

Towards the Professionalization of Students Prepared to Become Teachers

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Abstract: *The study is focused on mentoring of the teaching practice for student teachers. It aims at assessing their formation based on the application of theoretical knowledge in professional practice, taking into consideration new perspectives about the meaning of teaching effectively. The following study is based on a survey of students conducted by student teachers, based on the characteristics of the profession of teachers and valued professional competencies as necessary to achieve. Review and analysis of data allows us to appreciate to what extent the previous experiences, relationships with companion pedagogues and teacher mentor, as well as all the supporting factors in professional practice, condition the effectiveness of the professional practice of the student teacher. Professional practice, viewed as a coordination of theoretical knowledge with practical skills and adaptation to the school context, makes us think about the choice of different strategies in the preparation of teachers skilled in the function of a successful teaching.*

Keywords: *teaching practice, mentoring, professional development, professional competencies*

Introduction

The context of the preparatory work in the faculty

The student teachers participate in a process that gives them the essential professionalism, which is achieved towards the pedagogical practices. According to Paquay (2007), the pedagogical practices compose an important modality in the professional developing of future teachers, because they put the student teachers in situations that will come up during the process of teaching. There are some considerable numbers of treatments on pedagogical practices in building the profession of the teacher and especially on the way how the impact in building professional responsibilities is seen. Brau-Antony & Jourdain (2007) and also Perrault, Brassart & Dubus (2007) evaluate that the pedagogical practices are the dispositive that contributes more in developing professional necessary competences to exercise a teacher's profession. Leaving aside the tension that is felt amongst theoretical knowledge and practical ones, the student teachers find the need to build and obtain diverse professional competencies: technical and didactical in choosing contents of teaching and learning, also social, relationship, adaptations and interactions in a class.

Our research is concerned with the process of professionalism in the first steps of the career. It aims to detect support items that help towards the professional practice, the adaptations that lead to a progressive building of professional competences, seen as a crucial element in the process of developing the identity of a student teacher. As a matter of fact, it seems inadequate to look for us to ask for the achievement of a good relationship with knowledge during the professional practice since the very beginning. According to Charlot "the relationship with knowledge is the relationship with the world, the other and with him/herself of a subject that is facing the need to learn".

The student teacher is gradually integrated in the school context and tries to adapt with it. Lyn McDonald (1st Volume, Number 2, 2004) emphasizes the role that cooperation has in the development of student teachers. The primary factors in the relationship mentor teacher-student teacher are systematically considered. Personal pedagogy of student practitioner and cooperation are seen as important, especially in the ability of mentor teachers in articulating their practice and helping in linking theory with practice. The initial professional experience, lived in different ways can enhance and reinforce the motivation on a choice made or may bring a period of doubt to future teachers.

The presentations during the development in professional practice

Seen as one of the forms of knowledge with a lot of values, presentations of student practitioners give meaning to practice. They serve to operate when confronted to the surrounding environment by maintaining at the same time a cognitive balance in a specific professional context.

To reduce possible discrepancies between the rates, ideas and real practices, the student teachers present a series of works that are especially focused about of lessons construction and the different aspects of teaching. Initially a concept of the ideal way of teaching is developed, starting from discussions, cultures and ideas embedded in the school experience.

Exploring forms of personalization of training, starting from individual presentations makes you aware of the way everyone develops a particular view about the nature of professional competences. If this point of view evolves with practice, ideal views, relative with the profession and qualification will guide the behaviour and attitudes of a student teacher through his experience in professional practice. But this process takes into consideration even moments of tension and imbalance in relation to the initial knowledge, from which the student has to build new coherences, necessary in developing professional competences.

Professional competences, identity construction and the relation to knowledge

To find a balance, student teachers be exposed to reports of the formation rates, with the requirements of the profession, different disciplines, professional practices and are so engaged in action. The rate of knowing and the feeling of controlling the situation might lead straight to a partial reorganization of professional practice. The identity of the student teacher can be discovered by looking at the awareness, the interactions and adjustments.

Altet, in a study on the student teachers identifies three types of reports with knowledge throughout the period of the professional practice:

- The “instrumental”, on which you can see a strict need of the student teachers for using in class available recipes that have been successful.
- The professional report, which underlines the progressive construction of acting schemes and the need to articulate theory and practice at the same time.
- The intellectual report, in which the satisfaction brought by studying, the practices done in university and the participation in an environment far from the teaching one is evaluated.

The professional competences are gained in a progressive way in such a practice that puts the student teacher in front of complex real life situations, where he looks from himself to put in practice the theoretical aspects that he learned. From this point of view, socializing (exchange between colleagues, different meetings) and personal experiences (leaving with the students, the image of the ideal teacher, engagement in sport activities or other entertainment activities) help in building the presentations on the teaching profession.

The final goal of any training should be increased confidence and competence of the co-operators. Teachers who feel a sense of accomplishment in their role will bring that passion and commitment that is necessary to make practice a crucial experience, suggested by literature. The study show that the characteristics, attitudes and good practices of mentor teachers include the ability to motivate student teachers and in many cases, to be motivated by them.

Method

In making this article possible, qualitative and quantitative method was used. Initially a survey with last year's student teachers, who were almost in the end of their professional practice, and also mentor teachers who accompanied the students in the classes, was made. This survey was given to around 100 students who were invited to anonymously fill them, during a meeting that lasted around 35 minutes, and also to around 20 mentor teachers. In addition to the written survey, a conversation was developed too.

A series of questions that were directly related to teaching and the behaviour of the student teacher in class, such as the tricks of teaching developed through the professional practice, the implementation of different theoretical aspects taught in the University during the everyday practice, the organization of the work in class, taking into consideration students with different levels, teamwork and the co-operation of the mentor and the other actors.

The surveys showed different modalities of action and engagement in professional practice. Besides the classic identification questions (sex, age, school where you practiced etc.), the questionnaires was concerned with professional experience. This was requested by various questions dealing with: the importance that was dedicated to professional practice; the possible expectations from the mentor teacher (help, sharing experience, etc.); the difficulties encountered in the professional context, the links that student teachers could decide between teachings they have gotten at the University and the reality lived throughout the professional practice; relationships with accompanying teacher, his assistance and intervention during the realization of professional practise, the need of conversations and sharing experience with other student teachers and with other teacher in the school and some suggestions about issues that they thought should be changed.

In general, professional practice is seen as a very important aspect of the process of forming future teachers. Student teachers have appreciated the fact that it is divided in two years, alternating with the observation period, because this

way they get to know the class and the students better, which allows them to follow in continuity their development and reach towards the necessary competences to teach.

The role of professional practice in forming future teachers

Professional practice forms a teacher; it's where the knowledge learned in the University is put in practice. This is not considered simple. It requires adapting and good integrating abilities in an unfamiliar environment. The student teacher has to find his spot and integrate in a well-structured context, in depth of which there are different actors: students, mentor teachers, accompanying pedagogue, parents, other teachers in the school etc. During a discussion with a student was noticed that he never had the chance to integrate in a satisfactory way and find himself. This is not a general case, but many of them say that it's difficult integrating and be recognized as part of the school. Maybe the timespan itself cannot let this aspect become better.

The data and comments that were collected are overall positive as far as professional practice is concerned. However, there are some remarks that testify the problems that you run through. Being in a school for a short period of teaching doesn't give you the chance to finish a whole activity or project. On the other hand, you can notice a lack of homogeneity in the development and inclusion of professional practice. A student said that he was under the impression that he learned less than his friends because the teacher had only given him second hand responsibilities. This student attributes this fact to the lack of inclusion of integration theory-practice from the mentoring teacher through all the development of the practice.

However, the collected data is encouraging. Out of 100 students, 76 of them seem satisfied by the practical formation that they had the chance to get. Only 12 students are not very satisfied, but they say there was nothing wrong with the way of proceeding. For 82 students, professional practice is the most interesting and motivating part of their formation as a future teacher. 68 students say that only with the theoretical knowledge that they get in the University they wouldn't be able to confront the class in the near future, seeing the multiple problems they had to overcome in the everyday teaching practice. To the question whether the objectives that were set with the student were achieved, 73% of the teachers answered positively, 22% answered "partially" and in only 5% of them the objectives weren't reached. To the question "How do you qualify the level of implication of the student teacher during the professional practice?" the answers were these: 46%- very good, 32%- good, 17%- satisfactory, 5%- weak.

As we expressed above, because this article in a broader study zone, the diversity of surveys and the conversations with teachers and student teachers is broader and involves a considerable number of topics, related to all the aspects of the educative job in a school, which have to get absorbed by the student teachers.

Professional practice is estimated from the students that are preparing to become students from different didactical points of view. It allows "learning how to build summaries that are optimized for the level of the students" (62%), "learning how to build mechanisms that will make students learn" (53%). It also makes easier the professional orientations, favouring a better knowing of "the teacher staff" (61%), "yourself" (48%) and of "the characteristics of students" (72%). Apart from this aspect, from a pedagogical standpoint, it offers an interesting experience, especially through improving the quality of the relationships between students and a more efficient administration of different situation throughout teaching.

The evaluation forms in the end of the professional practices are seen from around 55% of the surveyed students as a chance "to reflect over the professional practice" and as "a possibility of evaluation and self-evaluation". For 23% of them it was an occasion to "create a fair relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge". For some more, these evaluations let you "realize better the preparation for teaching". As you can see, the role played by the professional practice in schools has a special importance in creating professional future teachers.

What we expect from the mentoring teacher

Throughout this professional experience, the help of the mentoring teacher is seen as an essential factor in realizing a successful practice. According to 73% of the surveyed student, the mentoring teacher "should not hesitate to make any kind of remark", we can distinguish different nuances in the relationship created between the accompanying teacher and the student teacher. Through a request "to be always paying attention to the mentoring teacher", "to trust and be certain about what he says", and the wait for "the concrete solution" and the expressed need to "overcome difficulties", we see how relationship between the student teacher, the mentoring teacher and the pedagogue that guides them in these practises, becomes better and more professional. According to the modalities of considering the help that is reciprocally expected, the transformations connected to the professional practice are seen more or less related with these counter

reactions. For 52% of the students, pedagogical practice “improves mainly thanks to the help given by the mentoring teacher”, and for 23% of them, this improvement comes from “work and personal reflection”. For 16% of them, it improves because of “the reciprocal relationship teacher-student” and for 9% the professional practice didn’t have “any influence” in their teaching practice. It’s suggested that an effective co-operator is not only engaged for the teaching profession, but it is also an articulate supported of that profession (Mayer & Austin, 1999). They keep suggesting the idea that co-operative teachers work as a “Doormen towards the profession” and they have a central role in building and keeping teaching a profession with a high status. Mentor teachers mediate the professional formation of student teachers, by supporting the acquisition of their practical and professional capabilities (Fairbanks, Freedman and Kahn, 2000). This development of professionalization is tightly connected to the direction, reciprocal learning and friendship amongst the accompanying teacher and the student teacher.

Discussion

Towards the professionalization of student teachers, the focus on the pupils

The analysis highlights a lot of themes. Initially, an important place is dedicated to the reflection of the student teacher, which allows choosing the appropriate didactical solutions in order to adapt teaching with the reality in the class, and favours the effective practical analysis, whose purpose is to understand the difficulties that pupils go through, so that he/she can find appropriate ways and forms to have a successful teaching process. Taking into consideration the level of the student encourages different questions and opens a lot of opportunities to work with efficiency and to manage a successful teaching process. Alternating the time between individual research, time of the individualized help supposes the position of the student teacher, the clarity of the action, establishing a healthy relationship with learning, being self-conscious over what you want to achieve. Preparing the teaching sequences and sessions, the clarification of the objectives, defining the technique and methods that are going to be used, making questions with forming character, knowledge over the subject, making an argumentative evaluation etc. are substantial factors that increase the participation in the class.

Professionalism

The problematic has to do with the fact that the professional status of a teacher has taken great importance and tendencies to see the act of teaching as a professional act is becoming more visible. As a matter of fact, this case is built on knowing the professional character of teaching that requires an initial college formation and intellectual, personal and social capabilities. The complexity of the duty of a teacher requires for him to be able to solve several problems. In his work he has to be independent and accomplish his responsibilities. In such a context, we have to put of first view a bigger participation of student teacher in administering the educative orientation of the class and a dynamic co-operation between the student teacher and the mentoring teacher. Furthermore, the presentations that student teachers make in their role as a teacher, the responsibilities they assume and the relationships with the pupils are also part of the professionalization process. Student teachers have to be sensitized on the professional character of their future jobs and think about the purposes of education.

Implementation in forming future teachers

We have to notice the emergency of the process of teaching professionalization at the student teachers. For this, it’s necessary to create a professional portfolio with the purpose of favouring his development and the reflexive analysis, for a better understanding of his/her work. This portfolio gives the student teacher the chance to clarify his personal and professional objectives during college education.

Except from the different techniques and procedures, it is also about the development of a statement seen in a professional perspective. Last but not least, the student teacher should not forget that the main responsibility connected to his/her profession is the relationship created with the pupils and their well-being in the classroom. The respect towards individual and collective changes should also be in the attention of the teacher student.

The place of professional practice in the formation of future

In the professional context of the profession of the teacher and especially future teachers, professional practice shows up as a crucial moment in the professional development. It constitutes a favourable context in the acquisition of knowledge on the aspect of professional reaction:

- Professional Practice allows future teachers to develop professional competencies and to build their professional identity
- Professional Practice allows future teachers to obtain a realistic view of the profession
- Professional Practice allows student teachers to socialize with the teaching profession.

The way in which professional practice is articulated with other activities in the process of development has a lot of importance. The achievement of the expected competencies in the end of the professional practice is also related with the role and the effectiveness of the mentor teacher. Furthermore, we are not only talking about verifying the level of development of one or the other competence, but also favouring a clear reflection and thought over the teaching and learning practice on the student teacher. Evaluation requires taking into consideration a huge number of social factors and has to happen in a context where the mentor teacher and the student teacher share their ideas on teaching. On the other hand, even the mentoring teachers have to be trained to be able to supervise the practice. It involves identifying the purpose, styles, approaches and the ability to develop an effective relationship with the student teacher. This also means that the mentor teachers have to be in touch with the latest professional knowledge, which involves knowledge on the curricula, teaching and learning, the styles and the sources. This is what makes a successful mentoring teacher, but also requires the recognition of the status and the financing of the mentor teacher.

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