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'IT WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT AND MEMORABLE PART OF MY STUDIES...': GREEK GRADUATE TEACHERS EVALUATE THEIR PRACTICUM

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Abstract:

Teaching practicum is crucial in initial teacher education programs, determining their effectiveness and attracting researchers' and practicing teachers' attention. This study explores the experiences of ten graduate teachers (eight women and two men) from a university department in Greece regarding their internship during their undergraduate studies. Unlike similar studies, this study utilized the free text written by the participants as a research tool to highlight the topics that really interest the practicing teachers. The data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis. From the analysis, eight main categories emerged describing trainees' internship experiences: a) characterizations for the teaching practicum, b) emotions from the practicum, c) benefits and usefulness of the process, d) positive and e) negative aspects of the practicum, f) difficulties encountered, and g) recommendations for improving the practicum. These findings offer valuable feedback for enhancing the internship experience within the participants' department and stress the need for further research on the multi-factorial process of teaching practicum.

Keywords:

Teacher internship experiences, teaching practicum, teacher education programs, qualitative content analysis, qualitative research

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1 Introduction

Teaching practice occupies a dominant position in teacher education programs in our country¹ and internationally, demonstrating its usefulness and necessity (Stravakou, 2007, pp. 590-591). Indeed, its effectiveness is often considered a measure of the success of teacher education programs (Haigh et al., 2013, p. 1). Its importance and utility are further evidenced by the consistent focus of research on this topic and confirmed by practitioners in the field, namely practicing teachers and experienced educators (Al-Hassan et al., 2012, p. 419; Caires et al., 2012, p. 163; Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, pp. 1-2; Mtika, 2011, p. 551).

The above can be easily understood given that quality and thorough theoretical and scientific training, even though essential and necessary, is not the only condition for teachers' successful preparation to carry out their complex, multifaceted, and challenging work with competence and efficiency (Chatzidimou D., 2003, pp. 128-132; Pyrgiotakis, 2011, pp. 248-252). For teacher education and training to be considered sufficient, it should include, in addition to pedagogical training and training in the subjects they will need to teach, the acquisition of practical experience in their future professional field. As is the case in other professions (e.g., surgeons, pilots), in the teaching profession as well, before teachers embark on their careers, they need to be introduced to teaching during their undergraduate studies with supervision and support in order to familiarize themselves with the realities of the school environment and understand the requirements of the profession (Chatzidimou K., 2014, p. 318).

Thus, through the collaboration developed between school units and the university departments that prepare and train future teachers, the latter spend a certain period of their studies in their future professional field, undertaking various activities (e.g., carrying out and monitoring lessons), depending on how the practicum is implemented in their university department² (Asghar et al., 2024, p. 158; Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, pp. 1-30). In gaining their experience, trainees are supported by experienced teacher-mentors in collaborating school units and by teaching supervisors or academic supervisors at their university. These components of the so-called practice triad –namely trainee teachers, their university supervisors, and experienced teachers/mentors in schools– are the primary focus of the research conducted so far on teaching practicum (Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, pp. 1, 20; Lawson et al., 2015, pp. 1-3).

A basic purpose of teachers' practical training is to link and integrate theory with and into practice. In other words, during teaching practicum, the scientific knowledge acquired by students in university auditoriums links with educational practice and the realities of teachers' working lives. Based on modern interpretations of the teaching practice, which emphasize the development of a professional teacher who thinks critically, it is offered as a field for teaching and pedagogical experimentation –in contrast to its traditional view as merely an apprenticeship. Thus, during their time in the field, practicing students while engaging in teaching, attending lessons and school events, and interacting with the members of the school community, they use theory to understand

¹ Unfortunately, in Greece, teaching practicum is an integral part of the education of primary school teachers and less of secondary school teachers, despite its necessity (see Chatzidimou K., 2014; Chatzidimou & Chatzidimou, 2013).

² Teaching practicum can take multiple forms and is implemented with many variations across university departments internationally, serving diverse goals (Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, pp. 1-30), which depends on the model applied and the theoretical assumptions on which it is based (see Beshir et al., 2023).

and interpret the realities of the school environment. In this context, they assess the application of teaching theories, techniques, and methods, critically analyze them, as well as build connections between the knowledge gained during their studies to perform specific tasks. Therefore, they reflect on and about practice, and finally, ascertain the confirmation of theory in practice or its confutation as well as the difficulty of applying theory, experiencing, therefore, the “shock of reality”, which many students have admitted in studies to experiencing (Al-Hassan et al., 2012, p. 429; Jenssen & Haara, 2024, p. 1; Köksal & Genç, 2019, pp. 896, 908; Kotsalidou et al., 2007, p. 251; Lugton, 2000, n.p.; Poveda García-Noblejas et al., 2023, p. 243; Stravakou, 2007, pp. 590-591).

Teaching practicum contributes to the professional development of practicing students through the cultivation of their skills (e.g., in teaching methodology and classroom management), the acquisition of complex professional knowledge, and the establishment of their personal pedagogical theory and professional identity, shaping their beliefs and perceptions about teaching (Al-Hassan et al., 2012, p. 419; Asghar et al., 2024, p. 160; Busher et al., 2014, p. 445; Chatzidimou K., 2014, p. 318; Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, p. 25; Jenssen & Haara, 2024, pp. 3-4; Köksal & Genç, 2019, p. 907; Mtika, 2011, p. 552). Interestingly, some researchers argue that teacher trainees’ skills develop more intensively and speedily during the internship phase than at any other stage of their professional development (Caires et al., 2012, p. 172).

At the same time, teaching practice familiarizes students with the profession and the role of a teacher as well as with the organizational function of a school unit, helping them to gain self-confidence and patience towards students. Furthermore, the practicum socializes interns into the culture of the school community and their professional group (Busher et al., 2014, pp. 461-462; Caires et al., 2012, p. 164; Chatzidimou K., 2014, p. 318; Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, p. 25; Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020, p. 2; Jenssen & Haara, 2024, p. 4; Köksal & Genç, 2019, p. 907).

Interns’ familiarization and socialization with and into their future profession and professional environment confront them with the challenges experienced by the members of the school community, which they will later be able to address as serving teachers, thereby improving the quality of education offered and helping them determine their suitability for the profession (Chatzidimou K., 2014, pp. 318, 321). The socialization of student teachers is essential for shaping their identity, fostering a sense of belonging, and supporting their professional development (Caires et al., 2012, p. 164). However, this process can be challenging because of their limited understanding of school culture and teaching practices, along with their marginal position within schools. To overcome these difficulties, support from academic staff and mentors at schools is of paramount importance, enabling trainees to reflect on their practice (Busher et al., 2014, p. 446).

The training for the teaching profession is a multifactorial and complicated process, reflecting the intricacies of the profession itself (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020, p. 12; Mtika, 2011, pp. 552-553). It engages trainees in an intensive process of searching, exploring, and discovering not only themselves but also new situations and other actors in the field, which influences their professionalism and their decision to follow the profession or not (Caires et al., 2012, p. 166; Fotopoulou & Yfanti, 2011, p. 509; Poulou, 2007, p. 106).

Trainees have admitted in studies that practicum is a unique educational experience, albeit particularly demanding and stressful. In this context, they experienced a range of emotions and were confronted with practical, cognitive, and emotional challenges (Caires et al., 2012, p. 172; Dobbins, 1996, pp. 16-26; Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020, p. 2; Stravakou, 2007, p. 592; Windschitl, 2002, pp. 131-165). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to explore practicing teachers' reflections and concerns upon their retrospection of their practicum experience. This exploration can provide the necessary feedback for the practicum effectiveness and inform consequently bottom-up improvements to enhance the quality of teacher education programs, thereby assisting trainees in their transition from student interns to practicing teachers (Caires et al., 2012, p. 166; Mtika, 2011, pp. 551-552; Poulou, 2007, p. 94).

Therefore, this study set out to explore the experiences of Greek graduate students from their practicum. The central research question posed by this research is "How do graduate students assess their experience from the practicum they participated in during their undergraduate studies?"

2 The research

2.1. The research context

The practicum in the Department of Primary Education at Democritus University of Thrace adopts its modern approaches, having as a primary aim to bridge scientific theory with educational practice, which also serves as the main criterion for its quality (Department of Primary Education – Democritus University of Thrace [P.T.DE.–DUTH], 2020, p. 3).

The teaching practicum in this department is also offered in various forms. However, this research focuses exclusively on mandatory practical training for students, being an independent part of the teacher training program. Given that the program lasts four years, the practicum begins in the 5th semester (3rd year of studies), continues until the final semester (8th semester), and has a structure of four levels (Internship I, II, III, IV) (P.T.DE.–DUTH, 2020, pp. 4-37).

At each level, corresponding to one academic semester, the practicum includes a) the theoretical component conducted in the university department, which involves workshops, seminars, and exercises for the theoretical preparation of students for the activities they will undertake in school settings, b) the practical component carried out in partner school units, which includes both observing and teaching lessons, and c) meetings in the university department with the faculty members being responsible for the practicum, where students discuss and analyze their experiences, receive feedback, and engage in reflection (P.T.DE.–DUTH, 2020, pp. 4-37).

Regarding practicing students' participation in cooperating educational units, during Internship I, interns observe 20 hours of teaching in school classes. They may also partially participate in teaching by conducting hourly lessons. In Internship II, students attend classes with the potential of partial involvement and conduct lessons specifically in mathematics and science subjects. Internship III focuses exclusively on modern Greek language, history, and literature, and students attend and conduct lessons in these subjects. Finally, during Internship IV, interns follow a school class schedule for two days, prepare, and conduct lessons in pairs for one week, and then

prepare and individually conduct lessons for the daily schedule during the second week (P.T.DE.–DUTH, 2020, pp. 4-37).

The head and scientific supervisor of the practicum is a faculty member with expertise in this area, who is responsible for overseeing its general supervision. The teaching staff of the department provides support, evaluation, supervision, and feedback to students throughout their practicum. Additionally, the cooperating teachers in schools assist and encourage student interns during their teaching activities (P.T.D.E.–DUTH, 2020, pp. 6-11).

2.2 Methodology

The present research was conducted in April 2024, using a sample of ten graduates (eight women and two men) from the department. The rationale for recruiting graduates rather than current students was that graduates would be better able to assess and reflect on their practicum experience, its usefulness, and its educational value. The graduates were no longer subject to the immediate pressures and stress of the practicum process (Poulou, 2007, pp. 93-94), and many had either continued their studies at the postgraduate level or begun teaching. As such, their understanding of the obligations, tasks, and demands of teaching may have deepened, and they would be more capable of recognizing the potential benefits of the practicum (Poveda García-Noblejas et al., 2023, p. 244). Therefore, the decision to choose graduates was founded on the presumption that “immersion into practice further promotes the metacognitive awareness of these beliefs for both student-teachers as growing professionals, and teacher trainers as providers of teaching experiences” (Poulou, 2007, p. 102).

The sample was chosen using the convenience sampling technique (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 170), as we sought willing and voluntary participation from participants in order to gather rich data for the research. Before agreeing to participate, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research and were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 81-86).

To collect research data, the researcher -and author of the study- asked the participants to retrospect on their practicum experiences and compose an anonymous text on the following topic: “My evaluation and assessment of my practicum experience”. This approach was chosen because teachers may prioritize other issues for improving their educational practice rather than those posed by a researcher (Poulou, 2007, pp. 93-94). The written text was used as the data collection tool for this research as it allows participants’ spontaneous thoughts and opinions to emerge without any influence from researchers (Taratori & Masali, 2005, p. 586).

After collecting the data, the researcher read the participants' texts multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content. Qualitative content analysis was then applied as it allows for a systematic description of the meaning of the collected material (Schreier, 2012, p. 1). The stages of the conducted qualitative content analysis were the following:

Words, phrases, or sentences related to the practicum served as the units of analysis, and the researcher coded the participants' texts accordingly.

The data were categorized, and a categorization system was developed. The system was designed to meet the criteria of unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, and saturation. After the initial analysis, the researcher repeated the analysis about a month later to ensure consistency (Schreier, 2012, pp. 71-175).

The research findings are described and discussed below (Taratori & Masali, 2005, p. 587).

3 Findings

The participants wrote passionately in their reflections about their internship experiences. Their insights were summarized and categorized into seven main themes that emerged from the analysis: a) the characterizations they attributed to their practicum, b) the emotions they experienced, c) the benefits and usefulness they identified in the process, d) the positive and e) negative aspects they highlighted regarding the practicum, f) the challenges they faced, and g) their recommendations for improving the practical training in their department (see **Table 1** for the categories and the **Appendix** for the subcategories).

Table 1

Categories Emerging from Qualitative Content Analysis

a/a	Categories
1.	Characterizations for the teaching practicum
2.	Emotions from the teaching practicum
3.	Benefits and usefulness of the teaching practicum
4.	Positive aspects of the teaching practicum
5.	Negative aspects of the teaching practicum
6.	Difficulties faced by the trainees during the teaching practicum
7.	Recommendations for the improvement of the teaching practicum

The graduates participating in the research characterized their practicum experience as a demanding and time-consuming process, yet also the most significant and memorable part of their studies. For example, Participant 2 wrote: “The practicum during our undergraduate studies was the most important and, at the same time, the most memorable part of my studies”. According to Participant 7: “Preparing for the next day was a challenging and time-consuming process”.

The characterizations provided by the participants regarding their practicum may indicate ambivalence, nevertheless, they remembered it with nostalgia and experienced predominantly positive emotions during its implementation. These emotions included “joy and a deep love for the profession” they desired and chose, along with a sense of “fulfillment from their interactions with students”.

The category regarding the benefits and usefulness of the practicum is the one that accumulated most of the subcategories that emerged. The graduates found that the practicum served them

beneficially on multiple levels, although they reported different benefits in their texts. Overall, through their supervised experience in the professional field, the trainees recognized the complexities and challenges inherent in the role of a teacher. All participants emphasized their ability to practice connecting theory with educational practice, leading them to realize either the successful application and usefulness of theory or its inconsistency and inapplicability in real-world settings.

Some participants highlighted how the practicum helped them understand the school reality and their future professional environment, including the functioning of a school unit and its challenges, as well as the characteristics and needs of their future students. Others focused on their socialization into the culture of their profession through interactions with colleagues in the school units. They described how the practicum influenced their professional development by helping them assimilate the attitudes and practices they should adopt as professional teachers (University of Montevallo: Career Development Center, 2023, n.p.).

Here are some indicative excerpts from the participants' texts:

The rapid exposure to and familiarization with the work environment helped me clarify my goals. I had the chance to acclimate to the professional context alongside my future colleagues, gaining an understanding of the school unit, its components, and the operational codes it followed. (Participant 1)

Observing teachers' lessons helped me connect the knowledge I had gained from the studies with its practical application. At the same time, I had the opportunity to see how a school functions and the problems that can arise. During our weekly teaching sessions, we interacted more closely with students, listening to their concerns, difficulties, and strengths. (Participant 2)

Through the practicum, I witnessed how a teacher operates in a classroom, how teachers should treat students, and how they plan a lesson. (Participant 3)

My overall experience in the internship program allowed me to engage with my profession, interact with experienced primary school teachers and students, and understand the obligations I will have as a new teacher. (Participant 6)

One of the benefits was the insight into the complex and multifaceted responsibilities that teachers must carry out. (Participant 8)

During the internship, I tried to show my best towards everyone involved, meeting all requirements and obligations with consistency, respect, patience, understanding, and a genuine interest. (Participant 9)

The internship allowed me to explore how the theory I have studied previously applied in practice. Fortunately or unfortunately, theory is often far away from practice. The theory provides us with the foundations but lacks realistic stimuli. The theory gives us the “what” and not the “how”, which the practice offers. (Participant 10)

Many participants wrote in their texts that they expanded and enriched their professional knowledge through the seminars offered during the practicum and their time spent in the field. They also highlighted how this experience facilitated the cultivation of their classroom management skills. All participants emphasized the invaluable opportunity to enhance their skills in teaching methodology, especially in lesson planning and execution, by observing experienced teachers' lessons and conducting their own.

Consequently, they began to develop not only professionally but also personally, to form their professional identity and advance their skills in reflection and critical thinking. This progress was mainly accomplished by reflecting on their teaching effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement as well as by observing and analyzing experienced teachers' lessons to determine the elements that could be adopted or rejected in shaping their own teaching style. The participants also improved from the feedback received from various stakeholders, particularly from students.

Relevant excerpts from the research material are given below:

With the teaching practice, I could advance my knowledge, abilities, and skills that are crucial for my professional identity both as a teacher and a scientist. Furthermore, through the practicum, I tested my limits and strengthened my endurance since I was trying to do my best. In addition, as I engaged in the processes of self-assessment and reflection, I developed personally and I adopted a critical stance toward the preparation and conduct of teaching. (Participant 1)

Observing and monitoring experienced classroom teachers' lessons benefited me since I began to identify elements that I either wanted to adopt or discard in my own teaching style. (Participant 3)

For my lesson planning, I had to study hard. I also had to assess and constantly revise my ideas and lesson activities to ascertain that they would meet students' needs. (Participant 5)

During the practicum, I developed skills in self-improvement and self-assessment. Reflecting critically on the lessons I planned assisted me with identifying unproductive and ineffective practices and positively contributed to my growth. The seminars provided during the practice offered me valuable knowledge concerning classroom management. Furthermore, I learned how to design courses and lessons differently, using for example project-based approaches. All of this enhanced my ability to adjust and make informed decisions in diverse classroom contexts and situations. (Participant 6)

Ultimately, the participants concluded from the practicum that love for children is a necessary prerequisite for pursuing the teaching profession and realized that this career is appropriate for them. An interesting finding was the feelings of admiration and respect some interns developed for their future colleagues while observing the teachers in the cooperating schools. Specifically, some participants wrote:

From the practicum, I realized that this is the occupation I want to pursue, and it aligns best with my character. (Participant 4)

My admiration and respect for the teachers at the school increased. (Participant 5)

I found that to be a teacher, you must genuinely love children. (Participant 9)

A few participants explicitly admitted in their texts that they felt well-equipped from the internship when they assumed teaching duties after their studies. Still, one participant even wrote that the internship was beneficial for her postgraduate studies. The latter characteristically indicated: "It should be pointed out that this whole challenging practice process, which lasted for the last two and a half years, has importantly aided me even at the postgraduate level I am currently at" (Participant 2).

The graduates taking part in the research expressed a balanced view regarding the negative and positive aspects of the practicum implemented in their department. As far as the positive aspects are concerned, many of them saw positively the early start of their teaching practice and highlighted the value of daily contact with students and interaction within their future professional environment. Some participants noted their supervisor-professor's supportive stance during their teaching sessions and the collaborative relationships they had with the teachers at schools, some of whom acted as mentors. Few interns also appreciated the small number of audiences in the seminars provided during their internship, which facilitated the development of meaningful relationships and allowed for open expression of opinions and concerns among trainees. For example, two participants wrote:

It was of paramount importance that my supervisor-professor was discreet, never interrupting me during my lesson or putting me and my students in a difficult position. (Participant 2)

The teachers of the classes I collaborated with played a significant role. I had the opportunity to cooperate with three different teachers. The last teacher, specifically, was excellent, and we informally implemented co-teaching. As I remember, this teacher was an inspiration throughout this demanding journey. (Participant 3)

Conversely, some interns identified the seminars as a negative aspect of the practicum, viewing them as time-consuming and nonessential. Almost all trainees expressed discomfort with the heavy workload they shouldered during their internship, with many also criticizing the short duration of their practicum. Some graduates raised concerns regarding their supervision, noting

that their assessments were performed by only one professor, which compromised the objectivity of the assessment. Furthermore, several participants pointed out that their supervisors attended only one class session while the trainees were teaching, which limited their ability to form a comprehensive judgment of the trainees' performance. Individual participants also denounced their problematic collaboration with the classroom teachers they worked with, with one female graduate attributing the issues to power imbalances and the competitive attitude of the classroom teacher. According to the words of Participant 10: "The collaboration with the classroom teacher was very challenging for me. She often tried to undermine my authority in front of the students and sought to maintain her dominance, ensuring that the students preferred her".

Turning now to the students' difficulties, a participant revealed that applying what she learned from university courses to educational practice was not as straightforward as it was for others. On the other hand, almost all participants emphasized the challenges and laborious nature of balancing the rigorous university coursework with the practicum demands. Therefore, some revealed that they were unable to perform to the best of their abilities, which impacted them psychologically. For instance, Participant 4 wrote:

The schedule we followed during the semester of our practicum was very challenging. We had to visit school units, study, and then quickly move to another location using various means of transport to continue attending classes or delivering presentations until late. Afterward, we returned home where we had to plan lessons, study again, or complete assignments, all while feeling the fatigue of the whole day. This affected our psychological state and diminished our effectiveness, productivity, and efficiency, especially for those diligent students who attended every course and lesson and worked hard to perform at their best. (Participant 4)

In consequence of the difficulties they faced and the negative aspects they identified about the practicum, many participants recommended several changes for the practicum to better meet their needs and expectations. Their suggestions focused on the organization of the practicum, the reorganization of the curriculum, and trainees' supervision. Concerning the organization of the practicum, some participants proposed that seminars should be conducted before the internship period and that their content should be condensed. Others suggested initiating the internship at the beginning of their studies in the university department. Regarding supervision, one graduate recommended that interns should be assessed by three different supervisors to ensure objectivity. Additionally, several participants emphasized the importance of supervisors providing systematic, thorough, and timely feedback to improve students' performance and progress. As far as the reorganization of the curriculum is concerned, many participants expressed the necessity for the implementation of the internship to avoid overlapping with other courses, especially those that are very demanding. One participant highlighted the need for a curriculum restructure so that courses requiring relevant planning activities for the lessons in the internship or core courses related to the science of pedagogy precede the internship. Specifically, the participant stated:

I would like to propose some changes for the internship. Although we had previously attended the relevant courses for most of the lessons we needed to teach, this was not true for a few. In those cases, we were asked to design lessons for courses that had not

been covered in our studies yet but were scheduled for the next semester. For example, the course on educational assessment should have been offered earlier, in the previous semester, so we would have been better prepared for student assessment and grading before the end of our teaching practice. (Participant 9)

4 Discussion

The present study set out to identify how graduate teachers from the Department of Primary Education at Democritus University of Thrace assessed their teaching practice in order to shed light on the graduates' experiences regarding the practical training they underwent during their undergraduate studies. To identify any long-term benefits of the teaching practice, the study focused on graduates, who had completed their teaching practice almost six months before and, at the time of the study, either had begun teaching in educational organizations or were pursuing postgraduate studies. Unlike other studies that used predetermined themes to investigate teacher students' experiences, this research asked participants to write freely and spontaneously about their experiences. This approach aligns with the assertion in the literature that teachers often focus on different issues than those posed by researchers when reflecting on ways to improve their educational practice (Poulou, 2007, pp. 93-94).

The findings seem to justify our choices. Overall, the graduates' views illuminated diverse aspects of the issue under study, contributing rich data to the research. Their experiences comprise the personal and professional benefits acquired from their practical training, the emotions they underwent, and the challenges they confronted. Moreover, through their experiences, they formed well-defined opinions about the characteristics of the practicum, identifying both positive and negative aspects, and offering several recommendations for the improvement of the process.

The richness of the data, along with the various recommendations provided, show the importance that the graduates attributed to the internship. It is also worthy that they demonstrated a critical perspective regarding the organization, implementation, and effectiveness of their internship: a finding echoed those of other researchers (Thoidis et al., 2011, p. 530).

The overall findings align with existing literature, describing that learning to be an educator is a challenging, emotional, labor-intensive, and time-consuming process (Caires et al., 2012, p. 172; Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020, pp. 2, 12; Poulou, 2007, pp. 102-103). Nevertheless, the benefits for trainees are manifold, encompassing their resilience and preparation, subsequent professional development and career advancement, as well as the cultivation of their professional identity and professionalism. Furthermore, the internship emerges as a valuable and positively ingrained memory from their studies (Asghar et al., 2024, p. 166; Mtika, 2011, p. 552; Stravakou, 2007, pp. 590-592).

According to the participants, the practicum was invaluable in connecting theory with practice, helping them understand their future roles and responsibilities, gaining insights into student needs and the operation of a school unit, and familiarizing themselves with the school reality. It also facilitated their socialization within their professional environment, equipped them with additional knowledge and skills for teaching, and allowed them to assess whether the profession they chose was truly suitable for them. These findings align with theoretical perspectives regarding the goals

of the practicum expressed in the literature, supporting also conclusions from other studies (Asghar et al., 2024, p. 166; Busher et al., 2014, p. 461; Chatzidimou K., 2014, pp. 318-321; Chatzidimou & Chatzidimou, 2013, n.p.; Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, p. 25; Köksal & Genç, 2019, p. 907; Kyridis et al., 2005, p. 17).

Furthermore, consistent with Poulou's (2007, pp. 105-106) findings, the ability of the trainee teachers to reflect emerged as a significant outcome of their practice rather than a skill developed during their studies. Notably, comparing the present research findings with the objectives of the internship in the participants' department reveals a strong alignment, suggesting the effectiveness of the practicum (P.T.DE.-DUTH, 2020, p. 3).

In general, the findings align with those of similar research capturing the experiences and opinions of intern students regarding their internships, both in Greece and internationally (e.g., Al-Hassan et al., 2012; Busher et al., 2014; Caires et al., 2012; Chaniotakis et al., 2006; Köksal & Genç, 2019). Interestingly, the results closely resemble those in Poulou's (2007, pp. 96-101) research, which involved students from the same department and university. However, unlike Poulou's (2007, pp. 100-103) findings, which indicated that student interns experienced both negative and positive emotions, our graduates had only positive emotions to share (Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, p. 26). This is particularly interesting, as participants described the internship process as demanding, which suggests that they may also have experienced stress. However, the fact that our participants did not explicitly express negative emotions may be attributed to the timing of data collection, which occurred some time after the internship. Consequently, participants may have primarily recalled positive memories and feelings.

Similarly, in contrast to other studies examining the challenges faced by trainee teachers during their practice –where challenges included both external difficulties (e.g., lack of student motivation) and internal issues (e.g., classroom management strategies)– our research identified that the difficulties and negative elements highlighted by the graduates primarily related to the organization and implementation of the internship (Asghar et al., 2024, p. 159). This suggests a need for relevant improvements to better align the internship with practicing teachers' expectations.

In this context, the graduates' emphasis on the supervision and evaluation provided by the academic faculty is particularly significant, underscoring the crucial role of supervisors and the necessity for constructive and systematic guidance for trainee teachers (Caires et al., 2012, p. 173; Jenssen & Haara, 2024, pp. 2-3). This also highlights the challenges inherent in a role that combines coaching and assessment. The participants' suggestion for assessment by multiple supervisors, although it may place an additional burden on the existing for the faculty of the department –given the large student population in Greek pedagogical departments– could enhance the objectivity of assessments and, consequently, support greater trainees' professional development.

An interesting finding is that all participants, without exception, fulfilled the basic purpose of practical training –bridging theory with practice (Stravakou, 2007, pp. 590-591). While some participants successfully achieved this connection, others faced the reality shock often associated

with entering the classroom (Köksal & Genç, 2019, p. 896). Notably, only one participant mentioned the difficulty of combining theory with practice (Al-Hassan et al., 2012, p. 429). This participant also acknowledged receiving useful guidance and advice from both the university supervisor and the mentor teacher at the partner school. Her difficulty thus may stem from idealized perceptions of teaching and learning before the practicum, which clashed with the complex and unpredictable nature of real-world educational practice (Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, p. 14; Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 457).

However, variations in the participants' experiences emerged in several other findings. For instance, while some participants emphasized the benefits of effective collaboration with the classroom teacher, others reported difficulties stemming from power dynamics and conflicts (Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, p. 20). These differences suggest that each intern's experience may be unique and highly individualized since the internship is influenced by multiple factors. These include intern students themselves, supervisors and professors, teachers at cooperating schools, and the relationships between all contributors involved (Asghar et al., 2024, p. 159; Caires et al., 2012, p. 172; Cohen (Sayag) et al., 2013, pp. 20-21).

A finding though that emerged as a point of convergence across the different categories is the need for the practicing teachers to familiarize themselves with the school reality as early as possible and for a longer duration. This is a recurring theme in similar Greek studies (Thoidis et al., 2011, p. 531). The graduates thus highlighted one of the primary concerns regarding the organization of practical training, which is approached differently by the various departments responsible for teacher education in Greece (Sofos et al., 2024, pp. 683-691).

Finally, another commonality across the categories is the heavy workload that the internship imposed on the graduates, which led to a decline in their productivity and efficiency. Considering this finding, their suggestion for restructuring the internship and curriculum deserves careful consideration. Such changes could alleviate the heavy workload by decongesting the semester in which the internship is offered, while also better-preparing trainees by ensuring that core courses, essential for successfully completing the practicum, precede the internship in the curriculum.

5 Conclusions

Overall, the findings of this study confirmed the necessity and significance of teaching practice from the trainee teachers' point of view, highlighting its crucial role in their training, preparation, and professional development.

The findings of this study are not generalizable primarily due to the small research sample and the fact that the internship programs for future teachers differ across departments, both in Greece and internationally. Furthermore, even among the participants in this study, generalizations are not feasible for many aspects of the findings. This may be the most important finding, as it underscores that internship is a multifactorial experience, uniquely shaped by each intern. This conclusion supports the assertion from other research about "the multidimensional, dynamic, and idiosyncratic nature of becoming a teacher... resulting from the synergies of a large set of internal and contextual variables" (Caires et al., 2012, p. 172). Based on this, it is recommended that

future studies focus on exploring the relationships between the diverse factors composing practicum experience.

However, the findings from this study offer valuable feedback for improving the internship program in the department that the study concerns. Understanding these experiences allows all stakeholders to better support students, especially as they navigate the realities and challenges of practical training (Poulou, 2007, pp. 101-106). Based on the findings, alongside the previously discussed recommendations, the following suggestions are also proposed:

a) The internship should start in the third semester (second year of study), as is the case in other teacher training programs in Greece (Sofos et al., 2024, pp. 685-690) and as recommended by academic experts in education (Chatzidimou & Chatzidimou, 2013, n.p.).

b) The internship should include interns' exposure to various educational institutions within the Greek system (e.g., all-day schools) as well as their participation in all school activities (e.g., Teachers' Association meetings) as implemented by other pedagogical departments in Greece (Sofos et al., 2024, p. 694), to increase trainees' practical benefits.

c) Consideration should be given to the participants' recommendations for reorganizing the practicum and curriculum to enhance students' development.

d) Trainees should receive thorough and continuous feedback from supervisors throughout their internship.

e) The collaboration between the university and cooperating schools should be strengthened, ensuring that partner teachers are adequately informed and trained to support interns effectively.

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APPENDIX

Table 2

Characterizations for the Teaching Practicum

a/a	Characterizations
1.	The most important and unforgettable part of the studies
2.	A demanding and time-consuming process

Table 3

Emotions from the Teaching Practicum

a/a	Emotions
1.	Nostalgia
2.	Happiness
3.	Love
4.	Satisfaction

Table 4

Benefits and Usefulness of the Teaching Practicum

a/a	Benefits and Usefulness
1.	Realization of teachers' role and work
2.	Applying theory to practice and reflecting on the relationship between them
3.	Acquaintance with the school reality and the future professional environment
4.	Familiarity with the organizational function of a school and its problems
5.	Getting to know the students and understanding them
6.	Socialization in the professional environment
7.	Acquisition of professional knowledge
8.	Cultivating skills of teaching methodology
9.	Cultivating classroom management skills
10.	Personal development
11.	Professional development
12.	Reflection on the choice of personal teaching style
13.	Reflection on teaching and improvement of teaching practice
14.	Awareness of the appropriateness of the profession they have chosen
15.	Development of professionalism
16.	Start building a professional identity
17.	Preparation for the future profession
18.	Preparation for graduate studies
19.	Developing respect and admiration for fellow teachers at the partner school
20.	Realization that a love for children is a prerequisite for pursuing the profession

Table 5*Positive Aspects of the Teaching Practicum*

a/a	Positive Aspects
1.	Practicum starting from the 3rd year of studies
2.	Collaboration with and mentoring by classroom teachers
3.	Daily contact with children
4.	Small number of audiences in the seminars offered
5.	Interaction with the school environment
6.	Discreet attitude of the supervisor professor

Table 6*Negative Aspects of the Teaching Practicum*

a/a	Negative Aspects
1.	A heavy workload for the interns
2.	Short duration of the practicum
3.	Problems with the cooperating teacher
4.	Issues with the seminars offered
5.	Problems with the interns' supervision
5.1.	Risk of subjective evaluation and assessment
5.2.	Insufficient monitoring of the interns' performance by their supervisors

Table 7*Difficulties Faced by the Trainees During the Teaching Practicum*

a/a	Difficulties
1.	Connection of theory with practice
2.	Balancing course attendance with the practicum

Table 8*Recommendations for the Improvement of the Teaching Practicum*

a/a	Recommendations
1.	Changes to be made to the organization of the practicum
1.1.	To start from the first year of studies
1.2.	The seminars of the last semester should be provided in previous semesters with condensed content
2.	The curriculum to be reorganized
2.1.	A distribution of courses in the curriculum
2.2.	Not to coincide the practicum with the very demanding courses
3.	Changes to be made regarding trainees' supervision
3.1.	Students' teaching should be observed three times by three different supervisors
3.2.	More feedback should be provided to interns by supervisors