

Research paper

Practicum as a Space of Transition, Reflection, and Responsibility in Early Childhood Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

A practicum, or teacher placement, constitutes an important field of professional learning in initial teacher education, as it connects theoretical knowledge with educational practice, emotional engagement, collaboration, and professional identity. Although the literature has extensively examined practicum experiences, less attention has been paid to pre-service teachers' expectations before entering the field and to the differences associated with different levels of practicum within the curriculum. The purpose of this paper was to comparatively investigate how 237 pre-service teachers in a Department of Early Childhood Education in Greece, of whom 98 are enrolled in the third semester and 139 in the seventh semester of their studies, make sense of the forthcoming field experience, what emotions and expectations they express, and what needs for preparation, support, and assessment they identify. A cross-sectional descriptive design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative data. Data were collected through an online questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions and were analysed using descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis. The findings identified collaboration and support as a major theme in both groups. Third-semester pre-service teachers focused more on becoming familiar with the kindergarten setting, relationships with children, and the enthusiasm associated with their first field experience. Seventh-semester pre-service teachers placed greater emphasis on planning, classroom management, anxiety, feedback, reflection, and critical institutional awareness of practicum organisation. In addition, assessment preferences shifted from a final assignment towards spiral and reflective processes, indicating increased recognition of formative assessment in more complex practicum courses. The study contributes to the relevant discussion by highlighting the importance of practicum models in initial early childhood teacher education.

Keywords: practicum, initial teacher education, early childhood education, professional learning, pre-service teachers' expectations

A practicum, or teaching placement, is a key component of initial teacher education, as it creates the conditions for pre-service teachers' meaningful encounter with the teaching role. Its significance, however, is not limited to the application of knowledge and techniques taught at university level. It constitutes a field of professional learning in which pre-service teachers encounter the complexity of educational practice and gradually form understandings of teaching and of their own position within the educational process (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020).

The educational value of a practicum depends on the coherence between theoretical preparation, field experiences, and opportunities for interpretation and reflection. In early childhood teacher education, these experiences are usually organised as a process, moving from the observation of kindergarten routines to the planning and implementation of educational activities. Consequently, demands, responsibilities, and support needs do not remain stable. They vary according to the course of study and the level of pre-service teachers' participation in educational practice (Kim et al., 2024; Westerlund, 2023).

Although relevant literature has examined the experiences of pre-service teachers during or after the practicum, less attention has been paid to their perceptions, expectations, and emotions before entering the field. Comparative investigation also remains limited regarding pre-service teachers who are positioned at different levels of a practicum programme in early childhood education. Such a comparison may show how expectations concerning benefits, preparation, support, and assessment differ according to the level of participation and responsibility that characterises each practicum course (Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016; Leineweber et al., 2021).

To interpret pre-service teachers' expectations, the study draws on the systems perspective (La Paro et al., 2018; LaParo & Siskind, 2022) as its main conceptual framework. According to this perspective, the quality of field experiences is shaped through the interaction of relationships, fit within the educational environment, professional learning, and perceived efficacy. In the present study, this perspective focuses on examining the transition between practicum courses, emotional perceptions, supportive relationships, the gradual assumption of pedagogical responsibility, reflective and assessment processes, and the critical and institutional dimension of practicum.

Practicum as a field of professional learning

A practicum can be understood as a transitional space between university learning and professional identity. Within this space, pre-service teachers encounter the complexity of educational settings and are invited to negotiate understandings that have been shaped through their preparation. Field experience is not merely the application of knowledge. It is a process through which knowledge is tested, reconfigured, and made meaningful (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Halpern et al., 2025; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016).

The transition from university learning to educational practice is organised through different levels of participation and responsibility. In the initial practicum course, observing the organisation of the kindergarten, daily routines, relationships, and the educational process enables pre-service teachers to form an initial understanding of the professional field. Observation, however, acquires value when it is supported by questions, theoretical tools, and opportunities to interpret what takes place in the classroom (Bjørndal et al., 2024; Gelfuso, 2016).

In later courses, pre-service teachers are expected to assume a more active role, to plan and implement activities, to manage groups of children, and to justify pedagogical choices. The differences between practicum courses therefore concern not only the duration and requirements of practicum, but also the level of responsibility, the role of field professionals, and the forms of supervision and assessment (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2024; Leineweber et al., 2021).

A key element of this process is the connection between theory and practice. Theory does not function as knowledge that temporally precedes application, but as a means of observing, interpreting, and evaluating the educational process. Pre-service teachers need to return to theoretical concepts in order to understand what they observe, justify their planning, and reconsider their decisions. The meaning-making process involved in the transition from a university course to practicum depends on pre-service teachers' skills to create connections between the two fields (Westerlund, 2023).

The emotional and relational dimension of practicum

Professional learning in the space of practicum involves strong emotional dimensions, as entry into an unfamiliar environment and the gradual assumption of responsibility create conditions in which positive and negative emotions coexist. Enthusiasm about contact with children and participation in educational practice may be accompanied by uncertainty about the demands of the field, acceptance by field professionals, and the ability to respond to the educational role (Gardesten & Herrlin, 2024; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016). Emotional difficulties do not arise only from the demands of teaching, but also from the effort to understand rules, expectations, and complex situations. When pre-service teachers have not yet developed appropriate teaching strategies, these difficulties may be experienced as signs of professional inadequacy (Lindqvist et al., 2017).

The emotional experience is also influenced by the degree of responsibility. Initial observation may be associated more strongly with curiosity, enthusiasm, and uncertainty toward the unfamiliar. By contrast, taking responsibility for planning, implementation, and management of the educational process may increase anxiety, as pre-service teachers feel that their performance is being assessed. Emotional well-being during practicum is linked

to the quality of feedback and reflective processes, as well as to the possibility of detaching from the demands of the field (Varol et al., 2024).

Recognising the emotional dimension suggests that preparation for practicum should not be limited to instructions concerning assignments and deliverables. It should also include discussions about possible emotions, incident analysis, and recognition of uncertainty as part of professional learning. Reflective meetings can help pre-service teachers transform anxiety or doubt into queries about their practice, rather than interpreting them as individual weaknesses (Gelfuso, 2016; K rkk  et al., 2016). This possibility, however, presupposes supportive relationships and forms of supervision that allow pre-service teachers to express difficulties, receive feedback, and make sense of their experience.

In this sense, practicum is also a relational process. Pre-service teachers' learning is shaped through interactions with early childhood education teachers, supervisors, peers, and children. These relationships may provide well-being, guidance, ideas, and opportunities to reconsider educational choices. They can also create uncertainty when roles, requirements, or assessment criteria are not clear (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Izadinia, 2016).

Supervision acquires substantive meaning when it moves beyond monitoring the fulfilment of requirements and functions as a process that supports professional learning. Supervisors can help pre-service teachers understand the conditions of the field, connect theoretical concepts with what they observe, and justify their pedagogical choices. In this sense, supervision contributes to the formation of pre-service teachers' professional identity (Becker et al., 2019; Naidoo & Wagner, 2020).

Within supervision, feedback becomes particularly important. When it is provided as a final judgement on whether an activity is right or wrong, it may reinforce pre-service teachers' dependence on supervisors' assessment. By contrast, when it is organised as a dialogical process, it creates opportunities for formulating questions, justifying choices, and jointly shaping the next steps. In this sense, feedback becomes a practice through which experience is made meaningful (Nguyen, 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of these relationships also depends on institutional coordination between the university and early childhood educational settings. Pre-service teachers need to know the content of their role, the boundaries of their participation, the assessment criteria, and the persons they can turn to when they face difficulties. Correspondingly, early childhood education teachers and supervisors need reference points regarding the aims and requirements of practicum, with the possibility of adapting them to the conditions of each educational context (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020; Lillejord & B rte, 2016). Thus, supportive relationships and feedback are directly connected with the reflective, assessment, and institutional processes that organise the practicum experience.

Reflection, formative assessment, and critical and institutional awareness

Beyond its dialogical function, feedback acquires particular learning value when it is embedded in repeated processes of reflection and revision. Simple participation in an educational activity does not guarantee that pre-service teachers will understand the factors that influenced its development or that they will use what they have learned in subsequent situations. Opportunities are needed for describing, interpreting, and reconsidering experience with the support of theoretical concepts (Gelfuso, 2016; K rkk  et al., 2016). Reflective journals, learning portfolios, and successive versions of activities can make this learning process visible. Assessment, therefore, is not limited to the final outcome, but is developed as a spiral of feedback, in which the comments and insights of one phase are used to reshape the following phases (Carless, 2019). In this way, reflection is not concerned only with the improvement of specific educational choices, but also with the understanding of the conditions within which these choices are shaped, supported, or constrained.

Participation in practicum therefore presupposes the development of feedback literacy, that is, pre-service teachers' skills to understand the comments they receive, manage the emotional responses these comments provoke, and transform them into well-founded educational action (Carless & Boud, 2018). For this ability to develop it requires systematic guidance, clear criteria, and opportunities to reconsider experience through questions and dialogue with supervisors or peers (Azimi et al., 2019; Minott, 2023).

Formative assessment is thus connected with a different understanding of practicum. Instead of being approached as a process of final evaluation of competence, it is organised as a developmental process in which mistakes, revisions, and doubts constitute elements of professional learning. Assessment therefore needs to highlight not only what pre-service teachers carried out, but also how they interpreted the experience and reshaped their choices (Carless, 2019; Minott, 2023).

Practicum takes place within institutional contexts characterised by rules, roles, hierarchies, and power relations. Pre-service teachers are positioned between the university and early childhood education settings and are expected to respond to expectations that are not always aligned. Course requirements, the operation of the school unit, early childhood education teachers' views, and supervisors' assessment criteria may reinforce contradictions or dilemmas (Lillejord & B rte, 2016; Marom, 2020). The dependence of assessment on individuals with institutional authority

may also limit pre-service teachers' ability to express disagreement or question practices they consider problematic, especially when they believe that their stance may affect their assessment or position in the field (Marom, 2020).

The key dimension does not concern only the evaluation of the practices that pre-service teachers encounter in the field, but also the examination of how the practicum course distributes responsibilities, organises supervision, and responds to emerging needs. Pre-service teachers should not be treated as recipients of an already formed programme, but as subjects who can contribute to its evaluation and reformulation (Bovill, 2020). Safe reflective spaces are therefore required, in which not only individual performance, but also institutional conditions, contradictions, and power relations that facilitate or constrain action can be discussed. In this way, practicum can support not only adaptation to the educational context, but also the development of the capacity to analyse it critically (Bovill, 2020; Marom, 2020).

Purpose and research questions

Based on the theoretical framework presented earlier, the purpose of this study is to comparatively investigate how pre-service teachers in a Department of Early Childhood Education, positioned in two distinct practicum courses, make sense of the forthcoming field experience, what emotions and expectations they express, and what needs for preparation, support, and assessment they identify. The comparison between the third and seventh semesters makes it possible to examine how the different level of participation, responsibility, and learning demands characterising each course is connected with emotional responses, expected learning and professional benefits, supportive relationships, reflective and assessment processes, and the critical and institutional dimension of practicum (Bjørndal et al., 2024; Carless, 2019; Gardesten & Herrlin, 2024; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2016; Kim et al., 2024; La Paro et al., 2018; LaParo & Siskind, 2022; Leineweber et al., 2021).

Based on this purpose, the following research questions were formulated:

1. How do third- and seventh-semester pre-service teachers make sense of practicum, and what learning or professional benefits do they expect from it?
2. What emotions do pre-service teachers express before entering the field, and how do these emotions differ according to their practicum level?
3. What needs for preparation, collaboration, support, feedback, and assessment emerge in the two groups, and how are these needs connected with the design of practicum and with critical and institutional awareness of its conditions?

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study followed a cross-sectional descriptive design, combining quantitative data from closed-ended questions with qualitative data from open-ended questions (Cohen et al., 2018). Data were collected through an online questionnaire, analysed initially separately, and then considered together in the interpretation of the findings, in order to capture both the distribution of responses and the meanings that pre-service teachers attributed to practicum courses. The study compared two independent groups of pre-service teachers who were in different semesters. Consequently, the comparison aimed to identify similarities and differences between the two practicum courses, rather than to assess the individual development of the same participants during the course of their studies.

Participants and educational context

The target population of the study consisted of pre-service teachers in the third and seventh semesters of a Department of Early Childhood Education during the academic year 2025-2026. The invitation to participate was addressed to all pre-service teachers enrolled in the corresponding practicum courses. Of the 164 pre-service teachers in the third semester, 98 participated in the study, corresponding to a response rate of 59.8%. Of the 182 pre-service teachers in the seventh semester, 139 participated, corresponding to a response rate of 76.4%. Overall, the sample consisted of 237 pre-service teachers.

The two groups were positioned in distinct practicum courses. These courses corresponded to different levels of practicum. The third-semester practicum constituted the first level of contact with the educational field and focused on the on-site observation of the educational process, familiarisation with the early childhood education environment and its daily functions, and the initial connection between theoretical knowledge and educational practice. By contrast, seventh-semester pre-service teachers were preparing for more active participation, which included the planning and implementation of educational activities, collaboration with kindergarten teachers and supervisors, management of groups of children, use of feedback, and reflection on educational practice.

Data collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire that included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The use of an online format was chosen because it allowed the direct collection and organisation of responses, while also supporting anonymous participation (Evans & Mathur, 2018).

A common questionnaire framework was used and adapted to the two practicum levels represented by the corresponding courses. The two versions shared a common conceptual structure and addressed the same broad thematic dimensions, including pre-service teachers' meaning-making of practicum, emotional responses, perceived readiness, relationships, collaboration and support, expected professional benefits, the connection between theory and practice, and the organisational conditions of practicum. The adaptations concerned the number and wording of specific questions, reflecting the different responsibilities associated with each practicum course.

The questionnaire was conceptually aligned with the systems perspective on practicum in early childhood teacher education (La Paro et al., 2018). Within this perspective, practicum is understood as a complex system in which pre-service teachers' beliefs and expectations, relationships and communication with those involved, fit with the educational setting, and the development of knowledge and skills interact and shape professional learning. These dimensions correspond to relationships and fit, professional learning, perceived efficacy, and the evaluation of the practicum experience, as discussed by LaParo and Siskind (2022).

The questionnaire was piloted with 20 pre-service teachers, 10 from each practicum level. The pilot implementation helped to check the clarity of the questions and led to minor adjustments in their wording, order, and content before the final administration of the questionnaire.

Data collection procedure

The invitation to participate and the questionnaire link were distributed through the eClass platform of the corresponding practicum courses. Completion of the questionnaire was individual and took place before each group engaged in practicum. For the seventh semester, responses were collected from 29 September to 6 October 2025, while for the third semester they were collected from 30 September to 4 November 2025. The different data collection periods corresponded to the scheduling of the respective courses.

Quantitative data analysis

Responses to the closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated by semester to identify trends within each group and to enable the comparative presentation of the findings. For single-response questions, percentages were calculated based on the valid responses for each semester. For multiple-response questions, each selected option was recorded as a separate reference. Consequently, the corresponding totals express the number of selections or references, rather than the number of pre-service teachers. Since the two groups differed in terms of the number of participants and the number of responses and selections, the comparison was based on percentages rather than frequencies. Where questions differed between the two adapted versions, comparisons were made only for conceptually corresponding response categories. No statistical significance tests were conducted, as the purpose of the study was descriptive and focused on the comparative mapping of trends between the two groups.

Qualitative data analysis

The open-ended responses were analysed through qualitative content analysis. The unit of analysis was a word, phrase, or sentence that expressed a distinct perception, expectation, emotional positioning, or evaluative judgement (Saldaña, 2025). A single response could include more than one meaning unit and could therefore receive more than one code. Multiple coding helped to preserve the multidimensional nature of the responses.

The analysis involved repeated reading of the responses, identification of self-contained meaning units, assignment of initial codes, comparison of codes, and grouping of codes into categories. The development of categories was based on the content of the responses, while also taking into account the three research questions and the thematic areas of the questionnaire.

Firstly, the references were organised into categories corresponding to the main thematic areas of the questionnaire, such as emotions, expected benefits, preparation needs, and assessment preferences. After that, references from all open-ended questions were grouped into five thematic axes:

1. meaning-making of practicum,
2. emotional responses,
3. collaboration and support,
4. development of pedagogical skills and assumption of pedagogical responsibility,
5. critical and institutional dimension.

For each axis, frequencies and percentages of references were calculated by semester and were accompanied by excerpts from pre-service teachers' open-ended responses. The excerpts were selected on the basis of the clarity with which they conveyed the meaning under examination.

Double coding procedure

The coding of the open-ended responses was carried out independently by the two authors. Initially, each author read the entire material, identified the meaning units, and assigned initial codes. The two sets of codes were then compared to identify points of divergence. These divergences concerned certain meaning units, the naming of codes, and the inclusion of references in the categories. They were discussed jointly and resolved through consensus (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). On the basis of this process, the categories for the entire dataset were developed.

Ethical considerations

Pre-service teachers' participation in the study was voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, pre-service teachers were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of the data for research purposes, and their right not to participate. Participation or non-participation did not affect their studies, participation in practicum, or assessment in any way. Completion of the questionnaire required a statement of informed consent at the beginning of the online questionnaire, in accordance with the ethical principles of educational research (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024).

Responses were collected without recording names, email addresses, or other identifying information. A code was assigned to each response. The first part of the code indicated the semester of study and the second part indicated the response number, for example 3S-50 and 7S-106. The excerpts presented in the findings have been selected and reported in a way that does not allow the identification of participants.

RESULTS

The results are presented in relation to the three research questions of the study. First, pre-service teachers' meaning-making of practicum and their expected benefits are examined. This is followed by the analysis of emotional responses. Finally, the needs for preparation, support, feedback, and assessment are presented, together with the cross-thematic synthesis of the open-ended responses.

In Tables 1, 2, 3, and 5, *n* refers to the number of coded references rather than to the number of pre-service teachers. Percentages were calculated within each column, on the basis of the total number of references per semester. In Table 4, *n* refers to the number of responses. Each open-ended response could be coded into more than one thematic category.

Meaning making of practicum and expected benefits

This subsection examines how third- and seventh-semester pre-service teachers made sense of practicum and what they believed they would gain from it. The analysis focuses on the expected benefits associated with practicum, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of references to the expected benefits of practicum by semester

Category	Third semester n (%)	Seventh semester n (%)
Direct contact with children	70 (21.67)	107 (20.54)
Feedback on my practices	41 (12.69)	73 (14.01)
Familiarisation with the early childhood education environment	79 (24.46)	108 (20.73)
Experience in planning and implementing activities	45 (13.93)	109 (20.92)
Opportunity to apply theoretical tools	26 (8.05)	66 (12.67)
Collaboration with professionals	62 (19.20)	58 (11.13)
Total	323 (100.00)	521 (100.00)

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent references made by third- and seventh-semester pre-service teachers regarding what they expected to gain from practicum concerned familiarisation with the early childhood education environment, direct contact with children, and experience in planning and implementing activities. More specifically, in the third semester, familiarisation with the early childhood education environment accounted for the highest percentage of references (24.46%), followed by direct contact with children (21.67%) and collaboration with in-service teachers (19.20%). In the seventh semester, experience in planning and implementing activities

accounted for the highest percentage (20.92%), followed by familiarisation with the early childhood education environment (20.73%) and direct contact with children (20.54%).

The references indicate that practicum is connected both with an initial familiarisation with early childhood education reality and with the development of professional experience. In the third semester, practicum is described as an opportunity to observe and understand the functioning of the early childhood education settings: “I will acquire knowledge and see in practice how a kindergarten functions” (3S-50). In the seventh semester, the relevant references focus more on the application of knowledge and on understanding the pedagogical role: “I believe that I will gain valuable experience, confidence, and a better understanding of the role of the teacher through practice” (7S-106).

Emotional responses to practicum

The analysis of the data shows that pre-service teachers’ emotional responses to practicum are shaped by the coexistence of positive expectations and feelings of concern, as shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2

Distribution of emotional references to practicum by semester

Category	Third semester n (%)	Seventh semester n (%)
Enthusiasm	76 (33.33)	103 (26.89)
Anticipation	43 (18.86)	68 (17.75)
Anxiety	55 (24.12)	105 (27.42)
Uncertainty	17 (7.46)	26 (6.79)
Fear	19 (8.33)	43 (11.23)
Confidence	17 (7.46)	35 (9.14)
Joy	0 (0.00)	1 (0.26)
Eagerness	0 (0.00)	1 (0.26)
Other references	1 (0.44)	1 (0.26)
Total	228 (100.00)	383 (100.00)

The most frequent emotional references made by third- and seventh-semester pre-service teachers concern enthusiasm, anxiety, and anticipation. More specifically, in the third semester, enthusiasm accounts for the highest percentage of emotional references (33.33%), followed by anxiety (24.12%) and anticipation (18.86%). In the seventh semester, anxiety accounts for the highest percentage (27.42%), followed by enthusiasm (26.89%) and anticipation (17.75%).

The coexistence of positive emotions and concern is also reflected in the open-ended responses. A characteristic response from a third-semester student refers to “joy about collaborating with children, pride in taking my first step in the field, and curiosity about how it will develop” (3S-77). Similarly, in the seventh semester, positive disposition coexists with anxiety about responding to the pedagogical role: “I begin with enthusiasm and a willingness to learn, but also with some anxiety about how I will respond to my role” (7S-103).

Preparation needs for practicum

This subsection presents the preparation issues that pre-service teachers considered necessary before the start of practicum. The analysis focuses on the areas of knowledge, skills, and guidance that pre-service teachers identified as important for their participation in the practicum process, as presented in [Table 3](#).

The preparation issues most frequently identified mainly concern the development of relationships and communication with children, classroom and behaviour management, the basic principles of planning educational activities, and the structure and functioning of early childhood education settings. More specifically, in the third semester, the category “development of relationships and communication with children” accounts for the highest percentage of references (19.58%), followed by “structure and functioning of the kindergarten” (17.47%) and “classroom and behaviour management” (16.87%). In the seventh semester, “classroom and behaviour management” accounts for the highest percentage (21.82%), followed by “basic principles of planning educational activities” (20.81%) and “development of relationships and communication with children” (15.56%).

The references indicate that preparation for practicum is not limited to theoretical knowledge, but also includes the development of planning, management, and communication skills. In the third semester, one pre-service teacher points to the need for “clear instructions about the elements and procedures of the kindergarten, suggestions for ways of managing incidents, and indicative examples from the experiences of other students” (3S-57). Similarly, in the seventh semester, one pre-service teacher highlights the need for initial information, guidance, and feedback: “I would find an initial presentation of the classroom programme, activities, and daily routines

useful, so that I know how to participate effectively. I would also appreciate regular guidance from the kindergarten teacher regarding the management of the group of children and the organisation of activities, as well as brief feedback on my progress” (7S-77).

Table 3

Preparation issues considered necessary before the start of practicum by semester

Category	Third semester n (%)	Seventh semester n (%)
Basic principles of planning educational activities	36 (10.84)	103 (20.81)
Classroom and behaviour management	56 (16.87)	108 (21.82)
Observation and reflection	29 (8.73)	40 (8.08)
Structure and functioning of the kindergarten	58 (17.47)	44 (8.89)
Pedagogical theories and approaches	26 (7.83)	36 (7.27)
Collaboration with the kindergarten teacher	32 (9.64)	24 (4.85)
Inclusive educational practices, including interculturality, disability, and linguistic diversity	30 (9.04)	63 (12.73)
Development of relationships and communication with children	65 (19.58)	77 (15.56)
Total	332 (100.00)	495 (100.00)

Assessment of practicum

This subsection presents pre-service teachers’ preferred modes of practicum assessment. The analysis focuses on the extent to which pre-service teachers preferred final, spiral, written, assignment-based, or group forms of assessment, as presented in [Table 4](#).

Table 4

Preferred modes of practicum assessment by semester

Category	Third semester n (%)	Seventh semester n (%)
Final assignment	39 (39.80)	43 (30.94)
Spiral assignment, with revision and reflection	29 (29.59)	63 (45.32)
Written examinations	11 (11.22)	11 (7.91)
Assessment based only on assignments or deliverables	18 (18.37)	22 (15.83)
Group assignment	1 (1.02)	0 (0.00)
Total	98 (100.00)	139 (100.00)

As shown in [Table 4](#), third- and seventh-semester pre-service teachers’ preferences regarding the proposed mode of assessment focus mainly on the final assignment and on the spiral assignment, with revision and reflection. More specifically, in the third semester, the “final assignment” accounts for the highest percentage of preferences (39.80%), followed by the “spiral assignment” (29.59%) and “assessment based only on assignments or deliverables” (18.37%). In the seventh semester, the “spiral assignment” accounts for the highest percentage (45.32%), followed by the “final assignment” (30.94%) and “assessment based only on assignments or deliverables” (15.83%). By contrast, written examinations and group assignment receive limited support in both groups, a finding that reinforces pre-service teachers’ preference for forms of assessment more closely connected with practical experience and reflection.

Pre-service teachers’ preferences highlight the value of an assessment approach that is not limited to final evaluation, but is connected with reflection and with the course of practicum. Characteristically, a seventh-semester pre-service teacher states: “I would like a combination, that is, observation by a supervisor or kindergarten teacher and feedback, perhaps also with the help of an individual journal in which I would record personal experiences, pedagogical activities I have implemented, reflection, and observations” (7S-91).

Cross-thematic synthesis of open-ended responses and critical and institutional awareness

At a second level of analysis, the coded references from all open-ended questions were grouped into five axes: meaning-making of practicum, emotional responses, collaboration and support, development of pedagogical skills and assumption of pedagogical responsibility, and the critical and institutional dimension, as shown in [Table 5](#).

Table 5*Distribution of coded references by thematic axis and semester*

Thematic axis	Third semester n (%)	Seventh semester n (%)	Total n (%)
Meaning-making	219 (24.72)	538 (25.77)	757 (25.45)
Emotional responses	174 (19.64)	326 (15.61)	500 (16.81)
Collaboration and support	237 (26.75)	595 (28.50)	832 (27.98)
Pedagogical skills and responsibility	203 (22.91)	450 (21.55)	653 (21.96)
Critical and institutional dimension	53 (5.98)	179 (8.57)	232 (7.80)
Total	886 (100.00)	2,088 (100.00)	2,974 (100.00)

As shown in **Table 5**, collaboration and support account for the largest percentage of references in both semesters, with a slightly stronger presence in the seventh semester (28.50%) than in the third semester (26.75%). Meaning-making of practicum follows, showing a similar proportional presence in the two groups (24.72% and 25.77%, respectively). References to pedagogical skills and responsibility also remain relatively stable, representing 22.91% of third-semester references and 21.55% of seventh-semester references. Emotional responses have a proportionally stronger presence in the third semester (19.64%) than in the seventh semester (15.61%). By contrast, the critical and institutional dimension appears more strongly in the seventh semester, where it corresponds to 8.57% of references, compared with 5.98% in the third semester. In the seventh semester, references to assessment, organisation, and the requirements or constraints of practicum appear proportionally more frequently.

The key position of collaboration and support is also reflected in the open-ended responses. A third-semester pre-service teacher expects “mutual support, exchange of ideas and experiences, a collaborative spirit, constructive dialogue, and strengthening of teamwork” (3S-84). At the same time, the presence of the critical and institutional dimension in the seventh semester is expressed through references that move beyond individual experience and turn to the evaluation of the organisation of the curriculum. Indicatively, one student refers to the need to record “what I would like to change at any level of education and what I would like to change at the university in terms of courses, so that I graduate with more academic resources” (7S-03). These references indicate that, while collaboration constitutes a key element in pre-service teachers’ understanding of practicum, critical reflection on the conditions of practicum is recorded more frequently in the seventh semester.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study highlight practicum as a complex field of professional learning, in which familiarisation with educational reality, development of competences, emotional engagement, collaboration, and reflection on the conditions of initial teacher education coexist. Despite the different positions of the two groups of pre-service teachers within the practicum courses, collaboration and support constituted the most frequent thematic axis in both the third and seventh semesters. At the same time, the differences between the two groups appear to be connected with the demands of each practicum course. In the third semester, greater emphasis was placed on familiarisation with early childhood education settings, relationships with children, and the emotional responses associated with first contact with practice. In the seventh semester, references to the planning and implementation of activities, classroom management, feedback, reflection, and critical evaluation of the organisation of practicum became more prominent.

This differentiation does not constitute evidence of a linear development in pre-service teachers’ understandings, since the study had a cross-sectional character and compared the views of different groups of pre-service teachers. It does suggest, however, that pre-service teachers’ expectations are shaped in relation to the practicum course they undertake. In this way, practicum is not perceived as a single unified experience, but as a sequence of practicum levels with different responsibilities and support needs. In early childhood education, the quality of learning opportunities is influenced by the duration and content of practicum, the characteristics of the school settings in which practicum takes place, and the coherence of supervision procedures (Kim et al., 2024).

The findings can be interpreted through the systems perspective on practicum, according to which relationships, communication, fit with the field, learning, and perceived efficacy interact with one another (La Paro et al., 2018; LaParo & Siskind, 2022). The dominant presence of collaboration and support in both groups confirms that relationships are not a peripheral element of practicum, but a central mechanism through which pre-service teachers approach the demands of the field, develop knowledge, and form a sense of efficacy. The differences between the two groups can be understood as shifts in the emphasis placed on the different elements of the system, depending on the level of participation and responsibility. In the initial stage, familiarisation, relationships, and emotional security are foregrounded, while in the later stage planning, pedagogical decision-making, feedback, and organisation acquire greater importance.

The emotional dimension constitutes a key finding of the study. Enthusiasm and anticipation coexisted with anxiety, uncertainty, and fear in both groups of pre-service teachers. In the third semester, enthusiasm was more prominent, whereas in the seventh semester anxiety appeared more frequently. The increased presence of anxiety in the seventh semester may be related to the assumption of responsibility for planning, implementing, and managing the educational process. Field experiences are often emotionally demanding, because pre-service teachers are called upon to manage teaching and the relationships that emerge in educational practice (Gardesten & Herrlin, 2024), while difficult situations may be experienced as professional inadequacy (Lindqvist et al., 2017). Emotional preparation therefore needs to be systematically integrated into practicum through discussions before entering the field, analysis of incidents, and reflective meetings that normalise uncertainty as an element of professional learning. Expectations regarding benefits and preparation needs reflect two complementary orientations. In the third semester, practicum is understood mainly as entry into an unfamiliar professional environment, with emphasis on familiarisation with the kindergarten, communication with children, routines, and the boundaries of pre-service teachers' role. In the seventh semester, the emphasis shifts more clearly toward planning and implementing activities, managing the group, inclusion, and assuming pedagogical responsibility. However, the connection between theory and practice does not occur automatically through pre-service teachers' presence in early childhood education settings. Theory needs to be revisited during practicum as a tool for interpreting, planning, documenting, and reflecting on pedagogical choices (Westerlund, 2023).

The central position of collaboration shows that pre-service teachers do not perceive practicum as an individual test, but as a relational process of learning. Relationships with peers, early childhood education teachers, and supervisors provide ideas, security, guidance, and feedback, while they can support the formation of professional identity beyond the fulfilment of formal requirements (Naidoo & Wagner, 2020). The differentiation in assessment preferences reinforces this interpretation. In the third semester, the final assignment was preferred more strongly, whereas in the seventh semester pre-service teachers more often preferred the spiral assignment with revision and reflection. As practicum becomes more complex, greater value is attached to forms of assessment that follow the learning process, make use of feedback, and allow the revision of pedagogical choices (Carless, 2019; Carless & Boud, 2018; Nguyen, 2023).

Although the critical and institutional dimension was the least frequent, its stronger presence in the seventh semester indicates that students who are closer to actively assuming a pedagogical role begin to formulate concerns about the organisation of practicum, the requirements of the curriculum, and the conditions within which they are expected to act. This finding needs to be interpreted with caution, as it does not indicate a fully developed critical stance, but rather an emerging organisational awareness. Practicum can therefore include safe reflective spaces in which not only individual performance, but also the conditions that facilitate or constrain students' action, can be discussed (Marom, 2020).

Overall, the findings support the need for a staged practicum in which observation, relationships, and emotional support are maintained, while being framed by increasing demands for planning, inclusion, reflection, and critical awareness. Central prerequisites are stable collaboration between the university and kindergartens, clarification of roles, and agreement on learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study showed that practicum in initial early childhood teacher education constitutes a complex field of learning, in which familiarisation with educational reality, development of pedagogical competences, emotional engagement, collaboration, and reflection on conditions interact. The understandings of third- and seventh-semester students presented both similarities and differences that reflect the demands of the two practicum stages.

The differences between the two groups of pre-service teachers do not concern isolated needs or preferences, but different aspects of an interdependent network of relationships, expectations, emotions, learning demands, and organisational conditions (La Paro et al., 2018; LaParo & Siskind, 2022). The design of practicum therefore needs to address the pedagogical, relational, emotional, and organisational dimensions of the experience in a combined way.

For third-semester students, practicum is understood mainly as an opportunity to observe the functioning of early childhood education settings and develop relationships with children. By contrast, in the seventh semester, the emphasis shifts to the planning and implementation of activities, classroom management, inclusion, feedback, and reflection. This differentiation supports the need for a progressive design of practicum, with learning outcomes, forms of supervision, and assessment criteria adapted to the level of responsibility associated with each practicum level (Bjørndal et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024).

At the same time, the coexistence of enthusiasm and anticipation with anxiety, fear, and uncertainty shows that professional learning is not only a cognitive process. Emotional preparation, discussion of incidents, and reflective meetings need to constitute an integral part of practicum (Gardesten & Herrlin, 2024; Varol et al., 2024).

Collaboration with peers, kindergarten teachers, and supervisors becomes particularly important, as it emerged as a central thematic axis in both groups. Practicum should therefore not be organised as an individual test, but as a community of professional learning, with clear roles, stable guidance, and dialogic feedback (Bjørndal et al., 2024; Nguyen, 2023).

Pre-service teachers' preferences for reflective assignments reinforce the value of formative assessment that follows the development of learning (Carless, 2019; Carless & Boud, 2018; Minott, 2023). The use of learning portfolios, reflective journals, activity plans, self-assessment, and feedback can effectively connect theory with educational practice. At the same time, the stronger presence of organisational reflection in the seventh semester indicates the need to create safe spaces in which pre-service teachers can critically discuss the demands, contradictions, and power relations that shape their experience (Marom, 2020).

The findings, however, should be interpreted in light of specific limitations. The study was conducted in one university department and during one academic semester, which limits the possibility of generalisation. The cross-sectional design and the participation of different groups do not allow the differences to be attributed to the individual development of students' understandings over the course of their studies. In addition, the data were based on self-reports collected before practicum and capture expectations and initial understandings, rather than the experiences or changes that emerged after its completion. The different size of the two groups also limits the direct comparison of frequencies, which is why the interpretation was based mainly on percentages.

Future research could follow pre-service teachers longitudinally, combine data before and after practicum, and include observations, interviews, and the perspectives of kindergarten teachers or supervisors. This would allow a fuller understanding of how pre-service teachers' expectations are transformed into practicum experiences and, gradually, into professional identity.

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Ethical statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of educational research. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent obtained at the beginning of the online questionnaire. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the use of the data for research purposes, and their right not to participate. Participation or non-participation did not affect students' studies, their participation in practicum, or their assessment. Responses were collected anonymously, without recording names, email addresses, or other identifying information. The excerpts reported in the article have been selected and presented in a way that does not allow the identification of participants.

Data availability statement

Raw data cannot be publicly available in order to protect participants' anonymity.

AI disclosure

The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT to support translation, language refinement, and manuscript editing. The tool was used under the authors' supervision, and all AI-assisted text was reviewed, revised, and approved by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the study, data analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

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