



Initial Teacher Training Through Pedagogical Practice

KEYWORDS

pedagogical practice, Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, professional competences, support of mentor

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ABSTRACT *A fundamental role in the development of the psycho-pedagogical competence of preschool and primary school teachers during their initial teacher training is given to pedagogical experience, a training program based on specific teaching activities for this level of education. The hereby research intends to find aspects concerning the way students from the University of Oradea, specialization of Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education set their goals for their professional training through pedagogical practice. For this, a questionnaire design by Swiss researchers (Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, Luthiger, 2010) was used. We worked with those items that dealt with aspects concerning: student expectations for the support given by their training mentor, student self-assessment for professional competences and the belief that being a teachers is the best possible option for them. Data analysis underlines the necessity of a real support and actual methodological advice for primary school class activities, especially for the students that already have teaching experience.*

INTRODUCTION

Initial training of future primary and preschool teachers, like all other segments of the Romanian education system, encountered some moments of crises after the '90s due to the discontinuity of national education policies. But there still is a real concern for raising the quality of initial training of teachers. The study conducted by Hattie [2009] underlined that one of the most important factors in achieving academic performance with pupils is the quality of teacher training. The European Network on Teacher Education Policies (EN-TEP) was created in 2000 at the European level to establish a common background concerning the education policies of all member states for initial and permanent development of teachers. Romania was also accepted in ENTEP in 2007, having Iucu, R as president [2014].

We agree with Sas [2006, p. 40]: "The professionalism of teachers should not be reduced to the assimilation of certain competences described by professional standards; it requires a radical redefinition of the nature of those competences forming the basis of an effective pedagogical experience".

The present study aims to underline the need of rethinking the practical training aspect of future primary and preschool teachers.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Day and his partners [2006] conducted a study which showed that work place experience of teachers influence their motivation level concerning their involvement in achieving their job requirements and their interest in their chosen profession. They identified six stages in career motivation development. During the first 3 years the beginner teachers represent a stage of powerful career motivation, job involvement and interest in taking on various job tasks and roles. Then, it follows a demotivation stage (those having between 4 and 7 years of teaching experience) due to the difficulties encountered in the process of achieving job requirements. During the third stage (8-15 years of teaching experience), there is again a raise in career motivation, continued by a stagnation one, between 16 and 23 years of teaching experience. Those having between 24-30 years of experience fall into a demotivation stage, while those of over 30 years of experience can have a diverse motivation, both, positive and negative.

Recent studies [Voinea, Pălășan, 2014] underlined the influence of teacher perception concerning professional identity on student self-esteem, as well as the fact that self-assessment of professional competences forms the basis of professional identity. The authors define professional competences considering the roles performed by teachers: cognitive abilities and skills, planning skills, teaching process organization and performance, skills of socio-cultural integration of pupils, skills for performing extracurricular activities, complex skills of communication, school and professional counseling skills. Data analysis point out that teacher professional identity (beginner and more than 10-year experience teachers) is still focused on the traditional schema of teacher roles and requirements.

Charlotte Danielson's Enhancing professional practice. A framework for teaching (2007) is one of the reference works on the topic of teacher professional competencies viewed as a coherent and unitary framework of professional training in accordance with the stipulations of Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (America). We, too, believe that such a unitary, systematic and coherent framework is necessary for guiding the students in their attempts to achieve "excellence in teaching", an idea also underlined by some of our colleagues from Cluj in Educational Policy in Romania. Principles and Functionality in Initial and Continuing Teacher Training [Glava, C., Glava, A., 2014]. The author offers four general competences connected to: "Lesson Planning/Design", "School Environment/Climate", "Teaching/Schooling", "Professional Requirements" [2007, pg.1].

AIM AND HYPOTHESES

The research aim is to check if the expectations of target group students on the support they need in their professional training through pedagogical practice and their acquired skills are different because of their teaching experience and because of their graduated high school. Data was interpreted by comparative analysis.

Research hypotheses

1. Subjects expectations on their professional training through pedagogical practice and self-assessment of necessary competences for teaching differ according to their actual teaching experience.

2. Subjects expectations on their professional training through pedagogical practice and self-assessment of necessary competences for teaching differ according to their graduated high school (pedagogical high school or other different high schools).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The study was conducted on a lot of 91 subjects, students from the University of Oradea, Faculty of Science of Education, specialization of Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education. Out of all, 35,3% have already more than 2 years of teaching experience, while 64,7% have no teaching experience; 21,5% are pedagogical high school graduates and 78,5% have graduated various other specializations.

The research tool was designed by a group of scientists and teachers from the University of Teacher Education of Central Switzerland, Lucerne. The team from Oradea received a written agreement for its usage, after being translated and adapted. The questionnaire investigates aspects concerning: student expectations for the support offered by the training mentor (23 items; eg. What kind of support should the teacher of the class you perform your training practice with offer you for your teaching activities and for your learning process? He/ she should: 3. give information about students' learning particularities; 8. give specific feedback/ constructive criticisms), students' self-assessment of the necessary competences for becoming a teacher (7 items; eg. What is your belief on your present competences from various fields of teaching activities? 1. Professional competence, 2. Didactic competences), the belief that being a teacher is a suitable choice for them (1 item). The answers were given on a 5-level Likert scale.

Method

The subjects were given instructions for filling in the questionnaire. Then they filled it individually, being assured of the confidentiality of their answers.

Data analysis method

Gathered data were analyzed by parametric comparison methods: t Test for independent samples, using SPSS version 18 to validate the study hypotheses.

RESEARCH RESULTS

There were statistically significant differences for hypothesis 1, according to teaching experience criterion, for seven of the questionnaire items, those that assess students' expectations regarding the support offered by the training mentor. Thus, the subjects who have teaching experience (further on referred to as experienced students, while those having no teaching experience, as inexperienced students):

- have a greater need to discuss their lesson projects with the mentor, as compared with those inexperienced ($t=-4,93$, $p<0,01$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,57$, $\text{s.d.}=0,47$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=4,98$, $\text{s.d.}=0,32$)

- are more aware of the importance of their mentor's presence during their class activities ($t=-2,24$, $p=0,04$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,49$, $\text{s.d.}=0,61$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=4,85$, $\text{s.d.}=0,32$)

- value their mentor's suggestions and feedback given at the end of each class activity ($t=-5,79$, $p<0,01$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,60$; $\text{s.d.}=0,66$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=5,00$, $\text{s.d.}=0,00$)

-desire to always establish a connection between aspects of their class activities with methodological and theoretic knowledge that is important to acquire and perform in order to achieve the principle of combining theory with practice ($t=-2,02$, $p=0,04$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,00$, $\text{s.d.}=1,41$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=4,71$, $\text{s.d.}=0,31$)

-understand the importance of the teaching process being analyzed together with the mentor, from various perspectives ($t=-7,22$, $p<0,01$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,48$, $\text{s.d.}=0,65$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=5,00$, $\text{s.d.}=0,00$)

-want to be told also about their acquired skills that are necessary for a teacher ($t=-5,61$, $p<0,01$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,58$, $\text{s.d.}=0,33$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=5,00$, $\text{s.d.}=0,00$)

On the other hand, the students that have no teaching experience think it is important to be offered teaching materials to use during class activities ($t=2,22$, $p=0,02$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=4,52$, $\text{s.d.}=0,31$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=3,85$, $\text{a.s.}=1,74$).

There were no statistically significant differences for the other items in the questionnaire: To approach me clearly and directly ($t=-0,79$, $p=0,42$), To communicate the contents and objectives of working with pupils ($t=0,03$, $p=0,99$), To offer information about pupils' learning particularities ($t=0,30$, $p=0,76$), To offer information about the general principles of school ($t=1,85$, $p=0,06$), To give me the possibility of teaching some topics from the school curriculum by myself ($t=-0,34$, $p=0,73$), To underline my strong points ($t=-0,63$, $p=0,53$), To show me action alternatives for various situations ($t=-0,70$, $p=0,48$), To offer me the chance of closely observing the whole class or the students individually and to give me his/her opinion on my observations ($t=-0,67$, $p=0,50$), To offer me emotional support when failing in my class activities ($t=-0,99$, $p=0,32$), To offer me the freedom to put into practice my own ideas ($t=-0,77$, $p=0,44$), To underline my weak points ($t=0,17$, $p=0,86$), To explain certain didactic-methodic decisions he/she took ($t=-0,16$, $p=0,86$), To tell me about his/her own ways of controlling the class or some pupils in particular ($t=-0,17$, $p=0,86$), To show me didactic and methodological principles that form the basis of his/her actions ($t=-0,34$, $p=0,73$), To talk to me about personal dilemmas on teaching ($t=0,37$, $p=0,72$), To give me feedback on my training level and on my learning objectives ($t=-0,54$, $p=0,58$).

For the self-assessment of skills from various fields of teaching for the students of Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education, as compared to the inexperienced students, those having experience as teachers think they have acquired:

-professional competences ($t=-2,69$, $p=0,08$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=2,93$, $\text{s.d.}=1,33$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=4,00$, $\text{s.d.}=0,57$)

-didactic competences ($t=-5,37$, $p=0,00$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=2,50$, $\text{s.d.}=1,55$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=4,37$, $\text{s.d.}=0,55$)

-diagnosis and counseling skill ($t=-4,31$, $p=0,08$; $\text{minexperienced_students}=2,61$, $\text{s.d.}=1,65$; $\text{mexperienced_students}=4,25$, $\text{s.d.}=0,77$)

Further more, students having a certain teaching experience, as compared to those inexperienced, believe that being a teacher is a suitable profession for them ($t=-2,74$, $p=0,01$; $m_{\text{inexperienced_students}}=4,47$, $s.d.=0,55$; $m_{\text{experienced_students}}=4,87$, $s.d.=0,32$)

There were no statistically significant results for hypothesis 2, which dealt with differences among students' expectations on their professional training through pedagogical practice, according to their graduated high school. There is an exception for item 4: The teacher of the class I am performing my teaching training with should offer me information about the general principles of school ($t=-2,14$, $p=0,04$). The students that did not graduated a pedagogical high school feel a greater need for this action than the pedagogical high school graduates ($m_{\text{pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=3,26$, $s.d.=1,13$; $m_{\text{non-pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=3,86$, $s.d.=1,54$)

The image the students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education have on the self-assessment of skill in various fields of teaching is different for the two categories of subjects. The students that graduated a pedagogical high school think they have acquired:

-professional competences ($t=-2,69$, $p=0,08$; $m_{\text{pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=3,6$; $s.d.=1,33$; $m_{\text{non-pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=2,87$, $s.d.=1,74$)

-didactic competences ($t=3,27$, $p=0,03$; $m_{\text{pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=3,45$, $s.d.=1,33$; $m_{\text{non-pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=2,45$, $s.d.=1,90$)

-communication skills ($t=3,76$, $p=0,00$; $m_{\text{pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=4,75$, $s.d.=0,21$; $m_{\text{non-pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=4,25$, $s.d.=0,55$)

Further more, as compared to students that did not graduate a pedagogical high school, those having graduated one believe that being a teacher is a suitable profession for them ($t=2,96$, $p=0,04$; $m_{\text{pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=4,80$, $s.d.=0,13$; $m_{\text{non-pedagogical_high_school_graduates}}=4,42$, $s.d.=0,33$).

DISCUSSIONS

The study underlines that the expectations of students from the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education are different during their development through pedagogical practice according to their teaching experience and according to their graduated high school. The research results follow the findings of previous field studies (Day and his partners, 2006), pointing out the fact that teaching experience influences the need for support and guidance during professional training. Thus, students that have already started working as teachers are more aware of the need to reflect upon their own teaching activity, to receive a specific and complex feedback from their training mentors, than those inexperienced. But as students get more and more training experience, they feel the need to get clarifications and confirmations on their teaching activities with pupils.

On the other hand, the study revealed that teaching experience also influences the development of professional competences. Thus, students having teaching experience self-assess according to the profile of the traditional teacher (following the study Voinea, Pălășan, 2014), a profile that make reference to the next set of skills: professional, didactic, diagnosis and counseling.

In addition to teaching experience variable, we have also includes the graduated high school variable, to find out the degree in which students having graduated a pedagogical high school feel the need for support during their training practice and to point out the level of the competences they think they have acquired. The findings underline that pedagogical high school graduates, as opposed to students having teaching experience, ask less for the mentor's support, considering they have already certain professional competences, as compared to those having graduated other different high schools.

The practical value of this study is rendered by the necessity of a differential approach of students according to the specific training needs of each student category. We advise for the introduction of differential objectives and working task in the syllabus of Pedagogical training practice for students having teaching experience and for those inexperienced. A practical example should be to ask students working as teachers to keep a journal based on self-analysis, self-reflection and self-assessment.

As further researches, we intend to analyze the degree in which the support of training mentor or coordinating teacher of training practice influences student motivation during his/her stages of training practice; motivational aspect is one of the basic conditions in development and learning. There is also the need to design an operational chart on a teacher's professional competences, a tool accepted on a national and/or European level, alike the American model advanced by Danielson in 2007.

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