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BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN PRIMARY TEACHER EDUCATION: STRATEGIES FOR PREPARING FUTURE TEACHERS

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Abstract. The relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical teaching experience remains a central concern in contemporary teacher education. Preparing future primary school teachers requires more than providing knowledge of pedagogical theories, educational psychology, and instructional methods; it also requires opportunities to apply this knowledge in authentic and professionally meaningful situations. This article examines the theoretical foundations of integrating theory and practice in primary teacher education and identifies pedagogical strategies that can support the professional preparation of pre-service teachers. Drawing on established educational theories and recent scholarly literature, the article explores the role of school-based teaching practice, microteaching, lesson study, mentoring, and reflective activities in developing professional competence. Particular attention is given to the relationship between university-based coursework and the realities of primary school classrooms. The analysis identifies challenges associated with fragmented curricula, limited opportunities for practical application, inconsistent mentoring, and insufficient coordination between higher education institutions and schools. A conceptual framework is proposed to connect theoretical preparation, guided practice, professional feedback, and reflective improvement.

Keywords: primary teacher education, theory–practice connection, pre-service teachers, pedagogical competence, teaching practice, microteaching, mentoring, reflective practice, lesson study, professional development.

Introduction. The preparation of competent primary school teachers is an important condition for improving the quality of education. Primary teachers are responsible not only for introducing children to foundational knowledge and skills but also for organizing learning activities, managing classroom interactions, responding to individual differences, and establishing supportive educational environments. These responsibilities require an integrated combination of subject knowledge, pedagogical understanding, practical skills, and professional judgment.

Teacher education programmes traditionally combine theoretical courses with teaching practice. However, the presence of both components in a curriculum does not necessarily ensure that students can connect them effectively. Pre-service teachers may understand pedagogical concepts in university classes but experience difficulties when attempting to apply them in real classrooms. Similarly, practical experience

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without sufficient theoretical guidance may lead students to imitate familiar teaching routines without understanding the principles underlying instructional decisions.

Research on initial teacher education has increasingly examined how practical experiences can be organized to support professional learning. Baumfield et al. [1], in their international review of lesson study in initial teacher education, identify its potential for connecting theory with practice through collaborative planning, teaching, observation, and reflection. Similarly, a recent systematic review by Tan, Goei, and Willemse [2] examines different forms of lesson study in initial teacher education and highlights the importance of observation opportunities, mentoring, and appropriate integration into teacher education programmes.

The issue is also relevant to teacher education reform in Uzbekistan. UNESCO's 2026 discussion of teacher education in the country identifies research-based preparation and classroom inquiry as areas requiring further strengthening [4]. These priorities highlight the importance of developing stronger connections between university-based learning and professional practice in schools.

The purpose of this article is to examine theoretical perspectives on the relationship between theory and practice in primary teacher education and to identify strategies for preparing future teachers through integrated professional learning experiences.

The article addresses three research questions:

1. What theoretical perspectives explain the relationship between pedagogical knowledge and practical teaching experience?
2. Which educational strategies can help pre-service primary school teachers apply theoretical knowledge in authentic classroom situations?
3. What institutional and pedagogical conditions are necessary for strengthening the theory–practice connection in teacher education?

Methodological Approach

This article employs a conceptual literature-review approach based on selected foundational works in educational theory and recent scholarly publications concerning initial teacher education, teaching practice, lesson study, mentoring, and reflective learning.

The literature was examined according to its relevance to three central themes: the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge, strategies for organizing practice-based teacher preparation, and challenges affecting the quality of professional learning. Foundational educational theories were considered alongside recent reviews to connect established pedagogical ideas with current discussions of teacher preparation.

The analysis followed a thematic approach. First, the theoretical relationship between knowledge and experience was examined. Second, practical strategies used in teacher education were analyzed in terms of their potential contribution to professional learning. Third, institutional barriers and implementation conditions were considered to develop a conceptual framework for integrating theory and practice.

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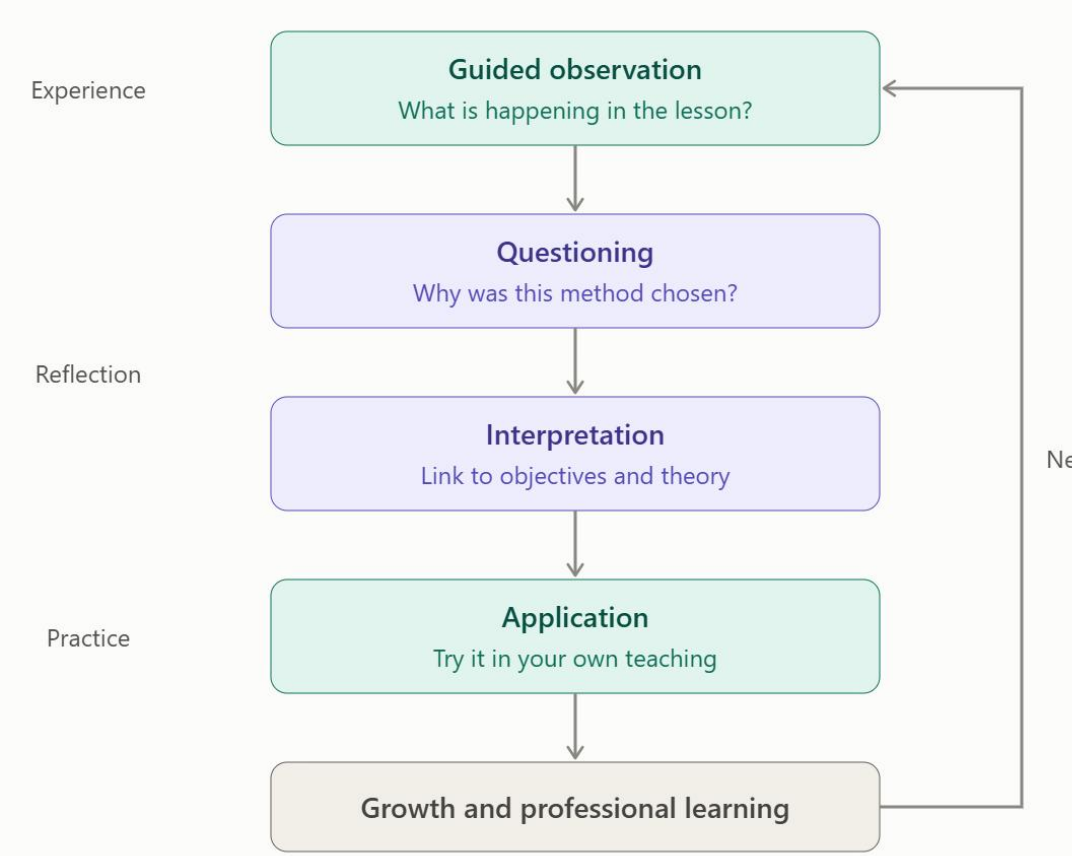
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Reflective practice and professional learning

Reflective practice provides another theoretical basis for connecting knowledge with experience. Schön [7] describes the importance of reflection in professional practice, including the capacity to reconsider decisions while acting and to analyze experiences afterward.

Teaching involves changing situations in which teachers must respond to pupils' questions, unexpected difficulties, differences in learning pace, and limitations in available resources. Professional competence therefore requires more than following predetermined instructions. Teachers must learn to interpret situations, evaluate their decisions, and adapt their actions appropriately.

In teacher education, reflection can be organized through teaching journals, post-lesson discussions, peer feedback, mentor conferences, and revised lesson plans. For example, after conducting a lesson, a pre-service teacher may examine whether the instructions were clear, whether the chosen activities supported the objectives, and whether the assessment provided sufficient evidence of pupils' understanding.

Reflection becomes more valuable when it leads to specific changes in subsequent practice. A student who identifies that an activity took longer than expected can revise the lesson sequence, reconsider the allocation of time, and test the revised plan during another teaching session.

Strategies for Connecting Theory and Practice in Primary Teacher Education

School-based teaching practice is one of the most direct ways to connect university learning with professional responsibilities. It allows pre-service teachers to

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observe experienced educators, become familiar with school routines, interact with pupils, and gradually assume teaching responsibilities.

However, the educational value of a placement depends on its organization. If students spend most of their placement observing lessons without specific analytical tasks or opportunities to teach, their experience may remain limited. Effective practice should therefore include clearly defined learning objectives, progressive responsibilities, structured observation, and regular supervision.

Before entering a classroom, students can study relevant pedagogical concepts and prepare observation questions. During the placement, they can examine lesson structure, instructional explanations, classroom management, and assessment practices. Afterward, university seminars and mentor discussions can help them interpret what they observed and connect it with theoretical principles.

A gradual progression from observation to supported teaching and more independent practice can reduce the gap between academic preparation and professional expectations. Such progression should be accompanied by feedback that identifies both strengths and areas for improvement.

Scortescu and Sava [8], in their review of pedagogical practice in initial teacher education for primary and pre-school teachers, emphasize the importance of practical preparation and cooperation between higher education institutions and partner schools. This supports the view that teaching practice should be designed as a structured component of the teacher education programme.

Microteaching as a bridge between theory and classroom performance

Microteaching is a structured activity in which pre-service teachers plan and deliver a short lesson or a selected part of a lesson in a controlled learning environment. It provides an opportunity to rehearse teaching skills before undertaking more complex classroom responsibilities.

The process typically involves planning, teaching, observation, feedback, and revision. Students may practice explaining a concept, asking questions, giving instructions, using instructional materials, or checking pupils' understanding.

For example, a pre-service teacher preparing a short mathematics lesson may first identify the learning objective and select an appropriate teaching strategy. After delivering the lesson to peers, the student receives feedback on the clarity of the explanation, the sequence of activities, and the suitability of the chosen materials. The lesson can then be revised and delivered again.

Microteaching is particularly useful because it makes teaching performance available for focused analysis. Students can concentrate on specific skills without having to manage every aspect of a full classroom lesson simultaneously.

Lesson study and collaborative lesson planning

Lesson study is a collaborative approach in which teachers or teacher candidates jointly plan a lesson, observe its implementation, discuss evidence of pupil learning, and revise the lesson in response to their observations.

In initial teacher education, lesson study can create a structured connection between theoretical preparation and classroom inquiry. Students begin by identifying a learning objective and reviewing relevant curriculum and pedagogical knowledge.

The review by Baumfield et al. [1] identifies lesson study as one approach through which prospective teachers can engage in inquiry into teaching practice. Tan et al. [2] further demonstrate the diversity of lesson study arrangements in initial

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teacher education, while highlighting the importance of appropriate mentoring and opportunities for observation.

Mentoring and professional feedback

Mentoring is an important mechanism for helping pre-service teachers interpret practical experiences and develop professional judgment. Experienced teachers can provide guidance on lesson planning, classroom management, instructional decisions, and communication with pupils.

Effective mentoring involves more than evaluating whether a lesson was successful. Mentors should help student teachers understand the reasons behind particular teaching decisions, identify evidence of pupil learning, and consider alternative approaches.

Feedback is most useful when it is specific, constructive, and connected to observable teaching practices. Instead of offering a general statement such as “the lesson needs improvement,” a mentor might explain that several instructions were given at once, making it difficult for pupils to follow the task, and suggest presenting the instructions in shorter steps.

The student teacher should also have an opportunity to respond, ask questions, and propose revisions. This dialogue helps establish mentoring as a learning relationship rather than a one-way process of evaluation.

Challenges and Conditions for Effective Implementation

Although the integration of theory and practice is widely recognized as important, several challenges may limit its effectiveness.

One challenge is the fragmentation of teacher education curricula. Theoretical courses and practical placements may be organized as separate components with insufficient coordination. In such circumstances, students may find it difficult to recognize how concepts studied at university relate to the decisions they encounter in school classrooms.

A stronger connection requires coordination between subject lecturers, pedagogical instructors, and school mentors. Course assignments can be designed around problems that students subsequently encounter during observation and teaching practice. In turn, experiences from schools can become material for discussion in university seminars.

A second challenge concerns the quality and consistency of mentoring. School mentors may have different expectations, approaches to teaching, and levels of preparation for supervising student teachers. Without shared criteria, students may receive inconsistent guidance or feedback that focuses on general impressions rather than specific professional competencies.

Institutions should establish clear mentoring responsibilities, provide guidance for observation and feedback, and create opportunities for university staff and school mentors to discuss students' progress.

A third challenge involves limited time and resources. Meaningful teaching practice requires coordination, suitable placements, opportunities to teach, and sufficient time for reflection. Large student cohorts and high workloads may make individualized supervision difficult.

Discussion

The literature examined in this article indicates that bridging theory and practice requires a coherent system of professional learning rather than an isolated increase in

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teaching practice hours. The central issue is not simply how much practical experience students receive, but how that experience is prepared, supervised, interpreted, and used to improve subsequent teaching.

School-based practice provides access to authentic classroom situations, while microteaching creates opportunities to rehearse selected teaching skills in a supportive environment. Lesson study introduces collaborative planning and systematic observation, mentoring provides professional guidance, and reflective portfolios help document learning over time. These strategies perform different but complementary functions.

Their effectiveness depends on coordination. Microteaching is more meaningful when students can later apply and refine the skills they have practiced in schools. Teaching placements become more educationally valuable when students use theoretical concepts to analyze classroom events. Mentoring and reflection are stronger when feedback leads to specific revisions in lesson planning and teaching performance.

Based on this analysis, the article proposes a four-stage conceptual framework for primary teacher education:

Stage 1: Theoretical preparation. Students study educational theory, child development, subject pedagogy, curriculum requirements, and assessment principles.

Stage 2: Guided practical application. Students analyze classroom cases, observe lessons, prepare teaching materials, and conduct microteaching activities.

Stage 3: Authentic teaching and professional support. Students undertake school-based teaching practice with guidance from school mentors and university supervisors.

Stage 4: Reflection, feedback, and revision. Students analyze teaching experiences, evaluate feedback, revise lesson plans, and identify goals for further professional development.

These stages form a continuous cycle rather than a rigid sequence. Experience in a classroom may reveal gaps in theoretical understanding, prompting students to return to academic resources or seek further guidance. Similarly, feedback from microteaching may influence how a student prepares for a school placement.

Conclusion

Bridging theory and practice is a central task in preparing future primary school teachers. Theoretical knowledge provides the foundation for understanding teaching and learning, while practical experience allows pre-service teachers to apply, examine, and refine that knowledge in professional contexts.

The analysis identifies several complementary strategies for strengthening this relationship: structured school-based practice, microteaching, lesson study, mentoring, and reflective portfolios. Their contribution depends on purposeful organization, constructive feedback, clear professional expectations, and coordination between universities and partner schools.

The conceptual framework proposed in this article connects theoretical preparation, guided practical application, authentic teaching experience, and reflective improvement. It offers a basis for designing more coherent teacher education programmes and for evaluating how different learning experiences contribute to professional readiness.

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For teacher education institutions in Uzbekistan, strengthening university–school partnerships and providing structured opportunities for classroom inquiry may help connect academic preparation with the demands of primary education. Such efforts should be adapted to local conditions and supported by appropriate mentoring, assessment, and institutional coordination.

Future research should examine how these strategies are implemented across teacher education institutions and which combinations of practical experience, supervision, and reflection are most closely associated with improved teaching performance. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how pre-service teachers use the knowledge and skills developed during university training when they enter the teaching profession.

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