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Pedagogical praxis as a process of developing professional competencies in university education of future teachers

Mariana Sirotová *

"FF UCM, Nam. J. Herdu 2, Trnava, 917 01, Slovakia"

Abstract

Pedagogical praxis plays an important role in the pre-gradual preparation of teachers. As is the case with a doctor, a teacher must also undergo his practical preparation in a real environment with real subjects. The acquirement of professional competencies begins during the pre-gradual preparation and they are further developed in a real educational praxis. Hypothetically, we can talk about a covariant dependence between the length of a teacher's pedagogical praxis and the degree of development of his professional competencies. The degree of the mutual link between these two segments depends on several factors. Pre-gradual preparation of a teacher and a pedagogical praxis realized during this time is one of the most important factors influencing the teacher's future educational praxis and the development of his professional competencies. It is, therefore, necessary to pay an appropriate attention to the realization of the professional praxis not only from a theoretical point of view. The article presents an analysis of the opinions and attitudes of students of the FF UCM, who underwent pedagogical praxis and the opinions of their teacher-trainers. Through a questionnaire the students and the teachers expressed their views of the process of acquiring the key competencies within the pedagogical praxis.

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* Mariana Sirotova. Tel.: +421-33-5565279
E-mail address: mariana.sirotova@ucm.sk

1. Pedagogical praxis – the theoretical definition

Pedagogical praxis is an integral, but mainly an important, part of the process of pre-gradual preparation of teachers for all the levels of education. A teacher cannot be adequately prepared for his future profession without undergoing a practical training during his university study. With respect to its importance it is possible to find enough professional and scientific studies as well as research projects aimed at solving the theoretical, practical or legal problems of the pedagogical praxis. These sources, however, do not offer a united view of the methodological procedure in the types and the realization of the pedagogical praxis in pre-gradual preparation of teachers. We must then ask a question if it is even possible to achieve unity in the realization of the pedagogical praxis at all the pedagogical faculties and for all the study programs. In the system of teachers' education the pedagogical praxis has a different scope and structure at different universities. This fact is a result of the specifics of the various study programs, but also results from a non-existing legislative support in the Slovak Republic. The unity can, however, be found in the accentuation of the need for improving the quality of the pedagogical praxis and in the gradual realization of the specific types of the pedagogical praxis. Pedagogical praxis is realized mainly for the reason of developing the professional competencies of future teachers.

Several definitions of the pedagogical praxis can be found in professional literature. To work out a characteristic of the pedagogical praxis, it is possible to use a comparison of the stated theoretical definitions through identifying certain common signs. The first common feature is the inseparability and importance of the pedagogical praxis in pre-gradual preparation. Without the theoretical knowledge background of the teaching subjects, the pedagogical and psychological disciplines, the realization of the pedagogical praxis becomes impossible. The third common feature is the fact that the pedagogical praxis is a specific form of learning making up space for a creative activity of the student – trainee. The fourth feature is the feedback concerning the ability of applying the theoretical preparation into the school praxis. The fifth common feature is the development of the professional competencies necessary for the realization of the teacher's job.

Pedagogical praxis as a form of experience-based and professional learning enables the students of teaching (the trainees) to develop their professional as well as personal competencies in cooperation with the teachers –trainers and the university teachers in the realistic conditions of the school praxis of the training schools. It creates a base for the development of their own teaching style and it develops the skills for studying the quality and efficiency of own pedagogical activity through the process of self-knowledge, self-evaluation and self-reflection. Pedagogical praxis creates space for verifying the theoretical knowledge, methods, and procedures directly in the conditions of the trainee's practical performance in real conditions of an educational process. Thus it provides the trainee with an optimal process for the development of his key competencies of his future job.

The target of the pedagogical praxis is based on a graduate's profile and can be specified as the development of a positive attitude toward the teaching profession, a student's self-reflection, the cooperation with the teacher-trainer and the didactics teacher of the department of the chosen teaching subject and the development of professional competencies. During the course of the pedagogical praxis a student gradually acquires basic professional abilities such as: the planning ability, the managing ability, abilities necessary for the realization of educational units, abilities leading toward the facilitation of a positive climate in school and the class and toward sustaining the discipline, diagnostic abilities and auto-diagnostic abilities (Ivanovičová, 2007). The general target of pedagogical praxis is thus to achieve such a degree of the trainee's personality development in the area of professional and personal competencies that will make him capable to start performing his job after finishing his studies.

Based on the importance of pedagogical praxis in pre-gradual preparation of future teachers and its general target we were interested in how university students as well as the graduates performing the job of a teacher perceive the fulfillment of this target. The pilot survey of the students' opinions of the pedagogical praxis was performed at the department of pedagogy FF UCM in Trnava and these opinions were compared with the views of the teacher-trainers. As we are trying to vigorously integrate the theoretical and the practical preparation of teachers, in a sense of gradual system in which the key competences of a teacher are thoughtfully formulated, we were interested in the opinions of both sides about the development of the individual competencies through the process of pedagogical praxis.

We chose the key competencies of a teacher as the outline of the questionnaire. Based on the study of the competency models of several authors (Vašutová 2007, Petlák 2009, Kosová a kol. 2012, Danek 2014 a Frýdková 2015) we divided the competencies into three areas:

A. Project competencies that contain the following abilities:

- to master the principle of utilizing the chronological thematic plan (well-planning and integrity of the themes, target orientation of the educational activities)
- to be able to didactically fit a chosen thematic unit into a given number of lessons
- to be capable of working out a detailed “educational” preparation of a lesson
- to be able to expertly define the educational target as a means of managing the education – in a form of a specific and measurable quality which is an expected result of all the activities of the students and the teachers in a given lesson
- to be able to evaluate the cognitive difficulty of an educational target according to the Bloom’s taxonomy
- to prepare a didactic analysis of the curriculum under the visual angle of a “bridge” which makes the curriculum more accessible to the students (which means to respect the specifics of children’s learning , experience, motivation) in the field of:
 - conception and relationship structures in a curriculum, to define the basic curriculum
 - horizontal and vertical linking of the curriculum in the current educational plan – utilizing the mutual relations between subjects
 - the pupils’ abilities and activities which are used in the educational process and lead to successful mastering of the basic curriculum – while taking into consideration the developmental and individual potentialities of pupils
- to be able to choose from the methodological arsenal the most efficient procedures and ways of organizing the teaching
- to be able to create a system of teaching tasks that ensure the fulfillment of the teaching target, to formulate the tasks clearly and in an engaging way, make sure they are appropriate, to be able to judge their learning difficulty from a point of view of the available taxonomies
- to be able to set a teaching strategy – to plan a purposeful, logical and dynamic methodological procedure of a lesson

B. Executive competencies which include the following abilities:

1. Communicational:

- to be able to connect with the class as a whole and with each pupil individually
- to be able to react to certain signals, such as tiredness, lack of concentration or interest, curiosity, interest, asking for attention etc.
- to lead a diagnostic discussion with pupils (a pupil)
- to lead a heuristic teaching discussion with pupils
- to execute a simple presentation and explanation
- to systematically create a positive climate in the class

2. Organizational and managerial:

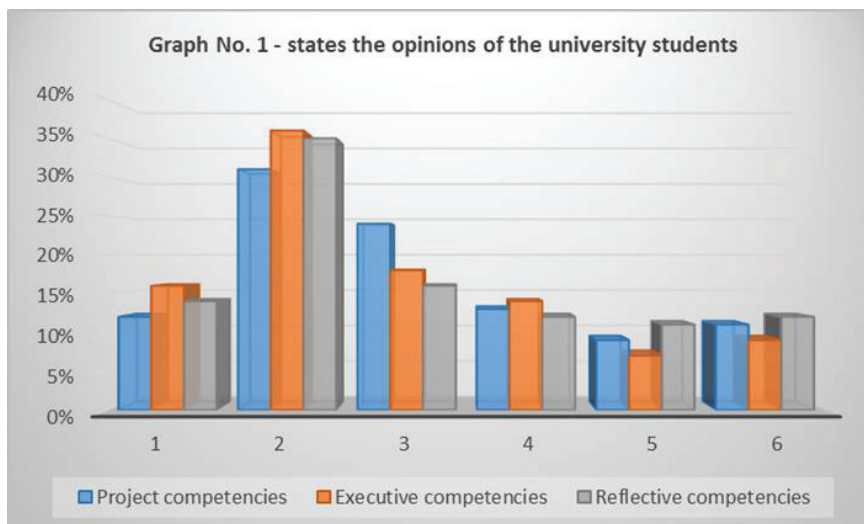
- to engage all the pupils in an activity
- to be capable of organizing the class environment in a way that enables a mutual contact between the teacher and the pupils
- to systematically encourage cooperation and mutual help
- to be able to sustain discipline in the classroom
- to facilitate an internal motivation of pupils, include motivating activities, prepare unconventional materials for exercising and checking the progress
- when linking several activities in a class to thoroughly follow an organizational procedure:
 - clear, understandable, simple and adequate instructions explaining the expected result, steps that need to be taken to achieve this result and conditions that must be adhered to
 - if necessary to offer an advice during an activity, to check adherence to the set conditions and rules
 - to summarize the results of the teaching or to write a report
 - to rigorously evaluate the results, to offer a feedback, to utilize pupils’ self-control and self-evaluation as often as possible
- to organize cooperative learning in pairs, groups, competitions and activities that enable pupils to widen their knowledge through other pupils
- to transfer the responsibility for the results and the behavior onto the pupils

- to organize individual teaching
 - to be able to transfer a simple learning experience onto pupils – to prepare conditions for an “aha!” experience
3. Diagnostic and interventional:
- to be capable of organizing a continual pedagogical diagnosis of the class as well as of the individual pupils
 - to adapt the teaching requirements to the abilities of individual pupils
 - to systematically work with pupils who require special attention
 - to utilize various positively motivating forms of evaluation
 - to regularly evaluate the course of the lesson and the overall results of the pupils
 - by utilizing the evaluating procedures to direct the students toward self-evaluation
- C. Reflective competencies which include the following abilities:
- to be able to systematically observe a lesson and summarize it in a report
 - to be capable of judging, evaluating a work of a colleague, to theoretically argue the evaluation
 - to be able to self-reflect and self-evaluate

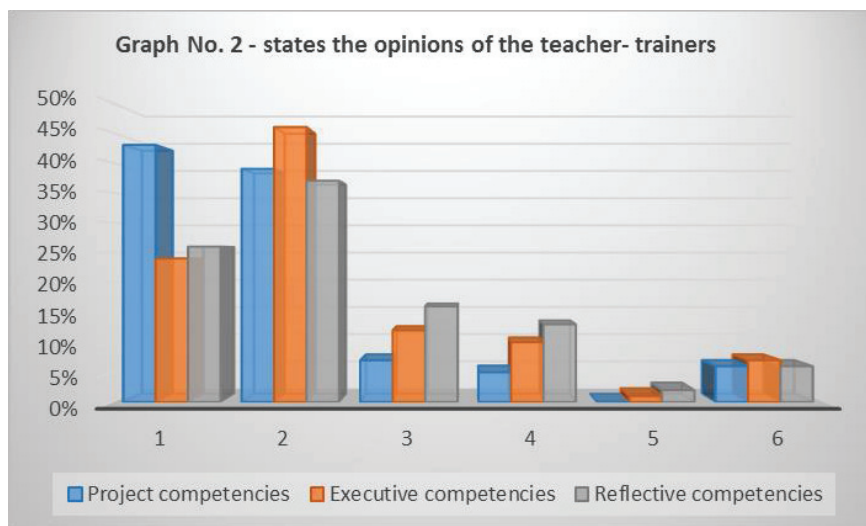
2. The analysis of the opinions of university students and teacher-trainers of the development of competencies through the process of pedagogical praxis

The questionnaire was given to the students of the teaching study programs in various subjects. There were 56 students of the 1.year of the master study program and 72 students of the 2.year of the master study program of FF UCM in Trnava. Feminization of the teaching profession is quite apparent in the Slovak Republic and it was visibly reflected in the gender structure of the respondents. Only 13% of the respondents were male while 87% were female. A similar rate was recorded in the category of teacher-trainers. The survey sample included 128 respondents, 89% were women. The questionnaire consisted of the characteristics of the individual competencies and the students evaluated them based on their own pedagogical praxis experience using an assessment scale from 1 to 6 (1 – yes, fully, 2 – mostly yes, 3 – partially, 4 – only in part, 5 – no, 6 – unable to assess). The same questionnaire was given to the teacher-trainers. In both cases the questionnaires were anonymous. In the process of evaluating and analyzing the collected data we followed the ethical procedures of research and data collection as described by Nováková (2015). A student submitted his questionnaire together with the questionnaire of his teacher-trainer and deposited it into a freely accessible box. Students were instructed by a letter included in the questionnaire package to submit their questionnaires only if their teacher-trainer had also filled his questionnaire.

Graph No. 1 presents the evaluation of the survey and states the opinions of the university students (expressed via the percent occurrence)



Graph No. 2 presents the opinions of the teacher-trainers



3. Conclusion

As is apparent from the graphs the teachers perceive the students' development of the key competencies more positively than the students themselves. In the area of project competencies 43% of the teachers agreed fully, 39% mostly agreed, 12% partially agreed with the students' development of these competencies during the praxis. Compared with the teachers the students fully agreed only in 12% of the cases, mostly agreed in 31% of the cases and 37% of students partially agreed. In case of the teachers a negative evaluation did not occur, and only 6% of the respondents stated that they are unable to assess the development of the competencies. However, in the students' category the negative evaluation occurred in 9% of the cases and 11% of the respondents couldn't assess. Similar evaluation was seen in the category of the executive and reflexive competencies. The results of the percentage analysis more or less reflected our expectations. We expected that the students would be more negative than the teachers. It can be explained by an insufficient length of the pedagogical praxis during the study, a problem with assigning the training schools, a problem with finding a qualified teacher-trainer that would not only be willing to accept a trainee for pedagogical praxis, but to also expertly guide him through the praxis as well as perform detailed didactic analysis with the student. The positive evaluation of the teacher-trainers can be considered quite natural. The teachers are not aware of the length of the pedagogical praxis and if they accept students for training they try to guide them in a positive way, expertly approach the outputs of the student's work and the didactic analysis of the preparation and the teaching process itself. The target of our pilot survey was to find out the opinions of the students, the opinions of the teacher-trainers and to compare them. Based on this comparison we adapted the timetable, the method and the scope of the pedagogical praxis and suggested tasks and exercises for students taking part in the pedagogical praxis whose solutions lead toward more optimal development of the particular professional competencies.

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