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Training Primary School Teachers – Issues and Trends Republic

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Abstract

Training teachers of all school levels has been a long-term fundamental issue in the Czech Republic. Significant attention is paid to training primary school teachers as primary school has undergone a vast transformation recently. As a part of this transformation, training primary school teachers is being innovated in terms of current trends emerging in other European countries. Along with these innovative steps, a number of issues have come up, such as which form of teacher training for this level of the school system is the most appropriate. Among the most frequent issues belong the following: to what extent the training should be academic, what should be the ratio of practical training to theoretical training, whether this training should be provided by universities or individual institutes, what should be the length of the study and final graduation. Broad discussion is held on the content of the study programmes as such, on the extent of their variability leading to prospective teacher's personal development and a high level of competence. The paper will present the basic design of teacher training in the Czech Republic including the issues connected thereto. It will also show current trends in the European context. Central to this will be a presentation of the research carried out with graduates in primary school education and practising primary school teachers. The findings will be assessed and used for drawing conclusions and making recommendations for the innovation of teacher training of the target school level.

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1. Introduction

In the nineties of the last century, a vast transformation of education commenced including not only the transformation of school education, textbooks and other didactics materials, but also teacher training. In terms of teacher training, the transformation aimed to eliminate a uniform approach to teacher training, which was identical

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for different school levels at various faculties of education, throughout the Czech Republic.

The former model of teacher training was characterized by a high ratio of academic theoretically orientated disciplines, in which the then ideology played a significant role as well. Training in methodology and practical training were also uniform, formal and for the future teaching practice highly unsatisfactory. Lectures and other frontal teaching techniques prevailed. Fundamental theoretical background and methodology of study was missing.

It was these drawbacks of the then teacher training that shaped the new concept of teacher training building on the principles of humanization, democracy, but also individualization and differentiation at all study levels. We intend to introduce this innovated training by describing lower and higher secondary school teacher training study programmes and primary school teacher training study programme [1].

2. Primary School Teacher Training Transformation

The situation of primary school teachers was markedly different. As early as at the beginning of the nineties, the faculties reached agreement on how to approach primary school teacher training. The fact that primary school teacher training took place only at the faculties of education had also a beneficial effect. One of the “guidelines” on how to prepare new study programmes was monitoring and deep analysis of European trends in teacher training for this level of education [2].

2.1. *The content and structure of the study*

A significant change in primary school teacher training concerned primarily the study content and structure. We may conclude that except for partial modifications this concept is a reality of current study programmes. Study programmes were newly accredited as 5-year (till then 4-year) programmes. They have retained their MA graduation. The content was structured into modules. Each module integrated thematically related courses. The study consisted and still consists of compulsory, compulsory elective and elective modules. In order to complete the study successfully, a student has to complete all compulsory modules, a given number of compulsory elective modules and 10% of his or her study load has to be comprise elective modules. If we follow the structure of modules and courses, we get the following structure:

- 1.-2. Block (Year) of Study
 - Module of the core university curriculum – History, Philosophy, ICT
 - Subject module - all subjects of the primary school curriculum
 - Specialized module – Arts, Physical Education, Music, English, French and German
 - Pedagogical-psychological module – the Basics of Pedagogy, History of Pedagogy, General Didactics, the Basics of Psychology, Developmental Psychology
 - Practical module – 1 week of observations in Year 1 in various educational institutions, 1 day a week of teaching practice - assistance in Year 2
- 3.-4. Block (Year) of Study
 - Module of the core university curriculum – ICT, Sociology, elective courses
 - Specialized module – foreign languages and “educational” subjects and their didactics
 - Pedagogical-psychological module – Special Pedagogy, Methodology, elective courses
 - Module of subject didactics – didactics of all subjects of the primary school curriculum
 - Practical module – 2 days of teaching practice – assistance - within particular subject didactics of primary school teaching, compulsory students’ learning outcomes
- 5. Block (Year) of Study
 - Specialized module – didactics of educational and language subjects
 - Pedagogical-psychological module – elective courses
 - Practical module – 2-week continuous teaching practice (Winter Semester), 4 weeks (Summer Semester)

After Year 5, the study is completed with a defence of a diploma thesis, a final state exam in pedagogy and psychology, Mathematics and its didactics, Czech Language and Literature and its didactics; and an exam based on specialization. During the final state exam, the quality of students' work during their continuous teaching practice is assessed as well (according to previously established criteria) [1].

The study is structured into a hierarchy structure. However, students are recommended to follow a standard trajectory reflecting the entry and final requirements of the courses and their interconnection. The overall proportion of compulsory, compulsory elective and elective subjects is 50:40:10. The innovation of the study content is characterized by the introduction of the courses reflecting current pedagogical theory and practice – multicultural education, sociology in education, inclusive pedagogy, etc.

The transformation of the content is related to the transformation of the forms of teaching. Frontal teaching is nowadays replaced with active forms – workshops, interactive lectures, etc. Very often critical thinking techniques, a class video recording analysis, simulation methods and drama education features are used during the learning process [8, 5].

2.2. The organisation of the study

Besides the modular structuring, the study organisation was also affected by the implementation of the credit system. A student is allowed to graduate only after he/she achieves at least 360 credits in all compulsory, chosen compulsory elective and elective subjects. The study is no longer formally divided into years of study, but into blocks of study. A student creates his/her own timetable and enrolls in courses with respect to prerequisites. This type of organisation of the study reflects student's approach to studying; his/her study abilities and circumstances. If a student fails a course, he/she can repeat the course once. If he/she repeats a course and fails again, his or her study is officially terminated.

Pedagogical practice has marked a significant change as well. Formal, previously non-supervised practice was replaced by supervised, structured and hierarchically structured practice in newly designed study programmes. Its reflective aspect and close interconnection with general pedagogy and subject didactics constitute a significant change. Teaching practice is evaluated according to previously defined and published criteria. Discussing a reflective diary is part of the final state exam in pedagogy and psychology [4].

3. Current issues of primary school teacher training

One of the current issues of prospective primary school teachers study programmes is that students are overburdened with strenuous “widely heterogeneous” content of the study, on the one hand. On the other hand, they are not experts in any content area. The argument that teachers are experts and professionals in teaching young learners and that they help to bring out and develop skills and abilities providing a base for lifelong learning often does not hold water [3].

Another issue concerns the fact that not all primary school trainee teachers go into teaching fully-qualified. Most of them lack a qualification in teaching a foreign language at primary school. Only those who succeed in completing a programme specialized in foreign language teaching to primary school pupils have this qualification. At the faculty of education in Prague, only 30% of all primary school trainee teachers acquire this qualification.

The fact that it is actually impossible to “complete” your primary school teaching qualification within lifelong learning can be seen as a currently pressing issue. The primary school extension programme is designed only for graduates in Pre-school Pedagogy or for some lower secondary school teacher training programmes [1].

The last issue to address concerns what is known as internationalization of the study programmes. Our international partners take a keen interest in primary school teacher training programmes. There has been an interest in reciprocal student exchange programmes, sending international students to study our programmes etc. Because of its heterogeneous character, more than 17 departments take part in this type of study facing a challenge to ensure good quality education in a foreign language, which is sometimes very difficult. Internationalization of the study is hindered primarily due to this reason. Another issue concerns a different length of the primary school teacher

training study programme abroad and its final graduation [1].

Usually, the study abroad lasts 3 years and it is completed with a B.A. diploma. In the content of the study, training in subjects and practical training prevail leaving the other academic disciplines with little or no space. If our students were to study abroad for a certain period, they would miss a number of disciplines. Yet our students participate in international exchange study programmes and complete the missing disciplines after their return risking extending their study or paying for a non-standard length of the study.

4. Graduates and going into teaching

The nation-wide survey on how many graduates go into teaching found that the highest number of graduates going into teaching comprises study programmes of primary school teaching. Of course, the question is how many of them stay in teaching 2 years after they enter the school. There is a wide range of reasons for that: primary school teacher training graduates are very flexible, good at communicative and creative skills, having thus very good employment prospects in other areas as well, for which they are able to retrain quickly.

Another reason is low financial reward for starting teachers and too slow pay growth. Young graduates who wish to start a family, purchase a home, travel etc. see this as a fundamental issue. Sometimes very “traditional” composition of teaching staff constitutes another considerable reason. Graduates bring enthusiasm, new ideas and innovative approaches, yet a great number of teaching staff due to their “burnout” discourage these graduates through their traditional approach to teaching, communication with pupils and their parents [2].

Conclusion

In this paper, we have briefly introduced current teacher training of prospective primary school teachers in the Czech Republic. We tried to point out issues which are to be faced even at the time of the application of innovated study programmes. Intentionally, we did not mention the economic aspect, which limits the quality and organisation of study programmes to a great extent.

A government financial support for a prospective primary school teacher study is the second lowest in the Czech Republic and equals the financial support for the programmes with frontal teaching without small groups of students and teaching practice (e.g. librarians). Yet, the faculties of education are still pleased to educate primary school teachers though they are aware of the fact that the current model of the study programme is just a compromise between a required quality and economic circumstances [4, 8].

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