IMPROVING TEACHING PRACTICE, A WAY OF IMPROVING PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING

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Abstract:
Teaching practice represented a fundamental discipline of the pre-service teacher training curriculum both before and after the implementation of the Bologna process in Romanian higher education. The data presented in this paper were collected in an extensive research referring to the implications of the Bologna Process on pre-service teacher training in the opinion of all the actors involved in this process (university teachers, students, secondary and high school teachers). In the present paper, we will approach teaching practice as a key factor of pre-service teacher training and we will analyze it as strength, but also as weakness, as quality benchmark, but also as improvable aspect of pre-service teacher training. At the end of our paper we will advance several proposals meant to improve the quality of actual/future teaching practice.

Key words: teaching practice, educational system, pre-service teacher training

1. Introduction

Teaching practice is a fundamental discipline from the teacher training program and it combines two dimensions: observational practice and applicative/operational practice. In the current curriculum, for the 1st Level, taking place simultaneously with the Bachelor's degree over a period of three years, teaching practice is provided in the third year of study, each semester with 3 hours, each week. Under the current plan of education, teaching practice is assigned with 3 credits in the 1st semester and with 2 credits in the 2nd semester, which means that students should devote to this subject between 75 - 90 hours (first semester) and 50-60 hours (second semester) for all the activities involved: preparation of lessons, effective lessons, activities carried out in schools and the time needed to study and fulfill school documents. Within the 2nd Level taking place simultaneously with a subject Master, teaching practice is provided only one semester being assigned with three hours/week and 5 credits. The teaching practice is coordinated by the Teacher Training Departments (TTD) from each university and takes place in schools under the supervision of a mentor. For the final evaluation of this subject, generally students have to present a Portfolio including a fix number observation grids, projects of lessons, evaluation and self-evaluation grids of their lessons, other school documents and a report of their relationship with the mentor.

In the present paper we will focus on teaching practice as strength, but also as weakness of pre-service teacher training, on the importance of teaching practice in relation to the quality of pre-service teacher training and on ways of improving it.
2. Methodology

The research results presented in this study are part of a research referring to the implications of the Bologna Process on pre-service teacher training in the opinion of all the actors involved in this process: university teachers working in Romanian TTD, students who attend the Program for obtaining the TTD certificate – 1st Level I (30 credits simultaneously with the Bachelor’s degree) and Level II (30 credits after the Bachelor’s degree, simultaneously with a subject Master and before the exam for acquiring tenure/Definitvat) – and actual teachers who have attended the teaching program before the implementation of the Bologna regulations. The survey was conducted on a representative sample consisting of 593 people: 333 third year students enrolled in the 1st Level of the teacher training program offered by TTDs of the 3 Universities of Timisoara (West University of Timisoara - WUT, Polytechnic University of Timisoara - PUT and University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Banat - UASVMB); these students have undertaken teaching practice and have a complete image of pre-service teacher training; 88 students enrolled in the 2nd Level of the teacher training program offered by TTDs of the 3 Universities of Timisoara, simultaneously being master students in a specific field, according to the present regulations; 122 teachers from secondary and high school from 6 counties, teachers who were formed over a period of four years, between 1995-2007 and who graduated during 1999-2007; 50 university teachers who teach in the TTDs of 15 Romanian universities.

In the case of students from 1st and 2nd Level we built a simple random sample, based on their specialization and academic center of origin (WUT, PUT, UASVMB) in order to obtain a regional representative sample and to increase the added value of the research results. School teachers and university teachers were identified using the snowball technique, a type of non-probabilistic sampling, where we asked some of the subjects investigated the contact details of other persons with the desired characteristics in order to include them in the sample. All subjects completed the questionnaires in writing, most of the questionnaires were filled in directly and some of them computer-mediated (part of the university teachers and part of the school teachers).

We have encountered some difficulties in calculating the margin of error of the sample because there were available only part of the statistical data regarding our basic population. In these conditions, on the margins of error, we specify the following: for students enrolled in the 1st Level, the margin of error was + / -4.85%; 333 respondents from a total population of 1841 people; for students enrolled in the 2nd Level, the margin of error was + / - 9.5%; 88 questioned students out of 500; in the case of teachers from Romanian TTDs, we questioned 50 people from an estimated number of 300 people (taking as reference the internet sites of the 44 TTDs of Romanian universities); in the case of secondary and high school teachers, trained during 1995-2007, we have questioned 122 people from an approximate maximum number of 25,000 people. Thus, the total population of our research (from which we have selected the samples above) is of maximum 30,000 subjects and the margin of error, on the overall sample, is + / -3.98%.
Regarding teaching practice, our objective was to identify its role and place in the quality insurance of current pre-service teacher training. As research method, we used the questionnaire and we developed identical items for all respondents, in order to facilitate a comparative analysis. For the statistical data processing, we preferred to use SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

3. Results and discussions

Below, we will present the results of our research, realizing a comparative analysis of the view of our four categories of respondents in relation to teaching practice as key factor for the quality of teacher training, as strength and as weakness of pre-service teacher training.

Teaching practice - Quality of pre-service teacher training

We asked all respondents to associate three items with the idea of quality of pre-service teaching training. We chose to calculate the weighted value (WV), using the following formula: \( \frac{(1 \times 3 + 2 \times 2 + 3 \times 1)}{(3 + 2 + 1)} \) because the WV, as an average obtained by weighting the frequencies recorded by each statement, depending on its position, is a finer calculation process of ordering than the simple arithmetic mean. Their answers outlined several significant categories, but the highest values were recorded for: students' interest and motivation, development of teaching skills, quality of didactic information and teaching practice.

Students' interest and motivation for initial teacher training has similar values for university teachers (WV 11.7) and school teachers (11.5) but there is an important difference between the values of this element among students from the 1st Level (3.1) and 2nd Level students (14.7); in our opinion this difference is explainable by the fact that 2nd Level students are more motivated than when they were during the 1st Level and more aware of this conditionality of their training. University teachers most often associated the quality of training with the development of teaching skills, this element recording the highest value (21), though, among other categories of respondents, it has weighted less: secondary and high school teachers - 7.3, 2nd Level students 10.3, 1st Level students 11.3. Quality of didactic information/knowledge is mentioned by all respondents but its values vary significantly: 26.5 for 2nd Level II students, 23.1 for 1st Level students, 11 for university teachers and only 3 for school teachers. Teaching practice is the most balanced in terms of associations made by the respondents: students 1st Level – WV 12.2; students 2nd Level – WV 10.2; university teachers – WV 4; secondary and high school teachers – WV 11.9
It is, however, surprising that this element has approximately equal values for secondary and high school teachers and for students (1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Level), while for university teachers it has the lowest WV.

\textit{Teaching practice – strength of pre-service teacher training}

Through the questionnaire, we asked the participants to list the main strengths of pre-service teacher training: students 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Level were asked to refer to the current period and secondary and high school teachers to the period when they followed the program. All respondents were asked to list at least two strengths.

All the beneficiaries of initial teacher education consider that there are three major strengths of pre-service teacher training: teacher educators’ skills, quality of the information and teaching practice, as follows:

- \textit{teacher educators’ skills} recorded the highest WV for secondary and high school teachers (20.5) and approximately equal values for students (1\textsuperscript{st} Level – 14.8 and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Level - 12.9), all beneficiaries of initial training agreeing that this is a positive element of their pedagogical training.

- \textit{quality of scientific information} is the most important positive element of the current system of training in the opinion of 1\textsuperscript{st} Level students (VP 23.1) decreasing in terms of WV for 2\textsuperscript{nd} Level students (VP 8.3) but having only little importance for secondary and high school teachers (VP 3.4).

- in terms of WV – the \textit{quality of teaching practice} is a strength for all three categories of respondents, with the following WV: 6.5 (students 2\textsuperscript{nd} Level ), 13.1 (students 1\textsuperscript{st} Level) and 8.9 (secondary and high school teachers).
We specify that university teachers do not consider that the teaching practice carried out in its current form is a strength of the current system of pre-service teacher training. The main aspects identified by university teachers as strengths of the initial training program are: the complementarity between subject related and pedagogical information (WV 14), the provision of progressive training based on individual and system needs (WV 11.3) and the fact that students have the opportunity of clarifying their career choices (10.7 WV).

Teaching practice - weaknesses of actual teacher training

In the opinion of all respondents, the main weaknesses of the initial system of teacher training focus on three major elements: lack of interest and motivation of students for teacher training, lack of professionalism of teacher educators and insufficient teaching practice.

- the lack of interest and motivation of students is the most important weakness for 1st Level students (13.7), followed by 2nd Level II students (11) and at a significant distance for secondary and high school teachers (3.8);

- lack of professionalism and interest of teacher educators is felt as the strongest weakness also by 1st Level students (12.2) and by teachers who were formed before the implementation of the Bologna regulations (8.8), but less by 2nd Level students (2.7);
- teaching practice has recorded the highest values in the case of teacher educators (WV 21.3) and in the case of secondary and high school teachers who have experienced the hardship of adapting to the realities of Romanian educational schools (VP 18.3).

Both students 1st and 2nd Level students argue that teaching practice is insufficient, although the WV recorded among these two groups of respondents are at a significant distance from the above mentioned.

**Improving teaching practice - way of improving teacher training**

One of the objective of our research was to identify and prioritize the ways of improving current pre-service teacher training. The comparative analysis of data referring to changes designed to optimize pre-service teacher training (Table 1), highlights the following:

**Table 1 - Comparative analysis of changes meant to improve the quality of pre-service teacher training (own elaboration)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes meant to improve pre-service teacher training</th>
<th>Students 1st Level</th>
<th>Students 2nd Level</th>
<th>Secondary and high school teachers</th>
<th>University teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversification of teaching practice institutions</td>
<td>20.36 I</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>3.70 III</td>
<td>3.14 IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of assessment tests</td>
<td>13.77 VI</td>
<td>2.96 VI</td>
<td>2.80 VI</td>
<td>3.02 VI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in extracurricular activities</td>
<td>15.76 IV</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.41 IV</td>
<td>3.24 III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing of teachers’ tasks and duties</td>
<td>18.73 II</td>
<td>3.82 II</td>
<td>3.89 I</td>
<td>3.88 II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing of educational policies</td>
<td>14.24 V</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>2.97 V</td>
<td>3.08 V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching stages</td>
<td>17.29 III</td>
<td>3.16 V</td>
<td>3.88 II</td>
<td>5.00 I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- in the opinion of 1st and 2nd Level students, the most important change refers to the diversification of institutions where teaching practice takes place;

- the knowledge of all teachers’ tasks and duties within schools ranks on the 2nd place for three categories of respondents (1st and 2nd Level students and university teachers) and on the 1st place in the opinion of teachers working in secondary and high school education;

- the implementation of teaching stages/internships ranks first in the view of university teachers and second in the vision of teachers working in secondary and high school education; this change ranks third for 1st Level students and fifth in the opinion of 2nd Level students;

- on the last place in the hierarchy - from the perspective of all categories of respondents – ranks the design of assessment tests with scale evaluation.

According to our respondents, the main changes designed to increase the quality of initial teacher training involve improving teaching practice, although the factors with the greatest negative impact on the quality of teacher training are the financing of training activities, national legislation and low motivation of students. Unfortunately, in addition to try applying various strategies to increase student motivation, university teachers working in TTD have little leverage to contribute significantly to the improvement of the financing of training and of educational legislation.

As it can be seen in Table 1, in the opinion of secondary and high school teachers and university teachers, the first changes meant to increase the quality of the initial teacher education are organizing the teaching practice in stages of 4 weeks (in each of the two semesters, students should participate only in teaching activities in schools) and knowing teachers' tasks and duties within schools. We can easily notice that the respondents established very similar scores and ranks for the elements we listed for this item, the most significant difference being encountered at the implementation of teaching stages (3.88 in the case of secondary and high school teachers versus 5 in the opinion of teacher educators). In the actual structure of teacher training, students have only two semesters of teaching practice, with a total number of 78 hours. Within the general context of our research, we formulated a hypothesis related to teaching practice: pre-service teacher training can be improved by the qualitative and quantitative restructuring of teaching practice, which was fully confirmed since: among the changes that students (1st and 2nd Level) consider essential for optimizing the actual pre-service teaching training on the first two places we can find the deployment of teaching practice activities not only in schools but also in other educational institutions and the knowledge of all teachers' tasks and duties within schools; on the first places in the hierarchy of changes that secondary and high school teachers considered essential for the optimization of teacher training are located almost equally, knowledge of all teachers’ tasks and duties within schools and teaching practice stages; conducting teaching practice activities not only in schools but also in other educational institutions ranks on the third place; according to teacher educators the first change meant to improve the quality of initial teacher training is the implementation of teaching stages.

In the general context of our research (after processing, interpretation and analysis of research data), we advanced several proposals aiming at the optimization of pre-service teacher training, generally, but also with specific references to teaching
practice. In our opinion, there are several ways in which teaching practice could be improved within the current system of pre-service teacher training (Domilescu, G., 2013, pp. 213-214):

- **starting teaching practice stages/internships on the 1st year, 2nd semester (1st Level students):** during the three years of the 1st Level, students will have enough time to become familiar with the specifics of all institutions of the educational system;
- **conducting teaching practice activities in all educational institutions:** school inspectorates, teacher training houses, pedagogical centres and universities;
- **knowledge of all the tasks and duties of teachers within schools and knowledge of all curricular documents and ways of completing them;**
- **participation in extracurricular activities conducted in schools;**
- **giving up the imitative model of current teaching practice (in which students try to imitate the behavior of their mentor) in favor of encouraging student's creativity and the use of modern methods of teaching and learning;**
- **teaching practice stages:** students would spend several compact periods in schools, being involved in educational and administrative activities. In the United Kingdom, practical experience of teaching occupies a central position: PGCE (postgraduate certificate in education) courses last 36 weeks; in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, 24 weeks should be spent in at least two different schools; in Scotland, trainees must spend 18 weeks in schools.
- **(bi)annual consultations between schools and TTD** regarding the competences required for beginning teachers; it should be an opportunity for schools to offer real feedback to universities in order to facilitate the connection between pre-service teacher training and the real needs of the labor market (schools);
- **to increase schools' responsibilities** could improve their involvement and, thus, the quality of the practical activities in those schools; in the support of our idea, we mention an example of good practice in reforming teaching practice in the UK: although at the beginning of the reform, there was considerable resistance to the idea that that initial teacher training should take place especially in schools and only when the universities saw their authority and power threatened, people began to talk about partnerships between schools and universities, change which generated unquestionable positive effects on the quality of initial teacher training;
- **the involvement of mentors in educational research;**
- **the implementation of an induction program.**

In the current educational context, implementing the latest two proposals may seem difficult, but we insist on them just because they have proven their effectiveness in the European countries where they have been adequately implemented.

The introduction of induction program was advanced by Prof. Ph. D. Romita Iucu almost fifteen years ago but, it was also included in the Law of National Education from 2011. Practical training at the beginning of the teaching career (mentoring, internship, induction) is still a problem difficult to solve for many European countries, not only for Romania. In most European countries, initial teacher training conducted in higher education is divided between departments, faculties and schools, but the responsibilities for the quality of these programs are not sufficiently well defined.
(Buchberger, F., 2000). The most problematical aspect is the clear separation between initial teacher preparation (including teaching practice), induction program and continuing professional development, as well as the lack of coherence between institutional development, teacher development and educational research. Only half of EU countries provide a systematic form of career support (induction, training) for young teachers and only a third of countries have national regulations for managing the difficulties of beginning teachers. In some European countries, induction programs are part of the pre-service teacher training system, in others they are separate or not present. The documents of the European Commission argue that teacher training would be more effective if it will be coordinated as a coherent system, "embracing initial teacher education, induction into the profession, and career long continuing professional development" (EC, 2007), which would allow all teachers to: take part in an effective program of induction during their first three years in the profession; have access to structured guidance and mentoring by experienced teachers or other relevant professionals throughout their career; take part in regular discussions of their training and development needs, in the context of the wider development plan of the institution where they work. OK

From the theoretical perspective, teacher induction is distinct from both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs but, due to its already proven positive influences (Ganser, T., 2002), we believe is necessary to directly correlate it with pre-service teacher training systems. Even if, in the last years teacher mentoring programs have become a dominant form of teacher induction (Hobson, A. J., Ashby, P., Malderez, A., Tomlinson, P. D., 2009; Strong, M., 2009), teacher induction can refer to a variety of different types of activities for new teachers; orientation sessions, faculty collaborative periods, meetings with supervisors, developmental workshops, extra classroom assistance, and reduced workloads.

Another example of good practice meant to optimize the system of initial teacher training refers to a successful innovation of the English Teacher Training Agency, which, in our opinion could also be implemented in our country: the most important innovation of the Teacher Training Agency in England has been to provide funds for encouraging practicing teachers to engage in fundamental research in schools. Educational research is considered an extension of the trend of promoting the teaching profession as a profession based on research: practice demonstrates that there is no better way to promote research in a profession than that those who mentor novices to be involved in research and development activities. A study that reviewed research evidence published during 1988 – 2001 in USA, Canada, Australia and Europe highlighted a number of features which could motivate practitioners to become involved with research, including (Helmsley-Brown, J., Sharp, C., 2003, p.3): direct relevance to their needs and interests; illustrations of activities which help them relate the findings to their own work; help from an outside expert; research built on what they already know; sufficient time to absorb and act on messages from the research.

Some specialists in the field consider that the objectives of teacher training programs can be described as "unclear, unrealistically ambitious, inconsistent and sometimes conflicting" (Buchberger, F., Campos, BP, Kallos, D. Stephenson, J., 2000) and that it is necessary to: redefine the aims of the entire system of teacher training; redefine teacher professional duties (teaching, learning, assessment, counseling, management, innovation); perform an analysis of necessary qualifications; develop explicit models for acquiring these skills and orientation training programs for teaching these skills.
**References:**


