

“FLYING SCHOOL OF TEACHING INTERNSHIPS” – IN SEARCH OF AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF TEACHER INTERNSHIP

Agnieszka Koterwas, Edyta Nowosielska, & Małgorzata Zambrowska

Institute of Human Development Support and Education, Maria Grzegorzewska University (Poland)

Abstract

The purpose of the speech is to present a two-year (2024-2026) project: *Flying school of teaching internship*, implemented at *Maria Grzegorzewska University* in Poland, within the framework of the ministerial program *Science for Society*. Its main idea is to build cooperation between academia and the community of practice - school-university partnership (Day, 2008) through the creation of the so-called learning community (Smith, MacGregor, 2009) and learning through reflective practice (Schon, 1984). The project was created in response to, on the one hand, the questionable quality of professional practice in teaching courses, and, on the other hand, the common allegation of a growing gap between pedagogical theory and school practice. The theoretical assumptions learned by students in their studies in school practice are usually not implemented, thus perpetuating the traditional constantly reproduced model of school teaching (Gevorgyan, Sargsyan, Aramyan, 2012, Sisyan, Babayan, 2024). Research component: The project involves teaching internships in selected public and non- public elementary schools by students - future early childhood education teachers - and accompanying academic teachers. The project has a research and application character. The subject of the study is the experience of students carrying out internships. The chosen method is participatory action research (Kemmis, McTaggart, 2005, Heck, 2024), while the means of collecting research material are focused interviews conducted with the students carrying out internships after each visit to the school, as well as reflective observation diaries kept by the students. Implementation component: Promoting good practices at conferences and in academic journals, introducing recommendations for the organization of student internships in Poland, and attempting to permanently implement the alternative model of teaching internships in elementary schools developed in the project.

Keywords: *University-school partnership, student internships, primary school, reflective practice.*

1. The role of professional internships in preparing future early childhood educators

Professional internships for students are a crucial element of the education process for future teachers. Collaborative learning and cooperation within communities of practice, as a form of mutual exchange of experience and reflection, are integral to the transformation of teaching culture. Combining practice with formal knowledge supports the development of critical and reflective thinking, allowing students to "think about practice through theory" (Klus-Stańska, 2019). A practitioner in education, in order to "make appropriate decisions, must essentially engage deeply in discussions about values and be able to provide justifications for their decisions" (A. T. Person, 1994, p. 25). They cannot treat previously acquired values as an immutable guidepost, because practice requires systematic analysis and constant reflection on the validity of their actions (A. T. Person, 1994, p. 25). Scientific theory and pedagogical theory are fundamental categories for explaining phenomena occurring in the educational process. Scientific theory allows for the recognition of general principles and patterns in education that can be applied to various situations, but it does not offer ready-made solutions for specific everyday problems in practice. Pedagogical theory, meanwhile, helps to ponder and reflect more deeply on various issues, encouraging discussion and reflection, and provides an important backdrop for action, though it is not sufficient on its own to effectively guide actions in everyday practice (Żytko, 2018, p. 15). Understanding the relationship between these two types of theory helps to better interpret educational processes and supports the development of conscious reflective (pedagogical) practice. Particularly important here is the concept of *theory in action*: "knowing in practice" — knowledge built through practical experience and reflection on future actions planned by the teacher, allowing for the construction of both "what" knowledge and "how" knowledge (Schon, 1984; Żytko, 2018).

During their internships, students verify the pedagogical theories they have learned during their studies and take their first steps as teachers, having the opportunity to apply their previously acquired knowledge, observe experienced practitioners, and learn through action — through direct interaction with children. It is at this moment that they form their image of the school and begin to define themselves as future teachers.

Contemporary approaches emphasize how crucial it is to develop professional pedagogical knowledge from the very early stages of a teacher's career. Particularly important here are experiences gained directly in the professional environment and the processes of interaction and joint negotiation of meanings within a community of professionals (Bałachowicz & Zbróg, 2022; Zbróg, 2019). This means that teachers learn not only through practice but also through dialogue and the exchange of experiences within their professional communities. The experiences they gain — especially in the context of interactions with students, parents, and colleagues — form the foundation of their professional knowledge development, enabling the exchange of perspectives and the collaborative interpretation of educational phenomena. In this way, pedagogical knowledge is co-created within a dynamic community of practice rather than developed in isolation.

Today's teacher must be flexible and ready for lifelong learning, responding to the changing social and educational needs. Teachers' knowledge is a dynamic resource that evolves along with the socio-cultural context in which students and schools operate. This requires teachers to be willing and ready to change their practices, engage in continuous learning, remain in a constant process of professional and personal development, and be open to reflection.

Internships develop the ability to reflect on one's own attitudes, strengthen interpersonal competencies, teach responsibility, and provide the opportunity to discover individual predispositions. At the same time, they allow students to confront their ideas about the profession with its reality. In the long term, the experiences gained during internships often become the foundation for further professional and personal development, inspiring students to adopt a conscious, engaged, and critical approach to their role in the educational process (Żytko, 2018).

2. Implementation of pedagogical internships at higher education institutions

The organization of teacher training, including the requirements for completing pedagogical internships, is regulated by the Law no 1450, July 25, 2019. The objectives of professional internships for future teachers of grades I–III in primary schools, as defined in this document, are as follows:

1. To understand the specifics of the profession of a preschool and early childhood education teacher;
2. To create conditions that foster the readiness to assume the role of a teacher;
3. To prepare for the effective organization of one's own teaching practice;
4. To consciously build relationships with children and pupils, their parents or guardians, and colleagues;
5. To implement innovation in teaching practice, particularly in the individualization of the teaching process, taking into account the diverse educational needs of students, supporting their comprehensive development, their activity, and their participation in the educational and social life processes (Journal of Laws, item 453, p. 34).

An analysis of the internship regulations of selected higher education institutions offering preschool and early childhood education programs showed that professional internships are described in very similar ways across different universities ("Principles of Pedagogical Internships" of the Faculty of Education at the University of Warsaw, "Internship Regulations" of the Faculty of Education and Psychology at UMCS in Lublin, "Student Internship Regulations of the Faculty of Social Sciences" at UWM in Olsztyn, "Student Internship Regulations" at APS in Warsaw, and "Regulations of Compulsory Professional Internships at the Institute of Pedagogy, Faculty of Social Sciences" at the University of Gdańsk).

Information regarding the objectives and tasks of students during their internships is included in the course syllabi. These objectives are consistent with those described in the above-mentioned regulation. The syllabus also contains information about the internship documentation that the student must prepare and submit to the university's internship supervisor, in order to obtain internship credit after review and approval of its completeness. Students are usually allowed to choose their own internship dates. During the internship, a mentor from the host institution accompanies the student. In some universities, a university-appointed supervisor also oversees students during their internships. The choice of internship placement is either assigned — with the university providing a list of recommended institutions — or left to the student's independent selection.

Currently, students at our institution, the Maria Grzegorzewska University in the field of preschool and early childhood education, complete two types of internships over the course of their five-year studies.

The first is a 30-hour assistant internship, during which students are tasked with learning about the organization of primary school work, observing the teacher's work methods and teaching strategies, and reflecting on their own predispositions for the teaching profession. The second is the assistant-pedagogical internship in grades I–III, in which students develop their didactic and educational skills by planning and conducting their first lessons, as well as observing the work of school specialists such as pedagogues, psychologists, and other professionals¹.

3. Methods

The study was designed as **participatory action research** (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Heck, 2024), with an applied objective of actively seeking solutions in the area of teaching internship implementation. The research was carried out by social participants – academic teachers and students of Pedagogy, who are future early childhood education teachers. The project aims to develop, through the collaborative efforts of this community, recommendations for the organization of student internships in Poland and to work towards the permanent implementation of an alternative model of teaching internships in elementary schools developed within the framework of the project. The project received a positive opinion from the Senate Committee for Research Ethics at APS, reference number 201/2024.

The research is being conducted as part of the Flying School of Teaching Internship project (Koterwas et al., 2024), by researchers from Maria Grzegorzewska University in Poland². The project is co-funded by the state budget, with funds granted by the Minister of Science and Higher Education as part of the “Science for Society” program. The project began in 2024 and will run until mid-2026. Its core idea is to foster cooperation between academia and the community of practice – a school-university partnership (Day, 2008) – by creating a so-called learning community (Smith & MacGregor, 2009) and promoting learning through reflective practice (Schön, 1983). So far, eight one-week internships – study visits – have been carried out in selected public and non-public elementary schools (grades 1–3) across Poland. The selection of schools was purposeful; we aimed to include “model” schools whose teaching practices align closely with constructivist principles. The goal was for students to be inspired by innovative didactic approaches that reflect the theoretical foundations they explore during their studies. The internship format is continuous, lasting one week and conducted under the supervision of academic teachers.

The research was participatory in nature, focused on partnership with the study participants by initiating social change and generating local, practical knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). A total of 94 students and 6 accompanying academic teachers participated in these visits. Before the school visits, the students took part in workshops, during which they analyzed and evaluated the existing internship model used at the university. During the visits in selected schools, their tasks included classroom observation and **completing reflective journals**. After the visits, they shared their experiences through **focus group interviews**. Collecting research material are focused interviews conducted with the students carrying out internships after each visit to the school (6), as well as reflective observation diaries kept by the students (94). We analyze the material assigned to main categories concerning: 1) students' approach to the university's adopted model of internship implementation 2) benefits resulting from participating in internships within the Flying School of Internships project.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The research material was presented by us in the form of a comparison between students' experiences of the standard internship model and the experiences gained through participation in the Flying School of Practice project. We structured this comparison using the following categories:

1. *Time*: Students clearly criticized the standard model of internships conducted during the academic year. They pointed out that the university schedule does not account for continuous internship periods. Their fragmented, irregular nature makes these internships perceived as ineffective, chaotic, and inconsistent. Students suggested that two weeks should be set aside during the academic year for internships in a selected school.

Within the Flying School of Practice project, students completed internships continuously during the summer break (in September) and the winter break (January/February), which is not possible in the standard model. According to students, maintaining continuity allowed for full engagement and a better

¹ Data based on syllabi available on university websites:

<https://usosweb.aps.edu.pl/kontroler.php?action=katalog2/przedmioty/pokazPrzedmiot&kod=PW-5P-PRA2a>

<https://usosweb.aps.edu.pl/kontroler.php?action=katalog2/przedmioty/pokazPrzedmiot&kod=PW-5P-PRA4>

² The project was carried out by a research team from Maria Grzegorzewska University, consisting of: Agnieszka Koterwas, Edyta Nowosielska, Małgorzata Zambrowska, Marta Krasuska-Betiuk, Monika Kupiec and Ewa Lewandowska.

understanding of the realities of a teacher's work. This intensive format made it possible to observe a broader range of educational phenomena and deepened reflection on the teacher's role.

2. *School Educational Environment*: Students noticed a clear contrast between the traditional model of teaching and the experiences they gained during the Flying School of Practice project. They highlighted the use of project-based learning, activating teaching methods, and outdoor education. They sought experiences that aligned with what they were taught at the university.

3. *Learning Community*: The Flying School of Practice project fostered the creation of a reflective community, including students, teachers, pupils of the visited schools, and university staff. Students shared their experiences regularly during organized meetings as well as informally in spontaneous conversations. In the standard model, students typically completed internships individually, and discussions with the university supervisor were limited to formal evaluations without deeper analysis. Students appreciated the presence of university supervisors during school visits. Daily conversations and ongoing consultations made the internships more reflective.

The presence of groups of students and lecturers in one school built a sense of security, allowing students to freely explore different classes and teaching methods. The internships were experienced collectively in an atmosphere of openness and exchange of observations. Students felt partnership, support, and mutual understanding. In contrast to individually organized internships, students were not limited to one supervisor and one class, which they reported reduced their stress levels.

4. *Documentation*: Internship documentation in the standard model was often perceived as a formality, lacking substantive value. Students described it as passively copying lesson plans from methodological guides. In the project, the documentation had a reflective nature — guiding questions encouraged deeper analysis of observed classes. Students stated that this approach made them more attentive and engaged.

5. *Participation in Different Classes*: The opportunity to observe many classes and different teaching styles was extremely valuable for students. It offered a broader perspective on a teacher's work and enabled comparisons between different pedagogical approaches. However, some students also appreciated the deep relationships with pupils, which could only develop during longer stays in one particular class.

6. *Selection of Schools*: Students pointed out that within the standard internship model, school selection was random, leading to experiences that were often cognitively unproductive. Students ended up working with random mentors and often did not observe the teaching or communication methods promoted during university courses.

Another difficulty was the lack of preparation of school internship supervisors. As students noted, school mentors often were unaware of the expectations, unfamiliar with the internship syllabi, and unclear about their responsibilities. In contrast, students participating in the project appreciated that the selection of schools was intentional and that they were warmly welcomed by the school communities.

7. *Professional Inspirations*: Participants of the Flying School of Practice project reported that it had a significant impact on their motivation and professional identity development.

These internships not only helped overcome negative experiences from previous internships but also inspired further action: choosing their own professional paths, undertaking work as teachers, or planning individual projects. Students strengthened their sense of pedagogical competence.

In conclusion, students of pedagogy undertaking internships in schools play an important role in building their professional competencies as well as influencing the student environment, having a real impact on the course and quality of the educational process. The opinions of students are very important to us — we treat them as full participants in the education process and active co-creators of the project. Thanks to a subject-oriented approach, they share with us their insights and recommendations, which constitute a valuable contribution to the development of an effective model of professional internships. Among the students' recommendations, the most frequently mentioned suggestions include: extending the duration of internships to a minimum of two weeks to truly experience the school environment, and carefully selecting mentor teachers whose work methods with children can serve as positive models. Students emphasize that the opportunity to observe teachers who effectively manage the classroom and use activating teaching methods is a valuable source of practical knowledge and serves as inspiration for further development of their pedagogical skills. Another important aspect they point out is the possibility of participating in various classes instead of being limited to just one. They notice that each class has its own atmosphere, dynamics, rituals, and challenges, which helps prepare them for working with diverse groups. Experiencing a variety of classes also enables student interns to adapt their own teaching styles to different students' needs and expectations, fostering the development of flexible responses to educational situations. Another key recommendation that emerged from the students' feedback is the reduction of internship documentation requirements and the preparation of schoolteachers to welcome interns. This is an important factor influencing the quality and effectiveness of pedagogical internships. Perhaps teachers serving as internship

supervisors should participate in workshops to help them understand how to fulfill this role effectively? Such training could include learning how to provide constructive feedback, support the intern's development, and manage internship time efficiently. In summary, these recommendations could be addressed by creating an active network of collaboration among early childhood education teachers, university lecturers, and student interns, operating as a mutual learning community.

Acknowledgments

Research work co-financed from the state budget under the program of the Minister of Education and Science entitled "Science for Society II," project no. NdSII/SP/0510/2024/01, co-financing amount PLN 999,856.00, total project value PLN 999,856.00.

References

- Bałachowicz, J., & Zbróg, Z. (2021). Kierunki przemian teoretycznych i badawczych w polskiej pedagogice wczesnoszkolnej – od mono– do polidyskursywności. [Directions of Theoretical and Research Transformations in Polish Early Childhood Education – From Monodiscursivity to Polydiscursivity] *Studia z Teorii Wychowania*, 1(34), 121-147. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0014.8462>
- Carr W., & Kemmis S., (2004). *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*. London: Routledge.
- Day, Ch. (2008). *Od teorii do praktyki: rozwój zawodowy nauczyciela*. [From Theory to Practice: The Professional Development of a Teacher]. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Gevorgyan, S. R., Sargsyan, V. G., & Aramyan, L. R. (2012). *A guide for improving the process of organizing student practice*. Yerevan, Armenia: ASPU.
- Heck, I. (2024). From Participatory Research to the co-construction of Action. Reflection on how to reinforce Action Research for Social Inclusion. *International Journal of Action Research*, 20, 50-68.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory Action Research: Communicative Action and the Public Sphere. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd Ed. pp. 559-603). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Law no. 1450 July 25, 2019 (Poland) *Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education on the standards of education preparing for the teaching profession*. Retrieved from <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20190001450>
- Pearson, A. T. (1989). *Theory and Practice in Teacher Education*, London: Routledge.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (red.) (2008). *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Santos Guimarães, M., & Silva Costa, E. (2022). The teaching internship in the process of building the professional identity of graduate students. *Educação & Formação*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.25053/redufor.v7i1.4853>
- Schon, D. A. (1984). *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Routledge.
- Sisyan, S., & Babayan, I. (2024). Pedagogical Practice as a means of forming a future teacher. *Main Issues Of Pedagogy And Psychology*, 11(2), 133-147. <https://doi.org/10.24234/miopap.v11i2.54>
- Zbróg, J. (2019). *Wiedza pedagogiczna przyszłych nauczycieli w perspektywie teorii reprezentacji społecznych*. [Pre-Service Teachers' Pedagogical Knowledge in the Perspective of the Theory of Social Representations]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej.
- Żytko, M., Nowakowska, L., Sobierańska, D., & Szyller, A. (2018). *Znaczenie praktyk pedagogicznych w procesie kształcenia nauczycieli*. [The Importance of Teaching Practice in the Teacher Education Process]. Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer.