



## Importance of educational practices in early childhood education teacher training

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses the central role of teaching practicums in the training of future Early Childhood Education teachers. Through a qualitative study based on the personal assessment reports of 14 students who completed their first practicum in schools in Cordoba (Spain), five key categories are identified that reflect the training experience: personal and vocational growth, emotional bond with students, practical learning, difficulties encountered and relationship with the teaching staff and families.

The analysis shows that internships not only allow theoretical knowledge to be applied in real contexts, but also act as a catalyst for personal and professional transformation. The emotional bond with children, the development of pedagogical skills and the overcoming of challenges contribute to consolidate the teaching identity and prepare future teachers for a reflective, inclusive and committed practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Initial teacher training, early childhood education, practicum and experiential learning, teacher-pupil bonding, pedagogical competence development.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Future Early Childhood Education teachers must do classroom placements as a crucial part of their preparation because they enable the integration of theory and practice in authentic learning environments. Through these experiences, students can put their newly learned material into practice, hone their pedagogical abilities, and consider their role as teachers.

One of the fundamental purposes of internships is to observe directly in the classroom the characteristics and evolution of the students, as well as the development of the activities carried out throughout the school year (García, 1989). This observation allows future teachers to understand classroom dynamics and the specific needs of children in early childhood education.

In addition, one of the key objectives of teaching practice is for trainees to carry out and apply systematic observation of children's behaviour and learning (Hamre et al., 2012). This task goes far beyond passive observation; it involves learning to observe with pedagogical intent, taking note of gestures, interactions, emotional responses, modes of participation and learning styles. Through tools such as field diaries, checklists, rubrics or anecdotal records, future teachers can detect behavioural patterns, emerging interests, specific difficulties and individual strengths in Early Childhood learners.

This procedure is crucial for creating reflective and flexible teaching methods that can react in a way that is sensitive to the group's actual requirements. For instance, ongoing observation can assist in determining whether a child exhibits strong motivation for particular activities, needs additional assistance with language development, or struggles with emotional self-regulation. This data is essential for developing suitable interventions, individualized instruction, and advancing an inclusive and fulfilling educational experience. (Esteve & Alsina, 2024).

Moreover, the ability to observe with judgement is also a professional competence that allows teachers to assess the impact of their own teaching interventions, adjust them when necessary and make decisions based on evidence from the context (Gairín-Sallán, et al., 2019). In short, to observe is to learn to look with purpose, with sensitivity and with educational responsibility.

Another objective is for future teachers to establish personal relationships with early childhood teachers, which is essential for understanding collaborative work and the institutional culture of schools (Skouteris et al., 2012; Moloney, 2010). This interaction is conducive to sharing experiences and building a professional support network.

In addition, one of the key objectives of teaching practice is for trainees to develop and apply tools for systematic observation of children's behaviour and learning. This task goes far beyond passive observation; it involves learning to observe



with pedagogical intent, taking note of gestures, interactions, emotional responses, modes of participation and learning styles. Through tools such as field diaries, checklists, rubrics or anecdotal records, prospective teachers can detect behavioural patterns, emerging interests, specific difficulties and individual strengths in Early Childhood learners (Kolb, 1984).

This procedure is essential for developing reflective and adaptive teaching practice, able to respond in a way that is tailored to the real needs of the group (García, 2008). For instance, constant observation can help to identify whether a child needs more support in his or her language development, whether he or she has difficulties in emotional self-regulation, or whether he or she is highly motivated towards certain activities. This information is key to personalising teaching, planning appropriate interventions and promoting a truly inclusive and meaningful education.

Observing children in early childhood education in the school context allows the future teacher to understand children not only from theoretical discourse, but also from everyday interaction, from the context of the classroom. This committed and profound educational outlook can only be developed in real contexts, in direct contact with students, and is progressively consolidated throughout the internship period (Cornejo & Fuentealba, 2008).

Moreover, the ability to observe judiciously is also a professional competence that enables teachers to assess the impact of their own teaching interventions, adjust them when necessary and make decisions based on evidence from the context (Gürsoy, 2013). In short, to observe is to learn to look with purpose, with sensitivity and with educational responsibility.

Finally, classroom practices in early childhood education teacher training allow students to get started in the preparation, development and evaluation of educational activities, consolidating their ability to design effective learning experiences and reflect on their impact on child development (Sarceda-Gorgoso et al., 2024; Beas et al., 2008).

The implementation of the European Higher Education Area in Spain modified the duration of the teaching practice (known as the practicum) for trainee teachers (Leite & Horta, 2016). As a result of this, the training plans were also modified and since then the need has arisen to know how these practices have influenced both students and the schools themselves (Gairín-Sallán et al., 2019; González-Garzón, & Gutiérrez, 2012; Ruíz-Bernardo et al., 2021; Santos, et al., 2017).

This background has led us to propose as an objective of the study to find out what assessment teachers in training (TiT) make after carrying out their first teaching practice in an educational centre.

## II. METHOD

This is a qualitative, descriptive study using self-reports from trainee teachers who have completed their first practicum as an instrument for collecting information.

### *Population and Sample Size*

The population are the second-year students of the Early Childhood Education degree at the University of Cordoba (UCO), Spain, who have just completed their first practicum course in educational centres. The sample is made up of 14 students from a tutorial unit who did their practicum in various centres in the city of Cordoba. This group was chosen because they were all tutored by the same professional tutor and university lecturer, which guaranteed uniformity in the guidance and follow-up received by these students.

### *Procedure and Analysis*

In the curriculum of the Early Childhood Education degree at UCO, students begin their first practicum during the second year of the degree. This first practicum in educational centres lasts four weeks, during which, in addition to attending the early childhood education centres, they participate in seminars with teachers from the university and from the early childhood education cycle of the educational centres. In these seminars, they express their doubts, share their experiences and ask questions about certain situations they observe in the classroom. The participating teachers give them guidance and guidelines on how to deal with these situations.

At the end of the practicum, each student is required to submit a report on his or her practicum which addresses various aspects, one of which is a personal assessment of this new experience. In this study, we will only analyse this point of the report.

In this stage we adapted some phases of the method used by Alsina et al. (2019). In an initial stage of the analysis procedure, the researcher carried out an individual and detailed reading of the answers given by the students corresponding to their assessment of the practices in the assigned school. This review was not limited to a mere identification of themes, but was intended to allow the researchers to familiarise themselves with the type of responses and reflections, as well as to understand the approach and ideas expressed by the students, and to begin to identify key elements, with particular attention to evidence of the development of key



competences such as critical thinking, reasoned argumentation and the ability to self-regulate learning.

From a pedagogical perspective aligned with the competency-based approach, understood as the integrated mobilisation of knowledge in meaningful situations (Perrenoud, 2009), this phase made it possible to assess the extent to which the responses reflected complex training procedures, beyond the mere reproduction of content. In this way, each teacher began to systematically organise and structure the information collected, taking as a reference both the expected learning and the defined performance criteria, with a view to generating inputs that would nurture a collective reflection aimed at the continuous improvement of educational practice and contextualised pedagogical decision-making.

From this initial review, and considering the general objective previously established, we proceeded to organise and structure the information in a coherent manner, thus facilitating a systematic analysis of what each student said about his or her experience during the teaching practice period. The accounts offer an honest and critical look at the performance of the teaching role, the relationship with the students and the teaching team, and the application of knowledge acquired during the theoretical training.

### III. RESULTS

From this initial review, and considering the general objective previously established, we proceeded to organise and structure the information in a coherent manner, thus facilitating a systematic analysis of what each student said about his or her experience during the teaching practice period. The accounts offer an honest and critical look at the performance of the teaching role, the relationship with the students and the teaching team, and the application of knowledge acquired during the theoretical training.

Although each student has a different style and level of depth, together they provide a valuable portrait of the experiences of prospective teachers as they encounter the real classroom for the first time. Students report on their interaction with students, the personal and professional learning they have experienced, as well as the support they have received from teachers and the school. They also consider the challenges they have faced and, of course, their emotions, evolution and teaching vocation.

Five main categories emerge from the qualitative analysis that allow us to systematise the

learning and experiences reflected in the evaluations that we will explain below and show some of the evaluations made by the students:

**a) *Personal growth and vocational discovery:*** this has to do with how the internships have allowed them to reaffirm their teaching vocation, increase their confidence and promote their personal and professional development.

In this case, all the students in the sample mentioned that the experience has been key to confirming their teaching vocation. The internship acts as a space for self-knowledge where strengths, doubts and deep motivations emerge. Many say that this stage was decisive in reaffirming their desire to become teachers and strengthening their commitment to early childhood education.

Many students say that the internship helped them to 'feel confident that they had chosen the right path'. This classroom experience acts as a transformative experience that cannot be obtained in the university classroom: it allows the future teacher to discover, in contact with the reality of school life, whether he or she really wants to become a teacher.

Example of assessment by subject TiT11: 'At the end of the internship, I felt very good about myself and I have confirmed that I want to do this'.

**b) *Emotional bond with the students:*** this category emphasises the affective connection between the teacher and the children, highlighting the importance of creating a safe and affectionate environment that favours learning and the integral development of the students.

Affective contact with children was a recurring theme in the students' assessments. They emphasised the importance of establishing a close relationship, based on affection, trust and empathy. These relationships are very positive because they not only enrich the professional experience, but also allow for a better understanding of the emotional needs of the students. During the internship, students have moved from an idealised image of teaching to a more realistic view, discovering their own limits, strengths and challenges. This procedure is crucial for building a strong, committed and reflective professional identity.

TiT13: "The best thing about this experience has been, without a doubt, the love received by the 14 students and their teachers.

**c) *Practical learning and development of teaching skills:*** This is associated with the competences acquired during the internship, such as classroom management, activity planning, effective communication and adaptation to the individual needs of the children.



In their reports, the students reflect an important development in competences such as communication, activity planning, creativity, pedagogical observation and adaptation to the pace of the group. They especially valued the possibility to apply theoretical knowledge in a real context. They were aware that the internships allow them to apply what they have learned theoretically in relation to classroom management, the design of playful and meaningful activities for the children, as well as adapting teaching to different paces. These competences cannot be acquired from theory alone.

TiT3: 'I have developed creativity, empathy, patience, and I have learned to read children's non-verbal cues.

**d) Difficulties and challenges identified:**

The challenges faced during the internship are acknowledged, such as managing diversity, handling disruptive behaviours, effective planning, and collaborating with families.

The students' assessments show that they also demonstrate critical awareness. They identify difficulties such as classroom management, addressing diversity, communicating with some families, and a lack of experience in resolving unforeseen issues. These challenges are perceived as opportunities for improvement and learning. These internships confront students with the unpredictable, with things not covered in textbooks. This awakens in them a flexible, critical mindset, and a willingness to continue learning throughout their lives.

All students mention in some way the challenges they faced (from managing group dynamics to integrating innovative methodologies), which demonstrates a critical reflection on their internship. These challenges are perceived as opportunities for improvement and learning.

TiT10: "I still struggle to effectively manage group dynamics in large classrooms or very heterogeneous groups."

**e) Relationship with the teaching staff and collaboration with families:** This relates to the importance of effective collaboration and communication with colleagues and families to enrich the educational procedure and support children's holistic development.

Most students point out the positive reception from teachers and positively value teamwork. They also recognize the importance of collaboration with families, although some highlight the need to improve communication and parental involvement. Positive comments appear about the teachers' reception and the importance of family-school collaboration. Some documents also mention

obstacles, such as low family involvement in certain contexts.

TiT5: "I was surprised by the collaboration between parents and teachers; everyone was very involved."

The five categories identified in the personal assessments are not independent or isolated; on the contrary, they form an interconnected system that reflects the comprehensive learning and transformation procedure that future teachers experience during their internships. They are interconnected in a dynamic system during the teaching practices of future Early Childhood Education teachers, as shown in Figure 1. Each node represents a dimension of experience, and the lines show the reciprocal relationships established between them. These connections reflect that:

- Personal growth is nourished by emotional contact with children, teacher support, and overcoming challenges. Thus, a future teacher who connects emotionally with their group, overcomes their initial fears thanks to the collaboration of their tutor, and learns to manage conflicts in the classroom, emerges strengthened in their decision to become a teacher.
- Emotional bond not only motivates but also facilitates learning and strengthens the school-family relationship. It is evident that establishing a caring climate favours personalized observation and teaching, which impacts both the child's learning and the student's self-perception as a future teacher.
- Practical learning emerges from managing difficulties and a collaborative environment. It is known that the experience of designing a meaningful activity that connects with the interests of the children's group strengthens the student's confidence as a teacher, allows them to apply what they have learned, and prepares them to respond to unexpected events.
- Difficulties become opportunities for improvement thanks to the support of the teaching team. A preservice teacher who doesn't know how to manage an inclusion situation turns to their mentor, observes, tries a strategy, and upon seeing positive results, gains confidence and reaffirms their teaching role
- Collaboration with families and teachers is the cornerstone that supports and enriches all other dimensions. For a preservice teacher, having the opportunity to collaborate in a meeting with families allows them to understand the child's reality outside the classroom, which in turn



strengthens their bond with the child and strengthens their role as emotional and pedagogical guide.

#### **IV. RESULTS**

Personal growth and vocational discovery are of great importance in the training of early childhood teachers. This allows them to confirm their commitment to the profession, identify their strengths and areas for improvement, and develop a strong professional identity. Self-assessment and critical reflection are essential for continued growth and adaptation to changing educational demands. Teaching literature indicates that teachers who have experienced this personal growth often demonstrate greater empathy, adaptability, and an ability to create positive learning environments (Barrientos, 2018; Guskey, 2002). Their self-confidence translates into more effective classroom management and the implementation of innovative pedagogical strategies.

The emotional connection with students demonstrated by preservice teachers allows them to establish strong emotional bonds, which is crucial in early childhood education, as it facilitates children's confidence, motivation, and emotional well-being. A teacher who understands and values the importance of these relationships is better prepared to meet the individual needs of their students (He & Qi, 2018). This bond will enable them to manage emotions in the preschool classroom in the future. Teachers can foster this bond through active listening, respect, empathy, and the creation of routines that provide security in their daily practice.

Therefore, it is important for them to develop these skills from their initial training. Activities such as shared play, individual conversations, and recognizing children's emotions are effective strategies for strengthening the teacher-student relationship.

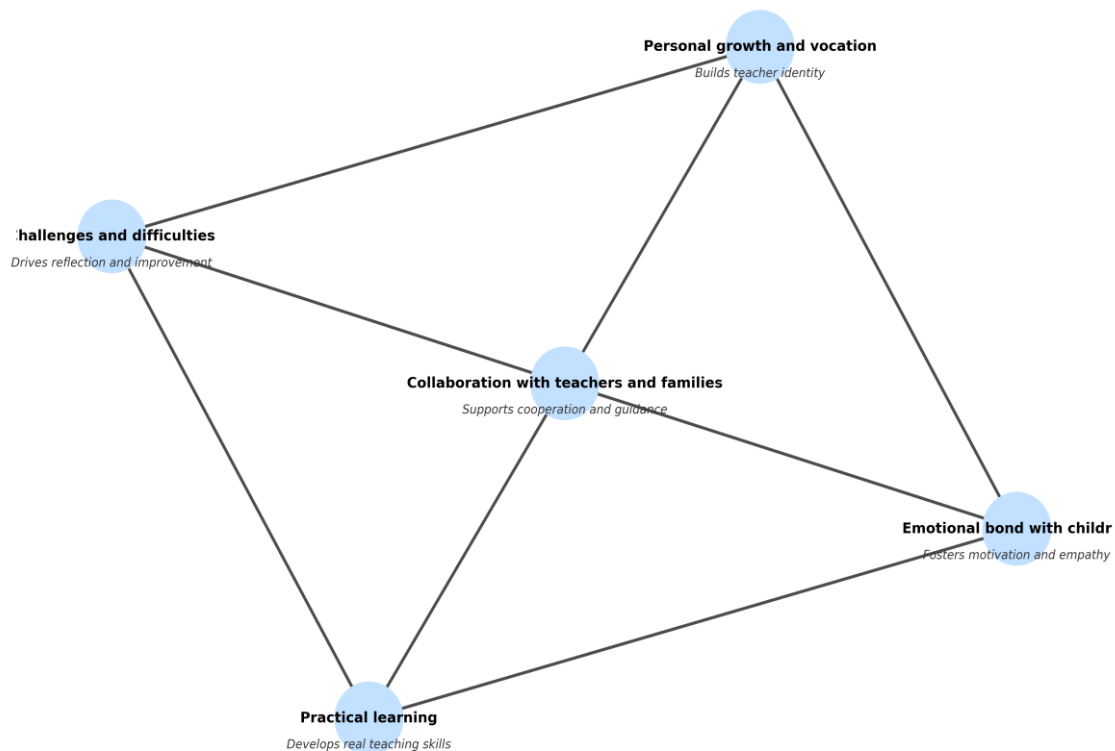
Students recognized that developing practical skills is essential for teaching effectiveness. It is important that theoretical training be complemented with real-life experiences that allow future teachers to apply knowledge, address everyday challenges, and reflect on their practice. The acquired skills will be reflected in future teachers' ability to create stimulating learning environments, manage behaviours, differentiate instruction, and collaborate with colleagues and families. These competencies contribute to quality education and optimal student development (Aldape, 2008).

Preservice teachers have been able to identify and reflect on the teaching challenges they still face. This is essential for all future teachers because it requires and encourages them to develop resilience, seek creative solutions, and continually improve, all of which they can then put into practice when the time comes. Hernández et al. (2023) point out that the ability to face challenges is essential in a dynamic and diverse educational environment. During the development of the teaching profession, teachers must implement classroom management strategies, adapt to individual needs, establish clear rules, and collaborate with other professionals and families to overcome challenges and promote a positive learning environment. Therefore, it is positive that they are aware of these needs and weaknesses during their training.

During their internships, these students discovered that the ability to work as a team and establish positive relationships with families is essential for creating a cohesive educational community. They recognized that these relationships facilitate consistency in educational practices and provide comprehensive support for students. As Barahona-Cruz et al. state (2023), teachers should encourage open and respectful communication with families.

Internships are not a complementary training program; they are the heart of teacher training. They constitute the bridge between theory and reality and represent a procedure of personal and professional maturation. Through them, future teachers develop key teaching skills and learn to think as teachers, beyond the role of student. Educational internships must be cared for, supported, and thoughtful spaces so that they fulfil their true role: training teachers with vocation, competence, empathy, and commitment. Therefore, the need to design supported internships, guided by trained tutors and in school contexts that foster mutual learning between teachers in training, students, and schools, is reaffirmed.

Finally, we must point out some limitations of the study. On the one hand, the size and type of sample, since only the reports of 14 students from the same tutoring unit were analyzed, which limits the generalizability of the results. Furthermore, a unique approach was taken to personal assessments, such that the study focuses exclusively on the subjective dimension (personal assessment of the internship), without contrasting it with external observations, interviews, or performance records.



**Figure 1. Interconnection of Categories in Teaching Practices Teacher Training in Early Childhood Education**

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