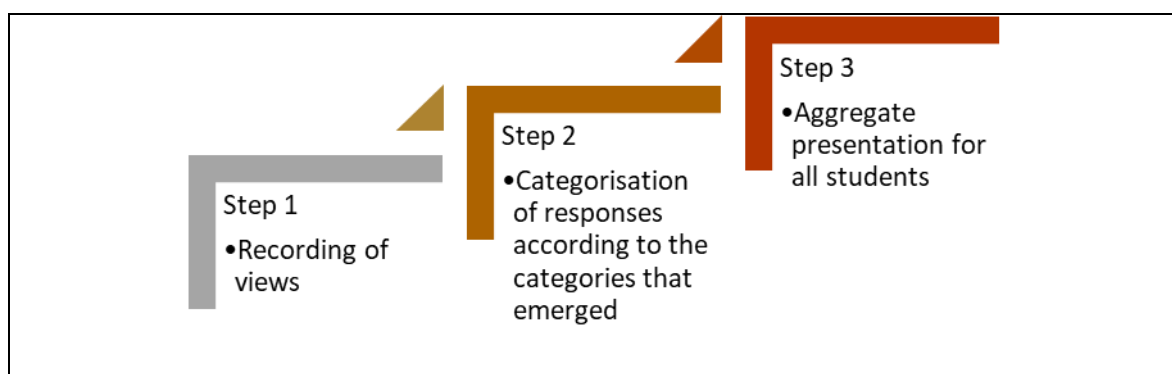


Figure 1: The Model Analysis

6. Results

The review of student responses to the first question, in which they were asked to record their views and the reasons for which they believe school placement is

important, indicated that there was some consistency amongst the responses and could thus be categorised as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Record of reasons SP is important

Reasons that SP is important	Number
Acquiring experience	51
Contact/interaction with children	49
Familiarisation/introduction to the kindergarten teacher's professional role	37
Familiarisation with the workplace	37
Linking theory-practice	37
Learning through practical application/trial in practice (planning, implementation, feedback, evaluation)	23
Understanding teaching & learning conditions	22
Ability to handle difficulties/various scenarios	20
Learning & improvement by observation & kindergarten teacher advice	17
Contact/interaction with colleagues	3

According to the table above, the most frequently cited important reason for taking part in school placement is the acquisition of classroom experience. In other words, there seems to be a tendency amongst students to connect their school placement with their future profession and therefore seek to acquire experiences through their placement that will help them cope with their job as kindergarten teachers in future. An equally important reason for students to participate in school placement is their contact and familiarisation with kindergarten children. Their responses make it clear that students place great emphasis on their contact with the children they meet in class and essentially determine their profession in relation to them.

Reasons immediately following in importance, according to student responses, concern both their professional identity, as they list familiarisation/initial contact with the professional role of the kindergarten teacher and familiarisation with the work setting as significant reasons, as well as the programme of study at DESECE, noting that through their school placement they are able to connect their theoretical studies to practice in schools.

Continuing with the reasons that students believe their school placement is important, student responses were along the axes related to both shaping their professional identity and to the thoughtful re-examination of their studies. Specifically, students stated that their school placement is important because they are able to learn through trial in practice (planning, implementation, experience feedback, evaluation of educational activities) and to better understand the teaching and learning conditions in a real classroom setting. Additionally, the fact that they are able to develop skills related to handling difficulties and situations that arise in an ordinary kindergarten classroom is also a very important issue for students. Finally, both their contact with kindergarten teachers and the axis of concurrent learning that occurs through school placement, along with the contact and cooperation with fellow students as determined by the

framework and the rules of school placement, were for some students significant reasons for taking part in the school placement programme.

As to the second research objective in this study, the possible change in student views regarding school placement, and specifically the nature of such a change, is investigated. The five axes in Table 4 (Teaching process, Interaction with the children, Interaction with the kindergarten teacher, Interaction with partner, Support in the laboratory) were determined as part of the students' reflection upon completing their requirements for winter semester. These axes as a whole fully describe the DESECE school placement framework, as outlined in the department's programme of study.

Table 3: Record of change in student views regarding SP

Change in views during SP	Number
Yes	64
No	50

Based on student responses, it appears that more than half changed their views about school placement (64/116 students), but a significant number (50/116) also stated that they did not revise their views on the school placement programme, according to Table 3.

Table 4: Record of axes of change in student views regarding SP

Change in views during SP as to...	Number
Teaching process	36
Interaction with the children	27
Interaction with the kindergarten teacher	16
Interaction with partner	7
Support in the laboratory	1

Specifically, through their involvement in school placement, the students changed their initial views, particularly in the area of teaching process and interaction with the children and the kindergarten teacher, and to a lesser extent about the learning process taking place in the university setting. In other words, it seems that those students who revise their views regarding SP are influenced by their experience in the field, and specifically by their participation in the teaching process in kindergarten classrooms and their contact with the children and the kindergarten teachers (Table 4).

The responses to the next question the students gave were also noteworthy, as it appears that although they stated that their views remained unchanged, most of them (110/116) re-examined previous decisions and behaviours, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Record of students' re-examined decisions / behaviours following SP

Re-examination of previous decisions & behaviours	Number
Yes	110
No	6

Of even great interest are the students' responses when asked to specify the instant they re-examined their previous decisions. In other words, although in the previous question on their change of views, the changes were mainly attributed to the influence of visits to kindergartens, the process of actually changing their decisions in relation to their behaviours appears to take place primarily at university, during student preparation and reflection, and to a lesser extent in the classroom when implementing educational activities. Specifically, 62/116 students stated they changed their decisions while planning activities in the laboratory courses; 49/116 during their evaluation; 25/116 in the SP course; and only 32/116 in the classrooms they were visiting at the schools (Table 6).

Table 6: Record of instant when students re-examined their decisions / behaviours following SP

Instant of re-examination	Number
During planning	62
At school	32
During evaluation	49
In class	25
At a private moment/place	5

Finally, for the fourth axis of student reflection and the students' re-examination of their studies within the school placement framework, it appears that almost all students (110/116) reconsidered the meaning of their studies (Table 7).

Table 7: Record of students' reconsideration of the meaning of their studies through SP

Did you reconsider the meaning of your studies?	Number
Yes	110
No	6

Specifically, for this last reflection axis, students were asked to choose which of the options given - role of the teacher, link between theory and practice, and relationship between teacher and student and amongst colleagues - influenced them to re-examine their studies. From a review of the responses, it appears that most students considered all of the above-mentioned reasons important in revising their views with regard to their studies (77/116, 76/116, 70/116 and 35/116, respectively, Table 8).

Table 8: Description of axes of students' reconsideration of the meaning of their studies through SP

As to...	Number
Role of teacher	77
Linking theory-practice	76
Teacher-student relationship	70
Relationship amongst colleagues	35
Role of family in education/Relation between school-family-society	3
Teacher development	2
Work schedule	1

Table 9: Record of reasons for students' reconsideration of the meaning of their studies through SP

What influenced you in your re-examination?	Student responses				
	Slightly	Somewhat	Moderately	Quite a Bit	Very Much
Interaction with kindergarten teacher	13	15	16	43	26
Interaction with fellow student	17	18	25	36	17
Interaction with children at the school	3	1	9	40	59
Contact with other teachers	12	15	24	52	10
Experience/presence in kindergarten	3	3	6	41	59
The school placement course	4	5	19	47	37
Specific activities	6	11	28	54	11
Organisation of workshop					1

Specifically, with regard to the reasons which influenced their re-examination, it appears that their presence in the school generally and their interaction with the children and the kindergarten teacher in particular, as well as the teaching programme, played a primary role in the changes which occurred and were recorded in this project. Also significant was the effect of the school placement course and the interaction with specific teachers in the Department (Table 9).

7. Discussion

It is clear that the role of school placement in the study programme of student teachers is, as they themselves state, critical to preparing for their career. It is easy to understand that the development and incorporation into their studies of a carefully organised programme of visits and activities in schools and at university, through educational processes before and after school, are critically important to enhancing the learning process. This is because, although they are more influenced by their experiential activity in schools, the process of change through reflective processes that present opportunities for critical thinking takes place within the special laboratories at university. This aspect is substantiated by the literature referenced in the previous section in regard to the benefits of empirical learning and reflection upon it (Dewey, 1933; Richert, 1991; Raikou, 2014), as well as by earlier research on the usefulness of cultivating reflective processes during the university education of teachers in combination with school placement (Raikou, 2014a, 2014b; Raikou, Karalis, & Kampeza, 2017; Raikou, Liodaki, & Karalis, 2016).

The findings of this study make it clear; therefore, that the study of student reflection constitutes a mechanism that seems to be quite important in preparing student teachers. This process provides a number of elements that can help to support and empower educators, and to redefine and improve the operational framework of school placement, with a direct impact on feedback on the knowledge provided to them.

In connection to the above and based on the results of the study, it was also found that by taking part in school placement, students acquire, shape and redefine

teaching skills and experiences through which they begin to understand and define their own professional identity (Fotopoulou, 2017; Fotopoulou & Yfanti, 2011).

In closing, we could say that several important issues emerge that call for further study with regard to improving this framework. Of particular interest would be the study of a reflective method using various applicable techniques (questionnaire, processing in groups, dialogue, role playing, and others) and their efficacy. Additionally, it could lead to a proposal for creating a cooperative environment amongst students in order to bolster their interaction in a beneficial manner.

In all events, the expedience of linking the study programme of student teachers to the school placement framework is supported by this study, which also highlights the constructive and effective contribution of reflection to the professional development of teachers.

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