


The Meaning of the Practicum in Initial Teacher Training: The Educational Value of Tutoring


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Abstract

The theory-practice and practice-theory relationship is a fundamental axis in the learning of trainee teachers; therefore, the practicum must constitute the key element in their university training. The research described in this paper, in which students and teachers from the bachelor's degrees in early childhood education and primary education programs at the University of Huelva in Spain have participated, has been carried out through a descriptive and interpretative qualitative study focused on case studies. This study highlights the need for greater communication between the work experience centers and the university and between the professionals who tutor the work experience period. It also points to a demand for greater professional training in relation to the tutoring of the practicum so that students have the opportunity to build their professional identity through shared action and reflection. It is necessary to continue studying and assessing a modification of the study plans where the practicum has a relevant weight throughout the initial university training.

Keywords: *practicum, qualitative study, case studies, reflective practice, tutoring, teacher training*

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Introduction

The incorporation of the Spanish university context into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has led to an educational transformation (Bezanilla et al., 2019), placing greater relevance on the practicum included as part of teaching degrees. The practicum is now the core subject with the highest number of credits in the curriculum (Saiz Linares & Ceballos López, 2019) in the Spanish context.

The practicum can be understood as a formative period that is officially regulated, allowing students to complete their training in schools (Saiz Linares & Susinos Rada, 2018). The practicum represents an opportunity to connect the academic and professional spheres (Blanchard & Fernandes, 2021; Rosselló et al., 2018) and to establish interactions between theory and practice as necessary to rework their pedagogical knowledge and give shape to the theories on which it is based throughout academic training. The practical practicum must be primarily based on reflective, inquiry-based, collaborative practice (Arias et al., 2017; Colomina et al., 2024; Zabalza, 2016) to ensure quality in initial training (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Iqbal & Ali, 2024; Maidou et al., 2020).

The practicum allows future teachers to experiment and experience the learning, knowledge, and interpersonal relationships acquired during initial training (Sarceda-Gorgoso et al., 2024). In the practicum, however, there is not always constant feedback between theory and practice so that both elements of knowledge nourish each other (Becerra-Sepúlveda et al., 2023; Iglesias et al., 2019; Isidro-Lorenzo & Carcausto-Calla, 2024; Vaillant & Marcelo, 2021).

The practicum cannot be considered simply another subject in the curriculum; instead, it must form the backbone of initial training (Saiz Linares & Susinos Rada, 2017; Valle & Manso, 2018). The goal of the practicum is refocusing students' learning so they can understand and reorient their actions (Arias et al., 2017). Indeed, "professional practice places the student—the future professional—before actual possible scenarios (teaching skills) in which they have to face problems and resolve them" (Valle & Manso, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, it seems evident that this practical training period involves three parties, primarily students, academic tutors, and professional tutors. Tutors are teachers who guide and accompany the learning process of students, some in the academic university context (academic tutor) and others in the school context (professional tutor). The role of the student is that of an assistant in training of the professional tutor. All three converge at this point to achieve the same goal (i.e., the student's practical training; Sarceda-Gorgoso et al., 2024). Close collaboration between all three parties is necessary, along with tutoring that provokes questioning, reflection, and decision-making among students while contributing to the acquisition of professional competences.

In recent years, several studies focused on analyzing the practicum. After conducting a study with future teachers at Spanish universities, Verger-Gelabert et al. (2023) concluded that students valued practical training more than theory-based subjects, showing some dissatisfaction with academic tutoring and the use of the portfolio as an evaluation tool, with students demanding greater communication with the professional tutor. Mudra (2018), on the other hand, carried out research in Indonesia to determine which obstacles prospective English teachers encountered in practical training, concluding that classroom management, teaching aids or media, and teaching methods, among others, represented the biggest barriers.

Saiz Linares and Ceballos López (2019) carried out a comparative study on the meaning of the practicum in three European universities, concluding that all three merged the professionalizing vision of the practicum with reflective actions, relating university learning with practical training in schools. These results match those found by Del Arco et al. (2021), Bruno and Dell'Aversana (2018), and Rodríguez-Gómez et al. (2017).

After conducting research with infant and primary education teaching students, Pantoja et al. (2019) concluded that the schools where practical training occurs should be more involved in designing the

practicum to strengthen the connection between the university and the school, integrating the practicum in the students' curriculum, and improving and adapting the evaluation instruments in line with the educational context. Similarly, Clarke and Mena (2020) state that professional tutors do not have extensive training on how to tutor, and in many cases, tutoring is the result of the idiosyncrasies of their immediate context. Furthermore, it should be noted that the focus on reflectivity associated with exploration methods—based on professional articles and biographies, self-evaluations, questionnaires, and field diaries—favors the development of dialogical competences on teaching but does not ensure improved teaching performance (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2018; Iglesias et al., 2019; Saiz Linares & Susinos Rada, 2018).

The practicum tutors' perception around “what,” “how,” and “what to teach” significantly contributes to determining the construction of students' professional identities (Pérez & Quijano, 2018); such perception influences how they guide the shared reflection on the pedagogical dilemmas they may encounter (Mosley et al., 2017). In other words, students' learning is influenced by the tutoring received (García-Lázaro et al., 2022). Saiz Linares and Susino Rada (2017) concluded that the schools, where students conduct their practical training, decisively affect which aspects of educational practice students focus on and how they shape their perceptions around education; these results match those found by Castañeda-Trujillo and Aguirre-Hernández (2018).

Difficulties found in the literature are the minimal time dedicated to practical training compared to the rest of the curriculum, as well as the fact that practical training is, for organizational reasons, conducted toward the end of the university course, creating an obstacle in terms of linking theory and practice (Valle & Manso, 2018). According to the study conducted by Plazaola Giger et al. (2018), although reflective practices are designed, these practices ensure that professional tutors promote student reflection.

To improve practical training, it is necessary to have a network of centers and teachers selected on the basis of educational criteria or good practices (Zabalza, 2011). This training requires committed professionals who analyze, reflect, and question the activities designed by the students, the decisions taken, and the actions in the school context (Castañeda-Trujillo & Aguirre-Hernández, 2018; Saiz Linares and Susino Rada (2017).

Related studies have focused on analyzing the sense of practice. For example, practicum focusing on stakeholders, in many cases, highlights the weaknesses and strengths of this formative action. This study is intends to further explore the general proposed objectives: (1) describe and analyze the design of the practicum teachers at the Faculty Of Education Sciences, University of Huelva, and (2) learn how academic and professional tutoring processes are conducted.

Contextualization of the Teaching Practicum at the School of Education Sciences at University of Huelva

The practicum is included in the curriculum as the practicum and dissertation module for part of the infant and primary education bachelor's degrees. This practicum comprises a total of 50 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS credits. The credit distribution is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution of Credits for the Practicum in the Infant and Primary Education Teaching Degrees*

Subject	Credits (#)
Practicum I	20
Practicum II	24
Dissertation	6

The distribution of the practicum, in the curriculum, is identical in both the infant and the primary education degrees. Practicum I is carried out in the second semester of Year 3. Practicum II is carried out in the second semester of Year 4. To enroll in Practicum I, students must have passed at least 72 credits. Practicum II requires students pass Practicum I (ANECA, 2022, VERI-INF, Section 5; Annex I, page 6; VERI-PRI, Section 5. Annex I, page 10).

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which the implementation of the Bologna process has brought about an impactful change in Andalusian universities, both in the overall curriculum and in the practicum course and its tutoring. The main goal of the research team was to explore whether the practices constitute the backbone of initial teacher training or are simply a subject in the curriculum.

Methodology

This study is part of the Development of Competences in Initial Teacher Education in Andalusia After Bologna project (EHEA; UMA 18-FEDERJA-127). This work involves a mixed-methods study.

The first phase of this study, which focused on qualitative study, used a survey technique in which questionnaires were administered to teachers and students in the early childhood education and primary education degree programs at various Andalusian universities during the 2019–2020 academic year. There were 1,380 students in the early childhood education degree program and 2,640 in the primary education degree program. To achieve a 95% confidence level, we needed a minimum of 351 responses to ensure data reliability. The sample exceeded this estimate, resulting in 790 students' responses. The study population of teachers was 1,832 subjects, resulting in a sample of 285. The questionnaire delved into the pedagogical perspectives on initial teacher training and knowledge of both qualifications within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) framework. Once data were collected and analyzed, the study moved to the second phase.

In the second phase of the study, we conducted a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012), which focused on a case study (Finol & Vera, 2020; Stake, 2010), and the objective was to learn about the participants' perceptions of the focus of the study (Flick, 2009; Rapley, 2014). For this study, the results would not be generalized; instead, they would be transferred after understanding them in another context (Flick, 2018).

The mixed-methods research design was proposed due to its openness and flexibility—both in the implementation of the study and in the analysis of the results obtained (Iño, 2018). For this reason, the research phases are intermingled but can be concretized as the following: negotiation and access to the field, data collection, categorization and analysis of data, and reporting.

Study validity has been achieved through the triangulation of the research process. The triangulation of agents during the data collection process was successful, participants in the study were both teachers and students, and a variety of instruments were used, specifically questionnaires and interviews.

In this article, we present the results obtained in the second phase of the research—a qualitative study carried out in an Andalusian university. The findings are focused on the tutoring conducted during the practical training period at the University of Huelva.

Participants

In this second phase of the investigation, participants were selected via a purposive sampling method and not by following statistical criteria (Hernández & Carpio, 2019). Participant inclusion depended mainly on their

availability and interest in the study, as they acted informants who provided their perceptions regarding the focus of the research. The following selection criteria were used:

- A member of the faculty executive team was linked to both degree programs.
- Teachers were involved in Years 3 and 4 of the infant and primary education teaching degrees, which is when the practicum is imparted.
- Students enrolled in the final year of their degree course, they have completed a practicum, and are available to take part in the study.

Thirteen people took part in the study: one member of the faculty executive team, six teachers (three from the infant education degree and three from the primary education degree), and six students (three from the infant education degree and three from the primary education degree). With the selected participants, we were able to conduct an intrinsic case study, allowing us to know in depth their perceptions about mentoring in practical training.

To respect participant confidentiality and to preserve the anonymity of the study, we used fictitious names. We also informed all participants about the implications of the study. Participants signed an informed consent form in order to participate.

Instruments for Data Collection and Data Analysis

The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was structured on demographic data, academic and professional experience, the pedagogical dimension of teacher training, and initial teacher education, with the items related to the practicum and its tutoring focused on the latter section. Once the questionnaires were completed, we analyzed them by debugging the data matrix, coding the data, and performing an analysis using SPSS software.

We used semi-structured interviews to collect information (Alegre, 2022; Mayorga-Fernández, 2004), and we understand how the participants interpreted and influenced the objective of the study (Angrosino, 2012). During these interviews, we asked participants a list of open-ended questions depending on the course of the conversation. Questions were differentiated according to the interviewee, with a total of three guides, and the questions were centered on the following thematic areas: teaching identity (current and future teachers), teaching professional experience, experiences as university students, and perceptions regarding the practicum and the final degree project (both teachers and students). Each interview lasted between 1.5 to 2 hours.

Data obtained during the interview were recorded in field notes and audio recordings, which were later transcribed verbatim. A range of institutional documents were also analyzed, including data from both information collection strategies using a deductive categorization system (Gibbs, 2012). To achieve this data collection, we followed the steps outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data transformation, and result extraction. Following this process, three categories emerged from this analysis: (1) overview of the practicum, (2) professional tutor, and (3) academic tutor. Each are described below:

- Category 1. Overview of the Practicum (Analysis of the Design and Implementation)
 - Subcategory 1.1. Recognition of the Formative Value of the Practicum
 - Subcategory 1.2. The Practicum as a Scenario for the Reconstruction of Practical Thinking
 - Subcategory 1.2.1. Criteria for Selecting Centers
 - Subcategory 1.2.2. Role of Tutoring
- Category 2. Professional Tutoring

- Subcategory 2.1. Professionalism and Involvement of Professional Tutors
- Subcategory 2.2. Training for Professional Tutoring
- Subcategory 2.3. Coordination of Professional-Academic Tutoring
- Subcategory 2.4. Working Conditions of Professional Tutoring
- Category 3. Academic Tutoring
 - Subcategory 3.1. Professionalism and Involvement of Professional Tutors
 - Subcategory 3.2. Training for Academic Tutoring
 - Subcategory 3.3. Working Conditions for Academic Tutoring

For this study, we used a range of acronyms to identify evidence, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Description of the Participants and Evidence Coding

Subjects	Coding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Faculty executive team; doctor of pedagogy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Doctor of education ○ Category: Professor hired doctor ○ 15 years as a university teacher; 20 years in another regulated teaching environment ○ Experience in responsibility assumed/charge: 9 years 	Int-VP-Hector
Participants: Infant education teaching degree	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student 1 (4th-year student) 	Int-AI-Carmen
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student 2 (4th-year student) 	Int-AI-Adriana
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student 3 (final work of degree) 	Int-AI-Nora
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Education physics teacher ○ Bachelor of Instituto Nacional de Educación Física (INEF; National Institute of Physical Education) ○ Psychopedagogue ○ Doctor of psychopedagogy ○ Category: Associate professor ○ University teaching: 7 years ○ Another regulated teaching environment: 25 years 	Int-PI-Jaime
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Education primary teacher ○ Bachelor of psychopedagogy ○ Doctor of psychopedagogy ○ Category: World: English: Computers ○ University teaching: 11 years 	Int-PI-Isa
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bachelor of psychology and pedagogy ○ PhD in psychopedagogy ○ Category: World: English: Computers ○ University teaching: 20 years as an associate professor 	Int-PI-Carlota

Participants: Primary education teaching degree

• Student 4 (4-degree course)	Int-AP-Marta
• Student 5 (4-degree course)	Int-AP-Nuria
• Student 6 (4-degree course)	Int-AP-Carla
• Teacher 4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teacher at education elementary ○ Category: Temporary substitute teacher ○ University teaching: 2 years 	Int-PP-Esther
• Teacher 5 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Bachelor of history ○ Category: Temporary substitute teacher ○ University teaching: 4 years 	Int-PP-Rosa
• Teacher 6 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Education primary and psychopedagogy teacher ○ Category: Temporary substitute teacher ○ University teaching: 4 years 	Int-PP-Irene

Institutional documents

• Infant Education Teaching Degree Self-Evaluation Report	VERI-INF
• Primary Education Teaching Degree Self-Evaluation Report	VERI-PRI

Results

The results are presented based on the three analysis categories established: (1) overview of the practicum, (2) professional tutoring, and (3) academic tutoring.

Category 1. Overview of the Practicum: Design and Implementation Analysis

European Higher Education Area (EHEA) guidelines consider professional training of students to be one of the main purposes of curricular plans, of which the practicum should be an essential part. The practicum can be considered the training period most valued by students (Verger-Gelabert et al., 2023) and teachers, as one teacher states regarding the primary education teaching degree:

I believe having a practicum is essential in this and other degrees, because it is what connects students directly to the actual context of schools ... , as there is no guarantee that other subjects will give students the opportunity to carry out practical activities directly related to schools, pupils, or other realities, so for me the Practicum is fundamental. (Int-PI-Isa)

If we are to offer prospective teachers a professionalizing dimension, practical training must be a key part of students’ training (Rodríguez-Gómez et al., 2017; Zabalza, 2016), and must be closely interconnected with the theory-based content from the classroom (Vaillant & Marcelo, 2021). However, the voices of these professionals include no reference to how these practical experiences can help students build their practical thinking. While it is important to connect with school life and make decisions in this context, it is also fundamental that students realize how to activate their skills and resources, what kind of tools to resort to when responding to a situation, and the reflective processes they activate. In other words, it is not enough to simply spend time in schools, socialize in their culture, and uncritically acquire knowledge. To have an impact on this professionalizing dimension, it is essential that schools, where students carry out their practicum, are

involved in the training, giving them the opportunity to not only observe good educational practice but also to actively take part in school dynamics and reflect on their interventions (Branda, 2018; Saiz Linares & Susinos Rada, 2017). Moreover, students at the School of Education Sciences of University of Huelva are fully aware of the importance of choosing the right school, as Nora states:

I took great care in choosing my school for practical training, as I wanted somewhere that would help ensure I was ready to face a classroom when I finish at the university. Whether in a nursery for babies and toddlers or at a kindergarten for 3- to 6-year-olds, I don't mind, but I want to at least have mastered the basics and be able to say that I can cope. (Int-AI-Nora)

Students acknowledge that chance often comes into play when assigning the schools, since students with the best academic records can choose first; others, such as Carmen, end up with their third or fourth choice:

I was unlucky when it came to choosing the school. The one I wanted was my childhood school, there are a lot of people who take it because it's pretty good, and it's very close to the university. So I couldn't get my first or second choices, I got the third or fourth option, but still good... I took this school because a friend of mine knew it, and he told me that it was very good, that it had good teachers. (Int-AI-Carmen)

Int-AI-Carmen's response indicates that other students' experiences play a role in the decision-making process when choosing a school; however, this is not enough since the university should provide students with complete information so they can choose their school based on pedagogical and educational criteria. In this regard, and possibly due to this lack of information, students often decide to change the school where they are going to conduct their practical training because they are not convinced about how it works. Adriana points out: "I asked for another school, for a change; I liked it, but the teachers did not follow the methodology that I would have liked, and I also wanted to experience another school" (Int-AI-Adriana). Sometimes the opposite is true, when a student does not dare change and ends up turning the situation into positive learning, as Marta comments:

I was about to ask for a change, but I am reticent when it comes to asking for things, so I just get on with what I have. I was given a 1st grade, and a very particular 1st grade at that... and he [the teacher] let me get on with it, I learned a lot about myself. I didn't say anything at the university..., but I learned a lot, it was my first contact with children. (Int-AP-Marta)

The practicum does not refer solely to the period of practical training that takes place in another physical context; it also refers to a learning opportunity for students in which the work of the academic and professional tutors becomes relevant and has great educational value. The quality of the practical training depends on both; however, in schools, the work of the professional tutor is crucial. This context involves experimentation, action, and active research, which is why the involvement, guidance, and feedback from this professional tutor are key to the students' development as teachers, as demonstrated by Nora and Nadia:

The degree course trains you for theory, but it does not train you for practice. I think I am capable [of creating a teaching programme] thanks to my practical training, because I had a good tutor who made me get involved, and also the school was quite competent, it had a project-based methodology, and that also gives you a certain fluency. (Int-AI-Nora)

I was delighted [with the professional tutor], both with the first one who left and also with his replacement, we became friends and everything. He was very helpful, giving me materials, everything... He let me act as a proper teacher, he gave me my role. (Int-AI-Nadia)

It is important to highlight the roles that both the professional and academic tutors play in students' learning during the practicum. The following paragraphs show, from the perspective of participants in the study, the importance of the work of both the teacher who tutors in the school and the teacher who performs this function at the university because both have to be part of a whole.

Category 2. Professional Tutoring

The professional tutor is a fundamental agent during practical training, as they will facilitate or hinder the learning process; practical training in the school presents a real opportunity to build practical knowledge and acquire professional skills. This process depends largely on the relationship between the university and the school, as well as the information they each provide. In this regard, according to the teachers interviewed, the extent to which students benefit from practical training will depend on the professional tutor assigned to them. According to Rosa:

It depends on who you have as your tutor at the school where you are doing your practical training. If you get someone who is bothered by having a trainee student in the classroom, well you are just there as a monitor. (Int-PP-Rosa)

This means that students have to continue their training once they have finished their university studies. According to Esther (Int-PP-Esther), “the university provides them with the tools and knowledge, but they have to develop them in practice, once they have finished their degree course.”

University teachers are aware of the importance of the involvement of the tutors in the schools, of the need to coach students, and of the improvements required to increase the quality of tutoring in these schools. According to Isa's words:

Sometimes we need to do better in explaining to the tutors in the school what their work is or what they have to evaluate, especially because you may find evaluations that are either very low or very high; I think it is not always clearly explained how they have to follow up and, above all, how they have to evaluate. (Int-PI-Isa)

This case study includes a wide range of teachers' opinions on involvement in the professional tutoring received by students during their practical training. In most cases, the professional tutors were adequately involved and concerned about student training, as Jaime points out:

The tutor at the school... most of them are much more involved... I think the school tutors should help them in everything, teach them documentation, how to draw up a programme, how to fill out an incident report, they should teach them how things are in general... everyone has their own particular way, but you should teach them how to behave, and then give them autonomy... and the school tutor should welcome students as if they were other teachers. (Int-PI-Jaime)

Greater complicity with students is an aspect that is sorely missing, “having an open, flexible mentality... teaching them how to teach” (Int-PP-Esther). Students must have the freedom to conduct their practical training but also receive solid supervision during which they are guided and assisted in order to implement the teaching–learning processes and learn to manage the classroom. It is essential that professional tutors allow students seeking teaching degrees to be part of the daily routines from Day 1, as evidenced by Nora's words:

In year one, in just the second week, she put me in the assembly and said, “Come on, sit in on the assembly;” she then sat at a table behind me and told me anything I didn't know... whatever it was, she made me take part from the very first minute, I was very happy with her. (Int-AI-Nora)

It would seem that this aspect is one of the issues to be improved in training in schools, as indicated by both teachers and students taking part in the study, when they stressed, “if you commit to having trainees, be sure to help them” (Int-AP-Carla). Another issue to improve, according to participants in the study, is the assignment of professional tutors since the trainees are often imposed on the teachers in the schools without them having received any prior training in tutoring. Rosa states:

It is often a burden for the school’s own teachers to have trainee teachers come in. If they are on board with it, then it is fantastic, but when the principal at the school imposes it, then perhaps it is the most negative part. There should be tutors who want to tutor, with all that this entails. (Int-PP-Rosa)

The evidence collected shows how students, in these degree courses, require the invaluable help of professional tutors. But the voices of the teaching staff (Jaime and Esther) reduce this work to the function of welcoming students and facilitating the transition from student to trainee teacher. It is striking that there is no mention of the responsibilities of involving students in reflective, investigative processes, guiding them in their decision-making, accompanying them during their deliberation processes, etc. The vision that is shown is not related to a reflective, investigative teacher in the classroom; rather, it gives the impression that the ultimate goal is to know how to manage the classroom and be able to experiment. But what is all this for?

Professional tutoring must count on an academic tutor to facilitate learning and to ensure the construction of the student’s practical thinking.

Category 3. Academic Tutoring

This study shows that academic tutors demand greater involvement with students, offering coaching, mentorship, guidance, follow-up, and feedback, as well as greater communication and coordination with professional tutors. In this sense, it is a priority “for the tutor here [at the university] to connect with the tutor there [in the schools]” (Int-PI-Carlota) since participants in this study have indicated that the university is lacking in many aspects in this regard, as Jaime’s states:

The academic tutor should be much more involved... they should go and talk to you, ask about your concerns... there should be more feedback... and more communication, see how things are in the schools, because there may be problems, in fact, there have been... you have to make things clear to them about what needs to be done. (Int-PI-Jaime)

The interviews appear to indicate that the function of the academic tutor is to resolve doubts and carry out the obligatory tutorials, as Rosa mentions: “With the students I have three mandatory tutorials, in addition to any others they want to have with me. I would do the first one as a group, and the other two individually” (Int-PP-Rosa). This aspect is corroborated by the student, Nuria:

We had a meeting at the start of the Practicum, and I haven’t spoken to her since, but I know what she’s like and I wouldn’t have had any problem speaking to her. When it came to handing in the work, I couldn’t go so I gave it to a friend to hand in. (Int-AP-Nuria)

It seems that the practical training report guide is presented in the first practical training seminar. Students are then given the documentation before starting at the school, with the seminars reduced to tutorials from this point. These tutorials focus on resolving conflicts, problems, or doubts that may arise in the school, with reference to the work that students need to hand in at the end of the course—but without monitoring students’ learning or offering a deep, critical reflection on the training process, and not developing reflection on action (Schön, 1998; Smyth, 1989). Some teachers describe this situation as an established protocol in which they play little or no part; the institution itself gives little importance to tutorial work. As Rosa suggests:

In the first tutorial, I will explain what is going to be required of them in the report, let them know what is going to be evaluated, the guide... I mean, it's not something I decided, rather it is imposed by the practicum coordinator. And then other tutorials to see how the practical training is going, and a final one by way of a short conclusion. (Int-PP-Rosa)

Coaching students, following up on assignments, providing tools to encourage reflection on practical training, maintaining good communication with the person in charge of tutoring at the school, etc., are some of the tasks tutors must carry out during practical training. The interviews with students from both the primary and infant degree courses demonstrated that these functions are not carried out. As Marta states:

We don't have much of a relationship with the tutor [academic tutor]; there are two or three seminars throughout the practicum when they give you information, but I think the tutor is there mostly in case you have any problems, obviously he will solve them...; we had an initial meeting where they showed us how to prepare it [the practicum report], and I did not see him again until it came to handing it in. (Int-AP-Marta)

In some cases, it would be essential for academic tutors to have more training on the practicum and learn the philosophy of this subject since there is a certain deficiency in this aspect, as can be seen from Nora's experience:

With this second tutor things didn't go so well... neither of us were happy because he was a bit special, and he didn't understand certain aspects of early childhood education. ...[H]ere came a point when I didn't know how to complete the work, so I asked him: "How do you want me to do the work?" All I wanted was to get the work done once and for all, because it was completely useless. What works for me is my day-to-day work experience... I was not afraid of the grade my tutor would give me, nor was I afraid of this teacher's grade. He had some problems with other students on the course... I did not want any problems, so I just did as he said and then I was off. (Int-AI-Nora)

This situation indicates that, despite the initiatives of the EHEA, it is the students who must adapt to the teachers and not vice versa, creating a barrier to good quality learning and preventing students from enjoying the process. One reason for this may be that the academic tutors have several students to tutor, making it difficult to offer suitable monitoring, since "there are always incidents, because it is difficult to control or supervise all students during practical training, especially at the School of Education, where we have a large number of students" (Int-PI-Isa). Another reason may be that "you only have a few paid hours of work to dedicate to the practicum" (Int-PP-Irene) since work at the university is overloaded with other teaching and administrative tasks. This situation means that, "in the end it is the student who pays the price, but I think the problem is one of general organisation" (Int-PP-Irene).

Improving the follow-up process at the university would help ensure that students do not see the report, turned in for their work during practical training, as "doing a job to get a grade" (Int-AP-Marta) but rather as an opportunity to redesign their teaching work from practice and expand their professional knowledge. Improving follow up would also help to serve as a space where students can build and shape their professional development. The academic tutor is in a position of great responsibility when it comes to reflecting on and perfecting the designs and approaches for the tasks to be carried out or for their thought schemes.

Some of the teachers interviewed, especially Jaime, said they believed the academic tutors should be associate professors since they have the most direct contact with the schools where the practical training occurs; however, the structure of the curriculum, with teaching only occurring in the morning, makes it difficult for these teachers to carry out this function as they have to remain at their place of work. Also, the teacher assignment criteria they follow, which are based on professional teaching categories, place associate professors at a disadvantage when it comes to choosing teaching in the departments, as Carlota points out:

The practicum should be taught by the associate professors, who are the ones actually in the schools; if I am the last in and the practicum has already been assigned, then there is nothing I can do... [T]he university works with a hierarchy that is very difficult to break down... [W]e have a master's degree in orientation and it is only in the morning, which means I have never been able to teach it; when it was in the afternoon... Of course, those of us who have to work in the morning cannot come, so they give them to interim teachers or people on internships, or doctoral staff, instead of us... These things are incoherent because the experience has to at least serve some purpose. (Int-PI-Carlota)

Along the same lines, the member of the management team considers that being, or having been, a teacher is an added value when it comes to managing the practicum and tutoring students in such an important period in their professional training:

This function [vice-dean of practice] should be carried out by someone who has taught in schools or even have been a tutor for practicum students. I think this gives you an overview of where students at the university will be heading, and I think it would be a desirable, albeit not essential, requirement, because, well, you end up managing from the office and anyone who has not been through the school experience will never be able to do a truly great job. In my view, having had a teaching career in a primary school is an added value. (Int-VP-Hector)

Therefore, it is essential to increase the time spent in schools, so students can be trained in a continuous flow from theory to practice and from practice to theory, experiencing theory and theorizing practice (Domingo, 2021). Jaime shared this about extending practicum time:

For me it is fundamental, in fact I think that now it is longer than before, but I would increase it [the practicum] even more... [F]or infant and primary teaching degrees it should be at least one full year of practical training, maybe not consecutively, but rather 3 months in years two and three, and then 6 months in year four, increasing students' responsibility as the course progresses... maybe in year two they could simply observe, and then start to play an active role in year three; it would be great to be like a proper teacher during at least part of the practical training... talking with pupils' parents, getting to know everybody at the school, and so on. (Int-PI-Jaime)

However, it is not enough to simply increase the practical training period; it is necessary to establish close communication between the tutors involved in the coaching process and rethink the roles attributed to trainees. Students should not spend a period of their training simply observing; instead, they should supplement their training with other functions and learn-by-doing from the outset. Teachers insist on this issue as they believe practical training should have a bigger presence in the structure of the degree courses; in fact, the infant and primary degrees only include two practical training subjects, Practicum I (VERI-INF) and Practicum II (VERI-PRI), which are too short given their importance. Furthermore, teachers believe practical training should be supplemented with practical sessions in schools as part of the subjects themselves, all within the context of theory-based training. According to Carlota:

This practical training seems too short to me... [J]ust when they are learning what schools are all about, it comes to an end and they cannot progress any further; we need to organise the subjects so we can get out of here [the university classrooms]." (Int-PI-Carlota)

Students also agree with extending the practicum period, as indicated by Carmen: "I think it is fine as it is. An initial contact, with students playing a bigger role in year four... I think it is well organised; I would just make it longer" (Int-AI-Carmen).

Practical knowledge can also be acquired at the university, while theory-based knowledge can be developed at the schools used for practical training (Zabalza, 2016). Students continue to perceive a rupture between

learning at the university and learning received in the schools, however, classifying the practical sessions as formative and the theory-based university learning as traditional and not very useful. Although the practicum has a priority role in the initial training of future teachers, it seems that “little weight is being given to it” (Int-PI-Carlota).

Discussion and Conclusions

After conducting the case study, and according to the participants in this work and the documents analyzed, we found that the practicum in this context has not undergone a profound transformation, nor has the link between the academic and professional worlds improved (Blanchard & Fernandes, 2021; Sanjuán Roca & Sarceda Gorgoso, 2023). Changes have been superficial and formal as proposed in the study by Saiz Linares and Ceballos López (2019), and according to the informants' perspective, there is still a gap between theory and practice in initial training, as recent studies have shown (Becerra-Sepúlveda et al., 2023; Iglesias et al., 2019; Isidro-Lorenzo & Carcausto-Calla, 2024; Vaillant & Marcelo, 2021). According to the results, the practices continue to be inadequate spaces of construction of knowledge through action and shared and inquiring reflection in line with what has been reported by other studies (Arias et al., 2017; Colomina et al., 2024; Saiz Linares & Ceballos López, 2019; Zabalza, 2016).

In this study, it is clear that a need exists for more communication and coordination between academic and professional tutors so that the accompaniment has an impact on the acquisition of professional skills and the tasks to be carried out during this period have educational meaning. Academic tutoring is essential for communication and coordination, and the results show that reflective and inquiring processes are only rarely promoted (Mudra, 2018). There is evidence of dissatisfaction with their professional work, with these results coinciding with those found by Verger-Gelabert et al. (2023). As indicated by Mudra (2018), they continue to focus more on technical and administrative matters rather than teaching (e.g., resolving doubts, providing guidance, instructing on how to draw up practical training reports). This constrains the possibility of developing professional competencies (Sarceda-Gorgoso et al., 2024).

In light of the results obtained in this case study, considering the contributions of the participants, further work should be conducted on extending training on the meaning of practice, reducing the number of students to be tutored (Zabalza, 2011), and readjusting the criteria for awarding the practicum. It would also be necessary to consolidate the tutoring processes and make tutors, both professional and academic, aware of the educational value of monitoring tutoring and the responsibility they assume in this process.

The schools that offer practical training should constitute stable networks of good practice schools selected on the basis of pedagogical criteria (Valle & Manso, 2018; Zabalza, 2011) in which students have the opportunity to build their professional identity through quality learning experiences. These results align with those found in other studies (Mosley et al., 2017; Saiz Linares & Susinos Rada, 2017).

Given the results of this study regarding the academic tutors, we found that it is necessary to continue advancing in the configuration of a quality practicum (Zabalza, 2019) to ensure these subject forms; the bedrock of training teaching competences (Saiz Linares & Susinos Rada, 2017; Valle & Manso, 2018) enable theory-practice interaction to build their professional knowledge. Such a turnaround would require the curriculum to be completely restructured, such that the practicum is included in every year of the degree course, ensuring a continuous back and forth between theory and practice and between practice and theory (Becerra-Sepúlveda et al., 2023; Iglesias et al., 2019; Isidro-Lorenzo & Carcausto-Calla, 2024; Sarceda-Gorgoso et al., 2024; Vaillant & Marcelo, 2021). In addition to having a quality practicum, an institution must have the necessary contextual conditions for its development.

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Appendix A: UMA 18-FEDERJA-12

The Development of Competences in Initial Teacher Education in Andalusia After Bologna (EHEA)

Andalusian Research Group for Innovation and Evaluation: Rethinking Education (HUM-311)

Dear Teacher:

This questionnaire is part of a research project on initial teacher education for early childhood and primary teachers in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in the Andalusian community. The purpose of the questionnaire is to describe and understand the changes in initial teacher education for pre-primary and primary teachers in the framework of the EHEA in the Andalusian region after several years of curriculum development. The questionnaire consists of three parts: (1) general questions about training and socio-professional data, (2) the pedagogical dimension of teacher training, and (3) experience in the degree in the context of the EHEA. This questionnaire is completely anonymous and voluntary. Data will be treated statistically and confidentially.

We sincerely thank you for taking the time to complete this task, the results of which we will share with the university community. We hope that these findings will help us to reflect on and understand the challenges of initial teacher education in Andalusia.

Due to the length of the instrument, a selection of the most important items has been made:

- If you tutor internships, please indicate the number of interns you tutor. _____
- Do you use any different teaching, assessment, and marking methodological strategies in the placement? Please select only one of the following options:
 - Yes
 - No
- Please indicate which strategies you use. Tick the corresponding options:
 - Observations questionnaires and observation scales
 - Video-audio recordings
 - Photographs
 - Anecdotal records
 - Pedagogical documentation
 - Portfolios
 - Interviews
 - Classroom diary
 - Pedagogical narratives
- How often do you provide students with feedback on what they have done and how they can improve?
 - Always
 - Many times
 - Sometimes
 - General feedback in class or seminars
 - Only in subjects where the teaching ratio/dedication allows
 - Never
- How satisfactory were the philosophy and program, subject credits, and course placement of the current internship plan?
 - Philosophy and Program of Internship
 - Very satisfactory

- Satisfactory
- Unsatisfactory
- Very unsatisfactory
- Duration
 - Very satisfactory
 - Satisfactory
 - Unsatisfactory
 - Very unsatisfactory
- Placement
 - Very satisfactory
 - Satisfactory
 - Unsatisfactory
 - Very unsatisfactory
- Do you think that the role of the student in the placement centers changed as a result of the changes introduced by the EHEA?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't know
- In your opinion, which teachers at the placement centers should act as tutors?
 - All those who wish to do so
 - Those with good professional qualifications
 - Those who offer innovative experiences
 - Those who have received specific training for this role
 - Other
- In the faculty: Who are—and who should be—academic tutors for the placement?
 - All faculty members
 - Only those who apply for it
 - Those with psycho-pedagogical training
 - Those who have been assigned this role in their teaching profile or contract
 - Those who have free hours in their teaching load
 - Those indicated by the work placement committee
 - Those who have received specific training for this role
 - Those who offer innovative experiences
- Do you establish contact with the professional tutors of the centers your students attend?
 - Yes
 - No
 - I don't have enough time allotted to them
- Do you consider that the relationship between academic and professional tutors enhances the training and tutoring of your students?

- Yes
- No

Semi-Structured Interviews

The questions were organized into different blocks: professional identity and preparation for professional practice, general aspects of the degree, and practicum and bachelor's thesis. In this work, only the questions related to the practicum are considered since it is the focus of the work.

Semi-structured interviews for the student body:

- **Academic and professional tutors:** What was the work of your practicum tutors at the faculty and at the centers? What was the relationship between them? How do you rate it? What would you change? How do you rate their preparation for tutoring you? How do you rate their level of dedication, etc.?

- **Activities in the faculty:** What activities were you assigned by your tutor at the faculty? How do you rate them? Did they help you learn? How do you rate the seminars? What strengths and weaknesses do you find in the different tasks? What would you change, etc.?

- **Activities in schools:** What were the roles in the school? What do you think of these roles? What was the balance between observation and intervention? What differences are there between the different practicums? How did you feel about them? Did they help you learn? How could you have learned better? What would you change, etc.?

- **Usefulness of the practicum:** How has the practicum helped you in your training? How could it help you better? Strengths and weaknesses? What would you change? Have you been able to put into practice what you have learned at the faculty? How has it helped you to develop your pedagogical principles, your teaching identity...?

- **Reflection:** Did you have the opportunity to reflect on the teaching practice you developed or observed at the school? How? What would you change?

- **Autonomy:** Have you had freedom at your placement center? Have you had difficulties in developing your proposals? Have you been able to act autonomously as a teacher?

- **Placement centers:** How do you rate the placement centers you have been to? How do you rate the learning they have provided you with the learning opportunities you have had there? How do you rate the catalogue of centers you could choose from? What would you change?

Semi-structured interviews for teaching staff:

- **Practicum:** Do you supervise the practicum? How many students? Do you think there are too many, too few? What teaching load does it represent for you? Do you think it is adequate?

- **Usefulness of the practicum:** Do you value the functions and contributions of the academic and professional tutor in the practicum? Do you consider that the work carried out by the academic and professional tutor contributes to the development of professional competences in future teachers? What strengths and limitations do you find?

- **Activities in the faculty:** How do you value the contribution of the activities proposed by the faculty? Do you consider that they are useful for learning? How do you value the seminars? What strengths and weaknesses do you find in the different activities? What would you change?

- **Activities in educational centers:** Do you think that the functions carried out by the students in the educational centers are adequate and sufficient?

- **Placement centers:** What contribution do placement centers make to the development of student competences? What contribution do professional tutors make? What is your relationship with them? What strengths and weaknesses do you find in this relationship? What do you think about the catalogue of centers offered to students for placements? Would you change anything about this catalogue? What do you think about the process of assigning centers and tutors? Would you change anything?

- **Practicum as a scenario for reflection:** Evaluate the contribution of the practicum in the construction of students' professional knowledge, strengths, and weaknesses of the practicum. What could be improved?

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