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Influence of teaching practice in the development of professional readiness of future early-childhood education teachers

Introduction

Pedagogy is a theoretical and practical science, therefore in teaching it there should be a balance between acquiring knowledge and practical activities. Consequently, in the training of early education teachers theory and practice should be interrelated. By combining theory and practice, the students or young teachers can better understand and remember the material that they study. Thanks to the teaching practice they understand practical applications of the theory that usually appears to them as useless in their future professional careers. Thanks to practical activities, students may check the level of the knowledge they have acquired which in turn may motivate them to greater involvement in science. Just as the pupil likes to see some sense and reference to everyday life in the knowledge they study at school, the student draws satisfaction from acquiring the knowledge which will be useful to him in his future work.

Each student taking a pedagogical course is obliged to take part in the teaching practice. It is included in all curricula of education, regardless of field.

What is more, it is recognized as an important element of preparation for the teaching profession. At that time, the student has the opportunity to observe, wonder, question, and take action (Szkolak, 2014).

Teaching practice in the light of legal documents

The document which regulates the teaching practice in professional teacher training is the Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 17 January 2012 on education standards in preparation for the teaching profession¹.

¹ Regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 17 January 2012 on education standards in preparation for the teaching profession, (Journal of Laws 2012 no. 0 item 131) www.isap.sejm.gov.pl (access: 22.03.2013).

Initial teacher training includes 5 modules, of which the first three are the preparation for the teaching profession.

Within these three modules, students gain practical, psycho-pedagogical and didactic knowledge. The next two modules aim at developing the skills acquired during the initial modules. The second module (psychological - pedagogical) consists of 30 hours of the teaching practice performed at school. During this practice, student teachers confront their knowledge with reality and gain experience in teaching and educating. The third module (teaching) offers a traineeship of 120 hours conducted in schools. During the practice students learn about specific elements of the school, its teaching tasks, work organization, documentation and teacher's work. In this way, they develop their professional teaching competence.

Organization of teaching practice at universities

Universities and institutions of higher education are responsible for organization, duration and financing teaching practices. The total number of hours of the teaching practice that a student is obliged to perform is 150. These are hours conducted or observed by the student at various educational institutions.

However, the number of hours devoted to the teaching practice differs among universities. In general, the limit of 150 hours of practical preparation of the student is maintained or even exceeded.

Interim and continuous teaching practices are organized in accordance with the organization of the teacher education process, with the latter ones conducted outside student's hours at university. In general, teaching practice in full-time pedagogical courses are carried out in the period from 8 to 12 weeks. Interim practices are organized within the framework of specific methodologies.

The teaching practice for students of early childhood education aims at preparing them to work independently and to use their pedagogical and methodological knowledge in practical classes.

During the teaching practice, students learn about their class, individual differences in a given group of students and personality traits, as well as documentation of a class teacher. They observe and conduct independent and integrated activities or lessons in various subjects and prepare different teaching materials.

The teaching practice aims to: illustrate methodological problems analyzed theoretically, teach students to perceive pedagogical phenomena and to define them, develop the ability to perform methodological duties, teach students to apply attractive forms and methods of work of the teacher, develop a reflective attitude towards theory, as well as observed and performed practical activities. Moreover, its goal is to deepen students' knowledge on the formulation of objectives of integrated lessons, the choice of educational content, creative learning, skills of teamwork, planning and evaluation of the educational process and the results of students' work. Such practices also help students gain the ability to express their own thoughts,

flexibility of interactive behavior, creative approach to reading materials in the field of education, competence in the field of prevention, diagnosis and treatment of difficulties and school failure.

During teaching practices, the future teacher acquires new knowledge about planning and the organization of teaching and educational work. He has a direct contact with the pupil and his/her parents, with whom he will have to work in the future. Practical classes will also help students develop the skills to prepare teaching programs, scripts or lesson scenarios.

Upon completion of the teaching practice the student has an interview with the tutor concerning reviews of classes submitted by pupils, practice record, reports on observed lessons as well as lesson scenarios.

Mandatory pedagogical training practices for students in the first degree for the specialization of early childhood education at the Pedagogical University of Cracow include:

- interim practical exercises, pursued as a separate subject (in the first year as general teaching practice, whose aim is to develop students' practical competence in the field of pedagogical activities which enable them to acquire experience in the functioning of the educational system, the specificity of schools; in the second and third years the teaching practice includes weekly classes in schools chosen by teachers and/or teaching practice supervisors). Practical exercises are also implemented within the framework of theoretical subjects, allowing students to apply knowledge gained during practical activities,
- teaching placements area test of the teaching profession. They are implemented continuously in the third year of a full-time course and last four weeks. In a part-time course, they are organized during the academic year in classes I–III of primary school. The student in consultation with the head of teaching practice decides on the place where a teaching practice is going to be conducted. The main goal of the teaching practice is to develop skills in planning and implementing educational-teaching work in classes I–III (early childhood education) under the guidance of a teacher with relevant work experience. During the practice the student can carry out related research in preparation for a diploma thesis².

The essence of teaching practice in the training of early childhood education teachers

The teaching practice should be treated equally with theoretical teaching. It enables observation, conducting classes, participation in the life of a given group of students as well as mastering knowledge based on action.

Apart from the fact that the practice is one way to prepare students for work in a teaching profession it also gives them the opportunity to approve of or amend student choices about their field of study or occupation. Additionally, it allows the

² www.ippis.up.krakow.pl/index.php/praktyki/ (access: 5.04.2013).

student to acquire skills that are necessary to fully participate in society. Preparing students for the future profession in such a way is an important part of education at the university level, also because of the demands made by employers today. As stated by M. Bartkowiak and M. Barańska “deliberately planned and actively implemented practices maybe a bargaining chip in the search for employment” (Bartkowiak, Barańska, 2012).

Thanks to the teaching practice students expand their specialistic knowledge in order to assess situations which they are part of or to make decisions and respect ethical standards. Thanks to the teaching practice students develop their knowledge and skills, gaining personal experience in working with students.

As mentioned before, according to A.T. Pearson, in order to be effective and valuable, the teaching practice must be a reflexive experience. Its objective is to both acquire knowledge and to use it, and the effect of such training is the actual practice of teaching skills not learning about them. It is therefore a key component of a teacher’s training. The teaching practice should result in higher students’ awareness about the actions taken by him/her and the knowledge of the action. The knowledge that a student acquires from the teaching practice is not universal, it cannot be applied in any situation, because it relates to specific circumstances or people. The future teacher must reflect and discover what would be appropriate in a given situation in which he found himself, whether he could use the strategies known to him, or maybe some of them should be modified. This is a reflexive practical experience – the ability “to modify the beliefs and teacher’s plans. It is very important because the teacher must be able to adapt to changing situations and it can only be done through changes in their knowledge” (Pearson, 1994).

According to K. Żuchelkowska particular attention should be paid to the following actions of students:

- observing an organized or spontaneous activity undertaken by three educational entities, namely the teacher, pupils and their parents,
- undertaking actions providing care, education and teaching resulting from the existing situation of education in the school,
- conducting organized teaching and educational activities,
- acting as a class teacher in the school,
- analyzing and interpreting the observed and experienced events and educational situations,
- observing the course of methodical teaching in the classroom,
- developing lesson scenarios,
- conducting classes on the basis of previously developed scenarios,
- organizing the work of pupils in task groups,
- diagnosing the level of knowledge and skills of pupils,
- working individually with pupils manifesting multiple intelligences or having developmental disorders,

- discussing classes and other forms of activities with the teaching practice supervisor or tutor,
- evaluating conducted classes and other activities (Żuchelkowska, 2012).

According to R. Perry the purpose of the teaching practice is to enable students to undertake different actions and activities. These include:

- establishing contacts with children – it is one of the most important and difficult tasks for the teacher. He must first get to know his students so as to organize their learning process in a valuable way. Mutual trust is also indispensable. The activities of students during the teaching practice, which is directly related to making contact with children, are based on observation. It is useful for creating curricula, selecting strategies, monitoring progress, discovering the strengths of children, explaining unusual behavior, which in turn all enable the creation of favorable conditions for learning,
- developing one's own philosophy associated with teaching – in the process of gaining experience, learning, reading, forming personal beliefs about learning, or teaching the future teachers develop their own philosophy of teaching, which contains what the student knows and what he thinks about teaching. This is important as it will affect the decisions taken by the teacher,
- creating an environment of learning and teaching – during the teaching practice, students learn how to arrange the classroom, use the space provided, select and store materials and organize the day. Students also have the chance to observe how the organization of the physical environment affects the behavior of students. In addition, they gain practical experience related to the preparation for the classes. Another thing students learn during the teaching practice is the ability to create an atmosphere conducive to learning. It should be characterized with the provision of emotional warmth and supportive environment,
- the development of personal theory and practical skills – while becoming a teacher it is important to create and develop one's own theory of teaching, which in turn is the basis for making decisions on the practice of teaching (what the teacher does and how). It therefore concerns both the subject of teaching (what?) and methods (how?). The development of personal theory is possible thanks to the description of events or the reflection on what the student sees and does. During the teaching practice, students learn new ways and techniques, try out the ones that they already know or about which they have read. In addition, students learn how to interpret situations, make decisions, act and react to what is happening,
- cooperation with adults in institutions of early childhood education – in the course of the teaching practice students also have contact with adults such as the supervising teacher, headmaster, other people working at school or parents. Prospective teachers can observe others in these relations, learning how to build interpersonal relations (Perry, 2000).

Another goal of the teaching practice is to develop professional competence. According to K. Denka at present teachers need the following competencies:

praxeological, communication, cooperation, creative, computer, and moral. The competences comprise knowledge, abilities, skills, and dispositions that enable the realization of the task of education. Teacher's competence is also associated with his self-esteem, self-awareness, the need to constantly improve his competence and his own professional development (Denek, 2012) (cf. A. Szkolak, 2014). During the teaching practice, students have the opportunity to develop communication skills by listening and talking with children, encouraging reading and at the same time stimulating the sensitivity of children to the richness of language. In pursuing educational goals the students utilize the knowledge about interpersonal communication. According to a study conducted by W. Lane experience gained by students during the teaching practice makes it easy for them to establish contact and communicate with children, control the class and themselves. The participants in this study, having such experiences, were of the opinion that the meeting with children or youth is not scary for them and they believe they can cope with behavioral problems better (Dróźka, 2000). In contrast, social and interaction skills are improved by supporting children in their activities, giving them advice, solving common problems which helps them achieve objectives. "Adapting activities to the capabilities of individual pupils should be associated with a particular emphasis on creating an atmosphere of cooperation and social skills as well as on more intellectual development rather than on acquiring and recreating specific content" (Czaja-Chudyba, 2013). During the teaching practice, student teachers have the opportunity to apply new ways of confronting various issues, news, innovations.

The future teacher and his competences affect both the functioning of the school and the effectiveness of the education process. Thanks to his competences the teacher can properly plan the educational process, realize the set aims and tasks, evaluate his own educational activities and teaching work in accordance with accepted norms and standards. The early education teacher who has developed professional skills can enrich the personality of the child, care for their comprehensive development. He knows how to organize the reality around children where they feel happy.

Therefore, "through the teaching practice, student teachers learn about this professional group, integrate with it, they learn how to be a good teacher, and acquire the habit of self-reflection" (Żuchelkowska, 2012).

J. Kuźma identifies three basic key features characteristic of the teaching practice in preparing students for the teaching profession,

- adaptive function – it involves the gradual introduction to the teaching profession. Adapting to the teaching profession is carried out by preparing for lifelong learning, self-improvement and self-education. In addition, this is also the process of adaptation to the school environment, extracurricular and multiple organizational responsibilities, or teaching and educational institutions,
- reflective function – involves deeper analysis, considering one's own role and place in the future profession as a teacher. The scope of this function also includes internal attitude towards the pupils as the subject of pedagogical work and

reflection on the knowledge and experience gained during studies. In this case, the student can ask himself whether he is the right person in the right place and dispel any doubts about the pursuing a career as a teacher of early childhood education,

- innovative function – it has a twofold dimension and significance. On the one hand it is the development of the student as researcher i.e. to prepare him for independent learning, conducting proper experiments and experimental tests. On the other hand, this function has to be reflected in the search of and implementation of pedagogical, psychological or teaching innovations (Kuźma, 2000).

The Encyclopedia of Education of the 21st century refers to the fourth function which is “the function of integration, which aims to combine knowledge from different fields of science, objects, activities. This affects the efficient organization of the educational process, and motivation” (Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna XXI wieku, 2005).

On the other hand, K. Denek lists the functions of the teaching practice as caring, teaching-educational, economic, creative, ecological and axiological. Thanks to them, students can link their theoretical knowledge with its practical application, leading to systematize, deepen and consolidate knowledge (Denek, 1994).

M. Jakowicka lists cognitive, educational, research, innovative and creative functions, emphasizing above all the importance of the cognitive and educational ones. The former is aimed at understanding by the candidate to the profession its specificity and the environment and to gain experience concerning the teacher’s work (by conducting classes and observation). The educational function has to develop in students certain habits concerning the teaching process, increase their interest in pedagogy, building proper interpersonal relations with pupils, staff, and parents (Jakowicka, 1991).

In the course of work on the role of the teaching practice the leitmotiv of this project has been identified, namely the statement that “the teaching practice should draw prospective teachers into the research process and to shape their novel attitude, defined by the ability to ask questions, self-formulation of problems, developing sensitivity and intuition indispensable for the discovery of new and relevant phenomena and processes in the moment of their creation i.e. in an authentic, bio-socio-cultural and socio-educational environment” (Kuźma, 2000). During the teaching practice the trainee teacher needs to have an open attitude and willingness to creatively verify the knowledge acquired during the studies. Entering the school environment the student should try to become sensitive to teaching and education difficulties related to his pupils. Every day of the teaching practice is a mine of diverse pedagogical knowledge about children and their education. Particular attention is paid to the issue that in their work no teacher is confronted with the same problematic situation to resolve. The application of theoretical knowledge is not sufficient to resolve all emerging problems and dilemmas. Observing the

reactions of active teachers to emerging situations can contribute to creating one's own theories and reactions to a given situation.

Student teaching practice integrates multiple elements in the process of teacher education. It is certainly the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge of school education, but also a combination of the purposes of education in various fields of academic training, often recognized in various categories of phenomena and concepts. What is more, it integrates concepts from a range of different subjects, the so-called pedagogical ones including psychology, pedagogy, sociology, etc. It is also the integration of various forms of implementation of educational tasks that require undertaking multiple types of activity, involvement of academic teachers, students and school teachers, as well as students' and pupils' activities in the school which then become the plane for mutual communication and mutual learning.

Summing up the role of the teaching practice in teacher education and hence the student's preparation for work, the words of F.A. Diesterweg paraphrased by K. Żuchelkowska might be referred to: "the first stage of education is worth as much as is worth the teacher working with children" (Żuchelkowska, 2012).

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Abstract

The content of the article is related to the debate about the role of teaching practice in the training of candidates for teachers of early-childhood education. The period of vocational training and equipping the future teacher with required professional qualifications plays an important role in the way of perceiving the profession and pursuing the occupation of early-education teacher. Theory and practice in training early education teachers should be interrelated. Thanks to teaching practice it is possible to draw attention to the wisdom and utility acquired in the study of knowledge.

Key words: teaching practice, early-education teacher

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