



The Practical Component of the Study Program for the Education of Class Teachers - Faculty of Educational Sciences, the Republic of Macedonia

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Abstract

The essential issue which is frequently discussed by educational policy makers, in-service teachers, students and scientists is the adequacy of the practical component of the curriculum for initial teacher education. When we say adequacy we do not only mean the percentage of classes that students spend in school in terms of the overall curriculum, but several aspects of this component: objectives accomplished in cooperation with schools where students perform their practice, ways of organizing performance in terms of time frame and in terms of the distribution of responsibilities between universities and schools.

While searching for an effective and efficient model for cooperation of our faculty with mentor schools we decided to study the attitudes and opinions of students - seniors about the success of the current model of practical training regarding: students' sensitization students to the importance of the teaching profession, training students for planning, organization, implementation and evaluation of teaching (didactic-methodical aspects). The survey was conducted on a sample of 45 full-time students - seniors at the Faculty of Educational Sciences - Department of class teachers in Stip, the Republic of Macedonia.

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In view of the methodological approach to the study, only the analytical-descriptive method was used because at this stage we only wanted to get guidelines for improvement. Our research has shown that students have a moderate to positive attitude towards the existing model of pedagogical/professional practical training. Their self-assessment of the level of practical competence has given us information about possible weaknesses (few classes, flaws in the mentoring and supervision process) of the model and of the overall curriculum for initial teacher education as well.

Key words: practical training, initial education, teachers.

1. Introduction

All countries in the European Union agree that teacher competencies are an important prerequisite not only for quality teaching but also for creating staff that will be able to design concepts for quality education. "In the process of building a 'European knowledge-based community' teachers and their education have an important role" concludes the European Commission for Education, Ministers of Education of the EU member states, as well as a huge number of members of the educational profession." [1:2] Therefore, the commitments to professionalize the teaching work through the establishment of standardized instruments and measures are becoming increasingly louder and clearer. Serious synthesis based on relevant research evidence presented in the Green Paper on Teacher Education [1] clearly indicate that key areas / discourses where interventions are necessary in order to improve the education of teachers are:

1. Policies for teacher education,
2. Partnership between teacher education and schools
3. Reflective practice in teacher education,
4. Establishment of powerful learning environments within the institutions of teacher education,
5. Didactics as a science/sciences for the teaching profession,
6. Multiculturalism and teacher education,
7. Problems related to gender balance and teacher education

It is quite evident that the detected areas include problems in the field of teacher education that are trans-spatial and trans-cultural, or problems that have global significance for institutions engaged in this activity.

Rapidly increased demands that society sets before today's teachers open many old-new dilemmas that in turn are becoming a subject of intense research, in particular of those working in the field of initial teacher education. If we take European as a benchmark it will be seen that there, as is the case here, the necessary balance between academic subject knowledge, knowledge in the field of educational sciences and methodology, and pedagogical practice / professional practice has not been made. On the one hand, excessive practicism and craft orientation of study programs for students studying primary school

teaching, and, on the other hand, excessive academicism and lack of knowledge of educational science and practice in curricula being studied by teachers especially for secondary schools.

Detecting differences between the current situation in the field of teacher education among member states of the European Union, as well as differences in the quality of discourse on education in general and teacher education in particular, resulted in numerous suggestions for improvement which, however, will have a different meaning / place in reforms for different countries.

The close cooperation between the teaching profession, schools and teacher education in all its diversity in certain systems of teacher education is one of the common requirements for high quality. In many countries in Europe and beyond, separation and fragmentation of these three components is characterized and treated as a possible factor that deprives their synergetic power. In the course of the last fifteen years, among many suggestions for reforming the system of teacher education, the priority need for reviewing the forms of cooperation between institutions of initial teacher education and schools, and the goals of cooperation and to strengthen practice of students, teachers-beginners and those with more experience are emphasized. [2;3]

More serious attempts to establish partnerships are made in Sweden, England and Wales. Their models for professional training of future teachers tend to provide mutual support in the areas of: lectures on the practical component of the program of initial teacher education, research and development and school activities, and for promoting cooperation between schools and educational institutions for teacher training specific emphasis is put on creating a professional culture for learning. [4]

In the countries (ours as well) of former Yugoslavia, as a result of nearly fifty years of common educational history a three-stage model of practical pedagogical training of future class teachers based on a partnership between university teachers of teaching methods and teachers in mentoring schools developed and still persists.

In the first stage students learn how to teach by observing the work of experienced teachers and they gain some experience under their immediate guidance - very similar to an apprentice when he/she learns the trade from his/her master. In this way students develop ideas about the process of teaching and learn specific strategies and mentors generally have the role of a model. In the second stage students learn to teach through systematic practice of acquired skills and techniques for teaching, while the mentor and the "university teacher" or teaching assistant monitor student's performance and then give them feedback on their success. This may be the stage where some important competencies for the teaching profession are formed. The third stage of this model that is often discussed within institutions of teacher education as the desired level should provide reflectivity and it presupposes learning grounded on critical thinking about different approaches to teaching and learning. Such an approach is expected to contribute to a profound understanding of the processes of learning and teaching, and the student and the mentor have a role of co-researchers. [5;6]

The efforts in the Republic of Macedonia to promote the professional development of teachers by improving the pedagogical/professional practice of students/future teachers does not always bear fruit because of the multi-factorial impact upon this process which will not be discussed in this paper.

1.1. Theoretical – empirical approach

The Pedagogical Faculty in Stip has paid great attention recently to educational reforms related to class teachers. In the course of study special emphasis is placed on the establishment of a system for integrating professional student practice. It is implemented in partnership with primary schools that have the status of mentoring schools. The study program for Class teachers teaching keeps the three-stage model for practical training of students and integrating theoretical knowledge of relevant areas of educational sciences, teaching methods and sciences covering knowledge of the subjects that teachers teach from first to fifth grade, but with the intention of adjusting goals and approaches to the need for creating a European teacher, all this through adherence to common European principles of teacher competencies and qualifications. (According to: Petrovska, Sonja) [7:57-60]

The first stage of the model is named school practice, with 24 lessons distributed in two semesters. The global objective of the program in pedagogical practice is to enable students/future teachers to learn about the characteristics of the teaching profession and about all aspects of school functioning, sensitiveness to the need of linking theory and practice, as well as practical experience of school life. Basic methods of implementation in practice are sitting in lectures, systematic observation and analysis of pedagogical documentation.

The second stage of practical training is appointed as a Methodical practice and implemented within classes for all teaching methods courses that future teachers will teach, in accordance with the state curricula for nine-year primary school. The main objective of this stage is practical training of students/future teachers for specialized, critical and creative planning, organization, implementation and evaluation of teaching respective subjects. Teachers and teaching assistants have a key role in students' practical training for specific teaching methods, as well as mentors/teachers in schools. Practical training starts in faculty lecture halls through planning, organizing, implementing and evaluating simulated teaching lessons, attendance in schools (natural environment), systematic observation of classes conducted by mentors and self-teaching under the supervision of teacher mentors according to the mentored planning process by teachers and assistants responsible for specific teaching methods.

The third stage of practical training of students is named Pedagogical practice. It is realized during the eighth semester of study and it takes three working weeks. The overall objective of this stage of practical training is self-executing of teaching tasks. The level of mentoring is reduced, but supervision by teachers, assistants and mentors is ongoing. Pursuant to the legislation that governs the functioning of primary education in the Republic of Macedonia, according to which teachers-interns implement teaching alone (although they do it under the mentorship of experienced teachers they are alone in the

classroom with pupils), the teaching staff and associates of the faculty consider this segment of students' practical training as extremely important.

The model that we develop, being based on 65 years of tradition of our institution (our predecessors: Teacher School "Goce Delchev" - Stip, Higher Pedagogical School "Goce Delchev" - Stip and Pedagogical Academy "Goce Delchev" - Stip), as well as on modern world and European trends in the development of teacher education, is expected to give a positive effect of three levels by:

- Developing a strong, double-sided beneficial partnership with schools.
- Differentiation and understanding of the need for division of labor and responsibility between partners (faculty and mentoring schools).
- Quality training of students for their profession and sensitizing their role as upgraders of educational activities in schools and in wider society.
- More active participation of competent teaching and research staff of the faculty in professional training of in-service teachers.

Despite our extensive experience in the practical training of teachers, we are continually trying to discover the strengths and weaknesses of this model and propose actions for improvement; we place our research in this context. Teacher education is a new field of research that does not yet have a theoretical foundation. But this must not discourage us and deter from our intentions to achieve professional and scientific success.

The *subject* of this research are the views and opinions of students at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Stip (seniors) concerning the significance of the model of pedagogical/professional practice in their practical training, as well as the level of its contribution to the professional development of students.

The *objective* of the research was to discover the strengths and weaknesses of the model for professional training of students through the study of their views and opinions on: the importance of the model for developing students' sensitivity to the significance and complexity of the profession, the importance of the model for developing skills in planning, organization, implementation and evaluation of teaching (didactic-methodical aspects).

General hypothesis: We expect that students/future teachers will positively assess the possibilities offered by the model for pedagogical/professional practice for their practical training for involvement in the educational process in schools.

Auxiliary hypotheses:

1. We expect that students/future teachers will positively assess the possibilities offered by the model of pedagogical/professional practice for developing students' sensitivity to the importance and complexity of the profession.

2. We expect that students/future teachers will positively assess the possibilities offered by the model for pedagogical/professional practice for their practical training to perform complex tasks in teaching (planning of teaching and methodical projections)
3. Students' self-evaluation of their level of practical competence will show that they feel insufficiently prepared to engage in the implementation of educational activities in schools.

1.2. Methodological approach to research

The study used a descriptive-analytical method to detect and describe current trends and some outcomes of this component of the curriculum for teacher education at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Stip, R Macedonia. Survey and scaling were used as basic research techniques, and a questionnaire – scaler was prepared for the research composed of three groups of questions relevant to the theoretical framework of the research. Given our intention to continue to explore this problem in depth, with the intention to improve the pedagogical model of practical / professional training of our students and enhance mentoring partnership with schools, the instrument has not yet passed the methodological procedure for the determination of its metric features and it has no deep statistical analysis.

The survey included 45 full-time students (seniors) in the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Stip, R Macedonia - generation 2011 / 12 (after they completed all requirements for a full course of studies reformed according to the Bologna Declaration).

1.3. Results and discussion

The first question of the questionnaire-scaler was designed to examine the opinion of students regarding the sufficiency of the number of classes designed for achieving the first stage of professional training according to the model of our faculty. Although these students (according to the study plan) had as many as 36 classes for pedagogical practice, deployed in three semesters, they believe that the purpose for which they are intended is too ambitious, and the number of classes insufficient. 38 students (84.44 %) answered - insufficient and only 5 students (11.11%) – satisfactory and 2 students (4.44%) - not sure. The answers to the next question are in the same context - In which year of your studies do you believe you should start with visiting schools and with pedagogical practice? (38/84.44 % students answered - in the third semester, 05/11/11 % students answered - in the fourth semester, and only 02/04/44 % students answered - not sure). The 38 students who believe that partnerships with mentoring schools should be formed as early as in the second semester, cite their own intolerance experienced during the first year of study while being introduced to school life through their direct participation in it as an argument for their attitude.

The analysis of the answers to the first scale (consisting of 6 questions designed to test students' attitudes and opinions about the importance of the pedagogical model/professional practice for the development of their sensitivity to the importance and complexity of the teaching profession) reveals

that the greatest number/percentage of respondents generally agree and fully agree with the views offered, which leads to the conclusion that the model of professional practice at our faculty helps them and provides opportunities for students: To understand the necessity of linking theory and practice (97.8%), To choose a model of teacher behavior (91%), To increase their interest in implementing the teaching profession (97.7%), To cope with the complexity of the teaching process (88.9%), To understand the complexities of the role of the teacher in the school (91%), To realize that without sharing good teaching practices there cannot be a good teacher (95.6%), To know how to collaborate with peers and mentors (93.3%), and to understand the need for evaluation of their own work (68.9%). (Table 1)

Table 1. Students' views and opinions about the importance of the model for the development of students' sensitivity to the importance and complexity of the teaching profession

The model for practical training at my faculty enabled me:	A		B		C		D		E		Total		N	Md	Q
	f	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%			
1.	0	0	0	0	1	2.2	10	22.2	34	75.6	45	100	45	5	0
2.	1	2.2	1	2.2	2	4.4	8	17.8	33	73.3	45	100	45	5	0.5
3.	0	0	1	2.2	0	0	6	13.3	38	84.4	45	100	45	5	0
4.	0	0	4	8.9	1	2.2	8	17.8	32	71.1	45	100	45	5	0.5
5.	0	0	1	2.2	2	4.4	3	6.7	38	84.4	44	97.8	45	5	0
6.	0	0	0	0	2	4.4	7	15.6	36	80.0	45	100	45	5	0
7.	0	0	2	4.4	1	2.2	9	20.0	33	73.3	45	100	45	5	0.5
8.	3	6.7	2	4.4	8	17.8	15	33.3	16	35.6	44	97.8	45	5	0.5

Legend of labels in Table 1.

A – I totally disagree; B – I mainly disagree; C – I am indecisive; D – I mainly agree; E – I totally agree;

1. To understand the necessity of linking theory and practice
2. To choose a model of teacher behavior
3. To increase my interest in implementing the teaching profession
4. To cope with the complexity of the teaching process
5. To understand the complexities of the role of the teacher in the school
6. To realize that without sharing good teaching practices there cannot be a good teacher
7. To know how to collaborate with peers and mentors
8. To evaluate my own work

Table 2 presents the results of the attitudes of students about the importance of their competence model for planning teaching. The distribution of frequencies and percentages expressed in the fields of consent reveals that the majority of respondents (I mainly agree and I totally agree) believe that the model allows them to be enabled for designing a methodical concept of a teaching lesson (95.5 %), and

formaking methodical synopsis for a lesson by a template/sample (100 %). A drastically smaller number of respondents believe that this model provides an opportunity to be trained for independent preparation of annual (global) plan (51.6 %), independent preparation of thematic planning (40 %), and identifying the advantages and disadvantages of existing plans (40 %).

Table 2. Students' views about the importance of the model for practical training in
Their capacity for planning teaching

The model for practical training at my faculty enabled me:	A		B		C		D		E		Total		N	Md	Q
	F	%	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%			
1.	0	0	5	11,1	24	53,3	0	0	16	35,6	45	100	45	5	0,5
2.	0	0	24	53,3	3	6,7	18	40	0	0	45	100	45	3	0,5
3.	0	0	0	0	27	60	5	11,1	13	28,9	45	100	45	5	0,5
4.	0	0	0	0	2	4,5	15	33,3	28	62,2	45	100	45	4	0,5
5.	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	22,2	35	77,8	45	100	45	5	0,5

Legend of labels in Table 2.

*A – I totally disagree; B – I mainly disagree; C – I am indecisive;
D – I mainly agree; E – I totally agree;*

1. To be able to independently make the annual (global) plan
2. To be able to independently make the thematic planning
3. To be able to recognize the advantages and disadvantages of the plans
4. To be able to make a methodical concept of the lesson
5. To me able to make a preparation or a methodical synopsis for the lesson according to the template/sample

While practical training for planning mainly involves training students in some already established template/sample for planning, in methodical projection we insist on a higher level of knowledge (understanding, application, decision making, developing strategies, and reflectivity).

The data in Table 3 reveal that students evaluate the model with high marks, they agree (totally or mainly) that it offers the opportunity to develop skills for: application of acquired knowledge in operationalization of education objectives (97.8 %), selection of appropriate teaching methods (91.1 %), selection and preparation of appropriate teaching materials (98.8 %), choosing the appropriate social organization of students in the class (88.9 %), integration approach in teaching (95.6 %), designing and application of differentiated assignments for students (83.3 %), and implementation of strategies and techniques for motivating students (91.1 %). Students' attitudes reveal a positive attitude towards the model with respect to its power in terms of acquiring some knowledge, such as that through pedagogical practice students can learn how to integrate ICT into teaching, how to select and use appropriate literature for preparing a lesson, how to systematize teaching contents, and how you to choose and use different instruments for monitoring, verification and evaluation of student achievement. (See Table 3)

Table 3. Students' views about the importance of the model for their training for
methodical projecting of lessons

The model for practical training at my faculty enabled me::	A		B		C		D		E		Total		N	Md	Q
	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%			
1.	0	0	0	0	1	2,2	8	17,8	36	80,0	45	100	45	5	0
2.	1	2,2	1	2,2	2	4,4	6	13,4	35	77,8	45	100	45	5	0,5
3.	0	0	1	2,2	0	0	4	8,9	40	88,9	45	100	45	5	0
4.	0	0	1	2,2	4	8,9	6	13,3	34	75,6	45	100	45	5	0,5
5.	0	0	1	2,2	38	84,4	3	6,7	2	4,4	44	97,9	45	5	0
6.	0	0	5	11,1	2	4,4	0	0	38	84,4	45	100	45	5	0
7.	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	13,3	35	77,8	41	91,1	45	4	0
8.	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	4,5	41	91,1	43	95,6	45	5	0
9.	0	0	0	0	5	11,1	10	22,2	28	62,3	43	95,6	45	5	0,5
10.	0	0	0	0	4	8,9	22	48,9	16	35,5	42	93,3	45	5	0,5
11.	0	0	0	0	3	6,7	10	22,2	30	66,7	43	95,6	45	5	0,13

Legend of labels in Table 3.
*A – I totally disagree; B – I mainly disagree; C – I am indecisive;
D – I mainly agree; E – I totally agree;*

1. To successfully apply the knowledge gained in the operationalization of the teaching objectives
2. To learn how to choose appropriate teaching methods
3. To learn how to choose and make appropriate teaching aids
4. To learn how to choose appropriate social organization of students in class
5. To learn how ICT can be integrated into teaching
6. To learn to choose and use appropriate literature for preparing lessons
7. To be able to apply strategies and techniques for motivating students
8. To be able to use integration approach in teaching
9. To know how to perform systematization of teaching contents
10. To know how to conceive and apply differentiated assignments for students
11. To learn how to use different instruments for monitoring, testing and evaluation of student achievement

After each of these steps, for each aspect of the practical training of students, respondents were asked questions in order to self-evaluate, on the three-stage scale (unsatisfactory, good, excellent), the level of their ability to engage in educational work in school (level of sensitivity to the importance and complexity of the teaching profession, level of practical competence for planning teaching, and level of competence for methodical designing of teaching lessons). The analysis of the results shows that the

majority (35/77.8%) of students, in terms of their level of sensitivity to the importance and complexity of the profession, evaluated themselves as being "greatly sensitive", 6 students or 13.4% classified themselves in the category of having "good sensitivity", and none of the students chose the level marked as unsatisfactory.

Regarding the second aspect of practical training, 38/84% believe that they are greatly trained and 7/15.6% believe they are well trained, and regarding the third aspect only 10/22.2% consider themselves as being perfectly capable of methodical designing of a teaching lesson. Even 35/77.8% respondents estimated themselves with the term unsatisfactory.

There can be many factors that affect the level of practical competence of our students such as: school mentoring, college mentoring and supervision, organization of practical training, number of students, and, finally - the practical training of students is only one component of the curriculum by which our students are educated. However, the views of students about the opportunities offered by our model confirm that we are on the right track.

1.3. Conclusion and recommendations

The analysis of the results of many studies, including our own, and the theoretical concepts in the field of teacher education lead to the conclusion that the time when all the objectives of primary education could be achieved through the professional engagement of a teacher practitioner/craftsman who only routinely applied the checked didactic - methodical approaches and reproduced models of teaching that he/she met during his/her schooling, have passed. Today the teachers' professionalism is measured by their ability for: application of knowledge, skills and abilities acquired through the other course programs, reflexivity in their work that develops creativity, and especially originality in pedagogical approach.

The views of the majority of respondents in all matters indicate moderate or completely positive attitude towards the model for pedagogical/professional practical training. The fact that the study did not have negative views regarding the possibilities offered by the model leads to the thought that perhaps: although the survey was anonymous, respondents were not sufficiently honest, the survey sample is small, but that there is need for a study of attitudes of school mentors, college professors and assistants.

Student self-assessment of the level of practical competence gives us information about possible weaknesses (small number of lessons, flaws in the mentoring and supervision process) of the model, and the overall curriculum by which class teachers study.

Continuous improvement of the practical training of students at the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Stip is our commitment and in our view we should move towards creating a model that will ensure the development of a wide repertoire of professional actions in the natural environment (mentoring

schools) offered by the faculty, and ensuring teachers who in the truest sense of the word will carry the epithet - mentor..

The development of a wide repertoire of professional actions should be aimed at providing conditions (partnership) for the development of student competencies for theoretically and reflectively grounded educational activity in school context. Integrating practice (in all models and levels of teacher education) with the other components of teacher education should include: developing strong partnerships with schools that will develop highly trained university staff for methodical and organizational shaping of educational work in schools and high quality school mentors with formalized status in the school and at the faculty. Shared responsibility will foster not only the development of models for practical training of students/future teachers, but it will also help in building schools and institutions for teacher education that will be centers/laboratories for research, for involving trainee teachers in school life, and for life-long learning of those more experienced.

1.4. References

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