

Using the “most significant change” technique to evaluate the teaching competence and psycho-emotional development of prospective teachers during the teaching practicum

Development
of prospective
teachers

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper presents the results of empirical research on the effects of teaching practice on student teachers’ teaching competence and psycho-emotional development using the “most significant change” narrative investigative technique.

Design/methodology/approach – Following a qualitative research approach, the study was conducted during the academic year 2021–2022 in two phases (January and May) with the participation of 73 student teachers of the Department of Theology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) during their mentored teaching practice. Student teachers’ narratives were collected and analysed using the most significant change technique (Davies and Dart, 2005). Content analysis was conducted with the contribution of seven independent judges.

Findings – The results indicate that the Teaching Practice course with the guidance of mentors has a direct and positive effect on student teachers’ teaching competence. Mentors also seem to have a positive effect on student teachers’ psycho-emotional development. The research also confirms the reliability of the most significant change narrative technique for investigating the effect of related educational interventions.

Originality/value – The study empirically validates the usefulness and potential of the investigative narrative most significant change technique for evaluating the effects of teaching practice on student teachers’ professional development with the guidance of experienced mentor teachers. The results of the study also have implications for the design and evaluation of teacher practice programmes.

Keywords Teaching practice, Student teachers, Mentor teachers, Teaching, Most significant change

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A significant aspect of many pre-service teacher training programmes throughout the world is the guidance and support offered by experienced mentor teachers to student teachers



The authors are grateful to the student teachers of the Department of Theology at the NKUA who took the time to participate in this research despite being busy with their student commitments, as well as to the team of seven independent reviewers who participated in the dual process of evaluating the narratives in order to identify the MSC.

(Ambrosetti and Dekkers, 2010; Cohen *et al.*, 2013; Lawson *et al.*, 2015; Livingston and Assunção-Flores, 2017; White and Forgasz, 2016). This paper presents the results of empirical research on the effects of teaching practice on student teachers' teaching competence and psycho-emotional development when they are guided and supported by mentor teachers. The investigation employed the "most significant change" (MSC) narrative investigative technique for the collection of data from student teachers (Dart and Davies, 2003; Davies, 1998; Davies and Dart, 2005). The study was carried out from October 2021 to May 2022 with student teachers of the Department of Theology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) completing their teaching practice in schools while being guided by experienced mentor teachers. After reviewing the multiple benefits of mentoring for student teachers, the paper presents the theoretical background of the MSC technique as well as the results from the analyses of student teachers' narratives with the use of independent judges. The results confirm the validity and usefulness of the technique for evaluating the beneficial effects of mentored teaching practice on student teachers' professional development.

Literature review

Training student teachers during teaching practice

Different approaches, processes and pedagogical principles are adopted by pre-service teacher training institutions around the world, and different people are involved in the training of future or beginning teachers (Brondyk and Searby, 2013; Hoffman *et al.*, 2015; Yee Mok and Staub, 2021). Pre-service teacher training generally aims at bridging the gap between theory and practice through the cooperation between university trainers and experienced mentor teachers (Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Green *et al.*, 2019) in order to prepare future teachers for their roles and responsibilities, contributing towards their professional development (Hudson, 2013; Izadinia, 2013). In Greece, university departments are responsible for the preparation of future teachers who follow a four-year programme of studies in their subject area. For graduates to be eligible for appointment in public or private schools, they must successfully complete a specially designed Pedagogic and Teaching Competence Programme (PTCP) as part of their four-year programme of studies, which leads to the award of the Certificate of Pedagogic and Teaching Competence. This applies only for graduates who entered university departments from the academic year 2015–2016 onwards. According to Greek laws 3848 (2010) and 4547 (2018), teaching practice is compulsory for the award of the certificate.

Likewise, since 2015, the Department of Theology at the NKUA has offered teaching practice to its fourth-year students, which lasts one academic year and is carried out in two phases (November to December and March to May). Teaching practice takes place in schools in and around the Athens area, and through their teaching placements, student teachers are guided and supported by experienced mentor teachers. Within this particular framework, a mentor teacher can be defined as a secondary school educator who voluntarily responds to an open invitation to undergo a six-month training programme facilitated by the university. The purpose of this programme is to equip the mentor teacher with the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfil their role as a mentor, despite not receiving any financial remuneration for their services. The mentor teachers undergo training to effectively support and guide one or two student teachers in the development of teaching competence, encompassing both cognitive and emotional knowledge acquisition. During both phases of the teaching practice, mentor teachers assume the responsibility of showcasing exemplary instructional practices in the field of religious education. As student teachers commence their teaching duties, which consist of one hour in the first phase and two hours in the second phase, mentor teachers provide support in terms of course planning and facilitating autonomous teaching.

The provision of support is implemented through a systematic approach that incorporates individualised feedback and counselling, while simultaneously evaluating their educational achievements.

Developing teaching competence during teaching practice

One of the main goals of the teaching practice experience is the development of student teachers' teaching competence. This entails development of learning skills and the implementation of teaching strategies with the support of experienced mentor teachers (Hobson, 2016, 2020) and, more specifically, their "academic" (Izadinia, 2015a, p. 349; 2015b, p. 398; 2018, p. 113) and "practical/technical" development (Rajuan *et al.*, 2007, pp. 232–233). Different mentoring approaches during teaching practice also have different effects on student teacher learning and professional development (Manning and Hobson, 2017). When mentoring involves encouraging the student teacher and developing their autonomy, this has a positive effect on a student teacher's readiness for teaching (Matsko *et al.*, 2020), enhancing at the same time the development of their practical knowledge (Aderibigbe *et al.*, 2018; van Velzen *et al.*, 2012). During this process, analysing, reflecting on and changing student teachers' beliefs and attitudes about teaching is truly transformative (Karavas and Drossou, 2010).

Psycho-emotional support during teaching practice

One of the most significant roles of mentor teachers during teaching practice is to advise and offer psychological and emotional support to student teachers, helping them overcome the anxiety and stress of first-time teaching (Karavas, 2006; Köksal and Genç, 2019) as well as feelings of self-doubt about their teaching ability (Izadinia, 2015b). By creating a climate of trust and open communication, the mentor teacher can assist student teachers in managing their anxiety and stress, which has a positive effect on their teaching competence (Aderibigbe *et al.*, 2018; Charisma and Nurmalasari, 2020; Karavas, 2008; La Paro *et al.*, 2018, 2020), their well-being and their sense of self-efficacy (Hobson, 2020; Hudson, 2016; Koukounaras Liagkis *et al.*, 2021; Liou *et al.*, 2016; Poulou, 2007; Van Schagen Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

The most significant change technique

Reflective narration has been used extensively in contemporary social and educational research to investigate personal and social change (Andrews *et al.*, 2013; Dwyer *et al.*, 2017). Reflection is a significant practice for teacher professional and personal development (Tsafos, 2014) since it enables teachers to re-examine beliefs, experiences and practices and make decisions for change (Henning *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, reflective narration can facilitate student teachers' learning and professional development and stimulate change through prior experience (Chan, 2012; Pulvermacher and Lefstein, 2016). Reflection activates cognitive processes, making student teachers more aware of their development and transforming their teaching beliefs and practices (Botha, 2021; Golombek and Johnson, 2004; Johnson and Golombek, 2011).

In 1994, in a rural development programme in cooperation with the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh, a narrative technique was used to monitor, evaluate and constantly improve community interventions. The technique focussed on identifying the "most significant change", as interpreted and perceived by participants (Davies, 1998). Addressing participants with a basic question ("In the last month, in your opinion, what do you think was the most significant change that took place in the lives of people participating in the project?"), an attempt was made to identify the changes in people's lives that occurred

after the intervention (Davies, 1998, p. 244). Participants were asked to describe what happened, when and where to explain why the change they described was so important. The changes after joint meetings of project representatives were classified into distinct domains, and finally, the most significant change in each domain was selected through a process of discussion, justification and evaluation (Davies, 1998). In the next stage, the most significant changes in each field were subjected to a verification process by the participants themselves. The final evaluation of the intervention was made after content analysis of all the narratives (Davies and Dart, 2005).

The MSC technique is considered a reliable and useful method of narrative research for evaluating the outcomes of an intervention and has been widely used in recent years in educational and other contexts (Choy and Lidstone, 2013; Dart and Davies, 2003; Heck and Sweeney, 2013; Kargatzi, 2022; Keinemans *et al.*, 2020; Koukounaras Liagkis, 2022; Koukounaras Liagkis and Papaioannou, 2023; Koukounaras Liagkis and Potamoussi, 2019; Tonkin *et al.*, 2021; Veenstra and Hidayati, 2023; Wilder and Walpole, 2008). Through the narration of personal experiences and their justification by the subjects, without the limitation of right or wrong answers, complex data and results, as well as unexpected changes, are captured (Dart and Davies, 2003). It is also possible to document the changes described, even those not initially foreseen, by providing rich material and a fuller understanding of the interactions that exist during the implementation of a programme (Wilder and Walpole, 2008). Given its many advantages and strengths, it was decided to use the MSC technique for evaluating the outcomes and impact of the Teaching Practice course of the Department of Theology at the NKUA.

Research purpose and research questions

The study reported in this paper was part of a wider research project focussing on the role and effect of mentors on student teachers' professional development during teaching practice. The study is qualitative in nature and was carried out during the academic year 2021–2022. This paper reports on the results of the use of the MSC technique for evaluating the outcomes of the Teaching Practice course for student teachers studying at the Department of Theology. More specifically, the specific study addressed two research questions:

- RQ1. What are the effects of mentors on the teaching competence and psycho-emotional development of student teachers as investigated through the use of the MSC technique?
- RQ2. Is the MSC technique an appropriate method for investigating the effects of mentors on the education of student teachers during teaching practice?

Methodology

Participants and research tool

This study included 73 student teachers in their fourth year at the NKUA Department of Theology who were completing their annual Teaching Practice course (2021–2022), which is required for the Pedagogic Teaching Competence Certificate and teaching religious education in schools. Fifty-nine student teachers participated in both phases (January and May 2022). The research adhered to the established ethical framework in both its content and methodology, aligning with the principles set forth by the conducting institution, NKUA. The participants willingly completed a participation consent form, and throughout all stages of the research, strict adherence to anonymity and confidentiality was maintained by assigning a unique personal code to each participant. The study employed the MSC narrative technique,

which offers a more holistic and rich depiction of the results of student teachers' teaching practice from their perspective (Dart and Davies, 2003; Davies, 1998; Davies and Dart, 2005). The adapted MSC tool aimed at anonymously capturing the most significant change that student teachers experienced during and at the end of their teaching practice period. The main question posed was "Choose and narrate the most significant change that you have experienced until this point during your teaching practice experience and in your relationship with your mentor detailing the events, the people, the feelings and the effects it had on you". In addition, student teachers were asked to give a title to their narrative and to justify why they chose a particular change as the most significant. The aim was to urge student teachers to not only produce a simple description of events, but also engage them in higher levels of reflection through cognitive processes such as making connections between events, justifying and explaining them.

Research process and design

To exclude researcher bias through the deliberate selection of positive stories describing change (Wilder and Walpole, 2008), the evaluation of student teacher narratives was carried out by seven independent judges including the researcher (Manolis Papaioannou) in both research phases. There was no benefit or other incentive for the independent panel of judges to participate in the survey. The research supervisor identified them based on their willingness to participate in the research process, their connection to the teaching of religious education, their prior experience serving as a mentor to students and their familiarity with the MSC application procedure. In particular, six of the judges served as secondary school teachers, and five had prior experience as mentor teachers (of which three served in this capacity during the survey period). In addition, two of the judges had experience as student teachers, and four had applied the MSC technique before. The selection of judges was intended to prevent investigator bias and to better represent and include the subjects' voices (Davies and Dart, 2005).

The use of the MSC technique in both phases was carried out in seven steps as follows (Dart and Davies, 2003; Davies, 1998; Davies and Dart, 2005; Wilder and Walpole, 2008):

- (1) Two group meetings were arranged with the student teachers in which they were informed of the aims of the study and familiarised with the context of their participation in research study and the process of collecting narratives.
- (2) The independent judges met five times (three in the first phase and two in the second phase). During these meetings, the judges decided on the criteria for choosing a narrative as a description of change and then read individually and evaluated all the narratives, identifying those that fulfilled the criteria for description of change.
- (3) The judges discussed and presented their evaluations of narratives and justified which in their opinion fulfilled the commonly decided criteria for description of change. This discussion resulted in unanimously agreeing on those narratives that fulfilled the said criteria.
- (4) The judges presented the domains of "change" that were identified in the student teachers' narratives in both phases. The domains were (1) teaching effectiveness, (2) pedagogical content knowledge in relation to teaching religious education, (3) psycho-emotional development, (4) professional identity formation, (5) relationship with mentor. Each domain was described to ensure the objective allocation of a narrative to a particular domain. Judges then read the narratives, allocated them to the relative domain and evaluated the described change on a scale of 1–5.

- (5) The judges discussed and justified the allocation of each narrative of change to each domain so as to reach a unanimous decision on the significance of the change on the basis of judges' scores. In the event of a tie (same score allocated to two "significant" changes), the scoring was repeated to determine the most significant change. The goal of this stage was to determine the "winning" MSC for each domain on the basis of judges' scores.
- (6) A feedback session with the student teachers on the most significant changes identified in each domain was carried out in both phases of the Teaching Practice course. More specifically, student teachers were divided in five groups (as were the number of domains) and asked to study the most significant changes to justify why they were considered so significant in order to confirm their choice and evaluation of the change as most significant.
- (7) All narratives were quantitatively and qualitatively content analysed, including those not selected as "change" descriptions, with comparative results by phase or by domain of change.

Results

This section presents the results of the analysis of student teachers' narratives using the MSC technique to evaluate the outcomes of the Teaching Practice course. More specifically, this paper focusses on the results pertaining to two domains: teaching effectiveness and psycho-emotional development. The outcomes of the Teaching Practice course on teaching effectiveness and student teacher psycho-emotional development were also investigated through other research tools (interviews and questionnaires), which are not presented in this paper.

Quantitative results by domain and by research phase

In the first phase of the research, 56 narratives of the total 70 contained descriptions of change (14 narratives did not contain a clear description or did not justify the described change). In the second phase, 58 narratives of a total of 62 contained descriptions of change (see Table 1), which represents a larger percentage of narratives describing a change event in relation to the first phase [$n = 58$ (93.5%) vs $n = 56$ (80%)]. This may be because the second phase narratives were written after the feedback session of the first phase carried out with student teachers.

Student teacher narratives contained descriptions of change in more than the two domains presented in this paper. In the first phase, more descriptions of change were related to psycho-emotional development ($n = 23$), while changes in teaching practice were described in quite a few narratives as well ($n = 17$). This may be because at the start of the teaching practice experience, student teachers are more concerned with psycho-emotional integration into the

	First phase	Second phase
Narratives with descriptions of "change"	56	58
Narratives without descriptions of "change"	14	4
Total narratives	70	62
Did not participate	7	15
Total of student teachers	77	77

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 1.
Narratives with descriptions of "change" in the sample surveyed

school environment and coping with the demands of a new role, that of a teacher, without any prior relevant experience. In the second phase, teaching practices increased (n = 24) and psycho-emotional development decreased (n = 17; see Table 2). This focus shift in student teachers is normal. By the second phase of teaching practice, student teachers are accustomed to the school environment and better manage their anxiety and stress. Their priority is teaching. Student teacher narratives described changes in psycho-emotional development and teaching practices more than in any other domain.

In both phases, student teacher narratives highlighted the benefits of the Teaching Practice course. More specifically, content analysis of their narratives showed that student teachers' references to learning how to teach and manage classrooms increased from 57.1% in the first phase to 80.6% (i.e. 50 of the 62 narratives) in the second. A similar trend was evident in their references to their psycho-emotional development (55.7% in the first phase to 69.4% in the second). The majority of student teachers (43 of 62) talked about the benefits of the teaching practice experience for their self-confidence, their stress management skills and the development of other personal characteristics (see Table 3).

Teaching and classroom presence

The narratives, which received the highest scores from the independent judges in each phase of the study, confirmed student teachers' perceptions of the value of the teaching practice experience. In the first phase, the narrative with the title "Attitudes and behaviour in the classroom" highlights the impact of teaching practice experience for classroom teaching:

I believed that knowledge and the transmission of information was of primary significance and the classroom climate was secondary. I now believe that both should complement each other and are of equal value. I also felt a member of the group and this helped me perform better. I chose to report on this change because I believe it is of primary significance. (ST52)

The essential outcomes of transformation can be seen in the description of the most significant change of the second phase in the narrative entitled "Inspiration in teaching":

Domains of change	Total of change narratives (first phase)	%	Total of change narratives (second phase)	%
Teaching and presence in class	17	30.4	24	41.4
Psycho-emotional development	23	41	17	29.3
Total of reported changes	56		58	
Total of narratives	70		62	

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2. Total of narratives of "change" per domain in the first and second phases

Categories of benefits of teaching practice experience	Number of references (first phase)	%	Number of references (second phase)	%
Teaching and classroom presence	40	57.1	50	80.6
Psycho-emotional development	39	55.7	43	69.4
Total of narratives	70		62	

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 3. References to the benefits of their teaching practice experience through student teacher narratives in the first and second phases

We began with the activities, my voice was voice low, I felt terror sitting at the teachers' desk, taking steps backwards not forwards. . . . As the days went by I took example from my mentor, I watched her movements, the way she taught. . . . Subsequently, my voice became more louder, my steps boldly led me in front of the desk and my cooperation with the students came about. My joy was great. My gradual development pleased them both. . . . I believe I was very lucky because I met the "inspiration" I was looking for. (ST73)

All the student teacher narratives at the end of the first phase highlighted the significant impact of the teaching practice experience on their development as teachers. Student teachers referred to this impact on many levels:

(1) They designed and implemented lesson plans and activities, putting theory into practice:

I managed to complete the whole lesson even though when I first started my teaching practices I believed I would not be able to do so. (ST34)

I created a whole lesson and with the help of my mentor I succeeded in delivering it to my students in a satisfactory way. (ST44)

I learnt that theory may seem or look good but only when you put it into practice can you see if it is functional and has the desired results! (ST62)

(2) They gradually developed the ability to stand before a group of students and to enjoy it:

I felt happy carrying out a lesson. (ST31)

Even though I am shy as a person, through my teaching practice I succeeded in standing in front of an audience and teaching high school students. (ST16)

(3) They taught student-centred lessons for the first time:

Until now I knew one approach, the teacher-centered one and for the first time I was given the opportunity to follow another approach. (ST4)

(4) They interacted with students during the lesson:

The feeling of entering a class with students wanting to participate in the activities, is very nice. (ST48)

I entered my class, I taught, I realized I interacted with the students and I felt great. (ST68)

The greatest thing was when students were asking me questions and I tried to answer them. (ST49)

(5) They reflected on ways to manage the class:

I realized that I need to learn how to manage each child separately in order to help him understand the meaning of the lesson. (ST47)

Autonomous teaching at the end of the first phase and at the end of the Teaching Practice course enriched their initial teaching experience. Student teachers' teaching skills and communication with students improved in the second phase, as shown quantitatively and qualitatively by student teacher narratives:

My students achieved the learning outcomes I had set in my lesson plan. (ST2)

Teaching practice helped me improve my teaching skills in class, to experience and apply in practice what I was taught on a theoretical level. (ST10)

Student teachers overcame the initial shock of standing in front of a class of students and became more comfortable and effective, as they mentioned:

Through the implementation of different activities and the two lesson plans I designed (of one hour and two hour duration) I observed that I had become more effective in the way I taught. This shows the fruits of a year's worth of toil and sacrifice in our training as teachers. (ST36)

In the first phase I did not have the experience and the courage to take over a class on my own. But now with willpower and perseverance I had a great improvement in setting up the lessons. In the two-hour lesson I taught I think I gave my best. I made the lesson interesting for my students. At the end of the lesson a student thanked me for the way I set up the lesson. I felt very good about myself. (ST47)

They admitted that the autonomous teaching gave them the opportunity focus more:

(1) On putting theory into practice and achieving their objectives:

The implementation of the teaching method in the different high school classes I entered was visible and improved each time. (ST32)

(2) On improving time management:

I gradually succeeded in managing class time, teaching more effectively and focusing on what was necessary. (ST18)

(3) On experimenting with their own ideas:

Towards the end of my teaching practice I could transform my initial doubts on my own ideas into alternative techniques and designs choosing the most appropriate for the class I was teaching. (ST50)

(4) On managing difficult situations amongst students, on improving their interactions with their student groups and enjoying the experience of teaching:

As you get to know these students you are able to build a better relationship and a better communicative context. At the end of your teaching practice you realize that you have become better at what you do over time. (ST41)

I gained teaching experience and I became better at managing time. As I taught this became evident to my students and I was able to build a better relationship with my class and to communicate with them more effectively. (ST68)

At the beginning of my teaching practice I could not believe that I would be able to manage a whole class on my own. However, by practicing teaching, planning lessons and receiving feedback, I felt more confident and I felt more comfortable with the whole situation. (ST59)

Even in those situations where student teachers noted a negative experience in terms of teaching, it is worth noting that there was a major change in the second phase of the teaching practicum, as illustrated:

In my next teaching I may be more stressed since my experience with my first teaching practice did not turn out to be as I expected. (ST56, first phase)

In the second semester, I was very anxious about how my teaching practice and my communication with my students would evolve. More specifically, one day when I was supposed to do two stages of a lesson with a particular class, I was very anxious from the previous day. But when I carried it out, it went very smoothly and enjoyably . . . in the end of the lesson one of the more “lively” students told me that I teach very well and asked me to come back. This amazed me and I will never forget it. I felt very good with my improved communication with my students because this caused me stress and I didn’t know how they would accept me as a teacher since I was close to their age and in the previous semester I felt very awkward. (ST56, second phase)

This gradual acquisition of competence and effectiveness in teaching can be evidenced in the comparative assessment of student teacher narratives between the first and the second phase, in the middle and at the end of the teaching practice period (see Table 4). As can be seen in the table, student teachers seemed to have improved in designing their lessons (Case 47), in terms of their teaching effectiveness (Case 36), and their relationship and communication with students and in classroom management more generally (Cases 41, 65, and 68).

Psycho-emotional improvement

The change that occurred on a psycho-emotional level was described most vividly in the most significant change narrated by a student teacher of the first phase with the title “From procrastination to determination”:

Through my participation in the teaching practice course I overcame my procrastination, something I tried to deal with in the past but without success . . . Every day I became more reliable and less procrastinating not only in relation to the school but also in my life outside school, like in my job, at university, in my personal life. I chose the specific change, because my tendency to procrastinate made me lose many opportunities in my life which I later regretted. (ST19)

“Teaching and presence in class”

ST	Example of reference (first phase)	Example of reference (second phase)
36	I succeeded in designing and teaching a lesson in a real classroom	I felt more effective in the way I teach
47	I realised that I needed to learn how to manage each child individually in order for him/her to absorb the content of the lesson	In the first phase I did not have the experience and the courage to take over a class on my own. But now with willpower and perseverance I had a great improvement in setting up the lessons
41	Apart from being an unprecedented experience, what I liked was my relationship with students	As you get to know these students you are able to build a better relationship and a better communicative context. At the end of your teaching practice you realise that you have become better at what you do over time
65	I succeeded in managing the class and the students more effectively	I learnt how to adapt to the needs of the students and to answer their questions and explain things better. I improved my communication with my students
68	When I entered the class and taught my students I realised that I interacted with them and I felt great	I gained teaching experience and I became better at managing time. As I taught this became evident to my students and I was able to build a better relationship with my class and to communicate with them more effectively

Table 4. Comparative examples of references per student teacher case in relation to the domain “teaching and presence in class” in the first and second phases

Source(s): Authors’ own creation

In a similar vein, in the second phase, the narrative entitled “Self-confidence” highlights the value of reflection induced by the MSC technique and the high degree of appreciation of such results concerning personal improvement:

Generally, as a person I am introvert and I did not like to come into contact with a lot of people and when I was forced to do it I kept a low profile. When I first visited my school I realised that this was something I wanted to overcome. . . . Finally, I want to add that this desire to change may have begun as a result of my teaching practice but it has had an effect on my personal life as well.

What is important is how the student teacher justifies their choice to narrate this change:

The reason I chose this change is mainly because my effort to succeed in this was great in relation to anything else. Besides this, it was the fact that I saw the results of this change in my personal life. (ST13)

The changes in this area evidently impacted the personal lives of student teachers, going beyond the context of the Teaching Practice course and its aims. In all narratives, there were many references to the benefits in terms of student teachers’ psycho-emotional development.

As a result, at the end of the first phase of the teaching practice, the student teachers learnt a numerous of important skills. They learnt:

(1) How not to be overwhelmed by stress:

I learnt how not to be overwhelmed by stress. (ST1)

(2) To be self-confident and bold:

This change helped me as a person to have more self-confidence and to be able to control a whole class of high school students. (ST16)

(3) To develop communication skills:

I succeeded in becoming more comfortable speaking in front of an “audience”. I now feel more communicative. (ST13)

(4) To become better as people and as personalities:

I became a better person. (ST22)

I managed to become more sociable from the moment I entered the classroom. (ST34)

I had changed and was getting bolder by the day. My confidence changed drastically. (ST40)

Through the process of the teaching practice my horizons have been broadened and, I believe, my character has improved. (ST51)

Above all, they could use the aforementioned skills to teach more effectively:

A big change-achievement for me has been believing in myself and that I can do what is asked of me, and ultimately teach. (UE59)

I learned to manage my anxiety/agoraphobia about speaking to large audiences . . . It was a change that helped me not only within the course but also in my personal life! (ST62)

In the second phase, as mentioned above, there was a slight decrease in the number of references that related to psycho-emotional development, perhaps because this was achieved

in the first phase. Still, related references highlight emphatically the effect of student teachers' training on their psycho-emotional development. Thus, in the second phase, the student teachers seemed to develop their self-confidence, to overcome their anxiety and to overcome challenges of teaching:

Teaching-practice helped me to gain more confidence and reduce the stress of "exposure" to the students. (ST10)

I became more self-confident and overcame my anxiety. (ST27)

I chose the psycho-emotional domain as a MSC because I think I was quite behind, especially in the first phase. Compared to the first phase, I notice quite a big difference for the better. I had the opportunity to work out my goals a bit better and be more courageous and have faith in myself that I will be able to cope in class. (ST65)

From the comparative study of the student teachers' narratives in both phases (see Table 5), the initial improvement in their psycho-emotional domain seemed to stabilise or even further improve, acquiring additional characteristics. At the end of the teaching practice, student teachers' motivation related not only to their presence in the classroom and their successful completion of teaching practice, but more generally to their personal growth and development in life. They referred to the development of their self-confidence (Cases 43 and 58), their patience (Case 23) and the management of their fear and stress and the faith they had in themselves (Cases 55, 64 and 66).

Conclusion and discussion

The present study aimed to address two research questions. The evidence obtained through the MSC technique provides significant findings in relation to the teaching competence and psycho-emotional development of student teachers. The narratives of student teachers provided insights into the attainment of the objectives of the Teaching Practice course and

"Psycho-emotional development"

ST	Example of reference (first phase)	Example of reference (second phase)
23	When I first taught I gained courage. When I designed my lesson I realised that I can take initiatives	At the beginning of my teaching practice I had no patience. However, this changed afterwards. I was more patient with whatever happened
43	I became more self-confident when addressing an audience and this helped in my personal development	I became more self-confident and sure of myself in relation to the past. This helped in other areas of my life and in my personal development
58	It influenced me throughout my teaching practice and from what it seems, my life as well	Through my teaching practice I became more self-confident and a bit more sure of myself
55	It made me treat young people not with suspicion, but with respect and love. And I consider this very important, not only in case I teach in a classroom in the future, but also in my life in general	This improvement in my stress management means that, despite any unexpected difficulties, I have gained the ability to carry out teaching so that the students are not burdened by my own emotional fluctuations
64	Through feedback sessions with my mentor I managed to control my fear	My mentor taught me to believe in myself and to overcome the anxiety I felt at the beginning. This is a lesson which relates not only to teaching practice but to my life more generally
66	I gained more self-confidence. I became more organised and responsible	Personal growth, improvement of my self-image and development of self-confidence

Table 5. Comparative examples of references per student teacher case in relation to the domain "psycho-emotional development" in the first and second phases

Source(s): Authors' own creation

the impact of the teaching practicum on their professional growth. Furthermore, the teaching practice, conducted with the guidance and support of experienced mentor teachers, facilitated the personal growth of student teachers by enhancing their skills and competences. These include stress management, taking initiative and building self-confidence, as well as fostering a sense of efficacy in their teaching abilities. In relation to the second research question, which examined the suitability of the MSC technique for exploring the impact of mentors on the educational experiences of student teachers during teaching practice, the findings demonstrate the efficacy and appropriateness of employing the MSC technique to assess the outcomes of student teachers participating in the Teaching Practice course. The MSC technique narratives offer a detailed depiction of the aforementioned outcomes of the Teaching Practice programme course conducted by the Department of Theology at the NKUA (2021–2022). The narratives of student teachers provide valuable insights into the outcomes of their training in the field of teaching. Additionally, these narratives serve as a means for student teachers to metacognitively assess and validate the cognitive and emotional impact of their training.

These findings validate the information from other sources cited in the literature. The research findings substantiate the results pertaining to the enhancement of teaching competence achieved through the guidance and support provided by mentors within the Teaching Practice course (Aderibigbe *et al.*, 2018; Hobson, 2016, 2020; Izadinia, 2015a, b). The student teachers acquired and improved their pedagogical skills, gaining proficiency in delivering teaching activities and implementing lesson plans. Additionally, the findings demonstrate the student teachers' ability to effectively engage in interactions and communication with their students, thereby deriving satisfaction from the teaching experience. The research conducted by Karavas (2006, 2008) further verifies the influence of the mentoring on the student teachers' psycho-emotional development. The inclusion of a mentor teacher in the context of teaching practice contributes to fostering the personal growth of student teachers through developing their abilities to effectively manage anxiety and stress, develop self-belief and cultivate confidence (Charisma and Nurmallasari, 2020; Hobson, 2020; Hudson, 2016; Köksal and Genç, 2019; Koukounaras Liagkis *et al.*, 2021; La Paro *et al.*, 2020; Liou *et al.*, 2016; Van Schagen Johnson *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, the application of the MSC technique in the Teaching Practice course offered by the Department of Theology at NKUA serves as evidence for the technique's implementation (Davies, 1998; Dart and Davies, 2003, 2005) and its suitability for assessing educational programmes (Choy and Lidstone, 2013; Heck and Sweeney, 2013; Kargatzis, 2022; Keinemans *et al.*, 2020; Koukounaras Liagkis, 2022; Koukounaras Liagkis and Papaioannou, 2023; Koukounaras Liagkis and Potamoussi, 2019; Tonkin *et al.*, 2021; Veenstra and Hidayati, 2023; Wilder and Walpole, 2008). Consistent with contemporary research, the utilisation of narrative approaches that engage cognitive processes affords student teachers the opportunity to cultivate an awareness of their professional growth (Botha, 2021; Golombek and Johnson, 2004; Johnson and Golombek, 2011).

Implications

The results have significant significance for institutions that provide teaching practice curricula for student teachers at the undergraduate or postgraduate level. It has been confirmed that engaging in this practice, with the guidance of experienced mentor teachers, facilitates the development of teaching proficiency and psycho-emotional preparation amongst student teachers in their instruction of a particular subject. Therefore, it is imperative that stakeholders, education policy makers, institutions and other relevant parties prioritise the preservation and enhancement of teaching practice programmes. The Department of Theology at NKUA can serve as a model for the implementation of such

programmes. At the academic level, the findings of this study can assist student teachers who may harbour apprehensions over their involvement in a teaching practice course, by instilling a sense of assurance regarding the positive impact it will have on their teaching skills and psychological well-being. Likewise, the emphasis placed on these findings can serve as an added incentive for mentor teachers to assume the responsibility of supervision and instruction for student teachers within a teaching practice programme.

The use of the MSC helps teaching practice programme managers monitor and assess instructors' learning processes to improve educational practices. MSC is a useful qualitative research tool for assessing educational intervention results. The MSC methodology can capture student teachers' views on their training outcomes. This method provides significant evidence of these outcomes in several domains, including teaching proficiency and psycho-emotional growth. Employing the MSC technique at two different points in the Teaching Practice course allowed a comparative analysis, revealing the progression of these outcomes in a comparable curriculum's intermediate and final stages. MSC encouraged the student teachers to evaluate changes and identify those that mattered most. Field verification also helped student teachers to recognise their development.

Further research should examine how the MSC can be used to evaluate student teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and professional identity in education. Further research on the role of mentoring in learning and training efficacy would be valuable. These studies may shed light on student teacher education, particularly practicum experiences and supportive relationships.

Limitations

This article presents the results of the use of the MSC technique on student teacher narratives for the evaluation of the mentored Teaching Practice course, at the same time shedding light on the results of the teaching practice on the student teachers' teaching competence and personal and emotional development. Variables such as the gender, age and background knowledge of student teachers, the quality of the relationship with the mentor, the learning environment or the previous experiences of the student teachers were taken into account and investigated in the context of the wider study but are not included in this paper. Also, although the MSC technique gives a clear picture of the range and form of the results of the training of student teachers, it is not sufficient to ensure the validity of the results. This requires the collection of data with other tools (triangulation), which was done in the wider research.

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