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'Being a teacher is different from working as a teacher': evaluating pre-service primary school teachers' practicum experiences in a Spanish context

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal qualitative study explores the value of practicum experiences for the formation of pre-service teachers' (PSTs) identities at different stages of their training in a Spanish context. It aimed to understand pre-service teachers' professional development and practicum experiences, their support needs during this time and contribution of practicum experiences for the formation of their teacher identities. Using a case study approach, data were collected from interviews with pre-service teachers and their drawings, to elicit visual representations of their sense-making. A reflexive thematic approach was adopted for the data analysis. The findings demonstrate their learning about the realities and challenges facing teaching professionals, and raise pressing concerns for teacher education. Firstly, teacher education has become a technical and instrumental practice due to the process of 'professionalisation' of teachers, the concern is that important moral and ethical dimensions of teaching are overlooked, resulting in unintended negative consequences. Secondly, pre-service teachers lack opportunities and space to question practice. Practicum experience must be more than simply 'learning the ropes'. It must support pre-service teachers to become reflexive practitioners, and it is suggested that in this task teacher educators and school-based mentors have an important part to play.

This paper draws on a qualitative longitudinal case study about the practicum experiences of pre-service primary education teachers (PSTs) at a university in Spain. Considering pre-service teacher perspectives, it contributes to current debates about the development of teacher agency and the extent to which this is enabled through initial teacher education (ITE). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define teacher agency as the critical development of individuals to respond to problematic situations in the context of action. Buchanan (2015) argues that an individual's professional agency is reciprocally related to his or her professional identity. As teachers construct an understanding of who they are within their school and professional context, they take actions that they believe align with that construction. Those actions (and how the actions are perceived by others) then feed back into the ongoing identity construction process (p. 704).

There is a connection between teacher agency and professional development that goes beyond the limitations of a discourse of training. Kremer-Hayon (1991) argues for the importance of

considering the agent who is developing as a professional (in-service or pre-service teacher) and the moment when it occurs, to define professional development. Mainly, as PSTs develop their agency, it encourages their involvement in a constant process of improvement as professionals, including both personal (beliefs, values, identities) and technical perspectives (resources, skills) through specialisation programmes, and shared career advancement, among other ways (Fütterer *et al.* 2024). García-Lázaro *et al.* (2022) explain that early professional development during the ITE involves contextual knowledge, spaces and events to reflect together through observation and dialogic-talks, and interactions with reference models, such as mentors.

As professional development involves self-questioning on being committed to the profession, the development of PSTs' identities appears as an issue to be addressed from the ITE (Heinz 2024, Wong and Liu 2024). In Vähäsantanen's words (Vähäsantanen 2014), 'teachers' agency plays a key role in negotiating and reshaping professional identity' (p. 8), understanding the decision-making process during experiential learning opportunities as a 'shift lever' to help PSTs to define themselves as professionals when they encounter dilemmas and tensions in their practicum (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011).

Drawing on insights from a Gadamerian framing, the paper explores pre-service teachers' visions and insights into the question of how far the practicum experience enables them to forge a professional identity and to exercise judgement, with teacher judgement being 'essential in education' (Biesta 2015, p. 76) or conversely, the extent to which it reduces teaching to 'a technical rather than an ethical, critical or creative act' (Clarke and Phelan 2015, p. 267) was a critical driver for this inquiry. Thus, the specific aims of this study into the professional development and practicum experiences of pre-service teachers, were:

- to examine pre-service teachers' professional development and practicum experiences from their perspectives
- to understand the support needs of pre-service teachers during their practicum
- to gain insight into the value and importance of practicum experiences for the formation of pre-service teachers' identities

Flores (2020) explains that PSTs' professional preparation should not focus on becoming technicians but on reflecting on how they can contribute to teaching (their role) and how teaching permeates them (influence). This influence helps to create a professional identity when PSTs analyse both their actions and context more objectively. This type of reflection takes place after practice periods especially, such as practicums, contributing to identity formation (Anspal *et al.* 2019). Forde *et al.* (2006, p. 5) also argue for the importance of teachers feeling ownership of their work, something that is especially important when education policy limits teacher agency, autonomy and the exercise of professional judgement: 'Underlying managerialist policies lies a construction of teacher identity and practice based upon compliance and conformity that tends to constrain teachers in the formation of their professional identity and in their role as educators' (ibid).

In Spain, as in many other countries, success in ITE courses demands evidence against prescribed competencies, which PSTs are required to demonstrate. For example, England is another national context which has a standards framework with which ITE programmes must comply (Department for Education 2023). Interestingly, the Department for Education (DfE) uses the term 'initial teacher training' and in England the direction of policy travel has been towards school-led initial teacher training. The difference in the use of the terminology, - initial teacher training and initial teacher education, with the latter being a term generally favoured by university providers – is significant in that 'it highlights a fundamental conflict of approach: should teachers be educated or trained?' (Clarke and Parker 2021). Clarke and Moore (2013, p. 490) have argued that 'neoliberal education policy's fetishisation of standards, measurement, transparency, and accountability has worked to eviscerate the ethical and political core of teaching, reducing it instead to what at times

seems little more than an exercise in technical competence and instrumental efficiency'. The focus on standards and competencies resonates with a narrow conception of the teacher's role and arguably serves to undermine teacher agency and professionalism. This has implications for teachers' moral judgement and the 'ethico-political dimension of teaching' (Clarke and Phelan 2015, p. 260).

Initial teacher education in Spain

The Spanish education system follows a concurrent model for ITE (Dinçer and Bikmaz 2020). This concurrency means that PSTs are enrolled on several education courses which run concurrently with different practicum experiences over 4 years at the university. In this way, they do not need to obtain a Master's degree in education to become teachers and a benefit of this model is that it is conducive to/promotes PST immersion in ongoing sustained reflection on education over the 4-year period.

Currently, the country faces a challenge related to access to ITE and the quality of school teaching. Thousands of graduate primary education teachers wait to access the teaching profession as in-service teachers in public, charter and private schools. The wait could be long, forcing most of them to spend years before working as full-time teachers for the first time or to gain short-term teaching employment, specially in the south area of the country. As a consequence, they will reach both stability in their workplace and good work conditions later than in other jobs, for instance, job security, access to a reasonable salary and professional development opportunities in the workplace (Urkidi *et al.* 2020). This mismatch between the teaching jobs and the annual high number of graduated teachers is due to good staff retention rates. Additionally, the national education policy context is unstable and characterised by change and a lack of consensus. This lack of an educational agreement comes from constant political changes that raise questions about the importance of education in the country nowadays (Rivas-Flores *et al.* 2022).

Spain is a member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which asks member countries to achieve different competencies. Although the discourse about competency development is presented within the teachers' professional development (Herppich *et al.* 2018, van de Oudeweetering and Voogt 2018), the promotion and acquisition of 'soft' or less utilitarian competencies seem to be crucial (Eurydice 2023). Specifically, some of the capacities teachers are expected to reach are: reflecting on their classroom practices and working autonomously; keeping critical relationships with educational organisations for a sustainable future; developing emotional stability; showing willingness to change and teamwork spirit; and working with educational diversity successfully.

The importance of caring ethically for the ITE students is a premise in Spain because the strengthening of teacher professional development is a priority worldwide as the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 of the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 states (UNESCO 2022). Universities play a decisive role since PSTs start to familiarise and develop these competencies through their first reflective practicum experiences. In the ITE programme, two placements are typically included in the third and fourth years of studies. The practicum is face-to-face in a school and there will be cooperating teachers in each school setting. In some other contexts, these cooperating teachers are called school-based mentors who supervise training teachers' practicum. The role of these cooperating teachers is crucial to developing a critical consciousness towards the process of teaching and growing as professionals at the same time.

The practicum aims to minimise the separation between the theoretical training in the university and the acquisition of the previously mentioned competencies as 'real' teachers in a classroom (Rebolledo 2015). Recently, Manso (2019) explained that the Spanish practicum is a backbone of the meaning of the ITE and its examination helps us to generate a consciousness in future professionals towards educational challenges. To this end,

universities can encourage the development of more reflective, thus prepared, teachers who show involvement in, and a wider comprehension of, educational issues (Cochran-Smith *et al.* 2015). This line of thought suggests that the perspective of PSTs about their development in the practicum setting is relevant to explore, in order to know whether these changes are taking place conditioning their professional development (Zeichner 2010, Gómez *et al.* 2019).

PSTs' professional development goes beyond practice training as it involves developing critical reflections that confront their beliefs, values and professional identities, and help them in their self-knowledge as teachers (Korthagen 2017). Thus, the ITE programme is the first agent in encouraging and creating professional development opportunities through the practicum for PSTs to understand the profession.

The study

In this part of the paper the research process is explained. The starting point was the three research aims, set out above, which narrowed down our broad topic of interest by providing a researchable angle on it. These aims were then expressed in the form of questions which provided the catalyst for the investigation and informed the choices made when devising a research strategy aligned to the questions, as: 'it is critical for researchers to work diligently to develop strong questions' (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013, p. 100). Expressed in the form of questions, these became:

- What are pre-service teachers' understandings of their professional development and practicum experiences?
- What are their support needs during their practicum?
- What insights can we gain into the value and importance of practicum experiences for the formation of pre-service teachers' identities?

These three questions informed all aspects of the research design, including the justification for decisions about the practical choices regarding sources of data, methods of data collection, approach to analysis of the data and ethical considerations, as set out below. Thinking through the design of the research at the outset is important, although as Mason (2002, p. 25) notes, this is not to be thought of as a 'blueprint' for the research but rather 'its unique value is in encouraging from the start the process of strategic thinking and reflection which must continue throughout the whole research process'.

This is a qualitative longitudinal case study which presents a descriptive and analytical research design – a single bounded unit of interest, which is pre-service primary school teachers' practicum experience using multiple data collection tools with a cohort of respondents. The exploration of reflection and professional development opportunities in the practicum settings has been a focus of much teacher education research (Davies and Heyward 2019, Bell *et al.* 2022). Its implications for the initial teacher education programme can be seen in the strengthening of professional preparation of PSTs from a critical, reflective and conscious perspective, far from an exclusive utilitarian way. This study aims to analyse and evaluate critically the PSTs' perspective on the role of the practicum in their initial professional development. On the research design, the authors acknowledge some potential limitations. For example, due to the nature of qualitative research, generalisability needs to be made cautiously with acknowledgement of the ways in which the researchers, the research design, the relatively small sample size and the context shaped the findings.

The data were collected over a four-year period (2019–2023) when each year corresponds to a practicum experience. The follow-up of a cohort of 9 PSTs (7 females, 2 males) changed from one year to another because it was necessary to select specific research instruments regarding the different practicums. During the four academic years, already validated protocols guided the interviewing process, adding some specific questions or topics by the researchers due to the

specificity of the context. The authors used different sources of information for the interpretation: interview audio recordings, class observations, field notes, and PSTs' drawings of themselves as professionals. In this study, only the data collected from the semi-structured interviews and PSTs' drawings are drawn on and discussed.

As part of the data collection, a visual research method was employed to assist the interviews – the photovoice method. Photovoice is defined as a visual approach which holds value for eliciting different and additional information from that which can be gleaned by more commonly adopted research methods such as interviews (Wass *et al.* 2020). In this study, research participants were asked to draw a picture to illustrate their perceptions of a primary school teacher's identities. During the interviews, participants were invited to talk through their drawings. This art-based technique proved particularly useful when trying to elicit information from participants who need to reflect on complex matters such as pre-service teacher education. Adopting the photovoice method enabled the collection of a rich corpus of reflections and images that capture PSTs' views on their professional identities. All of the interviews were conducted in Spanish as the participants' first language and then translated into English for analysis.

The lead author who conducted the interviews completed the initial analysis using qualitative thematic analysis. Together with the other two authors, the data were subsequently re-analysed and revised, the themes were identified and interpretations of these were developed using an abductive approach. The researchers followed the guidelines presented by Braun and Clarke (2022) for this process of reflexive thematic analysis. In the data analysis process, we went through the following steps – immersion, reflecting, taking apart data, recombining data, relating and locating one's data, reflecting back and presenting the data (Wellington 2015). Our visual data – the drawings – informed the themes and were analysed alongside the interview data. In the process of analysing visual and textual data, we found the following guiding questions proposed by Trombeta and Cox (2022, p. 1566) were particularly useful – what is in the images that supports or reinforces what was learned from the interview data? What is in the images that contradicts what was learned from the interview data? What is in the images that is not in the interview? What is in the interviews that is not in the images? These questions were used to facilitate comparison between different sources of data. At the end of the thematic analysis process, three main themes were identified: (a) PST's vision of the profession from a job and a vocational perspective; (b) professional development requirements; and (c) the importance of reflection. The trustworthiness of our analysis lies in a triangulation of the information among three researchers.

The participants' characteristics are shown in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym in the report of the findings.

Table 1. Characteristics of research participants and practicum settings.

Pseudonym	Gender	Practicum setting
Manuel	Male	All his practicum experiences in private schools (high socioeconomic areas).
Ainhoa	Female	All her practicum experiences in charter schools (medium and low socioeconomic areas).
Raquel	Female	All her practicum experiences in the same charter school (low socioeconomic area, the poorest area in Spain).
Carmen	Female	All her practicum experiences in private and charter schools (medium socio-economic areas).
Liam	Male	All his practicum experiences in charter schools (high and medium socioeconomic areas).
Rosa	Female	Practicum experiences in Spanish, Slovenian and Czech Republic schools (medium socioeconomic areas).
Alicia	Female	All his practicum experiences in charter schools (high socioeconomic areas).
Cristina	Female	All his practicum experiences in charter schools (high socioeconomic areas).
Julia	Female	Practicum experiences in private schools and a charter school (high socioeconomic and very low socioeconomic areas).

Their first practicum experience lasted 1 month and PSTs needed to observe classroom teaching. The second experience lasted 1 month and a half and consisted of teaching and developing classroom management. The third experience involved a 3-month practicum during which PSTs teach full time. There is a fourth experience which lasts three/four full months and should consist of teaching full time. They stayed in the schools for 5–7 hours per day from Monday to Friday.

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2024). The ethical approval for this study was given by the research ethics committee at University Loyola Andalucia. At the beginning of the study, each participant was briefed on the nature and purpose of the study. Each participant then completed a consent form.

Findings

In this section, we present an examination and classification of the participants' interview data about three main pillars related to their professional development. We highlight the most relevant statements that illustrate some of the controversies and issues surrounding how the role of the teacher and teaching are defined/conceptualised and the tensions and dilemmas experienced by the PSTs.

Deciding against a rigid, linear, separating out of the data with arrangement and presentation determined by the research questions as the organising principle, instead the findings are grouped under three key themes constructed from the data. This allowed for a more sophisticated treatment of the data which recognises the holistic nature of the data set, rather than imposing the research questions onto it as the organising structure. The data map on to the research questions but as participants' accounts reflected the nature of their lived realities, then carving these up mechanistically for reporting purposes in this way would fail to capture the nature of their lived experiences and the processes of sense-making. Their accounts evidenced the 'reality check' they underwent as aspirations for the kinds of teachers they would like to be, what it means to be a professional and the forging of a professional identity were reappraised through their experiences of practicum, and these were powerfully conveyed in the interview discussions and complemented in the visual data. In these ways, the data arrangement under the three themes, which we have characterised as: pre-service teachers' vision of the profession and reality shock: job versus vocation; professional development requirements: what do I need to become an educator? and professional identities as reflected in drawing, align to the research questions without disturbing the ecology of the data.

Pre-service teachers' vision of the profession and reality shock: job versus vocation

Finding PSTs' reflections about their definition of being educators brings a different overview of the ITE's role facing the current educational discourse related to skills to be *model teachers* (Werler 2015). The PSTs showed a progressive understanding of the double role of teachers: caregivers who provide emotional and physical support, and role models in structuring and achieving academic goals.

> You need to learn quickly that you support your students in their physical autonomy and their decision-making. Scaffolding children during their childhood and the beginning of adolescence is quite complex if you have not covered these areas for yourself previously. (Raquel)

> Managing the water cycle is okay; showing the water cycle to a child with ADHD, an African, a Moroccan, and a Ukrainian child who doesn't speak Spanish yet, and to other 21 students is not easy. Along with this content, they also need to relate it to their context and previous experiences. (Liam)

PSTs define a teacher as a professional who guides, manages and supports their students without imposing their beliefs and thoughts. These conceptions seem to clash with what they lived throughout their relationships with other teachers in the schools.

> Sometimes I wonder if I will forget my principles and values as a teacher when I became an in-service (teacher). (Julia)

> Being a teacher is highly demanding: personally and professionally. Our responsibility is focused not only on the curriculum but it is also related to children's personal development: I was not sufficiently aware of the values they show when they have an argument, the attitudes they show when talking about poverty, the well-being they have at the school . . .. (Carmen)

The practicum experience prompted the PSTs to question their desire to be a teacher. They discovered a balance that needs to be kept: personal time and life versus professional demands and needs. This balance contributed, from their perspective, to 'not idealising the teaching as a wonderful job' (Alicia)

> Through the arrival and first months of COVID-19, I felt, for the first time, I was dedicating 100% of myself to the job. I didn't have time to videocall my friends in the afternoon, I didn't do anything different from one day to another: I just spent the day in the school, thinking about teaching online, trying to reach those poor internet connection homes. I felt I had the responsibility to address the children' worries above my own exhaustion. Then I asked myself: are you sure (you) want this for your professional life? You will dedicate the next 40 years to do this every day (more or less)! The first dilemma for me was this one: I think I love teaching, what it involves; I mean, caring, listening, teaching, sharing with my colleagues, talking to families . . . but at what price? (Ainhoa)

PSTs were critical in relation to the popularised image of teaching, especially disseminated by social media. They identified the devaluation of the job from the social sphere by not considering the hidden part of the teaching.

> It is supposed we have lots of holidays and free time in the afternoon: hopefully, we have a long period of holidays. Without them, I believe we'd not survive. I didn't stop working when I left school every day, and I saw some burnt-out teachers because of the social pressure: families expect explanations about their children's homework feedback, the principal expects you to spend some extra hours preparing for Christmas day, the regional government expects you to fill these reports about the academic year assessment . . . You also need to spend time preparing your classes. Although you love dedicating yourself to these things, you also accept extra issues. This career, just as a job, is not well paid if you consider the hours spent to respond to those demands. You need to present a strong vocation, if you see teaching only as a job, you'll be disappointed. (Julia)

The modelling and conversations shared between cooperating teachers and PSTs generate critical spaces where questioning the quality of the teachers' professional preparation can occur. The mentoring of cooperating teachers has usually directed PSTs to focus on their teaching abilities and classroom management (Matsko *et al.* 2020). The alignment of cooperating teachers' work and the ITE's concerns could prevent the reality shock that happens when PSTs deal with the practicum as a first sight of their career.

> Observing the cooperating teacher and other colleagues makes you relate what things you learned in the university. When you see what the schools do and what priorities they have, you understand that there is not a bond that combines both perspectives. At the school, you are vulnerable in these terms. I know I was expected to help and participate as much as I could so I did it because I also know that it could be a future workplace for me. I followed the school's guidelines and its vision, but it was not always my vision and it's frustrating. (Manuel)

PSTs envisaged the practicum experience as an opportunity to develop as professionals, which makes us think about the concept of being professionals from their perspective. According to their reflections, demonstrating useful skills and attitudes was combined with an increase in their knowledge about teaching. This process introduced the concept of professional identity in their explanations.

> If I need to define what teacher I want to become, I'd say a vocational one: that sense of feeling helpful for the children' well-being. Loving being patient, creative and organised with your work will allow you to be a teacher. I'd also highlight the respect for childhood, its pace and its features. Children are children, don't expect them to behave like adults. (Rosa)

Professional development requirements: what do I need to become an educator?

Sachs (2016, p. 417) pointed out that professional development can be defined as a set of opportunities challenged by a *compliant teaching profession* today. As a result of observing their cooperating teachers, the participants highlighted the pressure and usual standardised practices they experienced during their practicum. If these practices start from the ITE, teacher professional development could become more difficult in the in-service years due to a previous superficial understanding of this matter (Tatto 2021).

From their perspective, assuming uncertainty, flexibility and creativity is part of developing as a teacher. Diversity in all its pathways (cultural, religious, identities, socioeconomic, behavioural, cognitive) is present in a classroom, consequently a prescribed standard teaching approach does not exist. The richness of diversity also generates the need for solid knowledge (content knowledge) and a sensitivity base to address all children' needs.

> I strongly believe I would not be ready to teach without my ITE. I've not only learned about resources and strategies, I've also learnt how to behave as a teacher because I'm not the sister of my students although they can think about it because of my physical appearance and my age. It makes me less experienced and cautious. Leaving aside the exclusive affection to focus on children's academic development is the first step to becoming a teacher. (Carmen)

It is important to develop shared learning and growth as a professional during the teacher's career. To this end, professional development is led by acting socially and purposefully, through activism to enlarge the teaching knowledge (Boylan *et al.* 2023). The participants discovered different sides of this reality and they reflected on the role of families in their jobs:

> I am guided in my teaching by giving children the opportunity to be autonomous in solving tasks, without my excessive intervention. It works, the educational research says so; however, during my first school-placement teachers wanted something done on time that produced some evidence. That rush made children repeat and comply. Teachers cared about the process but they couldn't stop and follow the children' natural pace. I totally disagree with this way of working and learning. Honestly, this is the reality and it is hard to accept it: you cannot do whatever you believe is correct. (Manuel)

The external and widely studied administrative burdens are considered both a requirement and a stressful factor for teachers (Parcerisa and Verger 2016). PSTs perceived this stress and realised how teachers deal with it thanks to their practicum settings. Confronting this part of their job positions them as professionals, guided by external 'well-dressed' requests from governments. As Buchanan (2015) states, the generation of professional identities can be compromised due to the presence of accountability as a feature of school life.

> The worst thing about this job is the paperwork … My last cooperating teachers didn't tell me so much about this issue, I suppose it's because she didn't want to scare me (he laughs) (…) Honestly, filling boxes and writing reports doesn't seem to be a hard task, I think the problem comes from the investment of time you make, subtracting time to your personal life because you're in a routine spiral responding to external demands instead of listening to what the kids need. (Liam)

Coping with bureaucracy, as with many other topics, involves frustration and emotional drops. PSTs recognise the need to self-regulate their emotional states due to the highly demanding situations they experienced. What practicum presents to PSTs in terms of emotional instability and its relationship with their perceived self-efficacy is an issue for ITE programmes. Multiple questions related to one's suitability for this job appear during the practicum and ITE students must

be supported to cope with stressful situations, thus favouring professional development in these terms (Clark and Newberry 2019).

> The thing is the obligation to make all schools bilingual in our region. The students don't understand complex content in English in the last stage of primary education; for instance, think about biology, maths or history. Nevertheless, it didn't matter for the regional government: everyone needs to speak English although they don't use Spanish well enough to explain themselves and understand. That makes me think about the official obligations teachers assume without being able to do anything else. I'm bilingual and I use ICT, in 10 years something bigger, such as artificial intelligence or whatever, will arrive at the schools and it will be a challenge for me so I'll probably need time to get used to it. It seems I won't have that time as my cooperating teachers don't have it right now. (Raquel)

Leaving aside personal interests because of the job demands was a complex decision for PSTs. In this study, through observing their cooperating teachers, they understood the constant pressure that Spanish society put on teachers to be sensible, sensitive and professionally updated. This social pressure seems to be a burden on the professional development of teachers given COVID-19 which is still a controversial issue because it created a setback in the psychological stability of teachers and students (Zancajo and Bonal 2022).

> I have learnt for the past couple of years not to be too demanding with myself. I was pushing myself to do things perfectly and that strategy was forcing me to expect perfection in my students during the practicum. That's not the way to be a teacher. You need to do lots of things but when the pressure is affecting your mental health, there is where you need to stop. Before COVID-19, I'm unsure if I'd said this right now. Maybe it was something that the pandemic taught us to become teachers: this is a beautiful job we have the luck to live, but it will always be a job. Your health is more important than a job, always. (Ainhoa)

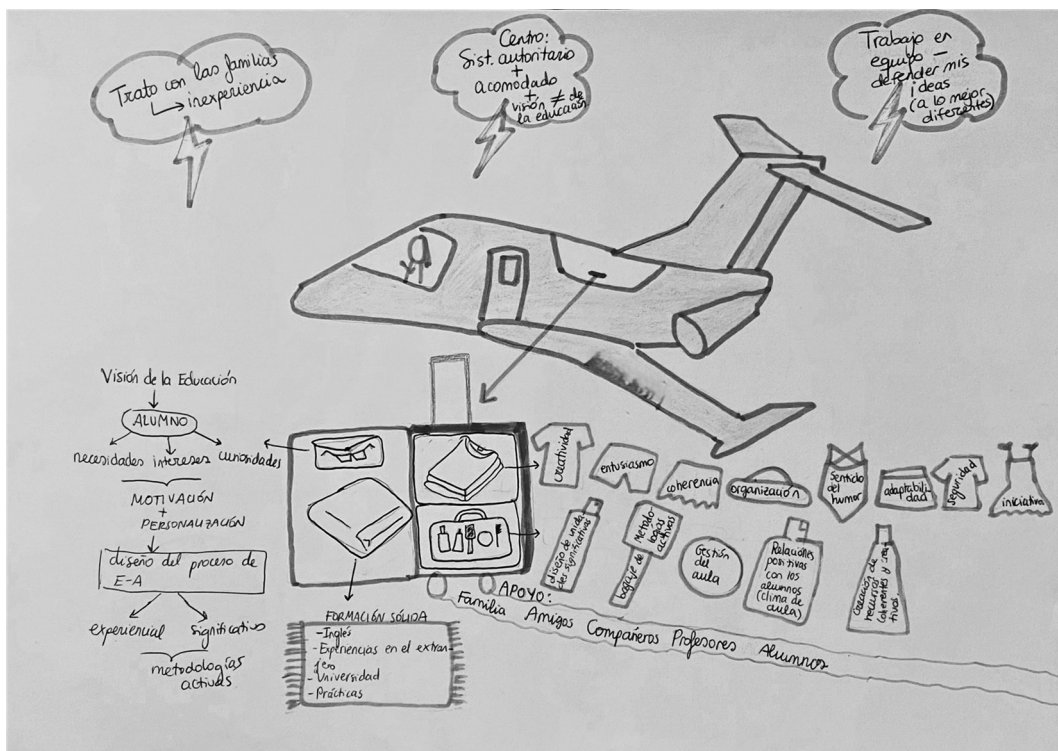Figure 1. Rosa's drawing of being a teaching professional.

Figure 2. Julia's drawing of being a teaching professional.

Professional identities as reflected in drawing

The PSTs were asked to draw themselves as professionals once they finished their studies. The three selected images represent the most repeated statements by all the participants and the elements that appear in the drawings complement their previous reflections during the interviews.

The first drawing (Figure 1) belongs to Rosa who highlights personal characteristics reached during the ITE course (flexible, open-minded, rooted personal values, energetic) and other attributes still needed to be developed further (patience, self-criticism, stronger communication skills). Rosa drew herself in the centre of the picture, surrounded by smiling children.

In Figure 2, Julia drew herself as a pilot whose baggage includes: her vision of education focused on the student's needs, interests and curiosities for active methodologies, good personal qualities (creativity, sense of humour, flexibility) and the wheels of this baggage are their family members, friends and university teachers. The clouds with lightning show the insecurities: the inexperience in the relationships with children's families; too authoritarian and settled schools; and the need to accept others' suggestions to work cooperatively.

In Figure 3, Manuel did not include any words in his drawing, but he explained it. He drew himself as a happy teacher who values the music and arts as tools to work with children. He drew a heart in his shirt to reflect the 'engine' of his teaching. He packed in a bag some pedagogical principles such as real bilingual education, the importance of music, and game-based learning. He added educational beliefs related to a teacher-student equal relationship, the importance of questioning himself and the presence of labyrinthine requirements to teach. The hands pointing to him show a close educational community towards those pedagogical goals and the intransigent paperwork as a threat to his educational beliefs.
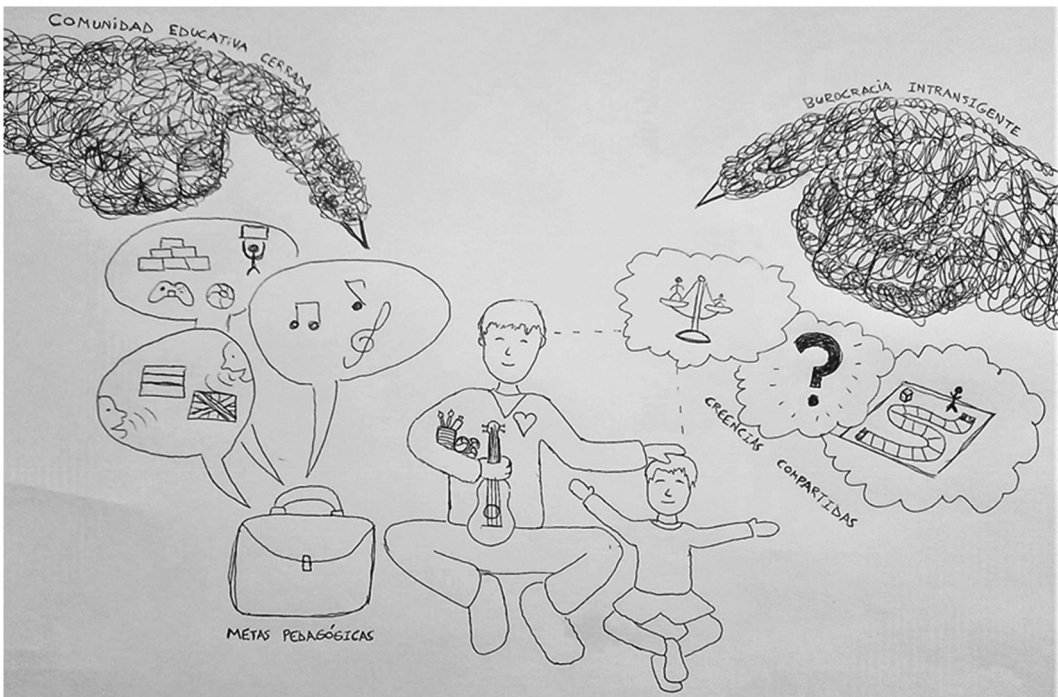
Figure 3. Manuel's drawing of being a teaching professional.

By analysing the above drawings, we found that the images largely reinforced their reflections highlighted in the interview data. The drawings were particularly relevant to the third aim of study in relation to the formation of pre-service teachers' identities. These drawings also presented two additional dimensions which were less explicit in the interview data – their beliefs on what makes an ideal school teacher and how these beliefs inform their identities as a teacher. The analysis shows that visual data complemented textual data when participants used visual elements to talk about complex and conflicted feelings.

Discussion: becoming a school teacher and professional development requirements

In this discussion section, we reflect on the key findings. Our reflections are enriched by reference to concepts drawn from a Gadamerian framing. We probe the findings to surface the tensioned nature of the processes of 'becoming' and 'being', as aspiration and desire collide with regulatory demands and constraints. This reflection on the key findings brings into focus the apparent conflict between compliance, alienation and a growing sense of frustration. Drawing on ideas from Gadamer, our reflections on the findings point to pre-service teachers learning through 'looking beyond', seeing themselves more clearly and expanding their understandings beyond the everyday to the wider contribution of teachers to a better society.

The findings attest to some of the ways in which 'performative technologies' (Englund and Gerdin 2019) operate to restrict teacher agency, and the struggles and tensions in the apparent conflicts emerging from this for the PSTs becoming teachers. Their apparent sense of a dawning of awareness of the undermining of teacher professional judgement in the managerialist culture of schooling surfaces some important tensions and paradoxes. We examine these ideas by drawing on insights from Gadamer, whose philosophical task was 'to understand what constitutes human

understanding' (Nixon 2017, p. 12). As Gadamer (2013, p. 310) puts it, 'Understanding begins [. . .] when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics'. A central insight from Gadamer's work, Nixon suggests 'is that understanding, interpretation and application comprise one unified process' (p. viii) and Gadamer's hermeneutics with an ethical and sense-making orientation, is drawn on to illuminate understandings of being a teacher in a neoliberal schooling system. To understand requires us to 'question what lies behind what is said {. . .} If we go back *behind* what is said, then we inevitably ask questions *beyond* what is said' (Gadamer 2013, p. 378).

The pre-service teachers' interview data reflect tensions inherent in a discourse of 'becoming' a teacher as their concerns are with 'becoming more truly themselves', which are reflective of the 'distinctive ethical strain' characterising Gadamerian hermeneutics (Nixon 2017, p. 16). The findings of this study provide insights into a group of pre-service teachers apparently struggling to cope with the demands of work intensification, an exhaustive administrative burden and an assessment-led curriculum and to make sense of what they at times encounter as a disregard of or insensitivity towards children's 'natural pace' of learning in the 'rush' to compliance. The pre-service teachers' awareness of the lack of teacher voice and the opportunity to exercise professional judgement developed during the practicum experience was illustrated in the dilemmas evident in their reflections. They also questioned the 'rush' and the effects of enacting mandated approaches which sometimes appeared in conflict with research about good educational practice and the time spent on form filling and box-ticking, all of which, as they became aware, were what 'working as a teacher' involves. This appeared far removed from their concept of 'being a teacher', i.e. being part of a wider project to 'contribute to the future of society'.

The ethical project of education and implicit in the work of Gadamer, the notion of the 'good society' (Nixon 2017, p. 54), appeared distant from the reality of some of their experiences as trainee teachers which appeared more reflective of 'a mode of planning that in its reliance on technical rationality fails to acknowledge the full complexity of the educational process' (p. 54). They had expected to evidence democratic educational practices of dialogue and negotiation with children, an openness to children and respect for the 'pace and features' of childhood, and they had hoped it would be possible to enact the role of teacher without detriment to their mental health and wellbeing and without compromising their values and beliefs as educators. The concept of 'Bildung', which Gadamer (2013, p. 10) elaborates in 'Truth and Method', 'describes more the result of the process of becoming than the process itself' is an idea which holds in tension:

> the self-possession through which one makes something one's own on the one hand and, on the other, the alienation which unsettles such self-possession. This alienation is inescapable if one genuinely attempts to remain open to what is very different from that to which one has become accommodated or from what one may have more actively accommodated. (Cleary and Hogan 2001, p. 526)

We explore the apparent tensions in the desire of the pre-service teachers to 'be' a teacher as well as the dawning realities of what it means to work as a teacher in their reflections. The nascent struggles apparent in their growing awareness and understanding of the responsibilities and complex demands of working as a teacher are examined and the operation of performativity (Ball 2003).

A sense of alienation from the external regulatory demands which take time away from prioritising children's needs and the compliance culture appeared in tension with their desire to retain their desire and beliefs about what it is to 'be a teacher'. This alienation can be sensed, for example, in the words of Manuel who reported 'I followed the school's guidelines and its vision, but it was not always my vision and it is frustrating'. A struggle was also apparent in balancing the demands of the role with their well-being and personal life. As Ball (2003, p. 216) noted:

> Expressed in the lexicons of belief and commitment, service and even love, and of mental health and emotional well-being. The struggles are often internalized and set the care of the self against duty to others.

There is a sense of conflict too in the information regarding awareness of the teacher's lack of agency, for example, in the requirement to enact policies over which they lack the power to

influence. This was seen in the example of the sense of frustration about the issue of all schools in one region becoming bilingual which prompted this pre-service teacher to reflect 'that makes me think about the official obligations teachers assume without being able to do anything else' and in the example of the desire to teach according to the natural pace of children's learning, which was in conflict with pressures to demonstrate evidence of learning and results within specified timescales. Neoliberalised education policy is, as Clarke (2021, p. 38) points out, 'riven by tensions and contradictions' such as on the one hand, the regulatory professional standards mandated for initial teacher training and which are a feature of the system in England as they are in Spain with the EHEA competencies for ITE and the 'espousal of need for greater teacher professionalism, which arguably includes the autonomy such standards both question and undermine' (p. 38). As Menter *et al.* (2009) noted:

> At the same time as national curricula have been increasingly closely prescribed, so the quality of teachers and teaching was being called into question, with increasing encroachment of government into the management of the process of entry into the profession and the development of highly interventionist accountability procedures'. (p. 221)

The beginnings of awareness of such tensions and contradictions, coupled with pressures to perform infringing on teacher well-being, were evidenced in the interview data, for example, 'You need to do and be lots of things but when the pressure is reaching your mental health, there is where you need to stop' and 'Teachers do a big effort to balance the content and the individualised attention but they have that rush and that "rush" is a real problem that makes me question if I'll be able to work under these conditions'. The pressures to continue working beyond what would normally be considered acceptable were set out vividly by the respondent who referred to the pressures of different stakeholder expectations, 'families expect explanations about their children's homework feedback, the principal expects you to spend some extra hours preparing the Christmas day, the regional government expects you to fill these reports about the academic year assessment . . . '.

Understanding these contradictions and tensions may be a route to greater self-understanding, as in the cases of the respondent who questioned herself as a role model for the children, the respondent who wondered whether they would hold true to their own principles and values once they become a teacher, the respondent who became more aware of the teacher's responsibilities for children's personal development, and the respondent who recognised how the practicum experiences had 'helped me to know myself and to think as a teacher'. Gadamer's notion of 'horizon' speaks to this: 'The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point' and '"to have a horizon" means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it' (Gadamer 2013, p. 313). He further explains the idea of horizon and 'looking beyond' in these terms:

> The concept of 'horizon' suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. (Gadamer 2013, p. 316)

In 'looking beyond' the vision represented, for example, in the visual image of the beatific teacher with raised outstretched arms and expansive stance, smiling alongside smiling students, the respondents' subsequent comments from their practicum experiences showed they were not 'looking away' but 'seeing it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion' for example as evidenced in comments such as 'Come to my school's neighbourhood, the poorest in Spain and tell the families they need to learn how to manage specific devices. Then, work with these children to use a tablet although they haven't had breakfast before coming to the school . . . I think we should be more realistic and sensitive in our discourse'. Here, in terms of Gadamer's concept of a 'fusion of horizons' which takes place in understanding, it appears that what the pre-service teachers learned through 'looking beyond' in these ways expanded their ways of seeing things. This is when:

> What is learned is thus incorporated into our view of things, both, it must be emphasized, in its similarity (it has something to say in which we can *recognize* ourselves and know ourselves better) and its difference (it is *another* view of things which expands our perspective, our horizon). (Grondin 2012, p. 15)

The pre-service teachers in this study are seeking entry to the profession in Spain and, as explained earlier, the Strategic Plan 2022–2025 (UNESCO 2022) identifies strengthening of teacher professional development as a priority worldwide. Yet, the 'professionalisation' of teachers is being circumscribed by the processes inherent in the neoliberal reform of education and, as Menter *et al.* (2009, p. 221) noted: "The deep irony of these processes of curtailing the independence and autonomy of teachers is that they are usually presented within a discourse of 'professionalization'".

Conclusion

This study provides an insight into the value and importance of practicum experience for the formation of pre-service teachers' identities at different stages of their training in a Spanish context. Through the practicum experience, these pre-service teachers learnt about the realities and challenges facing teaching professionals, as in their own words 'being a teacher is different from working as a teacher'. The study raises two interrelated and pressing concerns for teacher education – one is that teacher education has now been turned into technical and instrumental practice due to the process of 'professionalisation' of teachers. In this professionalisation process, the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching have been overlooked, which brought tensions to the surface for example in reconciling the need to 'rush' and comply, with a desire to follow children's inclinations and pace. As a result, there are unintended negative consequences, for example, pre-service teachers may struggle to make sense of some teaching practice that they are asked to do while their instincts and values have suggested otherwise. Secondly, in order to address the first concern, pre-service teachers need to be afforded opportunities and space to question the practice rather than simply 'learning the ropes' and enacting what has been prescribed. Teacher educators and school-based mentors could play an important role in helping pre-service teachers to become such a critically reflexive teacher.

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Data availability statement

Data generated or analysed during this study are available from the authors on request.

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