

THE IMAGE OF SCHOOL AT THE INTERSECTION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE IN THE DISCOURSE OF FUTURE TEACHERS

Agnieszka Koterwas, Edyta Nowosielska, & Małgorzata Zambrowska

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

Abstract

The aim of this presentation is to present selected findings from the two-year project Flying School of Teaching Practicum, carried out within the Science for Society programme at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw. The project was research-and-application oriented. It involved the implementation of teaching practicum by students—future early childhood education teachers—under the supervision of academic staff in intentionally selected primary schools distinguished by their organizational, methodological, or curricular approaches. The study aimed to analyse the experiences students gained in the professional environment. The method used was participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), and the research material was collected through eight focus group interviews with students participating in the project and through their reflective journals (134 in total). The analysis shows a gap between the image of modern school education constructed within the university and the realities of everyday school practice. This gap becomes visible in the areas of the organization of the teaching and learning process, the methods and forms of work used, and the way the roles of teacher and pupil are perceived. In students' statements, on the one hand, there appears fascination with innovative solutions implemented in selected schools, such as group work, project-based learning, or an emphasis on socio-emotional competencies; on the other hand, there appears a sense of helplessness in the face of entrenched organizational schemes, time pressure, the dominance of textbooks, and standard forms of work that make it difficult to implement modern teaching approaches.

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

1. Introduction

Contemporary school functions in conditions of dynamic social, civilizational, cultural, technological, and economic change, which redefine its traditional functions and the organization of teaching and educational processes. Globalization, digitalization, cultural diversity, and growing expectations regarding the quality of education make it impossible to limit schooling to the transmission of knowledge. School has lost its monopoly over knowledge transfer, as a result of complex social, technological, and cultural processes that have transformed the ways children participate in the world of information. Educational practice still too rarely recognizes and uses the potential of pupils' cognitive autonomy, perpetuating transmissive didactics based on knowledge reproduction (Bałachowicz, 2009; Klus-Stańska, 2018). That is why it is so important to develop an educational environment based on flexibility, transdisciplinarity, collaboration, and reflection (Bruton, 2011).

These changes imply the need to redefine teacher education toward the development of creative and reflective thinking about education. Teacher education can effectively support the development of a reflective and critical attitude toward educational practice, which helps prepare future teachers for conscious action based on the appropriate use of pedagogical knowledge. Such an attitude enables them to critically analyse their own experiences, adapt to changing educational conditions, and make educational decisions based on careful evaluation and deeper reflection (Perkowska-Klejman, 2015). In this context, the development of the teacher as a creative and reflective professional is particularly important (Schön, 1983), for whom partnership, dialogue, and systematic reflection on practice are key principles of action. Among pedagogy students, these attitudes can be developed primarily in the school environment, through cooperation between the university and schools. During these experiences, students have the opportunity to confront the theoretical assumptions learned during their studies with the possibilities and barriers to their implementation in the world of school practice. In this text, we make this confrontation the central point of our reflection. We attempt to answer the question: What image of modern education is constructed

within the university, and does it find reflection in everyday practice—with particular emphasis on teaching practicum carried out within school-university partnerships?

2. Methods

The study was designed as participatory action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Heck, 2024), aimed at solving organizational problems through the involvement of those who experience them (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The aim of the study was to improve the quality of teaching practicum by developing and implementing a practicum model in cooperation with students—future early childhood education teachers—and intentionally selected public and non-public primary schools in Poland, within the so-called concept of “university-school partnerships” (Day, 2006), in order to create a learning community (Smith & MacGregor, 2009) and promote learning through reflective practice (Schön, 1983).

The analysis forms part of broader research carried out within the project Flying School of Teaching Practicum* (Koterwas et al., 2024). The research was conducted from February 2024 to March 2026. It included 134 students of preschool and early childhood pedagogy at the Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw, who had the opportunity to complete a one-week practicum in “model” schools distinguished by the active work of principals or founders, their distinctive curricula, or the organization of education based on constructivist assumptions. Immediately after completing their one-week practicum within the project, eight focus group interviews were conducted. The transcripts of these interviews were subjected to inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using open coding. The study received a positive opinion from the Senate Committee for Research Ethics at APS. In this article, we analyse material concerning students’ confrontation of professional academic knowledge with school praxis. We ask what vision of modern education is outlined by future early childhood education teachers and whether it is reflected in everyday pedagogical practice.

3. Discussion and conclusion

3.1. The image of modern school

During the focus group interviews, students participating in the Flying School of Teaching Practicum project confronted academic knowledge with their own experiences from practicum placements in schools intentionally selected for the project. They constructed high expectations of school based on an idealized vision shaped by the pedagogical knowledge acquired during their studies. They paid particular attention to the need for pupils’ cognitive activation as a condition for learning. “Here at the university we are often told to arrange the desks somehow in groups or in horseshoes, in an active way. And going on practicum, I wanted to see that” (FGI3). In their statements, characteristic expressions appeared, indicating the belief built up during their studies in the existence of only one correct model of the ideal school: “I expected novelty and innovation and wanted to see this ideal theory in practice” (FGI3); “I had very high expectations because it was a great project, an innovative school, and I went there thinking it would be amazing, something ‘wow!’” The modern school is thus framed as something extraordinary, alternative, fascinating, with a “wow” effect. Students presented this image mainly in opposition to the traditional school model, by negation rather than by describing its specific functioning. “We could see a different way of working, compared to my earlier practicum, where there was literally a coursebook, a workbook and you just do everything from A to Z” (FGI2). “I went [to the practicum] wanting to change how I perceive school, to see how it can look different” (FGI1).

Among some students, the ideal school vision constructed during pedagogical studies was described as “strange” or unrealistic to implement in practice: “Here [at the university] they sometimes tell us to do different strange activities and try them, and I sometimes cannot imagine how one could conduct that in school and still manage to do everything and engage everyone” (FGI3). The theoretical construct of the ideal school is perceived by students as “strange” when it goes too far beyond their imagination of school and beyond the biographically entrenched model they have accepted. This gap between the image of modern school outlined at the university and the hierarchical, formal, and predictable school reality creates in them a sense of uncertainty, but also curiosity and a desire to test the extent to which the ideas learned during their studies can actually be used in everyday practice. In this way, practical experience becomes a space in which their entrenched schemes of perceiving school are confronted with new, more creative possibilities for teachers’ action. Activities involving the organization of space or the inclusion of pupils in lesson delivery—which seem “strange” or difficult to realize during university classes—take on new meaning when, despite the difficulties, they are attempted in school practice. As a result, the ideal

* 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.

model of school is not rejected, but gradually transformed into a more realistic and reflective one, adapted to specific conditions, an image of school in which learning means not only acquiring knowledge “about” reality, but also “in” reality and “through” reality.

3.2. School praxis

After study visits to intentionally selected schools within the Flying School of Teaching Practicum project, some students noticed a reflection of academic knowledge in school practice. They referred to specific lesson observations: “In mathematics classes in first grade I noticed that the practical classes were almost one-to-one the same as those we have at the university with the doctor, and I could observe what it really looks like in practice with children. (...) it was clear that what we are learning here really transfers to what happens later in class” (FGI7).

Today, the teacher should become a co-creator of a dynamic educational environment in which children are supported in learning not only about reality, but also within it and through experiencing it (Maynard, 2001). Students described these experiences as highly valuable, emphasizing that lessons in the selected schools revealed concrete implementation of the methods and forms of work they had learned at the university. They pointed out that they could observe how pedagogical theory “works” in everyday classroom activity, which strengthened their belief in the usefulness of their studies and showed the real transferability of academic knowledge into educational practice (Heintz, 2024). The encounter between theory and pedagogical practice is described in the literature as a key moment in the development of the reflective teacher (Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 2013; Loughran, 2010; Bernay et al., 2020). “I finally saw that it is possible (...) and that you can organize the teaching process in such a way as to introduce these interesting, diverse methods into practice” (FGI4). Such experiences are crucial for the development of professional pedagogical knowledge, because they allow students to see that innovative methods and forms of work are not merely a student abstraction, but a real and functioning part of school praxis. They sustain motivation for experimentation, strengthen a sense of didactic competence, and build the conviction that school can be a space for active, creative, and reflective learning. Thus, the professional pedagogical knowledge being formed ceases to be “dry theory” that is impossible to apply in the school environment.

Some students had different experiences. They reported that they observed lesson organization consistent with their vision of a “model” school only in individual teachers. Students said: “There are no such nice, innovative, ideal schools, but there are teachers who try...” (FGI5). This observation gave them a sense of agency in the role of teacher-innovator: “Even if the school is not especially conducive, I can do it in my own way too, and then it’s like, okay, it can be done, I’ll do it” (FGI4). Observing even one such teacher during students’ educational biographies is crucial for the construction of their professional identity. These practicum experiences not only helped to overcome negative experiences from earlier placements, but also inspired further action: independent observations, entering the teaching profession, and planning their own projects. Students strengthened their sense of competence: “I was in one lesson with a first-grade teacher and really one hour was enough for me to understand what it is about. What it could look like and what it should look like. I was thrilled (...) I saw so much to draw from that it will definitely stay with me for a long time” (FGI1).

Despite the careful selection of schools for our project, some students were disappointed by the lessons they observed. They emphasized that these lessons diverged from academic knowledge. “We learn all these amazing things, and then we go there and they sit all day doing workbooks—where is all that we are learning?” (FGI2). “The practicum itself differs, in my opinion, from what they feed us here. Because they feed us cotton candy, some ice cream. I mean, do this, do that, be like this. Constantly, constantly something. It is very different” (FGI3). These metaphors (“cotton candy,” “ice cream”) convey the perception of the university as a place of illusory, ephemeral ideals that contrast with school everyday life. In this way, the felt gap between the modern, creative vision of school conveyed at the university and the traditional, bureaucratic school practice becomes a signal to students that teacher education requires better integration of reflection on real school conditions and dialogue between the university and the school environment. Only such dialogue can contribute to a more coherent and realistic image of school in which theory and educational practice complement one another.

4. Conclusion

The analysis reveals a fundamental gap between the idealistic vision of school built within the university as a space of innovation and activation, and school praxis, which often perpetuates traditional transmissive patterns dominated by workbooks and pupil passivity. This contrast appears both in students’ narratives expressing fascination with “modern” theoretical proposals and in frustration caused by their absence in practice. The statements about university “cotton candy” versus the “ordinary” school indicate

that pedagogical knowledge conveyed during studies remains, for many students, isolated from the real conditions of everyday school life, making it difficult to translate into practice.

As a result, the gap between theory and practice becomes an important signal for teacher education, pointing to the need for a reflective linking of theory with school realities, where students can analyse the limitations that emerge. Only then can practical experience contribute to building a more realistic and flexible image of school as a space of learning for both pupils and future teachers, while beginning to function as a “catalyst for reflection,” encompassing not only criticism of school realities but also verification of students’ assumptions. Students gradually come to the conclusion that the “ideal” school does not exist as a ready-made, universal model, but emerges through continuous experience, experimentation, and dialogue between theory and everyday practice (Goldshaft, 2024). Teaching practicum becomes for them a space where theory meets reality (Loughran, 1996; Zeichner & Liston, 2013), and the image of the modern school shifts from a “wow” stereotype toward a more realistic, reflective, and critical vision of school as a setting for life, learning, and co-creation.

References

- Bałachowicz, J. (2009). *Style działań edukacyjnych nauczycieli klas początkowych. Między uprzedmiotowieniem a podmiotowością* [Styles of educational-activities of early grade teachers. Between objectification and subjectivity]. Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej TWP.
- Bernay, R., Stringer, P., Milne, J., & Jhagroo, J. (2020). Three Models of Effective School University Partnerships. *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 55*(1), 133–148. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-020-00171-3>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bruton, D. (2011). Learning Creativity and Design for Innovation. *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, 21(3), 321-333. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10798-010-9122-8>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development*. Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPORT.pdf
- Day, C. (2008). *Od teorii do praktyki: rozwój zawodowy nauczyciela* [From theory to practice: The professional development of a teacher]. Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne.
- Goldshaft, B., Sjølie, E., & Johannesen, M. (2024). Student teachers’ research and development (R&D) practice - constraining and supporting practice architectures. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 32(3), 853–873. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2140698>
- Heinz, M. (2024). The practicum in initial teacher education – enduring challenges, evolving practices and future research directions. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 47(5), 865–875. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2024.2428031>
- Herr, K. G., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The Action Research Dissertation: A guide for students and faculty*. SAGE Publications.
- 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* (pp. 559–603).
- Klus-Stańska, D. (2018). *Paradygmaty dydaktyki. Myśleć teorią o praktyce* [Paradigms of Didactics. Thinking about Practice with Theory]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Koterwas, A., Krasuska-Betiuk, M., Nowosielska, E., Zambrowska, M., Kupiec, M., & Lewandowska, E. (2025). Latająca Szkoła Praktyk – zapowiedź projektu badawczo-wdrożeniowego. *Problemy Opiekuńczo - Wychowawcze*, 630(5), 73–76.
- Perkowska-Klejman, A. (2019). *Poszukiwanie refleksyjności w edukacji. Studium teoretyczno-empiryczne* [Seeking reflectivity in education. A theoretical-empirical study]. Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej.
- Loughran, J. (1996). *Developing reflective practice in teacher education. Learning About Teaching and Learning Through Modelling*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203453995>
- Maynard, T. (2001). The Student Teacher and the School Community of Practice: A consideration of “learning as participation.” *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 31(1), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640123915>
- Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*. Basic Books, New York.
- Smith, B. L., & MacGregor, J. (2009). Learning communities and the quest for quality. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 17(2), 118–139. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09684880910951354>
- Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. (2013). *Reflective teaching: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge.