INSHIP: Towards Quality in Teaching Practice of Pre-service Teachers

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Abstract In this paper, the authors present the results of a qualitative study about teaching practice in pre-service teacher education. The study is part of the international project INSHIP, which aims to develop educational innovation through a complementary partnership model for teaching practice. Using the SWOT matrix, the authors explored the views of university teachers, teacher mentors, students, and deputy head teachers about the teaching practice in two study programs at the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education. The results showed that participants expressed both strengths (e.g., students gain experience and insight into the teaching process; schools meet potential future employees) and weaknesses (e.g., the gap between theory and practice) of the existing teaching practice. The participants' perceptions of opportunities and threats were directed toward improving the quality of the organizational (e.g., duration and schedule) and systemic (e.g., mentor selection) elements of teaching practice, as well as its content and interpersonal relationships among different stakeholders involved in teaching practice. The findings suggest that greater involvement of schools is needed in systemic, organizational, and content issues pertaining to teaching practice. Collaborative partnerships between faculties and schools are crucial for the effective implementation of teaching practice.

Keywords:
teacher education, quality assurance, teaching practice, SWOT matrix, complementary partneship

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1 Introduction: Teacher Education in Slovenia

In the Slovenian education system, teacher education is regulated by legalisation for preschool and higher education sectors, which establishes the teacher profiles required at certain levels of the education system, the educational qualifications of teachers, and other elements of the regulated profession (e.g., introduction to the profession, working conditions, professional development, and salaries). The teaching profession in Slovenia is regulated by law, and pre-school teachers must complete the first cycle of studies (bachelor's degree), while primary and secondary teachers must complete a second cycle of studies (master's degree) (Eurydice, n. d.; Komljenovič & Zgaga, 2012; OECD, 2016). Teachers in Slovenia are required to have five years of initial teacher education (Master's level, i.e., 300 ETCS). Exceptions are pre-school teachers and teachers of professional subjects in vocational and technical upper secondary education, who must have at least three years of initial teacher education (i.e., 180–240 ECTS). Primary school teachers complete a five-year qualification at faculties of education (i.e., 4+1, 300 ECTS). Secondary and upper secondary school teachers follow concurrent or consecutive modules of TE at faculties of education or other faculties. All teachers must pass a state professional examination, i.e., the State Teacher Certification Examination, which is taken before the National Examination Board for professional competency examinations in the field of education and appointed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia (Pravilnik o izobrazbi učiteljev in drugih strokovnih delavcev v izobraževalnem programu osnovne šole, 2012). In Slovenia, there are three public universities that offer study programs in teacher education (TE), in Ljubljana, Maribor and, since 2003, in Koper.

The faculties of education at universities are the most important institutions for pre- and in-service TE. They offer study programs for pre-school and primary school education and some programs for two-subject teachers. In addition, there are some study programs at other faculties (e.g., Faculty of Arts, Biotechnical Faculty, Faculty of Natural Sciences and Engineering), that also offer some teacher education programs, especially for subject teachers in various academic and art domains, as well as in physical education. Universities or other higher education institutions determine all teacher education programs autonomously, and the curricula are designed at the faculty level and approved by the university senates (Pravilnik o izobrazbi učiteljev in drugih strokovnih delavcev v izobraževalnem programu

osnovne šole, 2012). On the other hand, there are formal provisions in higher education legislation, so universities must accredit teacher education programs. The ministry responsible for pre-tertiary education, which is also the employer of preschool and school teachers, is not involved in the accreditation process. Quality assurance in initial teacher education is part of the national (internal and external) quality assurance system in higher education, developed in a European and international context. Teacher education programs are structured according to two models: concurrent and consecutive. All future teacher programs should have at least 60 ECTS credits out of 300 ECTS credits (second cycle) dedicated to educational contents (Komljenovič & Zgaga, 2012).

At the University of Ljubljana, approximately 10% of students are involved in teacher education programs. General admission requirements are regulated by the Higher Education Act, and applicants must meet selective requirements to participate in initial TE (Regulation and legislation, n. d.). These may vary depending on the type of study program or the number of available places. Students are required to provide their Matura (final high school examination) examination certificates, except for Pre-school education, where admission requirement is either the Matura exam or the Professional Matura, after completing a 4-year upper-secondary program in pre-school education or health care. The selection criteria in case of limited places are determined by the individual study program (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011).

According to the law, professional development is both a right and a duty for teachers. Each teacher is entitled to five days of professional development per year. Teachers receive points for participating in specific programs, which are necessary for career advancement. In-service teacher education is regulated and financially supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. Higher education institutions, public in-service teacher education centres, teacher unions and teacher associations, private-sector training centres (e.g., language schools) and others (e.g., NGOs, private companies) may offer in-service professional development courses. The special committee under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport is responsible for the accreditation and evaluation of in-service courses (Komljenovič & Zgaga, 2012).

Since 2009/10, the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana has offered seven first-cycle study programs (BA/BSc) and twelve second-cycle study programs (MA/MSc). It also offers a doctoral program titled Teacher Education and Educational Sciences, which is divided into the two scientific areas of the program title: Teacher Education and Educational Sciences. The program organises various in-service programs for teachers and school counsellors within the framework of continuous professional development and in accordance with the regulations for higher education (Faculty of Education, 2017).

1.1 Teaching Practice in the Framework of Pre-Service Teacher Education

In the reformed Bologna study programs (4+1 or 3+2), teaching practice (hereinafter TP) in schools is an obligatory part of education; it is allocated at least 15 ECTS of the full 300 ETCS. It is organized and carried out according to the principle of reflective practice and must allow students to integrate subject-content and pedagogical-professional knowledge by gradual introduction into teaching and the teaching profession. It is organized differently in different study programs – from four to ten weeks of TP in undergraduate study programs, and to some extent also at the master's level, mostly as research work (i.e., preparation of the master's thesis) (Juriševič et al., 2007b). Before entering the profession, teachers can follow a ten-month induction program (a traineeship), with a mentor assigned to them, or they can apply for open-recruitment job positions, where beginning teachers receive mentoring support. The induction phase prepares them to take the state professional examination to become fully qualified teachers (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2011).

Teacher mentors do not need to have any additional education/training. Because they are mentors, they usually receive points in the career development system. They can apply for mentorship themselves or school management can give them responsibility for mentoring student teachers. There is no additional payment for mentorship, except that which is included in the regular salary in case of a promotion (Juriševič et al., 2005). Mentors should be competent in the following areas: understanding the model of teaching practice, knowledge of adult learning and teaching, knowledge of the characteristics of each stage of student professional development, identification of individual student needs, communication skills in the

mentoring process, guiding, monitoring, and evaluating students' work in TP, planning, implementing, and evaluating mentoring (Juriševič et al., 2007b).

Student interaction with a mentor, who has good teaching skills, provides appropriate feedback, and establishes a good relationship with students in the classroom, is critical to the successful implementation of TP (Hill & Brodin, 2004). The mentor's role is to help the student with time management, assessment, use of various learning strategies, relationship and conflict management, and classroom management (Paula & Grinfelde, 2018). Developing a professional relationship between mentor and student provides an opportunity for both parties: students can learn how to plan and deliver lessons from their mentor, how to manage time, select topics, and deal with various problem situations. Mentors can encourage younger colleagues to be collaborative and to reflect on their work (Vršnik Perše et al., 2015).

The partnership model of mentorship assumes that learning about teaching and learning to teach aims to improve practice within schools. The core of this model is to understand that close relationships and collaboration are key to learning for both the mentor and the student (Hudson, 2013; Trevethan, 2017). During TP students develop competences in a variety of areas: didactics-methodology, communication, development of professional self-awareness, self-regulation, and educational management, as well as a narrow subject area (Juriševič et al., 2007b).

At the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana, TP has a rich history, dating back 70 years; it is conceptualised based on theoretical and empirical research. The main outcomes were produced by two projects, one in 1996/2004, i.e., Project Partnership I and II (Juriševič et al., 2005; 2007a), and the broader University of Ljubljana project titled Quality Assurance at University of Ljubljana, which took place between 2012 and 2015 (Juriševič, 2017). Quality assurance in TP has been guaranteed by the faculty's TP Committee since 2014; the TP in different study programs is monitored and evaluated internally on a yearly basis (by academic staff and mentors from schools) and externally (by the university evaluation system). A model for quality assurance in teaching practice has been developed (Juriševič et al., 2007b). The model consists of seven core indicators (i.e., assessment criteria, taxonomy of practical knowledge, authentic assessment, teacher mentor competences, teacher educator competences, student teacher self-regulation, and assessment of teaching practice) and four supporting pillars (i.e., system,

organization, content, and relationships), resulting in a total of 22 quality indicators (Juriševič, 2017).

Collaboration with mentors in the primary schools takes place directly through communication with university teachers and staff or indirectly through contacts that students themselves make with mentors, thus strengthening their social skills. Communication takes place in various ways, by phone, online or live, when faculty teachers and staff are involved in the implementation of activities in schools, and at different stages of TP: during the preparation of the TP program, during its implementation, and at the end with the evaluation of the learning content, processes, and student performance (Juriševič et al., 2007b).

The quality of TP is constantly monitored and evaluated at the level of individual implementations and study programs, and it is supported by the TP Committee of the Faculty, which promotes and guides the quality assurance of TP. Formative and summative evaluation (oral, written, individual, group) includes all participants in TP (students, faculty members, mentors in primary schools). Participants' satisfaction with the implementation of the individual TP is monitored and evaluated in the context of joint analyses at schools or faculties and in written form by completing questionnaires after completion of the individual TP (Kristl et al., 2007).

1.2 Teaching Practice for Primary Teachers and Subject Teachers at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

1.2.1Primary Teacher Education Study Program

Teaching practice (TP) for prospective primary teachers is organized in the first and second cycle programs – it takes place along the entire educational vertical and its content is upgraded every year, in the form of observations and performances within individual didactic subjects and as pedagogical practice, integrated and independent Table 1 to Table 4. In the first two years of the first cycle, TP is included in four subjects within the pedagogical part of the study program (Developmental Psychology, Didactics, Theory of Education, Educational Psychology). TP is carried out within the scope of the professors of these subjects, while in the third and fourth years of the first cycle, TP is organized within individual didactic subjects; it is led by professors of subject didactics. In the third year, students take turns teaching and

observing in groups of three, and in the fourth year, they teach in collaboration with a mentor. Mentors at primary schools may be qualified primary teachers with at least five years of teaching experience; specialized training for mentoring is desirable. At the Faculty of Education, TP is led by habilitated university teachers and teaching assistants in individual subjects, mostly by university teachers of subject didactics (Juriševič et al., 2007a; Primary Teacher Education, 2017).

A student who achieves 60 ECTS from the pedagogical part of the program (criteria of the Council for Higher Education), of which at least a quarter is accounted for in TP, is recognized as qualified, which is a prerequisite for enrolment in the second cycle (master's) program. In the second cycle, TP is given in the form of project work and is included in the Research of Practice subject (6 ECTS), which is an upgraded form of TP compared to the first cycle. In the project work, students use action research to identify and solve current problems in practice, from which they can then develop topics for their master's theses. Project work in TP is complemented by faculty activities (exercises and seminars) that take place in other subjects in this program. Upon completion of their individual TP, students submit the required assignments (e.g., report, diary, and portfolio) to university teachers, who evaluate them and provide feedback for the students (Juriševič et al., 2007b). The Faculty of Education has contracts (collaboration agreements) with all institutions where students complete teaching practice (Primary Teacher Education, 2017).

Table 1: Student teaching practice model in the first cycle Primary Teacher Education study program at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana.

	1st year
Type of practice	Research
Scope and framework of teaching practice	2nd semester, 15 days in May
Prospective institutes	Registered school and extracurricular educational activities for children aged between 6 to 12
Mentoring conditions	Qualified primary teacher with at least 5 years of teaching experience
Main activities	Primary Teacher Education: 60 hours in class and/or out of class, the structure (performances, observations, conducting research) depends on the research problem. Primary Teacher Education with English: observations and performances in English lessons

Table 2: Student teaching practice model in the first cycle Primary Teacher Education study program at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year
Duration	2 weeks	2 weeks	3 weeks	3 weeks
Prospective institutes	Primary school	Primary school	Primary school	Primary school
Execution	2×5 days continuous	1×5 days continuous; 1×5 days intermittent	Continuous	Continuous
Purpose	Observational	Assistance	Guided	Independent
Main activities	10 days observing	10 days observing and assisting the teacher	14 hours teaching and about 45 hours observing	1 day observing, 14 days teaching all subjects except foreign languages
Work method	Individual	Individual	Groups of three students	Individual
Link to subject(s) and curricula	Didactics Developmental Psychology	Educational Psychology Theory of Education	All special didactics	All special didactics
Choice of lesson objectives	M	M	M	M
Preparation review	M	M	M, F	M
Lesson observation	M	M	S, M, F	M
Lesson analysis	M	M	S, M, F	S, M
Report review	F	F	F	F
Assessment of performance	M, F	M, F	M, F	M, F
Analysis/Evaluation of teaching practice at the faculty	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. S – carried out by a student; M – carried out by a mentor in primary school; F – carried out by a faculty teacher or faculty staff.

Table 3: Student observation and performance model in the first cycle Primary Teacher Education study program at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

Number of performances per student	8
Number of observations in performances	~ 10 x 8
Choice of lesson objectives	M
Help in preparing the lesson	M, F
Preparation review	M, F
Observations	S, M, F
Performance analysis	S, M, F
(Partial) assessment of performance	(M), F

Note. *S – carried out by a student; M – carried out by a mentor in primary school; F – carried out by a faculty teacher or faculty staff.*

Table 4: Student teaching practice model in the second cycle Primary Teacher Education study program at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

	1st year
Type of practice	Research
Scope and framework of teaching practice	2nd semester, 15 days in May
Prospective institutes	Registered school and extracurricular educational activities for children aged between 6 to 12
Mentoring conditions	Qualified primary teacher with at least 5 years of teaching experience
Main activities	Primary Teacher Education: 60 hours in class and/or out of class, the structure (performances, observations, conducting research) depends on the research problem. Primary Teacher Education with English: observations and performances in English lessons

1.2.2 Two Subject Teacher Study Program

Teaching practice (TP) for future teachers of two-subject study programs is organised in the first cycle programs, i.e., in the third and fourth years (Table 5). The complexity of the context of TP is gradually increasing. It is carried out in the form of observations and student performance in a particular subject didactic topic from two selected subject areas. It is also conducted in the second year of the program and as independent TP. An individual student is educated to teach two subjects in parallel from the following areas: Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Home Economics, Mathematics, Physics, and Technology. Although all orientations follow a unified concept and methodology of TP implementation, there are some possible differences between orientations, resulting from the specific content of a particular subject orientation (Juriševič et al., 2007a; Faculty of Education, 2017).

Specifically, TP in the Two-Subject Teacher program includes three types of practicums: (1) continuous TP, (2) student performance outside TP, conducted in collaboration with mentors from schools and under the supervision of academic staff, and (3) student observations outside TP, in which students participate in and analyse regular classes, often supervised by academic staff. Continuous TP includes 8 ECTS (4 weeks total for both subject areas), and the remaining credits are for other forms of TP. As mentioned above, 3rd and 4th year students have continuous TP, which lasts for two weeks each (5 days for each subject area). The TP is conducted simultaneously for all students, during the school semester, therefore, conducting TP results in a disruption of all other study activities at the faculty. For most

students, TP is conducted at the same school for both subject areas. The implementation and organisational aspects of TP in different subject areas are consistent only in terms of duration and administration, and all content and other organisational aspects of TP are specific to every subject area (Magajna, 2005).

In the second cycle program, TP is carried out in the form of exercises and research work in individual subjects, and in the preparation of a master's thesis, but not in the form of ECTS credits. Prior to enrolment in the second level of the study program, the candidate must provide evidence of practical experience in the field of education amounting to 15 ECTS. Candidates may prove their experience with work certificates from their employers or by completing a study program that included at least 15 ECTS of TP in the field of education. The obligations are determined by the Senate of the University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education (UL PEF) on the proposal of the Commission for Postgraduate Studies at the second level of UL PEF, according to the diversity of the professional field. The candidate may fulfil these study obligations during the first cycle, in continuing education programs, or by passing specific subject examinations before enrolling in the master's program (The two-subject teacher, 2017).

Table 5: Student teaching practice model in the Two-Subject Teacher first cycle study program at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana

	3rd year of study	4th year of study
Function	Independent	Independent
Length and approximate term	Takes place in the spring semester in the form of 5 working days for each subject area	Takes place in the spring semester in the form of 5 working days for each subject area
Envisaged institutions	Primary schools*	Primary, secondary vocational and technical schools*
Conditions for mentors	At least 5 years of teaching experience in teaching the chosen subject*	
Estimated number of student performances/observations	Biology: 3-5/3-5; Physics: 6/4-6; Home economics: 3/5; Chemistry: 3-5/3-5; Mathematics: 8/8; Computer science: 6/4; Technology: 5-6/5	Biology: 3-5/3-5; Physics: 8-10/2-4; Home economics: 3/5; Chemistry: 3-5/3-5; Mathematics: 8/8; Computer science: 3/1; Technology: 5-6/5

Note. *Teaching practice in Computer Science is carried out in all primary and secondary schools, and the written period of the mentor's teaching experience is only a desirable condition.

The mentor for student teachers at partner institutions or the teacher mentor at a school may be a two-subject teacher of the relevant subject with at least five years of relevant professional experience; special training for mentoring is desirable. At the university, TP is led by habilitated university teachers and teaching assistants in specific subjects. Upon completion of each individual form of TP, students submit the required assignments (e.g., report, diary, portfolio) to academic staff, who evaluate them and provide feedback or grades (Ferk Savec & Wissiak Grm, 2017). The Faculty of Education has contracts or cooperation agreements with all institutions, where students conduct TP based on the complementary partnership model.

1.3 The Present Study

TP is one of the key components of the study programs in pre-service teacher education. The purpose of the present study was to examine the current state, best practices, and challenges in implementing TP at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana in order to enhance and ensure more effective and comprehensive professional development experiences for prospective teachers (Čagran et al., 2007; Juriševič, 2007a; 2007b; 2017; Lawson et al., 2015).

2 Method

A qualitative research design was chosen to capture the complex experiences of the various stakeholders involved in teaching practice (TP) in the two study programs at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana. The contextual analysis was conducted using the SWOT matrix.

2.1 Participants

The participants were stakeholders involved in the TP in two different study programs at University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Education: Primary Teacher Education (PT) and Two-Subject Teacher education (TST). Specifically, the participants were 12 third- and fourth-year students (7 PT, 5 TST), 9 university teachers (4 PT, 5 TST), 11 teacher mentors (4 PT, 7 TST), and 2 deputy head teachers from partner elementary schools. Altogether, 29 of the participants were female and five participants were male.

2.2 Instruments

Data collection for the SWOT matrix was slightly different for different stakeholders.

University teachers, teacher mentors and deputy head teachers completed the SWOT matrix (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats). In the instructions, they were asked to reflect on the implementation of TP, and the following possible areas were listed: instructions for mentoring and implementing teaching practice, content and tasks of the practice, student competences, practice organization (duration, year, communication with the faculty), cooperation between the mentor and the student in implementing the activities, cooperation with faculty or teacher-mentor, satisfaction with the mentoring role, feedback to the student, student assessment, and acceptance of the student in the team.

Students completed the SWOT matrix online. In the instructions, they were invited to reflect on their experiences with implementation of the TP that they performed in their previous years of study. The matrix was further elaborated, listing the following aspects of TP implementation:

- instructions and preparation for TP;
- activities and tasks in TP;
- organization of TP (e.g., duration, academic year);
- documentation of TP (e.g., practice diary);
- cooperation with mentors;
- experiences with students;
- TP feedback and evaluation;
- acceptance among school staff; and
- fulfilment of expectations for TP.

The last category was 'other' in which the participants could write about their experiences during TP unrelated to the aspects listed above.

2.3 Procedure

First, all participants were presented with the main objectives of the study and invited to participate. Data were collected through an online survey (students) and emails (university teachers, teacher mentors and deputy head teachers) from February to April 2020. The data received from all participants were analysed and categorised according to the SWOT framework, using comparative content analysis to distinguish the main general and representative responses (Leiber et al., 2018).

3 Results

The qualitative results are presented according to the content areas of the SWOT matrix. First come the strengths of the teaching practice (TP), followed by the weaknesses and possibilities for its implementation. The authors conclude with an analysis of threats covering all four areas of the SWOT matrix.

3.1 Strengths

In general, the participants highlighted the following strengths of TP: (a) instructions for TP are clear, informative, and relevant, (b) activities during TP are well distributed, (c) students are well prepared for TP, (d) evaluation and reflection after each TP, (e) students gain experience and insight into the teaching process, (f) students are accepted by teachers and school staff, and (g) students are active and involved in various school activities.

Specifically, deputy head teachers highlighted two main strengths: (a) teacher mentors and schools learn new approaches from students., and (b) schools get to know prospective teachers for recruitment reasons.

In addition, participants in the PTP program pointed out the following elements:

- TP is conducted in the program every academic year *(S)*[1];
- the complexity of TP gradually increases throughout the study program *(S, M)*;
- experienced teacher mentors provide useful advice and feedback *(S, F)*;

[1] S – students; M – mentors in primary school; F – university teachers; H – deputy head teachers.

- the majority of teacher mentors are good *(F)*;
- students gain experience with different groups of children because they can choose different schools and classes *(S)*;
- teaching practice is graded "pass" or "fail" *(S)*;
- time to reflect and discuss classroom events *(M)*;
- students explore different teaching approaches, introduce innovations, and help students with special needs *(M)*;
- good integration of TP content with study modules/subjects *(M, F)*;
- good organization and cooperation between the university and schools *(F)*;
- the interests of students are taken into account in TP *(F)*;
- students are involved in teamwork *(M, F)*; and
- good planning, consistent monitoring, and final evaluation *(F)*.

Furthermore, TTP participants highlighted the following elements:

- preparations for lessons are reviewed early *(S)*;
- students' reports from TP are useful for their future teaching *(S)*;
- TP is assessed remotely, so it is useful to write longer reports *(S)*;
- students bring new ideas and new perspectives to the classroom *(M)*;
- mentors receive timely instructions on expected student activities and how to assess them during TP, so they can organize what is needed (*M, F)*;
- students have the basic knowledge to carry out the planned activities *(M)*;
- students frequently attended the school, where they do their TP and are therefore motivated and engaged *(M)*;
- TP is a point where mentors in schools and academic staff share ideas *(F)*;
- good coordination between academic staff and mentors leads to effective TP *(F)*; and
- students receive feedback from both their mentors (during TP) and academic staff (after TP) *(F)*.

3.2 Weaknesses

The participants noted the following weaknesses in TP: (a) not enough TP, (b) incorrect understanding of instructions for TP, doing only what is written and no more, (c) overly comprehensive journals or reports, (d) submission forms, reports, and instructions are different for different subjects, and (e) some mentors are

incompetent: they do not respond to students, are not willing to help them, impose their opinion, do not have enough time, and do not take mentoring seriously.

Specifically, the deputy head teachers pointed out three main difficulties in the implementation of TP: (a) the time period for TP should be more in line with the school calendar and curriculum, (b) the gap between theory and practice in terms of student knowledge and expectations, and (c) weak collaboration between school teachers and university teachers before implementing TP.

In addition, the participants from the PTE program identified the following weaknesses:

- too many observational activities and not enough active teaching *(S)*;
- some students never teach in all primary school grades *(S)*;
- not enough knowledge and experience for teaching students with special needs *(S)*;
- too extensive and similar evaluation of TP for different subjects *(S)*;
- teacher feedback is not specific, holistic, or critical enough *(S)*;
- mentors are overloaded with too many students *(S)*;
- some students lack independence in class (*M)*;
- some students receiving feedback from mentors do not distinguish between personal and professional communication *(M)*;
- there is not enough time to adequately plan and evaluate teaching practice *(F)*;
- unregulated status of teacher mentors, which causes demotivation among teacher mentors *(F, H)*; and
- weak collaboration between faculty and schools or head teachers *(F)*.

Specifically, TTP participants described the following shortcomings:

- lesson preparation should not be reviewed by teachers *(S)*;
- two weeks is not enough time for a student to feel comfortable and confident in class *(S)*;
- two TPs at the same time of the year result in similar schoolwork being taught *(S)*;
- poor feedback from professors reviewing TP reports *(S)*;

- when TP is organized by the Faculty of Education, school staff have less positive attitudes towards students *(S)*;
- during TP students often focus only on the teaching aspect of the teacher's job *(M)*;
- TP should be part of the curriculum in the first year and/or second year of study *(M)*;
- the timing of TP is not aligned with the primary school calendar *(M)*;
- mentoring in schools is not regulated *(F)*;
- the TP-related workload varies from department to department and even from subject to subject *(F)*;
- students are not familiar with the variety of technology in schools *(F)*; and
- students may have difficulty in dealing with students with special needs *(F)*.

3.3 Opportunities

The participants emphasized the following opportunities for TP: (a) a longer duration of TP, (b) more supervision and discussion of students' difficulties during TP, (c) student visits to the school and observation of mentors in the classroom prior to beginning TP, and (e) more and clearer guidance from mentors on how and what students should do, as well as critical thinking, concrete feedback, and evaluation.

The deputy head teachers pointed to two opportunities in particular: (a) tools to monitor students during TP and appropriate feedback between faculties and schools, (b) preparation for TP should include more real-world knowledge, such as communication, school administration, and legislation.

Participants in the PTP program specifically pointed out the following elements:

- inclusion of the definition of a good mentor in the instructions provided to students, and students provision of subsequent feedback on mentors *(S)*;
- more independent student teaching and collaboration with the teacher (regarding documentation) *(S)*;
- integrated, non-shared TP *(S)*;
- learning about certain topics (e.g., special needs) prior to TP *(S)*;

- reports should include fewer objective observations and more feelings, memories, good and bad features of the day *(S)*;
- volunteering to work with the primary school students during their free time *(S)*;
- in the beginning students could plan lessons and co-teach with the teacher *(S)*;
- expand the network of mentor schools outside the capital city *(M)*;
- regulating the status of mentor teachers *(M, F)*; and
- seminars for mentor teachers prior to TP *(F, H)*.

TTP participants highlighted the following elements in particular:

- more project work and real-world situations during their faculty education *(S)*;
- TP in the first year of the program *(S)*;
- less reflection in reports *(S)*;
- one-on-one discussion with the professor to highlight the good and bad aspects of their TP *(S)*;
- TP could take place one day per week, so that students could prepare lessons during the week in consultation with the academic staff *(M, F)*;
- TP is an opportunity to meet excellent and committed teachers *(F)*; and
- TP could occasionally take place in a "lab" at the Faculty of Education with primary school students from surrounding schools *(F)*.

3.2 Threats

The participants emphasized the following setbacks in TP: (a) poor relationships between students and mentors, (b) Unexpected situations (e.g., illness or accident, pandemic), and(c) regulations for mentors.

The deputy head teachers specifically pointed out the following challenges: (a) time management and effectiveness, (b) preparation for TP should include more real-world knowledge (e.g., communication, school administration, and legislation), (c) blind acceptance or misuse of approaches and methods from foreign practice, and (d) overly theoretical teacher education.

The participants from PTP specifically pointed out the following:

- lessons at school are cancelled (e.g., school class in nature) *(S)*;
- students may be dissatisfied with TP and thus with the teaching profession because of poor mentoring *(S)*;
- different schedule/program at the faculty *(S)*;
- students are not accepted by teachers and staff *(S)*;
- willingness and lack of motivation in some students *(M, F)*;
- TP should be organized outside the exam period *(M)*;
- excessive bureaucratization and too much documentation could lower the motivation of teacher mentors and students *(S, F)*; and
- decision-makers' unresponsiveness to systemic changes *(F)*.

TTP participants highlighted the following elements in particular:

- overburdened students and professors *(S)*;
- completing certain administrative tasks related to practice may place an unnecessary workload on academic staff *(F)*;
- inconsistencies between school personnel and students *(S)*;
- a mentor may determine that a student is unsuitable for a teaching position for any reason *(M)*;
- many teachers are reluctant to take on the mentoring of a student *(F)*;
- there is no guarantee that a student's mentor is competent *(F)*;
- some mentors work with multiple students at the same time, so students learn from each other rather than from the mentor *(F)*;
- in some school subjects it is difficult to get enough teaching experience in two weeks of TP *(F)*; and
- the TP period is coordinated with various school activities (competitions, field trips, national exams, etc.) *(F)*.

4 Discussion

Quality education cannot be achieved without quality teacher education, as prospective teachers are the most important agents in implementing the curriculum in schools. Namely, teaching practice (TP) is considered an essential part of teacher education because it helps prospective teachers gain practical experience and transfer

their professional background and theoretical knowledge into a role in a school community (Allen & Wright, 2014; Cohen et al., 2013; Grudnoff, 2011).

The authors can conclude that all exposed criteria to which the SWOT matrix was applied were evaluated as both strengths and weaknesses, depending on individual perception and experience. Thus, the results partly confirm that some parts of the TP in the two studied programs can be set as examples of good practice, e.g., the organizational structure following the gradual involvement of students during the first cycle of studies. Similarly, Flores et al. (2014) report students' positive experiences with the organisational aspects (i.e., interaction with supervisors and cooperating teachers) and curricular content (i.e., reflection and research components) of the TP module. In addition, the results of Sangster and Green's (2012) study of pre-service primary teachers suggest that TP was an opportunity for students to develop professionally and personally, making them reflective practitioners (see also Mulryan-Kyne, 2021). Vršnik Perše et al. (2015) report that students are in general very satisfied with TP and are interested in being actively involved in the teaching process.

The participants' perceptions of opportunities and treats were focused on improving the quality of organizational (extended practice, different time period, schedule, etc.) and systemic elements of TP (selection of mentors, conceptual orientation of pre-service teacher education, partnership model of teaching practice, etc.). Correspondingly, Vršnik Perše et al. (2015) report on students' suggestions for changes related to the adaptation of TP, including mentor-developed criteria for evaluating students' TP and integration of theory and practice. In addition, Flores et al. (2014) report on pre-service teachers' suggestions for improving TP in terms of greater coherence of the curriculum and better articulation of its components. This can be improved through thoughtful program design, specific pedagogical approaches, and investment in the quality of all staff involved in the implementation of TP (Korthagen et al., 2006; Ulvik & Smith, 2011). Furthermore, Rauduvaite et al. (2015) suggest that to improve the organization of TP for prospective teachers, the use of reflection in the study process should be encouraged as a basis for combining and integrating theoretical and practical knowledge and for learning from one's own experiences.

Moreover, the participants also saw opportunities and treats in the content area (relationship of content and goals in relation to authentic school-based learning and teaching, etc.), and in the interpersonal relationships between students, academic staff, mentors at the school, and school staff in general. Relationships between students and their mentors are particularly important for the professional socialization of prospective teachers (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020). Paula and Grinfelde (2018) found that prospective teachers who had adequate mentor support when entering the teaching profession reported lower levels of stress and uncertainty.

The fundamental elements of TP, such as the objectives of TP, the competences of students in TP, the competences of academic and school staff for mentoring students during TP, and the evaluation of students' performance during TP should also be emphasized (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020). All these aspects were discussed by the participants in the present case study, wherein they demonstrated a certain imbalance in terms of meeting the learning needs of students, which is probably caused by a non-systematic, haphazard approach in coordinating TP at the levels of preparation, implementation, and evaluation. Heeralal and Bayaga (2011) point out the importance of adjusting the TP to the students' needs and interests so that learning is more likely to be of long-term benefit to students. Trevethan (2017) highlights the importance of educative mentoring, in which mentors see their mentoring role as working with student teachers to improve children's learning and emphasizes the importance of professional courses for mentors.

The findings indicate that schools need to be more involved in systemic, organizational, and content issues related to TP. This aligns with previous research by Flores et al. (2014), which points to the need to improve university-school relationships, which can help narrow the gap between theory and practice (Smith et al., 2006). In addition, Paula and Grinfelde (2018) suggest that policy makers should focus on teachers' support guidelines at the national level, which would allow schools to ensure the most appropriate environment for prospective teachers. Collaborative partnerships between faculties and schools are critical for the effective implementation of TP (Lipscombe et al., 2019; Jurišević et al., 2007b). Vršnik Perše et al. (2015) also emphasize the importance of collaborative partnerships between faculty and schools for the integration of TP experiences and the development of teachers' professional identities (see also Zhao & Zhang, 2017).

However, it seems that the regulation of the status of mentoring, especially mentors' responsibilities and competences, organization of training and professional development courses (CPD) for mentors, and a recognition and awards system for mentors at the national level, are an ongoing challenge. Nonetheless, for quality assurance it is important that TP in teacher education is evidence-based and that prospective teachers are equipped with contemporary knowledge and skills to cope with daily challenges in schools (Flores et al., 2014; Hudson, 2013; Juriševič, 2017; Komljenovič & Zgaga, 2012; Leiber et al., 2018).

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