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Anticipating Practicum: Pre-Service Teachers' Educational Imaginaries and the Schoolized Mind

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Abstract

This study explores how pre-service early childhood educators imagine and anticipate their upcoming practicum experience before entering the classroom, focusing on how schooling is both remembered and reimagined in advance of practice. Drawing on qualitative data from open-ended prompts in a Google Forms survey with undergraduate teacher education students, the study examines expectations regarding childhood, schooling, the teacher's role, and practicum challenges. Using thematic analysis, the findings reveal persistent tensions in how participants conceptualize teaching and learning. While students frequently articulate child-centred and democratic ideals—emphasizing care, participation, and experiential learning—their responses simultaneously reproduce elements of the schoolized mind, through which schooling is imagined as structured by control, transmission, evaluation, and teacher authority. Practicum is anticipated both as a learning opportunity and as a moment of exposure requiring competence, classroom management, and error avoidance. The findings suggest that pre-service teachers approach practicum through already sedimented and socially shaped imaginaries of schooling. These anticipatory frameworks highlight the need for teacher education to critically engage with how schooling is imagined, in order to better shape future pedagogical practice.

Keywords: teacher education; practicum; pre-service teachers; schoolized mind; teacher identity; pedagogical beliefs; early childhood education

1. Introduction

The transition from university student to teacher represents a critical stage in the formation of professional identity and pedagogical orientation [1]. Within teacher education programmes, the teaching practicum is widely regarded as a central component of this transition, providing pre-service teachers with opportunities to experience classroom life, apply theoretical knowledge, and develop professional competencies in authentic educational contexts [2]. Through practicum experiences, student teachers engage in activities such as planning lessons, teaching, observing classrooms, receiving feedback, and reflecting on practice—processes that are often framed within experiential learning theories emphasizing the cyclical relationship between experience and reflection [3]. Consequently, the practicum has long been considered a key mechanism through which teacher education connects university coursework with professional practice. In the context of this study, practicum refers to a structured period of school-based experience within initial teacher education, during which pre-service teachers gradually engage in classroom observation and teaching under supervision. In the Greek context, this process typically includes an initial observation phase followed by limited teaching responsibilities prior to full classroom engagement [4].

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Despite its central role, research consistently highlights persistent tensions within teacher education programmes, particularly regarding the relationship between theory and practice. Studies have repeatedly identified a gap between the pedagogical theories presented in university courses and the realities encountered in schools, suggesting that pre-service teachers often struggle to translate theoretical frameworks into classroom practice [5]. These tensions frequently emerge during practicum experiences themselves, where student teachers encounter the complexities of classroom management, institutional expectations, and diverse student needs. Empirical studies have shown that practicum can significantly shape pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching, sometimes reinforcing existing assumptions rather than transforming them [5,6]. At the same time, practicum experiences are often accompanied by uncertainty, anxiety, and concerns about classroom management or professional competence, particularly during the early stages of teaching practice [7].

Alongside this body of work, a growing body of literature has examined the development of professional identity among pre-service teachers. Teacher identity begins to form during teacher education programmes through interactions with coursework, pedagogical theories, and early teaching experiences [8,9]. However, much of the existing research has focused on identity development during or after practicum experiences, rather than examining how student teachers perceive themselves as future educators before entering the classroom [10,11]. As a result, less attention has been paid to the anticipatory imaginaries that pre-service teachers construct regarding teaching, schooling, and their own future roles prior to their first practicum experiences.

By analyzing pre-service teachers' educational imaginaries, we can better understand the assumptions and tensions that shape the transition from student to teacher. These pre-existing orientations may influence how student teachers interpret practicum experiences, what challenges they anticipate, and how they position themselves in relation to students, knowledge, and authority. Yet relatively little research has explored the discursive and conceptual frameworks through which pre-service teachers imagine teaching before they step into the classroom.

This study addresses this gap by examining how pre-service early childhood educators in the final semester of their studies anticipate their upcoming practicum experience prior to entering the field. Drawing on qualitative responses from undergraduate students in a teacher education programme, the study explores how participants conceptualize childhood, schooling, the role of the teacher, and the anticipated challenges of teaching practice. Particular attention is given to the traces of what can be described as the schoolized mind [11], a set of internalized assumptions about schooling that privilege knowledge transmission, classroom control, teacher authority, and performance-oriented evaluation. While teacher education programmes frequently promote child-centred and democratic pedagogical approaches, institutional imaginaries of schooling may continue to shape how future teachers interpret their role and responsibilities.

Against this background, the present study seeks to explore the following research question: How do pre-service teachers anticipate practicum, and what traces of the schoolized mind shape these expectations before entering the classroom?

2. The Past in the Present: Apprenticeship of Observation and the Schoolized Mind

Pre-service teachers do not enter teacher education as blank slates. Long before they begin to study pedagogy formally, they have already spent many years inside classrooms as pupils, observing teachers, routines, relationships, and institutional expectations [12]. This long immersion in schooling leaves sedimented impressions of what education is, how

authority operates, what counts as learning, and what a teacher is expected to do [11,13]. Within this framework, the transition to teacher education is never a beginning from zero but rather a movement built upon already internalized experiences and assumptions about school life.

A central concept for understanding this process is Lortie's [14] notion of the apprenticeship of observation. Future teachers have observed teaching for years, but only from the position of students. They have been exposed to the visible surface of educational practice: the teacher explaining, managing behaviour, organizing activities, controlling time, and responding to students. Yet they have had much less access to the less visible dimensions of teaching, such as pedagogical reasoning, planning, ethical dilemmas, institutional constraints, or reflective decision-making [14]. As a result, what they often internalize are not the complexities of teaching as a profession but familiar scripts of schooling as they appear from the learner's seat [15,16].

Within this article, these accumulated experiences are interpreted through the concept of the schoolized mind [11]. The schoolized mind refers to an institutionally produced and historically sedimented mode of thinking through which schooling becomes internalized as common sense. It includes assumptions about the proper organization of educational time and space, the legitimacy of teacher-centred authority, the centrality of curriculum delivery, the importance of control and order, and the equation of learning with measurable performance. In this sense, the schoolized mind does not simply refer to conservative opinions about school; it describes a deeper process through which the grammar of schooling becomes normalized within subjectivity [12,17].

This formation is not produced only through formal schooling itself. It is reinforced by broader social discourses, family narratives, media representations, and dominant cultural ideas about what "real teaching" or "proper education" should look like [11,16]. Schooling thus appears not merely as one possible educational arrangement but as the natural and self-evident form of education. Through repeated participation in school life, individuals come to embody its logics: segmented time, curricular pacing, adult supervision, performance pressure, and the teacher as the central organizer of classroom meaning.

Their anticipations of teaching are shaped not only by what they are taught at university but also by what has already been deeply inscribed through their own experiences as students. Moreover, many students have also encountered school settings through observation-based course components or practicum-related exposure prior to full teaching responsibility. These experiences may further stabilize conventional assumptions, especially when the school settings they observe reproduce familiar institutional routines rather than alternative educational possibilities [18].

Seen in this way, the apprenticeship of observation and the schoolized mind are closely related. The former helps explain how student teachers come to acquire durable images of teaching through prolonged exposure to classroom life. The latter helps explain what kind of logic these images often carry: a historically stabilized school common sense centred on hierarchy, transmission, order, and performative accountability. Together, these concepts allow us to understand the conservative dimension of pre-service teachers' expectations before practicum: their anticipations are shaped by a past that remains active in the present.

At the same time, these sedimented assumptions should not be understood as fully coherent or fixed. Pre-service teachers often express contradictory beliefs, combining progressive language with traditional pedagogical expectations. Such internal tensions do not necessarily indicate confusion; rather, they reflect the coexistence of multiple pedagogical influences within teacher education [19]. If the past survives in the form of the schoolized

mind, it does not do so uncontested. It encounters other discourses, hopes, and possibilities that orient pre-service teachers toward different educational futures.

3. Educational Imaginaries of Future Teachers

If the apprenticeship of observation and the schoolized mind capture the weight of the past, the concept of educational imaginaries helps us to understand how pre-service teachers also orient themselves toward the future. Alongside sedimented assumptions inherited from their own schooling, student teachers are exposed during their university studies to alternative ways of thinking about education [20]. These perspectives do not merely provide technical teaching methods; they open symbolic and normative horizons about what education could become.

The notion of imaginaries has been used by social theorists to describe the shared frameworks through which people make sense of social life, institutions, and collective possibilities. For Taylor [21], social imaginaries concern the ways people imagine their social existence, their relations with others, and the norms and expectations that make common practices appear meaningful and legitimate. Imaginaries are therefore not detached abstractions; they shape how institutions are perceived, justified, and enacted in everyday life [21]. At the same time, imaginaries are performative in that they embed assumptions about the present and the future within specific problematisations, guiding what is perceived as desirable, necessary, or inevitable in education [22].

Within education, imaginaries refer to broader visions of what schooling is for, how teaching and learning should be organized, what kind of child is presupposed, and what forms of social relation education should cultivate. Educational imaginaries thus involve symbolic and conceptual frameworks through which education is understood and made meaningful [23]. They operate at multiple levels, shaped by policy discourses, institutional arrangements, cultural narratives, and personal educational biographies. Educational actors do not approach teaching and learning as neutral participants but as subjects already embedded in historically and socially produced understandings of schooling [21,23].

For pre-service teachers, these imaginaries are especially important because they influence how teaching is anticipated before it is enacted. Student teachers do not only carry memories of how schools have functioned; they also begin to construct images of the kind of schools and classrooms they would like to inhabit and help to create. Seen in these terms, teacher education is not merely a site of knowledge acquisition but also a space where future-oriented pedagogical meanings are produced [8,9].

These future-oriented imaginaries are neither politically neutral nor pedagogically uniform. Contemporary education is traversed by competing visions. On one hand, the neoliberal imaginary redefines schooling through performativity, measurable outcomes, managerial accountability, flexibility, employability, and the constant need to demonstrate effectiveness. Within such a framework, innovation is often valued insofar as it improves competitiveness, efficiency, or adaptation to market demands. Even seemingly progressive language can be absorbed into this logic when participation, creativity, or digitality are framed mainly as instruments for optimization and individual performance [16]. As Rahm and Rahm-Skågeby [22] suggest, such imaginaries tend to narrow the horizon of possibility by framing education primarily as a response to predefined economic futures, often presenting adaptation as the only viable trajectory.

On the other hand, teacher education may also introduce student teachers to alternative imaginaries that challenge the dominant grammar of schooling. These include democratic and child-centred traditions, critical and arts-based pedagogies, experiential and relational approaches, and commons-based perspectives that foreground cooperation, co-creation, shared responsibility, and the collective management of educational

life [17,24,25]. Such approaches open a different horizon for thinking about teaching not as the delivery of predefined content by an authoritative individual but as a relational, ethical, and participatory practice through which knowledge, agency, and community are cultivated together. In this direction, recent work highlights how pedagogies grounded in care and relationality can enable the emergence of alternative and preferable future imaginaries, particularly in contexts marked by inequality and constraint [26].

For pre-service teachers, these imaginaries often emerge through university coursework, seminar discussions, readings, collaborative activities, and encounters with pedagogical approaches that differ from the schooling they themselves experienced. In this sense, teacher education becomes a space where alternative educational futures can be named, rehearsed, and partially inhabited before they are fully enacted in practice. Students may begin to imagine classrooms where children participate actively, where learning occurs through exploration and expression, where arts and technology become media of inquiry rather than mere instructional supplements, and where the teacher's role is reconfigured from controller to facilitator, co-learner, or commoner [8,9,24].

These imaginaries become especially salient in the period before practicum. Practicum is not only a technical requirement or a field-based experience; it is also an anticipatory threshold where future teachers project themselves into an educational role not yet fully lived. In this period, they imagine what kind of teacher they want to become, what sort of relationship they wish to build with children, and what kinds of pedagogical environments they hope to create. Such projections matter because they shape how practicum itself will be interpreted. Pre-service teachers enter classrooms not only with inherited scripts from the past but also with hopes, ideals, and normative visions of educational possibility [27,28].

However, these future-oriented imaginaries do not necessarily displace the schoolized mind. More often, they coexist with it in tension. A student may endorse participation while still imagining the teacher as the final authority; may value creativity while also fearing deviation from planned objectives; may speak of democratic education while still equating success with control, smooth implementation, and visible outcomes. This is why imaginaries are analytically useful: they allow us to see that pre-service teachers are not simply reproducing what they already know but are navigating a contested symbolic terrain between dominant institutional inheritances and alternative pedagogical futures [21,23].

At a broader level, these tensions are also connected to the limits of the social imagination itself. As argued in critical work on postschool imaginaries, dominant narratives about education and society can both reveal and constrain what can be collectively imagined as possible [29]. In this regard, imaginaries are tied to what Haiven [30] terms the radical imagination, a collective process through which alternative ways of being and organizing social life are envisioned and sustained. The stories we tell about education, much like those we tell about broader social systems, can either nourish the emergence of alternatives or foreclose them, shaping the horizons within which educational futures become thinkable [17,30].

Thus, the concept of educational imaginaries helps us to grasp the more hopeful and open dimension of pre-service teachers' anticipations. It draws attention to the ways teacher education can expand the horizon of the possible, enabling students to imagine schooling otherwise. At the same time, it allows us to examine which futures become more available, more legitimate, and more thinkable than others. In this study, educational imaginaries are therefore approached as future-oriented pedagogical projections shaped by university experiences, broader ideological formations, and competing visions of what education should become [21,23].

4. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design to examine how pre-service teachers anticipate their upcoming practicum before entering the classroom. Rather than focusing on practicum as an enacted experience, the study investigates the anticipatory imaginaries through which future educators conceptualize childhood, schooling, the role of the teacher, and the challenges of teaching practice.

The questionnaire was developed by the author in alignment with the conceptual framework of the study, with the notion of the "schoolized mind" [11] serving as a sensitizing concept guiding the formulation of the questions. The instrument was designed to elicit open-ended, reflective responses capturing participants' understandings of key pedagogical and social dimensions.

A qualitative approach was considered appropriate, as it enables the exploration of meanings, assumptions, and expectations embedded in participants' narratives [31]. The analysis therefore focuses on how participants articulate their pedagogical understandings, offering insight into the ways in which educational beliefs and imaginaries emerge prior to professional practice.

4.1. Participants and Context

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an early childhood education teacher preparation program at a Greek university. The participants were students in the researcher's course during the final semester of their studies, immediately before beginning their practicum placement. At the time of data collection, they were in the preparation phase for practicum, which made it possible to capture their expectations and anticipatory perceptions before their first direct teaching experience in the classroom.

All participants were women, aged between 21 and 22 years old. They had no prior teaching experience; however, they had previously completed a short observational school placement (approximately one week) two years prior to the study.

The questionnaire was administered during the second session of the course; students present completed it in class, while those absent were given the opportunity to respond later from home using the same online form, resulting in 28 out of the 61 total responses being submitted remotely.

As participants had already completed several theoretical courses in pedagogy and child development, their responses reflect the intersection between university-based pedagogical discourses and their prior experiences within formal schooling systems.

4.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through a Google Forms survey consisting of 10 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' pedagogical imaginaries prior to entering practicum (see Appendix A). The questionnaire invited students to reflect on their perceptions of key dimensions of education and the anticipated challenges of practicum. The questions were intentionally formulated in an open and reflective manner in order to capture how pre-service teachers imagine educational practice before entering the classroom.

Given that data were collected through an online questionnaire, the possibility of external assistance cannot be entirely excluded. However, the experience-based and reflective nature of the questions required participants to draw on personal perceptions and anticipations, resulting in responses that were diverse in content, structure and expression, with no indications of standardized or externally generated patterns.

The questionnaire required approximately 20 min to complete. This approach allowed participants to articulate their own meanings, assumptions, and expectations about teaching and learning without being constrained by predefined response categories, enabling the

study to examine the discursive frameworks through which future educators anticipate their professional role.

4.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis [31]. This data analysis tool was selected because it allows researchers to identify recurring patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets while remaining attentive to participants' own language and interpretations.

The analysis followed an iterative and reflexive process. In the first stage, all 61 questionnaire responses were read multiple times in order to achieve familiarization with the dataset and to gain an overall understanding of participants' narratives. During this phase, initial notes were recorded concerning recurring ideas, tensions, and representations related to childhood, schooling, teaching, and the anticipated practicum experience.

In the second stage, segments of text were coded inductively. Codes were assigned to phrases or passages that reflected participants' assumptions, expectations, and pedagogical representations. Examples of early codes included references to children's innocence, classroom management, teacher responsibility, fear of mistakes, knowledge transmission, and democratic participation. In total, 722 initial codes were generated across the dataset.

In the third stage, related codes were grouped into broader conceptual categories. Through constant comparison across responses, these categories were gradually refined into candidate themes that captured recurring patterns in how participants imagined childhood, teaching, and practicum.

The final stage involved reviewing and refining the themes in relation to the entire dataset in order to ensure internal coherence within each theme and clear distinctions between themes. Particular attention was given to identifying tensions and contradictions within participants' responses, especially where progressive pedagogical ideals coexisted with assumptions reflecting the logic of the schoolized mind. The resulting thematic structure captures the dominant patterns through which pre-service teachers anticipate their professional role before entering the classroom.

To enhance the transparency of the analytic process, the following tables illustrate how meanings were constructed through successive stages of interpretation. Table 1 provides an example of the movement from raw data to codes, categories, and higher-order themes, making visible the interpretive decisions involved in the analysis. Table 2 presents the final thematic structure, showing how participants' responses were organized into interconnected themes and subthemes. Together, these tables demonstrate the analytical logic through which the data were transformed into coherent patterns of meaning.

Table 1. Illustrative example of coding and thematic development.

Raw Data Excerpt	Initial Codes	Analytical Category	Higher-Order Theme
"Children need a safe and supportive environment in order to develop."	safety, support, development, care	Child as vulnerable and dependent	Children between Innocence and Agency
"The teacher should guide the learning process."	guidance, teacher responsibility, direction	Teacher as authority	Caring Teacher and Pedagogical Authority
"I am afraid I will not manage the classroom properly."	fear, classroom management, inadequacy	Practicum anxiety and self-doubt	Anticipating Practicum
"I want to complete all activities successfully."	success, performance, completion	Teaching as effectiveness and delivery	Teaching as Performance

Table 2. Overview of themes and subthemes (revised).

Theme	Subthemes
1. Children between Innocence and Agency	a. Childhood as vulnerability and dependency; b. Childhood as emotional and developmental becoming; c. Childhood as active participation; d. Childhood as rights-bearing subjects
2. The Caring Teacher and Pedagogical Authority	a. Teacher as emotional supporter and caregiver; b. Teacher as motivator and inspirer; c. Teacher as organizer of learning; d. Teacher as final authority and decision-maker
3. Anticipating Practicum: Anxiety, Responsibility, and Professional Exposure	a. Fear of failure and inadequacy; b. Classroom management as central challenge; c. Transition from student to teacher identity; d. Practicum as evaluation and exposure; e. Desire for safe and supportive learning environments
4. Teaching as Performance: Responsibility, Success, and the Pressure to Deliver	a. Teaching as successful delivery of activities; b. Maintaining attention and engagement; c. Teaching as achievement of predefined goals; d. Pressure for effectiveness and smooth implementation; e. Responsibility for learning outcomes

The coding process was conducted manually using Microsoft Word, allowing close engagement with the data and the iterative refinement of codes and themes. To enhance analytical rigor, the coding process followed a systematic and transparent procedure, including repeated engagement with the data, constant comparison across responses, and ongoing reflexive interpretation. Given the reflexive nature of thematic analysis, the emphasis was placed on depth of interpretation and transparency of the analytic process, with less focus on intercoder reliability.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Students were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes. No identifying information was collected, and all responses were treated confidentially. The study focused on participants' perceptions and expectations and did not involve any form of intervention or sensitive personal data.

5. Results

The analysis revealed a series of tensions in how pre-service teachers imagine childhood, teaching, and their upcoming practicum experience. Across the dataset, participants frequently articulate progressive, child-centred, and democratic pedagogical values. At the same time, however, their responses repeatedly return to discourses that reproduce the logic of the schoolized mind, including assumptions about knowledge transmission, teacher responsibility and control, adult authority, and evaluation through objectives and outcomes. The following themes illustrate how these tensions emerge in participants' representations of childhood, the role of the teacher, and the anticipation of practicum.

Theme 1: Children between Innocence and Agency

Participants' responses reveal a recurring tension between child-centred and democratic pedagogical ideals and more traditional assumptions associated with the schoolized mind. Across the majority of responses, childhood is described as a stage requiring supportive environments where children can feel safe, accepted, and encouraged to grow:

> "Children need guidance because they are not yet ready to take responsibility on their own." (P31)

> "Children can express their ideas and should be given the opportunity to participate in decisions that concern them." (P47)

Participants emphasize emotional security, play, and the nurturing of children's abilities, suggesting that children require protective and supportive conditions in order to flourish. At the same time, several responses introduce a different understanding of childhood, presenting children as individuals with opinions, rights, and the capacity to actively participate in learning processes. This tension suggests that childhood is imagined simultaneously as a space of vulnerability and a space of agency:

"Children are learning beings who need care and respect." (P22)

"Children need a safe and supportive environment in order to develop." (P13)

These responses frame childhood primarily in terms of developmental needs and relational support. The emphasis on care, safety, and guidance positions children as individuals who require adult protection and structured environments in order to develop appropriately. Similar responses across the dataset refer to emotional safety, acceptance, and supportive learning conditions as the central features of childhood.

Such constructions resonate with dominant developmental discourses that portray childhood as a stage characterized by vulnerability and dependency. Within this framework, children are positioned mainly as recipients of care rather than as fully capable social actors:

"Childhood is the most carefree period of life." (P56)

"Children should not be passive recipients of knowledge but active subjects of learning." (P2)

While the first response idealizes childhood as a time of innocence and emotional simplicity, the second introduces a contrasting representation that emphasizes children's participation and agency in learning. Together, these responses illustrate how participants simultaneously imagine children as both protected beings and active participants in educational processes.

The idealization of childhood as carefree aligns with what sociologists describe as the romanticized child, a cultural construction that separates childhood from the complexities of social life [32]. In contrast, the representation of children as active subjects of learning reflects perspectives from the sociology of childhood that conceptualize children as social actors capable of shaping their environments and contributing to knowledge production [25]. The coexistence of these perspectives highlights the tension between traditional developmental understandings of childhood and contemporary child-centred approaches that emphasize participation and agency.

Theme 2: The Caring Teacher and Pedagogical Authority

Participants' responses regarding the role of the teacher reveal a tension between relational care and pedagogical authority, as well as between ideals of democratic participation and the persistence of hierarchical responsibility in the classroom. Most participants describe the "good teacher" is frequently described as a supportive, empathetic, and inspiring figure who builds trusting relationships with children and creates a positive learning environment. At the same time, however, the teacher is also expected to guide learning, organize classroom activities, and maintain responsibility for the overall functioning of the class. This dual representation suggests that participants imagine teaching through a hybrid model in which emotional closeness coexists with instructional authority:

"A good teacher supports and encourages children." (P9)

"A teacher should inspire children and create a positive environment in the classroom." (P14)

These responses highlight the relational and emotional dimensions of teaching [33,34]. Participants emphasize qualities such as empathy, patience, and the ability to build supportive relationships with children. In this framing, the teacher is seen as someone who motivates and emotionally supports students while fostering a safe and encouraging learning atmosphere. Within this framework, teaching is understood as a relational practice grounded in responsiveness to children's needs and the creation of supportive learning environments:

"The teacher should guide the learning process." (P44)

"The teacher has the final responsibility for what happens in the classroom." (P19)

Alongside the emphasis on care and emotional support, many participants also highlight the expectation that teachers maintain authority over the organization and direction of classroom activities. Participants frequently describe the teacher as responsible for guiding learning, coordinating activities, and ensuring that the classroom functions effectively. This tension becomes more evident in responses that simultaneously emphasize listening and control:

"The teacher must ensure that everything runs properly in the classroom." (P28)

"A teacher should listen to children and take their opinions into account." (P35)

This representation reflects the persistence of hierarchical structures within educational settings, where the teacher retains institutional authority over learning processes. Even when participants support more participatory and collaborative classroom dynamics, they often acknowledge that the teacher ultimately holds the responsibility for decision-making and classroom management. Such tensions reflect the coexistence of democratic pedagogical ideals with the hierarchical organization of schooling, illustrating how the logic of the schoolized mind continues to shape expectations about authority and responsibility in the classroom.

Considered together, these responses illustrate the emergence of what may be described as a "caring authority"—a hybrid representation of the teacher that combines emotional closeness with pedagogical control. While participants express support for democratic and relational forms of teaching, they simultaneously reproduce assumptions about the teacher's final authority and responsibility within the classroom. This tension suggests that participatory ideals coexist with deeply internalized expectations of hierarchical organization in schooling, revealing the influence of the schoolized mind in shaping pre-service teachers' imaginaries of classroom life.

Theme 3: Anticipating Practicum: Anxiety, Responsibility, and Professional Exposure

Participants frequently describe practicum as an experience accompanied by anxiety, uncertainty, and the fear of making mistakes. Across responses, students anticipate practicum as a moment in which they will need to demonstrate their ability to function as teachers in real classroom conditions. This anticipation generates concerns about their preparedness, their ability to manage the classroom, and the possibility that their actions will be observed and evaluated by others.

A dominant concern relates to classroom management and maintaining children's engagement. This was one of the most frequently mentioned challenges across the dataset. In particular, most participants identify the coordination of classroom dynamics, the participation of all children, and the ability to sustain students' attention as central challenges:

"I believe the biggest challenge will be managing the classroom and responding properly to the needs of all the children." (P5)

Such responses suggest that participants already imagine teaching through the lens of responsibility for classroom order, participation, and responsiveness to diverse needs.

At the same time, a substantial number of responses reveal doubts about professional adequacy and the ability to successfully perform the role of the teacher:

"The fear of whether I am capable and whether I will succeed." (P36)

Here practicum is perceived not only as a learning opportunity but also as a moment of self-evaluation, where participants confront uncertainty about their competence as future educators.

Another recurring concern relates to the transition from the role of student to that of teacher:

"Now I will be the one who has to teach something, whereas until now I was the one listening." (P59)

This statement highlights the shift from being a recipient of knowledge to becoming the person responsible for guiding learning. Such a transition introduces expectations of authority, responsibility, and pedagogical competence that many participants perceive as challenging.

Beyond these concerns, participants repeatedly express the desire for a supportive practicum environment where mistakes can be part of the learning process:

"I would like to experience it without the anxiety and the fear of making mistakes." (P21)

Similarly, others emphasize the importance of acceptance and emotional safety:

"I would like to be in an environment of acceptance that will make me feel comfortable to try in practice everything I have learned." (P7)

Overall, these responses indicate that practicum is imagined not only as a space for professional learning but also as a moment of exposure and vulnerability, where future teachers anticipate being observed, evaluated, and tested in their emerging professional role.

Theme 4: Teaching as Performance: Responsibility, Success, and the Pressure to Deliver

Beyond concerns about classroom management and professional adequacy, participants' responses reveal an additional expectation regarding teaching practice: the anticipation that teaching must be effective, engaging, and successfully implemented. Across many responses, students imagine practicum as a situation in which they will need to deliver well-organized activities, maintain children's attention, and ensure that learning unfolds smoothly. Teaching is therefore frequently anticipated as a practice that must be performed successfully in front of both children and supervising adults:

"I want to manage to complete all the activities successfully." (P42)

"I want to make the lesson interesting and understandable without losing the children's attention." (P33)

"Organizing activities that keep their interest." (P57)

Participants repeatedly refer to the need to sustain children's engagement and prevent boredom. In several responses, successful teaching is closely associated with the ability to maintain attention, motivate participation, and ensure that activities unfold according to plan.

"To make the children interested in our activities and feel comfortable with us." (P42)

"Achieving the successful implementation of the scenarios with children's participation." (P2)

These responses reveal that participants frequently imagine teaching through the lens of responsibility for the effectiveness of the lesson. The success of teaching is often linked to whether activities work as expected and whether children remain attentive and engaged throughout the process.

At the same time, these responses suggest that participants may already internalize assumptions associated with the schoolized mind, where teaching is imagined as the structured delivery of learning activities whose success depends on the teacher's ability to control the classroom, maintain engagement, and achieve planned goals [11]. Even before entering the classroom, future teachers appear to anticipate their role as one that requires constant attentiveness to performance, responsibility, and the smooth functioning of the lesson.

Taken together, these responses indicate that practicum is imagined not only as a space of experimentation and learning but also as a moment where teaching must be successfully enacted. The emphasis on maintaining attention, completing activities, and ensuring that the lesson unfolds as planned reflects how pre-service teachers anticipate their role through the lens of pedagogical performance and responsibility.

6. Discussion

The findings show that pre-service teachers anticipate practicum through a marked tension between progressive pedagogical aspirations and deeply internalized assumptions about schooling. Across the dataset, participants frequently expressed child-centred, caring, and democratic ideals, yet these coexisted with expectations shaped by control, teacher responsibility, and the successful delivery of planned activities. Thus, the significance of the findings lies not simply in identifying what participants believe but in revealing that their anticipations of practicum are structured by dual and often contradictory pedagogical frameworks. Similar tensions have been identified in studies on teacher beliefs, which show that pre-service teachers often hold hybrid and sometimes conflicting understandings of teaching rather than coherent pedagogical positions [4].

The first two themes indicate that this tension is already present in how participants imagine both the child and the teacher. On one hand, children were often described as active, respected, and deserving of supportive learning environments. On the other hand, they were also represented as vulnerable, dependent, and in need of adult guidance. Similarly, the teacher was imagined not only as empathetic, inspiring, and relational but also as the final authority responsible for organizing and directing classroom life. These findings resonate with research showing that pre-service teachers tend to combine progressive pedagogical language with more traditional assumptions about authority and responsibility [4]. At the same time, the dual representation of childhood reflects broader tensions identified in childhood studies between developmental constructions of vulnerability and sociological perspectives that emphasize children's agency [25,32].

The third theme shows that practicum itself is anticipated as a moment of vulnerability, exposure, and self-testing. Participants did not describe it only as an opportunity to learn but also as a demanding threshold where they would need to demonstrate competence and manage the realities of classroom life. Anxiety about classroom management, fear of mistakes, and uncertainty about professional adequacy appeared repeatedly in the data. This aligns with previous research indicating that practicum is often experienced as emotionally demanding and associated with concerns about performance and evaluation [7]. Particularly revealing was the way participants described the transition from being students to becoming responsible for teaching, a shift that has been identified as a critical moment in professional identity formation [8].

The fourth theme extends this picture by showing that teaching practice is frequently anticipated through a performative logic. Participants often linked good teaching with the ability to sustain attention, complete activities successfully, and ensure that the lesson unfolds smoothly. In this sense, teaching is imagined as something that must be visibly effective and well-executed. This pattern aligns with broader discussions of performativity in education, where teaching becomes associated with the successful delivery of planned activities and the demonstration of effectiveness through observable outcomes [17,35]. Within this perspective, educational practice is often understood as the implementation of predefined objectives, where teachers are expected to organize learning experiences that produce visible and measurable results. These findings suggest that pre-service teachers may internalize expectations of effectiveness and responsibility before entering the classroom, shaping how they interpret their role during practicum [5,6].

As a whole, the results indicate that pre-service teachers anticipate practicum through four interconnected pedagogical imaginaries: an image of the child, an image of the teacher, an image of practicum, and an image of teaching practice. Across all four, the same tension persists: democratic and relational aspirations coexist with assumptions tied to authority, transmission, control, and performance. These findings suggest that pre-service teachers do not enter practicum as neutral learners but with already structured expectations shaped by prior schooling experiences and emerging pedagogical influences [14,15]. At the same time, the coexistence of alternative orientations indicates that these expectations are not fixed but remain open to negotiation, supporting the view that teacher identity formation begins before practicum and develops through the interaction of multiple and sometimes competing pedagogical influences [9,10]. New theories are not simply replacing earlier assumptions but coexist with them, creating hybrid and sometimes contradictory understandings of teaching [36–38].

6.1. Limitations

This study is subject to several methodological limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the sample is relatively small and drawn from a single teacher education program within one national context, which limits the generalizability of the results. The findings therefore reflect situated pedagogical imaginaries rather than broadly representative patterns across teacher education contexts.

Second, the data rely exclusively on self-reported responses collected through an online questionnaire. While this approach allowed participants to articulate their anticipatory understandings in an open and reflective manner, it also means that the findings capture expressed beliefs rather than enacted practices. Participants' responses may also be shaped by socially desirable discourses or by their familiarity with pedagogical concepts acquired during their studies.

Finally, the study focuses on anticipations prior to practicum rather than on actual practicum experiences. As such, it does not examine how these imaginaries may be confirmed, transformed, or challenged through engagement with classroom practice. Future research could build on this work by adopting longitudinal or observational designs that trace how these tensions evolve during and after practicum.

6.2. Implications for Teacher Education

The findings suggest that pre-service teachers enter practicum with internally conflicting pedagogical orientations, where democratic aspirations coexist with assumptions of authority, control, and performance. This indicates that practicum preparation should include space for critical reflection on these tensions, rather than focusing only on the development of teaching techniques.

Creating opportunities for structured reflection may support pre-service teachers in recognizing how their expectations are shaped and how different pedagogical logics coexist in their thinking. At the same time, the findings point to the importance of framing practicum as a supported transition, where uncertainty and experimentation are legitimate parts of learning to teach.

Future research could examine how these anticipations evolve during practicum and how they are reshaped through engagement with classroom realities and mentoring practices. It would also be valuable to explore how different program designs influence the persistence or transformation of these tensions across contexts.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to its non-invasive qualitative design involving adult participants and the absence of sensitive data or interventions. The study was conducted in accordance with standard ethical principles for social research, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and anonymization.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Questionnaire Items

The following open-ended questions were included in the online questionnaire administered to pre-service teachers:

1. How do you understand childhood?
   (Please describe how you perceive children and their position in school and society.)
2. What do you consider to be the main need of children within the classroom?
3. What do you think is the primary purpose of school?
4. What does a "good teacher" mean to you? How would you like children to perceive you as a teacher?
5. How do you determine whether a lesson has been successful?
6. How do you think children learn best?
7. Who makes decisions in a classroom? What is your opinion on this?
8. How would you ideally like to experience your practicum?
9. What do you think will be the biggest challenge for you during your practicum?
10. What concerns or expectations do you have about your role as a teacher during practicum, particularly in relation to responsibility, classroom management, and achieving learning outcomes?

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