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Primary English teacher education in Portugal: an exploratory study

Flávia Vieira^a, Sandie Mourão^b, Ana Isabel Andrade^c, Mário Cruz^d, José Reis-Jorge^e, Carolyn Leslie^b, Maria Isabel Orega^f, Ana Sofia Pinho ^g, Elisabete Mendes Silva^h and Ana Raquel Simões^c

^aDepartment of Literacy, Didactics and Supervision, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal; ^bFaculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Nova University Lisbon, Portugal; ^cDepartment of Education and Psychology, University of Aveiro, Aveiro, Portugal; ^dHigher School of Education, Polytechnic Institute of Oporto, Portugal; ^eSchool of Education and Human Development, Lisbon Institute of Education and Sciences, Portugal; ^fDepartment of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, University of Algarve, Faro, Portugal; ^gInstitute of Education, University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal; ^hDepartment of Foreign Languages, Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, Bragança, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The expansion of early language learning has fostered the need to prepare qualified teachers of English to young learners. This paper presents findings from a multi-site case study of initial teacher education programmes created in 2015 in Portugal when English became compulsory in grades 3 and 4. The study investigated intended professional learning competences and tasks as described in curricula, as well as teaching and inquiry practices developed in practicum settings. A multi-method approach was used, involving the analysis of ten higher education institutions' curricula, a sample of practicum reports, the responses of former student teachers to an online survey, and reflective records from student teachers, faculty supervisors, and cooperating teachers. Findings portray a reflective, inquiry-oriented view of professional development and the enactment of current teaching approaches. The study stresses the role of curricula and practicum arrangements in creating meaningful professional learning scenarios and promoting learner-centred teaching in schools.

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Introduction

Review studies of teacher education programmes around the world have shown that they can take various forms and assume diverse views on what teachers should learn and be able to do (Flores 2016; Darling-Hammond 2017; Darling-Hammond L. and A. Lieberman 2013; Schratz 2014; Simões, Lourenço, and Costa 2018). The purpose of research into the rationale and practices of those programmes is not to find out what is 'universally' good, but rather to understand and learn from what enhances the quality of teacher education in different contexts (Darling-Hammond 2017; Zeichner and Conklin 2008).

Investigating initial teacher education (ITE) is especially needed in fields that are, as yet, in their infancy. This is the case of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), which

has been characterised as ‘the Cinderella of applied linguistics research in general and of second language acquisition in particular’ (Garton and Copland 2019, 1). European policies on early language learning were fostered by the Barcelona European Council in 2002 (Council of the European Union 2002), and the Eurydice 2017 report indicates that in 2015–16 83,8% of children were learning at least one compulsory foreign language in primary schools in Europe (European Commission 2017). However, teacher preparation policies and practices are varied and not much is known about the effectiveness of teacher education programmes (Enever 2011, 2014; Kubanek 2017; Rich 2019; Rixon 2017; Zein and Garton 2019). Rich (2019) highlights the limited or non-existent provision of ITE programmes for specialist primary English teachers and calls for more research into contextual constraints and the complexities of provision in different contexts. This article presents an exploratory study of such programmes in Portugal. As English became a compulsory subject in primary education in 2015–16, preparing specialist teachers became a political priority and an ITE Master’s in TEYL was created in several higher

education institutions (HEIs) around the country.¹ However, no studies with a national scope have been carried out on the existing programmes. This was the main drive for undertaking a descriptive multi-site case study on ITE curricula and practicum experiences, with a view to understanding the role of programmes in creating meaningful professional learning scenarios and promoting learner-centred teaching in schools.

Early language learning and initial teacher education

The promotion of early language learning assumes that language education is a critical element to enhance a culture of democracy and intercultural dialogue (Beacco et al. 2016; Council of Europe 2001, 2018), and also to develop lifelong learning competences like literacy competence, multilingual competence, cultural awareness and expression competence, citizenship competence, and personal, social and learning to learn competence (European Union 2019). Therefore, ITE programmes need to promote a broad understanding of language education and create opportunities for students to explore its value beyond ‘teaching the language’. This means being prepared to create developmentally appropriate environments that support meaningful language learning along with a growing sense of identity, critical thinking, openness to diversity, intercultural dialogue, and global citizenship (Andrade and Pinho 2010; Cameron 2001; Enever 2011; Pinho 2019; Pinho and Moreira 2012; Simões 2018).

Programmes also need to provide solid training in communicative, learner-centred TEYL approaches. These might include Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT) (Shintani 2016), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Ellison 2019), storytelling and multiple literacies (Bland 2019; Ellis and Brewster 2014), drama-like activities (Phillips 1999), gamification and technology-enhanced learning (Butler 2019; Belinchón Majoral 2019; Cruz 2019). Students should become acquainted with and reflect about theoretical underpinnings and practical realisations of these approaches. Connecting theoretical learning with the world of teaching is particularly important to surpass the gap between preparation and practice often found in theory-to-practice models of teacher education, thus ‘reflection, experimentation and dialogue should be core components’ of teacher education for TEYL (Rich 2019, 55). Teacher education pedagogies should allow students

to analyse teaching policies and contexts, probe theories, theorise practice in dialogue with others, and build personal visions of education and of their role as reflective educators (Dausend 2017; Korthagen 2017; Russell, McPherson, and Martin 2001; Yin 2019).

Although teacher competence frameworks for TEYL tend to focus on specific age-appropriate teaching skills (e.g. Roters 2017; Uztosun 2018), an understanding of teaching as a reflective, scholarly activity must also integrate an expanded notion of the teacher as a critical thinker, a decision-maker, and a curriculum manager (Council of Europe 2014; European Commission 2015; Dausend 2017; Flores 2016; Karatsiori and Gritter 2016; Loughran 2009; Rich 2019). This means that ITE programmes for TEYL need to foster pedagogical inquiry, namely in practicum settings. Inquiry-based teaching is far from representing a dominant approach in teacher education (Mentor and Flores 2020), but it is relevant to link theory to practice and promote an understanding of teaching as an 'epistemic engine', i.e. an activity that generates professional knowledge (Loughran 2009, 200). Inquiry may enhance teachers' agency in managing constraints and innovating practice to foster the development of humanistic, learner-centred pedagogies (Bell 2001; Bullock 2016; Crawford-Garrett et al. 2015; Smith 2018; Vaughan and Burnaford 2016; Vieira et al. 2019).

The study: context, research questions and methodology

The ITE Master's in TEYL

The creation of an ITE Master's in TEYL in 2015 initiated a new era in the preparation of teachers. English had been introduced as an optional extra-curricular activity in primary education in 2005, but most teachers were either qualified to teach English in upper school levels or unqualified to teach English at all (Conselho Nacional de Educação 2013).

Candidates to the MA must hold an undergraduate degree and 80 ECTS in the field of English, and teachers of English from upper school levels can apply for requalification purposes. The MA is three semesters long (90 ECTS) and complies with national regulations regarding the minimum number of credits in four trainings areas that are common to all Masters in Teaching: General Education (12 ECTS), Didactics (21 ECTS), Teaching Subject (18 ECTS), and Initiation to Professional Practice/practicum (32 ECTS). Study plans vary across HEIs, but they usually integrate course units (CUs) in the fields of English (language, culture, and literature), language acquisition and development, language education policies and methodologies, psychology of education, sociology of education, curriculum studies, educational technology, and educational research.

The practicum usually takes place in the second and third semesters along with other CUs, and it is supervised by faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers in schools.² Practicum arrangements differ across HEIs, but they always include a period of context analysis and lesson observation followed by a period of teaching. Teaching time also varies, in most cases between 12 and 24 hours. Student teachers (STs) produce a mandatory practicum report that is defended publicly before an examining board. Reports may vary in structure, content and length, but they all present a reflective description of

teaching practice, which entails the mobilisation of theoretical knowledge and, in some cases, the development of action research projects.

Research questions and methodology

Given the absence of nationwide studies on ITE programmes for TEYL, a descriptive multi-site case study was designed within a national network of teacher educators – *PEEP-Primary English Education in Portugal*³ – created in 2017 to enhance the field of TEYL. The study was initiated in February 2018 for a period of three years, involving 18 faculty members from ten HEIs (six Universities and four Polytechnic institutes).⁴ Its purpose was to investigate ITE programmes for TEYL from an interpretative perspective, seeking answers to two research questions: (1) *What professional learning competences and tasks do curricula intend to promote?*; (2) *What teaching and inquiry approaches are explored in the practicum?*

Following a replication logic (Yin 1984), a multi-method approach was used for all programmes (Figure 1), involving document analysis – curricula and practicum reports –, an online survey to former STs, and the collection of reflective records from STs, faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers. Methodological triangulation and the triangulation of data from different types of participants were used to mitigate bias and enhance the trustworthiness of results (Fusch, Fusch, and Ness 2018).

Members from each HEI were responsible for collecting local data and cross-institutional analyses were done by a sub-team that included the first two authors as coordinators of the study. Team meetings (online and face-to-face) were crucial to negotiate perspectives, ensure the content and face validity of research instruments, and discuss findings. This increased inter-rater reliability and the interpretative validity of results through enhancing the accuracy of the interpretations made (Martella, Nelson, and Marchand-Martella 1999).

The confidentiality of data and the anonymity of participants were ensured at all stages. Participants were informed about the scope and objectives of the project, and a consent form was included in the survey and in the reflective records’ protocols. The form included statements regarding the respondents’ informed consent to participate, the anonymity of responses, the possibility to withdraw at any

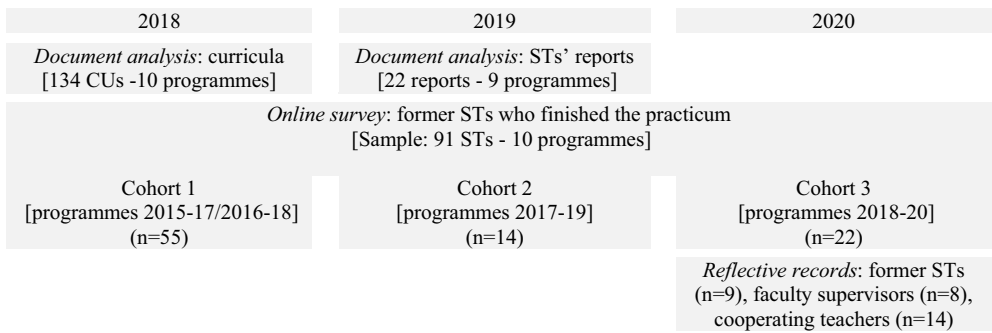


Figure 1. Multi-method approach – research timeline.

moment, and the use of anonymised results in research reports and publications. Only cross-case results are disseminated to preserve the confidentiality of institutional information.

Document analysis

Document analysis entailed the extensive reading of ten curricula and a sample of 22 STs' practicum reports from nine programmes, involving the categorisation and quantification of qualitative data.

Document analysis. Curricula were investigated by analysing the CU's syllabi ($n = 134$) on ten official study plans accredited in 2015⁵ with a view to identifying intended professional learning competences and tasks. Competences were mostly identified in the rubric 'intended learning outcomes' as described in the syllabi and categorised through an inductive baseline analysis using a teacher competence framework adapted from Mohamed, Valcke, and De Wever (2017). Two competences were added in accordance with their emergence in the data: 'Knowledge of the educational purposes of TEYL', and 'Commitment to educational assessment and inquiry'. The adapted version includes 13 competences:

- Knowledge of social, cultural and political aspects of contexts
- Knowledge of curriculum
- Knowledge of the educational purposes of TEYL
- Knowledge of content (language, culture, literature)
- Knowledge of educational theories and pedagogical approaches
- Knowledge of students (background, diversity, ways of learning)
- Ability to analyse and produce teaching strategies and materials
- Ability to plan, organise and evaluate learning
- Ability to interact with students and create learning environments
- Disposition to collaborate with colleagues, parents and the community
- Commitment to professional responsibilities
- Commitment to educational assessment and inquiry
- Disposition for (further) professional development

Professional learning tasks as described in the syllabi were identified in the rubrics 'teaching methodologies' and 'evidence of coherence between teaching methodologies and intended learning outcomes', with a focus on tasks that are directly or indirectly linked to practice. The tasks were then categorised into four types: Analysis of Educational Documents, Analysis of School Contexts, Analysis of Teaching Practice, and Teaching Practice (Vieira et al. 2019).

Report analysis. Report selection was based on a previously agreed set of criteria of overall quality and variety of topics and approaches. Since the reports are publicly available in institutional online repositories, permission to analyse them was not necessary. To ensure trustworthiness, the analysis followed detailed guidelines which included three pre-defined sets of items: (a) a set of TEYL strategies and resources (e.g. storytelling, songs & rhymes); (b) a set of pedagogical foci regarding the development of learners'

language competences (e.g. speaking, reading) and and other types of competences (e.g. autonomy, cooperative learning); (c) and a set of inquiry strategies (e.g. lesson observation, learner questionnaires). Excerpts from reports were transcribed to illustrate the STs' views and reflections on teaching and classroom-based inquiry.

Online survey

The survey was designed by the team and an email was sent to three cohorts of former STs to ask for their collaboration. The first part presented information about the the project and the survey, the email contacts of the project coordinators for requiring additional information, and a consent form. The second part included a section on background information and a set of questions (mostly closed) on STs' perceptions of the relevance of training areas, professional learning, teaching and inquiry strategies used, and positive/ negative aspects of experience. Questions about teaching and inquiry strategies integrated the items considered for report analysis to allow for methodological triangulation. No statistical validation procedures were carried out given the exploratory nature of the study, but the context-bound nature of the survey items enhanced its descriptive validity as regards the relation between data collected and the focus of inquiry (Martella, Nelson, and Marchand-Martella 1999).

From a total of 117 STs, 91 (77,8%) responded, covering all programmes. Most (76,9%) had had English teaching experience before the MA and over half of these had had experience teaching young learners. Frequencies were calculated for closed questions and open answers were summarised.

Reflective records

Reflective records were collected through email⁶ in nine HEIs as a secondary source of information. Two protocols were designed, one for STs and another one for faculty supervisors and cooperating teachers. They included an introduction to the project, the email contacts of the project coordinators for requiring additional information, a consent form, a section on background information, and a set of topics for reflection. STs were asked to reflect on the relevance of the training areas, classroom-based projects, report writing, and professional learning. Supervisors and cooperating teachers reflected on STs' motivation and preparation for the practicum, priorities of and conditions for supervision, classroom-based projects, and assessment.

A total of 31 responses were obtained: nine from former STs who had completed the MA in six HEIs; eight from experienced supervisors working in six HEIs; and 14 from cooperating teachers whose supervisory experience varied from one to four years in this MA, most of them with English teaching experience in different school levels (from pre-primary to upper secondary).⁷ Participants' reflections were analysed by extracting main ideas on the topics covered.

Findings

Given the extensive nature of the study and the amount of data collected, selected findings were organised into two sections related to the research questions: (a) intended professional competences and tasks in curricula (research question 1); (b) approaches to teaching and inquiry in the practicum (research question 2).

Intended professional learning competences and tasks in curricula

In the analysis of the syllabi of 134 CUs from ten programmes, a total of 421 intended competences (knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes) were registered and categorised according to the teacher competence framework adapted from Mohamed, Valcke, and De Wever (2017). Table 1 presents the distribution of categories across programmes ($n = 10$) and CUs ($n = 134$), indicating a broad view of professional development, with most categories being identified in most programmes. Categories that are common to all programmes relate to STs' curriculum knowledge, content knowledge, ability to analyse and produce teaching strategies and materials, and ability to plan, organise and evaluate learning. The least present category is knowledge of the educational purposes of TEYL, which was explicitly stated in just ten CUs across six programmes.

A total of 174 practice-related tasks were identified in the 134 CUs and categorised into four types: Analysis of Educational Documents, Analysis of School Contexts, Analysis of Teaching Practice, and Teaching Practice (Vieira et al. 2019). All programmes include all types of tasks, but their distribution across training areas varies:

Table 1. Intended professional competences in ITE programmes.

<i>Teacher Competence Framework</i>	Teacher Competence Distribution		
	Across Programmes $n = 10$	Across Course Units $n = 134$	
	f	f	%
1. Knowledge of social, cultural and political aspects of contexts	9	32	23,9
2. Knowledge of educational purposes of TEYL	6	10	7,5
3. Knowledge of curriculum	10	25	18,7
4. Knowledge of content (language, culture, literature)	10	47	35,1
5. Knowledge of educational theories and pedagogical approaches	9	36	26,9
6. Knowledge of students (background, diversity, ways of learning)	9	22	16,4
7. Ability to analyse and produce teaching strategies and materials	10	48	35,8
8. Ability to plan, organise and evaluate learning	10	48	35,8
9. Ability to interact with students and create learning environments	9	22	16,4
10. Disposition to collaborate with colleagues, parents and the community	8	23	17,2
11. Commitment to professional responsibilities	9	31	23,1
12. Commitment to educational assessment and inquiry	9	31	23,1
13. Disposition for (further) professional development	9	46	34,3

- Analysis of Educational Documents occurs mostly in Didactics (7 programmes/ 21 CUs);
- Analysis of School Contexts is more evident in General Education (6 programmes/ 10 CUs) and Initiation to Professional Practice (5 programmes/ 5 CUs);
- Analysis of Teaching Practice is mostly present in Didactics (9 programmes/ 27 CUs) and Initiation to Professional Practice (10 programmes/ 24 CUs);
- Teaching Practice occurs mostly in Didactics (9 programmes/ 37 CUs) and Initiation to Professional Practice (10 programmes/ 26 CUs).

There is a notable absence of nearly all practice-related task types in the area of Teaching Subject (9 occurrences out of 174), and the areas of Didactics and Initiation to Professional Practice account for most of the CUs with those kind of tasks (88 and 57 occurrences respectively).

Table 2 summarises the practice-related tasks found across programmes. They focus on STs' understanding of educational policies and guidelines, and of situational variables that affect teaching and learning in school contexts, as well as on their ability to analyse and implement teaching, and to inquire into pedagogical contexts and processes. Inquiry tasks integrate strategies like document analysis, observation, case studies, inquiry-based teaching, and reflective writing in journals, portfolios, and reports.

Survey results regarding STs' 'strong agreement' on the practical relevance of the CUs from Didactics were positive (60%). However, they were less positive regarding the practical relevance of CUs from General Education and Teaching Subject (33% and 28% respectively). STs' justifications suggest that these CUs were too general and/or omitted reference to TEYL. Nevertheless, most STs 'strongly agreed' that they felt prepared for the practicum (71%) and were confident they would succeed in it (73%). The supervisors' and cooperating teachers' reflective records also indicated positive perceptions of the their motivation and prior preparation.

Approaches to teaching and inquiry in the practicum

Survey results and the analysis of STs' reports showed that teaching approaches in the practicum were varied and globally aligned with current understandings of TEYL, although each ST explored only a few due to limited teaching time. Table 3 presents the number and percentage of reports (n = 22) where TEYL approaches were explicitly documented, and survey results regarding the percentage of STs who indicated they put them into practice (n = 91).

Table 4 presents the pedagogical foci of teaching as regards the development of learner competences. Results refer to the number and percentage of reports (n = 22) where those foci were evident, and the percentage of STs who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they learned how to promote them, which indicates that they explored them to some extent.⁸

The findings account for the exploration of communicative, learner-centred approaches that move beyond promoting children's language abilities. STs' reports reveal an expanded view of TEYL as an opportunity to develop cognitive, affective, social and cultural competences, which outlines their personal beliefs about language learning and determines their teaching goals⁹:

Table 2. Summary description of practice-related tasks in curricula.

<i>Training area: General Education</i>			
<i>Analysis of Educational Documents</i>	<i>Analysis of School Contexts</i>	<i>Analysis of Teaching Practice</i>	<i>Teaching Practice</i>
Analysing educational & language policies, TEYL curriculum	Analysing school organisation & regulations, educational projects, case studies, learner characteristics	Analysing classroom-based research reports	Designing an integrated curriculum project, a classroom-based project, activities to promote communication skills
<i>Training area: Didactics</i>			
<i>Analysis of Educational Documents</i>	<i>Analysis of School Contexts</i>	<i>Analysis of Teaching Practice</i>	<i>Teaching Practice</i>
Analysing educational & language policies, primary education & TEYL curricula, coursebooks & other resources	Analysing the practicum context, learner characteristics, teacher studies	Analysing TEYL plans, activities/ materials, projects/ case narratives Observing and analysing lessons (in schools, videotaped) Reflective writing	Planning TEYL lessons and designing activities/ materials Designing a project (plans, materials, research tools) Micro-teaching and simulations Teaching lessons/ trying out activities/ materials
<i>Training area: Teaching Subject</i>			
<i>Analysis of Educational Documents</i>	<i>Analysis of School Contexts</i>	<i>Analysis of Teaching Practice</i>	<i>Teaching Practice</i>
Analysing language/ cultural aspects in coursebooks & other resources		Analysing TEYL resources Observing and analysing video clips Building a portfolio on intercultural competence	Planning activities and lessons
<i>Training area: Initiation to Professional Practice</i>			
<i>Analysis of Educational Documents</i>	<i>Analysis of School Contexts</i>	<i>Analysis of Teaching Practice</i>	<i>Teaching Practice</i>
Analysing educational & language policies, TEYL curriculum, coursebooks & other resources (in relation to unit/lesson planning and project design)	Analysing school organisation, school projects, the practicum context	Observing and analysing lessons in schools Analysing TEYL projects, activities/ resources Sharing and discussing teaching experiences/ materials (related to the practicum) Reflective writing Writing the final practicum report	Planning and teaching units/ lessons Designing/ adapting teaching materials Designing and developing a research project (action research/other)

My main reason for developing self-direction practices with primary school students is the importance I give to pedagogy for autonomy, which in turn is related to my vision of education, according to which the school assumes the role of educating with reference to the cross-disciplinary values of responsibility, participation, self-management, democracy and solidarity, so as to enhance motivation, interest and willingness to learn. (Excerpt from ST's report, translated)

Table 3. TEYL approaches in the practicum.

<i>TEYL strategies & resources identified in reports and indicated by STs' in the survey regarding their practice</i>	Reports (n = 22)		Survey (n = 91)
	f	%	%
Game-like/ gamified activities	11	50,0	78,0
Storytelling	11	50,0	70,3
Songs and rhymes	10	45,5	78,0
Arts & Crafts	10	45,5	53,8
Total Physical Response	9	40,9	65,9
Project-like activities	7	31,8	43,9
Task-based teaching and learning (TBLT)	5	22,7	49,4
Drama	4	18,2	23,0
Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)	3	13,6	41,7

Table 4. Pedagogical foci in the practicum.

<i>Pedagogical foci identified in reports and indicated by STs in the survey regarding their professional learning</i>	Reports (n = 22)		Survey (n = 91)
	f	%	Agreement %
<i>A. Focus on language competences</i>			
• lexical competences	18	81,8	92,3
• listening competences	18	81,8	
• speaking/ interaction competences	18	81,8	
• reading competences	14	63,6	
• writing competences	11	50,0	
• grammatical competences	8	36,4	
<i>B. Focus on cognitive, affective, social and cultural competences</i>			
Autonomy (e.g. participation, choice, reflection on learning ...)	10	45,5	92,3
Cooperative learning	10	45,5	93,9
Socio-affective aspects of teaching and learning	10	45,5	82,4
Values education (e.g. citizenship values, critical thinking)	8	36,4	86,8
Learner diversity (e.g. differentiation, diversity of strategies ...)	8	36,4	82,4
Plurilingual/ intercultural education	7	31,8	85,7
Cross-disciplinary learning	5	22,7	75,8
Special needs education	2	09,1	46,1

The English classroom can be conceived of as a space where individuals from different socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds come together. It works as an intercultural microcosm, in other words, as a meeting place – a small piece of the global patchwork quilt. The aim of our project is to ensure that students can apply competences to interact in the complex network of human relations, to mobilise tools and develop the ability to reflect on their experiences, in contrast to the experiences of others. In this way they create the necessary cognitive and affective conditions for mutual understanding and acceptance of the Other, who may hold different religious beliefs, and be linguistically, socially and culturally distinct. (Excerpt from ST's report, translated)

In six programmes, action research is explicitly promoted in the practicum and 15 reports describe small-scale action research projects developed in one class. These projects involved selecting a topic that was considered to be relevant for children's learning, formulating

pedagogic-research objectives, designing teaching strategies and materials, collecting and analysing data, and evaluating the impact of practice. Table 5 presents the inquiry strategies identified in these reports, and also those indicated in the survey as having been used to reflect on teaching and learning, not necessarily within action research projects. Data collected in class refers to learners' opinions (e.g. through dialogue and questionnaires) and performance (e.g. through observation and the analysis of learner tasks/ assignments).

Action research reports account for teacher and learner development as interrelated phenomena of inquiry-based teaching. STs explore topics of their interest, centre teaching on learning, reflect on their practice, and get a deep understanding of learning processes and outcomes:

As teachers we know our students learn things by doing them, by reflecting on what they are doing, how they are doing it, and what they can do to enhance this process. My first experience with action research taught me to apply these principles to myself and improve my teaching practice. It allowed me the freedom to choose a topic I believe is crucial for language acquisition and the opportunity to research the reality of my own classroom, leading me to closely examining and developing a much stronger understanding of what takes place when students are engaged in peer interaction and on which benefits I might expect my students to draw from it. More specifically, this study taught me that children do use a range of conversational strategies to communicate with their peers and that these strategies do enhance their language acquisition process, namely by increasing fluency, by increasing their motivation to communicate in L2 and by developing other non-linguistic skills such as their ability to work collaboratively. (Excerpt from ST's report)

Inquiry often leads STs to challenge conventional practices and explore new paths that reshape their identity:

Table 5. Inquiry strategies used in the practicum.

<i>Inquiry strategies</i>	Reports (action research) (n = 15)		STs' Survey (n = 91)
	f	%	%
Learner questionnaires (e.g. self-assessment, feedback on teaching)	14	93,3	76,9
Analysis of learner tasks/ assignments	11	73,3	64,8
Lesson observation – unstructured	10	66,7	67,0
Analysis of language learning progress/outcomes	10	66,7	59,3
Dialogue with learners	8	53,3	72,5
Written reflections on practice (e.g. teaching journal, portfolio)	8	53,3	69,2
Analysis of classroom interaction	5	33,3	76,9
Document analysis (e.g. coursebook)	4	26,7	38,4
Lesson observation – structured (with grid)	1	06,7	68,1
Learner interviews	1	06,7	15,3
Learner reflective records (e.g. learning journal)	1	06,7	13,1
Case analysis (e.g. of a particular child or group of children)	0	00,0	17,5

The project had an impact not only on the students but also on myself, both at a personal and a professional level, because it made me question certain routines and ‘vices’ of teaching in primary education, leading me to reflect and seek practices that led the students to want to learn, not just as regards language competences, but also as regards cross-disciplinary attitudes like autonomy, organization and creativity. (...) I wanted to develop a project that defied me, which in a way demanded a posture of responsibility and deep study since I left my comfort zone and I had to dedicate myself fully to the project. I believe I was able to face the challenge and I now feel more confident in my own capacities to continue this path. (Excerpt from ST’s report, translated)

Reflective records and open responses in the survey provided information on benefits of and constraints to action research (Table 6).

Participants acknowledged the value of action research as a professional development strategy, but they also indicated constraints resulting from STs’ lack of competences, work overload, the demands of report writing and little supervisory support, although survey results showed that most STs (above 75%) felt supported by supervisors and cooperating teachers. Structural factors that may limit the continuity, scope and impact of projects were also mentioned: the division of the practicum over two academic years, in some cases requiring STs to move to another school; potential misfits between projects and the national curriculum and local instructional plans; and small amount of teaching time to develop projects and achieve visible outcomes. Doubts about the sustainability of action research and innovation beyond the practicum were also raised, given that schools do not usually favour inquiry-based teaching.

Despite constraints, survey findings portray a very positive perception of the practicum experience. Most STs agreed that they enjoyed it (91%) and that they learnt to understand and conduct teaching as a reflective practice (96%), to integrate theory and practice (89%), to adapt their teaching to the context of practice (91%), to try out various teaching approaches (92%), and to conduct formative assessments of learning (87%).

Reflective records further showed that practicum experiences influenced STs’ self-image and ideal visions of a ‘good’ primary English teacher. ‘Good’ teachers are viewed as learner-centred educators who create supportive learning environments, cater for children’s needs and differences, are open to their ideas and creativity, let them organise activities and accomplish projects, and promote significant learning. They should be

Table 6. Action research projects: main benefits and constraints.

	Benefits	Constraints
<i>Student teachers’ professional development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing competences related to observation, context analysis, teaching and learning • Exploring approaches with a potential impact on future practice • Learning how to plan and undertake classroom-based inquiry • Developing as a reflective practitioner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • STs’ lack of competences (e.g. language proficiency, educational knowledge, ability to reflect and self-regulate learning ...) • STs’ self-doubt and emotional stress related to students’ learning outcomes and well-being • Little supervisory support
<i>Conditions for and nature of inquiry</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring personal interests • Responding to situational needs • Reflecting authentically upon didactic issues • Interconnecting practice-inquiry-report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work overload • Demands of report writing • Structural factors: practicum divided over two academic years; national curricula and local programming; teaching time • Doubts about the sustainability of action research and innovation in schools

committed and organised, demanding but also gentle and fair, sensitive and ready to listen to learners, as well as patient and caring.

Discussion and conclusions

One of the most persisting problems of teacher education is the divide between theoretical preparation and practice (Korthagen 2017), leading students to experience the practicum as a 'survival stage' or 'a time of disillusionment, failure, and shattered idealism' (Russell, McPherson, and Martin 2001, 42). In a comparative study of well-developed systems for teacher education, Darling-Hammond (2017) stresses the importance of 'connecting theory and practice through both the design of thoughtful coursework and the integration of high-quality clinical work in settings where good practice is supported' (306). Our findings appear to match these conditions and are aligned with recommendations from studies on primary English teachers' expectations regarding effective teacher education (Rich 2019).

The analysed TEYL curricula create opportunities for the development of multiple professional competences and a wide range of practice-related tasks focused on educational policies, contexts, materials, and practices. These aspects, along with the promotion of inquiry-based teaching in the practicum, allow STs to develop a critical view of TEYL, appreciate the complexity of their role as educators, relate theory to practice, make informed decisions, and enact change. According to reports and perceptions of the practicum experience, TEYL appears to be understood as a space for promoting learner-centred pedagogies and a wide range of learner competences – linguistic, cognitive, affective, social, and cultural. Action research projects illustrate STs' attempts to develop teaching *for* and *with* children, which seems to be correlated with an understanding of inquiry as a form of research *by* and *for* teachers (Smith 2018). In other words, as STs inquire into their own teaching, they become concerned with how teaching influences learning and vice-versa, which means that inquiry promotes a virtuous combination of teacher and learner growth. Reports portray STs' efforts to 'interpret their story of pedagogical inquiry', use public theories to illuminate practice, and build personal visions of learner-centred education (Pereira and Vieira 2017, 139–40).

Overall, these programmes assume a view of professionalism that values teachers' beliefs, experience and agency as curriculum managers (Flores 2016; Loughran 2009; Karatsiori and Gritter 2016; Korthagen 2017). A person-centred, phenomenological view of teacher knowledge and teacher learning (rather than a positivist view) is adopted, fostering the development of reflective language educators who are prepared 'to cope with the unpredictable: to recognise unique combinations of circumstances and to act effectively within them' (Roberts 1998, 115). Yet, two major shortcomings to this understanding of professional learning were observed.

The first one is that practice-related tasks are mostly associated with only part of the curricula. The reduced number of those tasks in the CUs of the Teaching Subject area and the General Education area may explain why STs perceive them as less relevant for practice and seems to call for a closer articulation between the development of 'content knowledge', 'general pedagogical knowledge' and 'pedagogic content knowledge' (Shulman 1987). Collaboration among departments in curriculum design and implementation would enhance the professional orientation of programmes, although it is also

important to avoid an instrumental view of teacher preparation according to which anything that is not useful for practice is useless. Our focus on practice-related tasks is not intended to dismiss other types of tasks that also appear in curricula, for example analysing theoretical texts or writing theoretical essays to expand content knowledge and critical thinking skills. Our point is that these tasks are insufficient to help STs connect theoretical learning and the world of practice.

Another shortcoming is that only two thirds of the programmes promote the use of action research in the practicum. Although the role and nature of research in ITE programmes are controversial issues (Bell 2001; Brew and Saunders 2020; Bullock 2016; Mentor and Flores 2020; Tatto 2020), action research appears to be highly beneficial for language teacher development (Edwards 2020) and has been recommended for teacher education in TEYL (Rich 2019; Dausend 2017). Our findings suggest that it should be extended to all ITE programmes as a 'programmatic framework' that fosters prospective teachers' agency as researchers and critical intellectuals, and their ability to transform local practices through inquiry (Crawford-Garrett et al. 2015).

The alignment between teaching, inquiry and report writing gives coherence to professional development processes in the practicum and was appreciated by participants. Nevertheless, constraints to inquiry cannot be overlooked. Teaching time appears to be a critical issue and may require a reconsideration of practicum arrangements, without compromising time needed for context analysis, lesson observation, and project design. The potential tension between inquiry-based teaching and the need to comply with formal curricula, school plans and mandatory coursebooks requires more collaboration between HEIs and schools, within a view of the practicum as a hybrid space where multiple rationalities meet and need to be negotiated (Zeichner 2010). As for report writing, it entails the theorisation of practice through the integration of experience, theory and practical wisdom (Lunenberg and Korthagen 2009), which is a demanding task. As one of the STs wrote in her reflective record, 'it was the most challenging thing I had to do, as everything had to be justified, over-thought and over-reflected'.

The study highlights the role of ITE curricula and practicum arrangements in fostering reflective teacher development and learner-centred teaching. However, given its exploratory nature and its focus on indirect evidence of teacher preparation, further research might involve the observation of classes and supervisory sessions on campus and at schools to investigate teacher education and teaching processes. The nature of inquiry-based teaching needs to be understood further, since action research can have different goals in ITE settings: reflective practice; participatory, critical inquiry; and teacher leadership to effect change in schools and communities (Vaughan and Burnaford 2016). Follow-up studies on teachers' subsequent practice are also needed, namely to understand what hinders or facilitates learner-centred, inquiry-based teaching in schools, and how HEIs and schools might better collaborate in the education of reflective professionals.

Self-studies of teacher education, especially when undertaken as a collective enterprise, empower teacher educators as co-constructors of knowledge about their profession (Loughran 2002; Zeichner 2007). The multi-case study approach allowed members of each HEI to get a critical view of their own case in comparison to others, as well as an overview of the potential value and limitations of ITE rationales and practices around the country, which may instigate changes in future programme accreditation processes. However, we also need comparative international studies that help us understand what constitutes

'quality' in diverse contexts, and what factors may enhance or hinder the preparation of specialist primary English teachers.

Notes

1. Masters in Teaching (90 or 120 ECTS) were first created in Portugal in 2007 within the Bologna Reform, in Universities and Polytechnic Institutes, replacing previous undergraduate teaching degrees. Institutions are responsible for designing study plans and all programmes are accredited by a national accreditation agency.
2. Faculty supervisors are usually experts in English and/or English Teaching Methodology, and cooperating teachers are primary English teachers appointed by school principals on the basis of contacts established by HEIs.
3. <https://peep-network.com>
4. All HEIs where the MA was active in 2018 were invited to participate in the study. The team gathered faculty members with diverse roles in ITE programmes: teachers from various fields, practicum supervisors, practicum coordinators, and programme directors. A colleague from one of the institutions withdrew after a few months, and since partners were responsible for collecting local data, part of the findings refers to nine HEIs only.
5. Accredited syllabi may be adjusted/expanded by the faculty, but they represent a blueprint for practice and must be complied with.
6. Originally planned as focus groups, this option was employed to overcome the restrictions induced because of the COVID 19 pandemic.
7. It is not possible to indicate the number of HEIs involved in the case of cooperating teachers, because some indicated the school where they worked instead of the HEI.
8. Regarding language competences in section A of the table, the survey only included a general question about learning to promote language abilities, which amounts to 92,3% of the STs' responses (agree / strongly agree).
9. Reports can be written in Portuguese or in English; excerpts from reports written in Portuguese were translated.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Flávia Vieira has a PhD in Education and is a full professor at the University of Minho. She is a member of the Centre of Research in Education (CIEd) at the Institute of Education. She is the Director of the Master's Degree in Teaching English in Primary Education and has coordinated the practicum of Master's in Teaching in her institution. She belongs to IDEA-UMinho, a centre for the innovation and development teaching and learning at the University of Minho. She works in the fields of language teacher education, pedagogy for autonomy, and the scholarship of teaching and

learning in higher education. She is co-editor of the Peter Lang collection Foreign Language Teaching in Europe.

Sandie Mourão has a PhD in Teacher Education and Didactics and is presently a research fellow at CETAPS, Nova University Lisbon, where she researches early English language learning and intercultural citizenship education. Her research interests include language education in the early years; picturebooks in language education; and play, assessment, intercultural understanding and teacher education in early English language learning.

Ana Isabel Andrade has a PhD in language Didactics and she is a full professor at the University of Aveiro. Until 2019 she coordinated the Research Group - Languages, Theories and Practices in Education and Supervision at the research centre in Education - CIDTFF. She has coordinated projects in the field of language teacher education at national and international level (e.g. ILTE Project - Intercomprehension in Language Teacher Education; Languages and Education: Building and Sharing Teacher Education Paths). She is an expert of the ECML/CELV in the field of education for plurilingualism.

Mário Cruz has a PhD in Didactics and Professional Development, a PhD in Linguistic Studies, and Master Degrees in Teaching English and Spanish at Primary and Secondary Education. He is an Associate Professor at the School of Education of Oporto Polytechnic, where he teaches Didactics of Languages and Spanish Language, Culture and Literature. He is the Director of the Master's Degree in Teaching English in Primary Education and a researcher at inED - Centre of Research and Innovation in Education, where he coordinates the field of Teacher Training and the following research projects: VarLang, CLIL4U, Schoolers & Scholars and PEPPA 6/7. He is co-editor of the journal *Sensos-e*. At present he coordinates the Education field of ATHENA European University consortium.

José Reis-Jorge has a PhD in Education. He is full professor at ISEC Lisbon/ Institute of Education and Sciences and Honorary Senior Lecturer and Doctoral Thesis Supervisor at the University of Liverpool, UK/Laureate Online Education. He is a member of the Editorial Board and peer-reviewer for Teaching and Teacher Education (Elsevier) and Teaching in Higher Education (Taylor & Francis). He is a member of CEIA-Center for Studies and Applied Research, ISEC Lisbon, and CETAPS-Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-American Studies, Nova University Lisbon. His main research interests are in the fields of teacher research, teacher assessment and professional development, supervision in higher education, and reflective practice.

Carolyn Leslie has a Ph.D. in Foreign Language Didactics and is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Nova University Lisbon, where she supervises students on the Master's degree in Teaching English in Primary Education. Her research interests lie in the learning opportunities afforded by peer interaction and primary assessment.

Maria Isabel Orega has a PhD in Didactics and Education. She is a professor in the School of Education and Communication of the University of Algarve. She is an English language teacher and teacher trainer involved in graduate and postgraduate degrees in the area of Primary English Language Teachers Education. Her research fields are reading skills, information and communication technologies in teaching, and learning styles. She is a member of the research centre CETAPS (Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies).

Ana Sofia Pinho is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Education of the University of Lisbon, and a member of UIDEF, a Research and Development Unit in Education and Training, at the same institution. She has a PhD in Language Didactics and Teacher Education. She works in the fields of language teacher education, pedagogy for linguistic and cultural diversity, citizenship education, teacher professional development, university-school partnerships and professional learning communities. She coordinates the Institute of Education team in RIDIPD (Ibero-American Network for the Development of Teacher Professional Identity).

Elisabete Mendes Silva has a PhD in English Literature and Culture studies. She is an Assistant Professor in the department of foreign languages at the Polytechnic Institute of Bragança, where

she teaches English language and culture. She is a researcher at the University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies. Her main areas of interest include English culture, history of ideas, political thought, and teaching English as a foreign language. She co-edits *Teaching Crossroads* since 2012.

Ana Raquel Simões has a PhD in Language Didactics. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Aveiro, at the Department of Education and Psychology. Her areas of interest and research are intercultural education, plurilingualism, global citizenship education, teacher education and EFL teaching to young learners. She is part of the coordination board of CIDTFF (Research Centre on Didactics and Technology in the Education of Trainers).

ORCID

Ana Sofia Pinho  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1814-1042>

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