



The Role of Pedagogical Practice Duration in Developing Pre-Service Teacher Competencies

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ABSTRACT

Pedagogical practice is a core component in preparing pre-service teachers by immersing them in real teaching environments. This practice helps develop pedagogical competencies by integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application, while also teaching students how to select, prepare, and utilize educational materials and resources. This study explores pedagogical practice's role in enhancing pre-service teachers' competencies in the "Welfare and Care for Children" program at AAB College, Prishtina, Kosovo. A quantitative descriptive and correlational research design was employed, using a survey administered to 56 students in the program. Findings from the literature review and data analysis indicate that pedagogical practice is beneficial, equipping students for their future careers. Moreover, mentor teachers in kindergartens and schools play a crucial role in the student's professional development. However, the results also reveal a weak mentor-novice-teacher relationship, attributed to the limited duration of pedagogical practice. It is recommended that the duration of pedagogical practice be extended in the program curriculum, allowing students to gain more extensive practical experience and receive mentorship from experienced teachers.

KEYWORDS

Pedagogical practice; pre-service teachers/educators; pedagogical competencies.

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical practice plays a significant role in the preparation of a teacher for professional service, as it involves the application of all the knowledge and skills acquired during their studies, and it represents an essential element of both teacher training and effective professional development practices (Abdullayev & Hamroyev, 2021). The structure and implementation of practical teaching, in faculty and school settings, are specifically defined by the curriculum through pedagogical practice courses according to the year of study and the content outlined in the subject syllabus (Drew & Klopper, 2014). Pedagogical practice constitutes a fundamental component of every teacher's qualification. All students preparing for a teaching career are required, in line with faculty regulations, to engage in practical training by following the guidelines or manuals designated for this purpose.

The Child Welfare and Care Program at the Faculty of Social Sciences, AAB College in Prishtina, is a special program that trains specialized professionals for the professional care of children¹. This academic program aims to prepare students professionally to become caregivers and educators for children aged 0-6 years (children in nurseries, kindergartens, individual or collective care settings, and 6-year-old children at the preschool level)². In this program, pedagogical practice provides the course that supports student teachers in becoming independent and actively engaged in the educational process. The pedagogical practice curriculum is structured to be developmental, allowing students to progress gradually in their professional training, starting with observation and assistance, and eventually taking on responsibilities such as delivering lessons or leading classroom activities. The program outlines the trajectory of practical learning across all academic years, providing students through pedagogical practice with the opportunity to begin applying the knowledge gained from their coursework in real educational settings (Grossman, 2005). To support the development of practical learning, faculties of education in Kosovo have created practical learning manuals. Students through these manuals are introduced to their roles and responsibilities during educational practice (Avdiu-Kryeziu & Kryeziu, 2024).

The practice organized by the faculty begins within the faculty itself, using the designated teaching hours, which include a series of methodological lectures. After the necessary preparations, students are then placed in preschool and elementary institutions for their practical experience. This study program is four years long, and students must complete pedagogical practice in the third and fourth years. Students are free to choose the location, and institution (public or private), for their pedagogical practice, which is supervised by the coordinator for practical teaching.

¹ <https://aab-edu.net/fakultetet/shkenca-sociale/>

² <https://aab-edu.net/fakultetet/shkenca-sociale/programet-studimore/perkujdesje-dhe-miregenie-e-femijeve/>

The opportunity for pre-service teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in real classroom situations and consolidate their professional learning is closely linked to the duration of their pedagogical practice. In Kosovo, the pedagogical practice duration for pre-service teacher education programs in public universities is 20 weeks (Rrustemi & Kurteshi, 2023), a total of 400 teaching hours (Winsor, 2004), while in private universities, the duration of the pedagogical practice is 8-9 weeks or 160 - 180 teaching hours. In this context, the opportunity for pre-service teachers in private universities to apply theoretical knowledge in real classroom settings and to solidify their professional learning is relatively limited.

The duration of pedagogical practice is shorter compared to countries like the Netherlands and Australia, with 48 and 24 weeks respectively (Wang et al., 2003). In response to this gap, a few studies have explored whether the duration of pedagogical practice is adequate to enhance pre-service teachers' professional capacity and how this practice is implemented (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020). The following studies, for example, have explored various aspects of pedagogical practice: students' attitudes towards it (Ikitde & Ado, 2015), challenges faced by pre-service teachers during practice (Scott, Gentry & Phillips, 2014), factors related to pedagogical practice that contribute to the professional preparation of student teachers (Rrustemi & Kurteshi, 2023), and students' perspectives on pedagogical practice in their preparation for teaching (Avdiu-Kryeziu & Kryeziu, 2024).

However, one of the key issues in pedagogical practice is the disconnect between theory and practice, as these two areas appear insufficiently integrated. When comparing Kosovo's private universities, which allocate 8-9 weeks for the entire pedagogical practice program, with universities in other countries that offer more weeks of practice, it becomes evident that the time dedicated to pedagogical practice is relatively short. This raises concerns about the effectiveness of pedagogical practice programs in enhancing pre-service teachers' pedagogical competencies within theory and practical experience (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how the duration of pedagogical practice influences the development of professional competencies and the mentor-student relationship among students in this program.

Hypothesis:

H1. A significant positive relationship exists between participation in pedagogical practice and theoretical knowledge integration into students' practical application.

H2. The duration of the pedagogical practice has an immediate impact on the professional preparation and development of pedagogical competencies in students.

H3. There is a connection between the role of the mentor teacher and her professional experience in the professional development of students.

Research Questions

RQ1. What challenges do students face during the implementation of pedagogical practice?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pedagogical Practice

Exposing pre-service teachers to real-world environments contributes to their professional skills and competencies development, preparing them for effective teaching (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020; Mosia & Matabane, 2022). Pedagogical practice plays a vital role in teacher education; it serves the preparation of pre-service teachers and introduces them to real classroom environments (Mannathoko, 2013; Marais, 2023). It is viewed as equipping future teachers with extensive practical and professional training (Komba & Kira, 2013; Metin Aslan, 2024; Tsakeni, 2023). This practice is considered a context in which future educators engage with authentic teaching situations (Hirmas, 2014), often in a structured and even simplified setting (Guevara, 2017), where they can observe, assist, teach, and conduct educational research (Caprano et al., 2010). Experiencing real teaching scenarios provides prospective teachers the chance to work with a certain level of independence, while still being guided by a university mentor from a partner institution (Graham & Thornley, 2000).

Mentoring involves a combination of coaching, counseling, and assessment, where an experienced teacher within a school is assigned the responsibility of supporting pre-service or newly qualified teachers in their professional growth (Bakija-Haraçija & Avdiu, 2023; Mbugua, 2011). The mentor's responsibilities are varied, ranging from facilitating the practice setting, observing the student's performance, and offering personal, professional, and educational guidance (Hobjila, 2012). Mentors play a vital role in the practical phase of teacher education, recognizing that the learning process in teaching is both individual and social (Cheng, 2005). They provide feedback not only on the execution of teaching activities (Hojeij et al., 2021; Loman et al., 2020) but also on classroom management, contributing to the overall improvement of teaching quality (Hung et al., 2003). According to Rustemi and Kurteshi (2023), key elements connecting theory with practice include mentor feedback, observing the mentor teacher's instruction, lesson planning, experimenting with specific teaching methods, self-evaluation, discussions, and the assigned task completion. These findings are also supported by Mufidah (2019), who emphasizes that pedagogical practice significantly aids student teachers in developing professional competencies.

Pre-service Teacher's Pedagogical Competencies

For students, initial teacher training through pedagogical practice should facilitate the development of the necessary competencies and skills for the teaching profession (Dlamini & Tsotetsi, 2024; González et al., 2018). This teaching practicum allows students to translate theoretical knowledge into practice (Fotopoulou, 2020), forming the foundation of their professional identity (Stenberg & Maaranen, 2020). A student's progress from the beginning to the end of the internship program reflects the theoretical understanding achieved, the effectiveness of the activities designed to build practical skills, and their competence in actual teaching performance (Tasgin & Kucukoglu, 2016).

Bernard (2015) examined the essential qualities and competencies needed to demonstrate effective practices inside and outside the classroom by the teachers. He identified several key areas: exposure to diverse educational environments, effective classroom management techniques, a solid understanding of assessment strategies, and familiarity with teaching resources. To develop these core attributes, pre-service teachers must engage in pedagogical practice, which is designed to help them become more effective teachers. Various taxonomies of teacher competencies are introduced during teacher training, including subject knowledge and the teaching methodologies used in lesson delivery (Manasia et al., 2020).

Among the professional competencies students develop during their pedagogical practice are classroom management, instructional and assessment planning, and communication (Toklu & Hursen, 2021). As a key professional skill, communication is enhanced by encouraging students to ask clarifying questions, helping to eliminate misunderstandings or confusion (Han et al., 2017). Another essential competency for ongoing professional growth is reflection. This involves the future teacher engaging in self-analysis of their practical teaching experiences. Through critical reflection, student teachers evaluate their performance (Martin & Clerc-Georgy, 2015), while grounding their instructional decisions in educational research (Laframboise & Shea, 2009). Reflection also boosts self-confidence and strengthens communication abilities, helping pre-service teachers overcome challenges that may arise during pedagogical practice (Khales, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a quantitative research method was utilized. This approach is characterized by the examination of objective theories through the analysis of relationships among variables. The researcher formulates clear hypotheses and gathers data to confirm or refute them. Data collection is conducted using instruments designed to measure participants' attitudes, and the results are subjected to statistical analysis, including hypothesis testing (Creswell, 2018). A specific form of non-experimental quantitative research used in this study is the correlational design, where statistical techniques are employed to evaluate the direction and strength of associations between two or more variables (Creswell, 2018). Correlational analysis addresses two essential questions: whether the relationship between variables is positive or negative, and how strong that relationship is.

Research instrument

This study employed a quantitative descriptive and correlational research design to analyze students' experiences during pedagogical practice. The descriptive method allowed for the systematic collection and description of the student's challenges and experiences, while the correlational component helped identify relationships between factors such as the duration of the practice, the role of the mentor, and the integration of theoretical knowledge into real practices. This design enabled a detailed analysis of the factors influencing the development of pedagogical competencies and provided objective data for the study's conclusions.

The questionnaire was designed according to the information and study plan of the "Welfare and Care for Children" program at the Faculty of Social Science, AAB College, Prishtina. The instrument includes a section on demographic variables (age, preschool/school institution where the practice was conducted public or private, and location) as an option for conducting various necessary analyses. The second part consists of 10 closed-ended items measured on a five-point Likert scale, along with one open-ended question designed to gain qualitative insights into the challenges faced by students during pedagogical practice. The responses to this question were analyzed using thematic analysis, enriching the interpretation of the quantitative findings and offering a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences.

First, the questionnaire was piloted to identify possible errors (Creswell, 2018). Cronbach's Alpha model was applied to assess the reliability of the measurement instrument used for students preparing for the teaching profession. Based on 10 items, the analysis produced a value of 0.758, which shows acceptable internal consistency and supports the instrument's reliability.

Table 1.

Reliability of the instrument

Cronbach's

Alpha	N of Items
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.758	10
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Population and Sample

The study's population consists of fourth-year students of the "Welfare and Care for Children" program at the Faculty of Social Science, AAB College, Prishtina. The sample was selected through random sampling, ensuring that each student had an equal and independent opportunity to participate and complete the questionnaire. A total of 56 students from this program participated in the study.

The age distribution of the participating subjects, as presented in **Table 2**, shows that most of the respondents (69.6%) belong to the 22-25 age group, representing a high percentage of the sample. Regarding the institution where the students carried out their professional practice, more than half of the participants (64.3%) completed their practice in preparatory classes (schools), whereas 35.7% of the students conducted their practice in preschool institutions (kindergartens). This distribution indicates a predominant focus on school settings for professional practice. In the type of institution where the pedagogical practice took place, most students (73.2%) completed their practice in public institutions, while 26.8% carried out their practice in private institutions. This shows a clear preference for public institutions among the students in this study. Finally, the locations where the pedagogical practice was carried out show that most students (58.9%) completed their practice in Prishtina, representing the largest portion of the sample.

Table 2.*Demographic characteristics of the survey sample (N=56)*

	Demographics	Frequency	Valid %
Age	22-25 years old	39	69.6
	26-30 years old	4	7.1
	31-35 years old	2	3.6
	36-40 years old	5	8.9
	41-45 years old	5	8.9
	Over 46 years old	1	1.8
Educational institution	Primary school	36	64.3
	Preschool institution	20	35.7
Sector	Public	43	76.7
	Private	13	23.3
The city where the pedagogical practice was conducted	Prishtina	33	58.9
	Mitrovica	8	14.3
	Gjilan	3	5.4
	Ferizaj	11	19.6
	Gjakova	1	1.8

Data collection procedure

The survey of students was conducted through physically distributed questionnaires and via Google Forms (the link to the questionnaire was sent via email). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before participation. Responses were collected over two weeks. Once data collection was completed, the responses were downloaded, cleaned, and organized for statistical analysis. Incomplete or inconsistent responses were excluded to ensure data quality and accuracy. After data collection, the information was entered into SPSS version 25 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), where different statistical analyses were done.

Data analysis

This study utilizes vast statistical analyses to evaluate and test the data. These analyses include descriptive analysis, bivariate correlation, validity and reliability testing (Cronbach's Alpha), normality tests, Spearman's rho correlation, Pearson coefficient, linear regression, and ANOVA. By using these methods, strong and accurate conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationships and impacts between different variables, and the strength of these relationships too.

FINDINGS

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests were used to assess the normality of the variable "Pedagogical practice," with the results presented in **Table 3**. According to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the test statistic is 0.136 with a p-value of 0.012, indicating that the distribution is abnormal ($p < 0.05$). On the other hand, the Shapiro-Wilk test provides a statistic of 0.977 and a p-value of 0.350, suggesting that the distribution can be considered normal ($p > 0.05$). These results are contradictory, but the Shapiro-Wilk test is generally preferred for small samples (such as this one with 56 subjects), indicating that a normal distribution can be assumed for this variable. Therefore, based on the Shapiro-Wilk test, it is reasonable that the distribution of "Pedagogical practice" is normal.

Table 3.

The normality test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pedagogical practice	.136	56	.012	.977	56	.350

To test the first hypothesis (H1) that there is a significant positive relationship between participation in pedagogical practice and the integration of theoretical knowledge into practical application by students Spearman's rho analysis was conducted. The results in **Table 4** present Spearman's rho correlation coefficient of 0.875, indicating a strong positive relationship between participation in practice and the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. The p-value (Sig. (2-tailed)) is 0.003, which is lower than the commonly accepted significance level ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that the relationship is statistically significant.

Table 4.

The relationship between participation in pedagogical practice and the integration of theoretical knowledge into practice

			Participation in pedagogical practice	The integration of theoretical knowledge into practice
Spearman's rho	Participation in pedagogical practice	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.875**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.003
		N	56	56
	The integration of theoretical knowledge into practice	Correlation Coefficient	.875	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.
		N	56	56

Several analyses were conducted to test the second hypothesis (H2) that the duration of pedagogical practice impacts the professional preparation and development of pedagogical

competencies in students, and the outcomes are presented in Tables 5 and 6. **Table 5** displays the regression model. The correlation coefficient, $R = .269$, indicates a weak relationship between the duration of practice and the development of pedagogical competencies. The coefficient of determination, $R^2 = .072$, suggests that the duration of practice explains approximately 7.2% of the variance in the development of pedagogical competencies. Although this percentage is relatively small, it may still have a meaningful impact on the analysis. The ANOVA results ($F = 4.198$, $p = 0.045$) indicate that the model is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), supporting the existence of a significant relationship between the duration of pedagogical practice and the development of pedagogical competencies.

Table 5.

The impact of the duration of pedagogical practice on the development of pedagogical competencies

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.269 ^a	.072	.055	1.14691

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	5.522	1	5.522	4.198	.045 ^b
	Residual	71.032	54	1.315		
	Total	76.554	55			

In **Table 6** we have key data to interpret the impact of the duration of the pedagogical practice on the development of pedagogical competencies. The coefficient B for the variable Duration of pedagogical practice is 0.321, which indicates that for each unit increase in the duration of the practice, there is an increase of 0.321 units in pedagogical competencies while holding other variables constant. The Beta (Standardized Coefficient) is 0.269, suggesting that this variable has a weak, but still significant, impact on pedagogical competencies development. The T-value is 2.049, greater than 2, indicating a noticeable and reliable impact variable. The p-value (Sig.) is 0.045, smaller than the commonly accepted significance level of $p < 0.05$. This suggests that the duration of the pedagogical practice has a statistically significant impact on the development of pedagogical competencies.

To test the third hypothesis (H3) that there is a connection between the role of the mentor teacher and her professional experience in the professional development of students the results are presented in **Table 7**. The Pearson correlation coefficient is 0.544, indicating a moderate positive relationship between these two variables; the p-value (Sig. (2-tailed)) is 0.000, which is smaller than the standard significance level ($p < 0.05$), suggesting that this relationship is statistically significant. N (the number of data points) is 56, it is a sufficient sample size to draw a reliable conclusion.

Table 6.

Coefficients for the impact of the duration of pedagogical practice on the development of pedagogical competencies

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	1.508	.583		2.587	.012
	The duration of the pedagogical practice in the preschool institution/school has been sufficient	.321	.157	.269	2.049	.045

Table 7.

The connection between the role of the mentor teacher and her professional experience in the professional development of students

		The mentor teacher plays an important role in the student's professional development.	The guidance provided by the mentor educator with professional experience.
The mentor teacher plays an important role in the professional development of the student.	Pearson Correlation	1	.544**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	56	56
The guidance provided by the mentor teacher with professional experience.	Pearson Correlation	.544**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	56	56

To answer the research question (RQ1) “What challenges do students face during the implementation of pedagogical practice?”, the main difficulties encountered by students are presented and thematically categorized in **Table 8**. These include challenges in classroom management, implementing educational activities, and adapting to children; communication barriers with children and limited collaboration with mentor teachers; a lack of didactic materials necessary for teaching and learning; the short duration of the practice, difficulties in executing activities and documenting work; as well as insufficient professional support from mentor teachers, often due to their limited experience in mentoring students.

Table 8.

The challenges faced by the students during the implementation of pedagogical practice in the preschool/school institution.

Category	Themes	Description
Difficulties in the implementation of pedagogical practice	Classroom management and organization of educational activities	- <i>Managing the class during instruction proved to be difficult.</i> - <i>Managing situations when children cry.</i> - <i>Implementation of educational activities.</i> - <i>Few instructions for lesson planning.</i>
	Communication and Collaboration	- <i>I faced challenges in communicating with the children.</i> - <i>Communication and approach to children with special needs.</i> - <i>Lack of cooperation with the mentor teacher.</i>
	Materials and didactic resources	- <i>We lack the necessary didactic materials to implement educational activities.</i> - <i>Lack of materials for different forms of working with children.</i> - <i>Lack of teaching tools and equipment.</i>
	Challenges in organizing pedagogical practice	- <i>Short duration in implementing the pedagogical practice.</i> - <i>Difficulty in implementing activities with children.</i> - <i>Difficulties in documenting the work we did (diary, portfolio).</i>
	Preparation and support from mentor teachers	- <i>Lack of professional support from the mentor teacher.</i> - <i>A mentor teacher with no experience.</i> - <i>A mentor teacher with no experience in mentoring students.</i>

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research highlight the significance of pedagogical practice in preparing students for their professional roles and identify various factors that contribute to the professional development of student teachers. Findings of demographic data highlight important trends regarding the age, institutional focus, and geographical distribution of students involved in pedagogical practice. The majority of participants are young, the professional practice primarily took place in preparatory classes (schools), with most students

carrying out their pedagogical practice in public institutions. Furthermore, there is a high concentration of students in the capital, where the studies are also conducted.

Findings from this study show a strong positive connection between participation in pedagogical practice and theoretical knowledge integration into practical application. This supports the first hypothesis (H1), as the correlation is statistically significant. When students are allowed to practice the lessons and theories they have learned, they are more likely to understand and apply them in real-life settings. Participants in pedagogical practice can link theory with classroom reality, enhancing their professional preparation. Pedagogical practice is a core element in consolidating theoretical understanding by involving activities such as: planning selecting, preparing, and utilizing didactic materials and resources. This aligns with previous research by Kihwele and Mtandi (2020), who highlighted the importance of pedagogical practice in reinforcing theoretical knowledge. According to Scortescu and Sava (2024), studies on practical issues have emphasized that the effectiveness of pedagogical practice is influenced by factors such as the content, structure, delivery method, and the level of student preparation. Furthermore, findings from this study support the notion that pedagogical training should not only expose students to teaching but also actively guide them in connecting educational theory with classroom application.

In alignment with the second hypothesis (H2), the results confirm that the duration of pedagogical practice directly impacts the development of students' pedagogical competencies. This result indicates that sufficient time in pedagogical practice is important for the student's professional skills development. An extended practice allows students more time to gain a deeper understanding of educational processes, which will contribute to their professional preparation. According to Mangope et al. (2018), many pre-service teachers felt that the duration of pedagogical practice was insufficient to develop their pedagogical competencies. The collaboration between schools and universities is a complex process that should be enhanced by increasing the number of practice hours (Kula & Güler, 2021) and involving mentors in collaborative activities between the partner institutions and universities (Mason, 2013). This emphasizes the importance of extending the practice period and actively engaging mentors to support the development of pedagogical competencies and enhance the effectiveness of pedagogical practice.

Learning to teach is a developmental process, and the support from mentor teachers plays a key role in helping student teachers build confidence, improve teaching skills, classroom management, and communication, while also fostering a sense of belonging and self-efficacy within the school environment (Mokonea & Setlaltoea, 2023). Consistent with the third hypothesis (H3), the study shows a positive and significant relationship between the role of the mentor teacher and guidance from the experienced mentor teacher in the professional development of students. This result suggests that experienced mentors play a crucial role in the professional development of students. Experienced mentors provide guidance, support, and direct examples that help students develop the necessary skills for a successful career in

education. The study by Tóth and Szivák (2022) emphasizes the importance of mentoring student teachers at the start of their careers. The term "mentor" encompasses various roles that this professional plays in the initial training of student teachers: guide, advisor, supporter, and friend (Rakes et al., 2023). Mentors are regarded as facilitators of learning and positive role models (Rose & Rogers, 2012), helping to create social and cognitive conditions that foster the development of future teachers' professional identities (Yoon & Larkin, 2018). However, if the mentor-mentee relationship is not constructive, challenges in carrying out pedagogical practice, increased stress, or even reduced effectiveness of the student may arise (Paro et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the findings provide a detailed answer to the research question (RQ1) by identifying particular challenges students encounter in the pedagogical practice. These challenges include difficulties in classroom management, handling emotional situations with children, implementing activities, limited instructions for lesson planning, communication and approaches to children with special needs, lack of didactic materials and resources, insufficient duration of pedagogical practice, lack of professional support from mentor teachers, and poor relationships with experienced teachers in host schools. Such findings are consistent with other research, identifying these issues as significant barriers to effective pedagogical training and development (Toklu & Hursen, 2021; Mangope et al., 2018).

The results of this study hold significant value for both students and higher education professionals, offering insights into how practical learning can be integrated into students' preparation for their future careers. This highlights the need for more coherent planning and better institutional coordination. Specifically, students should be equipped with clear guidelines, simulated experiences, and practical resources before entering the classroom, while schools and mentors should be formally engaged as partners in teacher education. Moreover, this research supports policymakers and leaders in pedagogical practices by guiding the development of stronger collaborations between faculty, schools, and students, to achieve better outcomes in student preparation and enhance the effectiveness and quality of higher education programs.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the impact of pedagogical practice on the professional development of students, with a focus on theoretical knowledge integration into practical application. The study seeks to assess how the duration of pedagogical practice affects the professional preparation and development of pedagogical competencies in students, analyzing whether a longer practice period improves students' professional skills. Additionally, the study explored how the role of the mentor teacher, as well as his professional experience, influences the professional development of students, emphasizing the connection between experienced mentors and the student's success during the practice period. Despite the acknowledged importance of their role in student training, mentors are often inadequately prepared to effectively carry out mentoring activities (Clarke & Mena, 2020). The limited duration of the practice may affect the weak

relationship between students and mentors, limiting the opportunity for students to benefit fully from the professional mentoring experience.

There is a need for a change in the general pedagogical practice policy on duration and timing. It is recommended that the duration of pedagogical practice be extended from the current 9 weeks to a minimum of 20-24 weeks, allowing sufficient time for students to engage in lesson planning, implementation, and reflection under mentor supervision. This necessitates strong collaboration between university management and host schools to ensure that the duration of pedagogical practice is carefully reviewed and effectively utilized to enhance the development of pre-service teachers' pedagogical competencies (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020). Mentors require motivation to understand and perform their roles effectively, including specialized supervisory and mentoring skills, and targeted training, as they often lack adequate preparation (Puroila et al., 2021). There is a need for significant investments in the professional development of mentor teachers. New or inexperienced mentors may often lack the skills to guide students effectively. This suggests that it may be beneficial for mentor teachers to receive more training to provide better support and develop other pedagogical skills. However, to maximize the benefits of pedagogical practice, it is essential to ensure sufficient practice time better preparation of mentor teachers, sufficient teaching resources, and stronger school-university collaboration.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of extended pedagogical practice through longitudinal studies and conduct comparative analyses across multiple institutions to evaluate the effectiveness of varying mentor training models and practice durations.

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