Developing Professional Knowledge in the Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper wants to stress out the implications that the initial training of future teachers involves. It is based on the results collected from a five-year long study which has been investigating how students from the study programme Primary and Pre-school pedagogy acquire their theoretical and practical knowledge at the Faculty of Education Sciences, in Bachelor and Master degree studies. The study suggests strategies to improve initial teacher education and ways of determine students to become better teachers. Studying how students learn, we have identified ways of better training for the teaching profession by realised a link between theoretical and practical knowledge.

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The Postmodern contemporary society with all that it implies requires well-balanced training of the young generation so as they would be able to face social challenges. Their development and social progress are influenced by the investment made in the young generation through programmes developed by the state. These programmes focus on youth development in social and educational circumstances appropriate to their needs. State policies on education have changed a lot along with Romania’s adherence to the European Union (Potolea, D., Ciolan L., 2003). Child education focuses on offering them the opportunity to grow and develop harmoniously according to their innate abilities and their nature. Thus, it is extremely important to pay particular

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attention to the training of students’ who want to pursue a teaching career.

A performing educational system relies on many conditions such as efficient training of teaching staff. Competent teachers are a prerequisite of an efficient educational process. It is very important to develop a constant and real relationship between theoretical knowledge and educational practice of future teachers. Students, future teachers should be aware of the role they play in educating future generations and also of the fact that what they teach is what learners acquire. The quality of the learners’ studies is linked to the manner teachers know to present the teaching materials. The attainment of educational process is directly connected to the quality of competences, knowledge, skills and abilities used by teachers throughout the teaching activity.

Thorough training of future teachers involves the acquirement of all competences required by the teaching profession. Competences along with vocational abilities are the key to a successful teacher. Training of future teachers is an activity which involves an investment in the improvement of future teacher training, in continuous training and lifelong learning as well as a constant improvement of study programmes for teacher initial and continuous training (Lieberman, Pointer Mace, 2008). Lifelong learning is a necessity determined by unprecedented changes and by the fast pace they invade our social life. Therefore, school has to keep in the line with the changes using professional training adapted to the demands of labour market. Teacher training, specialist in education is achieved on two equally important segments: initial training of future teachers which experiences limitations at a certain point and needs to be continued through lifelong learning (Russel şi Loughran, 2007). These orientations involve training students, future teachers in a manner that prepares them to teach according to the requirements of teaching profession. Moreover, they should possess abilities of constant self-training after the completion of initial training (Grossman, Hammerness, McDonald, 2009). These concerns are discussed in the literature where we can find numerous studies about future teacher training but also continuous training, namely lifelong learning. Teachers should focus on their professional training irrespective of the educational level they teach to because teaching skills should be always improved. (Crowe E. 2010)

The training of specialists for early education is organized in most European countries by universities through three-four yearlong studies. Teenagers are more and more reluctant when it comes to working in education system due to the didactic profession’s lack of attractiveness. Therefore, state policies try to improve national education policies and make the didactic profession attractive for the best high school students, who would want to choose teaching out of passion and vocation: “in their policies and programmers, countries widely recognize the changing role of teachers towards becoming collaborators, facilitators of learning, and lifelong learners, but there is still too little debate involving teachers themselves.” (European Science Foundation, 2012)

Most countries try to apply different strategies of making the didactic profession more effective:

- Improving the recruitment of candidates for the teaching career;
- Improving the admission system to Bachelor and Master studies for teaching career;
- Thorough initial training;
- Support programmes for young teachers;
- Improving continuous learning programmes;
- Improving teachers’ mobility programmes;
- Programmes of professional retraining;
- Improving promotion conditions;
- More attractive salaries;
- Changing mentalities towards teaching career;
- Improving work conditions. (Mustard, J. Fraser, 2002)

The teaching profession can be achieved by the controlling the involved factors:

- Identifying the training needs of future academic teaching staff;
- Investigating the motivational factors involved in choosing teaching career;
- Polling the students’ attitude towards teaching career at the beginning, during and at the end of the psychopedagogic study programme;
- Students’ awareness of their own abilities compared to the professional competences required by the standards for academic teaching career;
- The trainers’ awareness of students’ abilities and the stimulation of active involvement in their own training;
The paradigms of professional training based on certain models are a useful guideline for professional training programmes of future teachers. Trainers’ training is a strong point in modernizing education; it is the most important way of renewing quality authentic education according to the demands of postmodern society. (Csibra, G., & Gergely, G. 2009)

1.1. Contemporary challenges in the educational process

If we compare various initial training programmes for future teachers, we notice that all are design in a manner that encourages the development of professional theoretical and practical abilities. Theoretically acquired knowledge should be implemented in practice by converting it into efficient classroom activities. No matter how effective theoretical knowledge is, it loses its efficiency without practicability. Moving from theory to practice is a difficult step. We notice many times that students who are good theoreticians fail when they need to put in practice what they have learnt and what they know (Bakkenes, Vermunt, Wubbels, 2010). The differences between students regarding the link between theory and proficient practice have various causes: personality differences, professional motivation, self-reflection and metacognition, etc.

The studies in the field highlight the necessity to stress out certain aspects related to the training of future teachers. One aspect is their thorough theoretical training, acquisition of theoretical knowledge, which is the foundation of teaching career: acquisition of pedagogic, psychological and methodological knowledge. Finding the right motivation for thorough theoretical training is a difficult endeavour. It involves personal factors such as motivation, ambition, determination, emotion withdrawal, persistent work, etc. Competences and performance in teaching career cannot be achieved with full engagement in general and specialised training (Gamble, J. 2010).

There are significant differences between students on the manner they assimilate theoretical knowledge and in terms of self-awareness of their own level of training. Some students are oriented towards rigorous learning and are interested in achieving a high level of knowledge while others are less motivated.

The second aspect refers to the practical training of future teachers. It involves using theoretical knowledge in the classroom and adapting it to each learning situation. Altogether, they are the most difficult part of professional training. It has been observed that theoretical study programmes combined with observational and experiential practice have more efficient results in terms of teachers’ initial training (Frijhoff, W. 2012). After studying more initial training programmes for future teachers, we can draw the conclusion that curricula are more and more often oriented towards a practical training of future teachers (Gamble, J. 2010). It has also been observed that the combination of theoretical learning activities with practice offers students, future teachers better training. It is not just the consequence of theory-practice relationship but mostly of motivational and metacognitive aspects. Students perceive better the requirements of teaching career, are aware of the importance of certain knowledge, which theoretically seems difficult but practice makes it easier. They also identify their own skills and abilities and can do something to improve their lacks. Metacognition, self-reflection and the manner each student understands his/her theoretical and practical training are extremely important in their professional completion (Welch,2012).

1.2. Methodology

Our faculty has adapted the study programme for future teacher in preschool and primary school education to European demands. Therefore, the syllabi are improved and updated for an efficient educational process every year. As in all European countries where emphasis is placed on practical abilities along with theoretical knowledge, our faculty tries to enrich the variety of practical-applicative activities. After consulting the Scandinavian literature (it is common knowledge that Nordic Countries have remarkable results in the educational field, (Hamilton, Clandinin, 2011) we focus on re-assessing our requirements for developing high quality education. We encourage the acquisition of theoretical knowledge (what to teach), the implementation of policies on educational practice (how to teach) and student’s motivation for thorough training in teaching profession (the way of teaching), (Gamble, 2010).

General competences (transversal and highly general in one field of study) and specific competences are the aim of theoretical training.
general competences in analysis, reflection, argumentation and interpretation as well as general personal traits aimed by the entire study programme;
management competences – the management of curricular implementation and education activities;
communication competences in educational situations typical for early and young education in different contexts and moments;
competences in planning educational activities for early ages;
methodological competences in organizing and conducting the learning process;
social competences in managing educational relationships with children of young ages and groups of children;
research competences in educational studies;
evaluation competences for the evaluation of various activities and partners as well as self-evaluation skills.

Specific objectives of the training programme for the teaching career are the following:

- the development of a functional system of advanced studies in the field of early education in social and institutional context;
- the development of a set of cognitive abilities with flexible, transferable and efficient functioning;
- the development of a positive attitude towards learning;
- the development of interest and curiosity towards knowledge;
- the development of positive character traits which are required by the teaching profession;
- the development of abilities to revalue organization competences useful in teaching process.

The planning of subjects aims:

- connected competences and training objectives;
- the distribution of each subject on types of activities and number of classes;
- proficiency standards.

Each course is divided into units which have a course project containing details about specific competences, student centred teaching and evaluation methods.

These course projects are the teaching staff’s fundamental document and teachers prepare materials for their students based on these projects.

Four categories of activities are targeted in order to improve teaching activities:

- courses and seminars with practical outcomes;
- -learning activities;
- research activities and preparation of study materials;
- pre-service teaching: observational and experiential.

E-learning activities enable students’ access to learning hand-outs prepared by their teachers. They also encourage dialogue between students and teachers. Each course has materials and course noted uploaded on Moodle platform. Students can also find topics for seminar portfolios and pre-service teaching. They have the possibility of asking questions and online explanations. Each student can post his/her own papers, achievements and portfolios on the platform according to the requirements of each study programme. Students have the possibility to see the peers’ work and teachers can monitor students’ activities.

Each student has to elaborate a portfolio over one semester. Portfolios contain reading charts, summaries, glossaries, intervention or research projects, conceptual maps and other materials. Evaluation consists of written and oral examinations, portfolio evaluation and grades in pre-teaching stages (Kelemen G., Presutti F., Norel M., 2013).

We assert with all our responsibility that the entire educational process of teacher training should blend theoretical knowledge with practice supported by classroom activities, observational practice, pre-service teaching and other well designed activities (Bertram, 2011).

1.3. Study

Our faculty, the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Work tries to implement coherent programmes of initial training for undergraduate teaching staff (for example, didactic Master studies, scientific Master studies, post-graduate studies of training for teaching career). We are focused on developing study programmes according to European requirements and the professional standards for undergraduate teaching staff,
on designing and developing intensive programmes, and an intensive psycho-pedagogic training programme for undergraduate teaching staff that would promote:

- A flexible training offer, adapted to specific learning needs, which facilitates the access to the development of undergraduate teaching career;
- Increase the quality of academic teaching staff training by integrating training strategies and techniques which are specific for undergraduate education;
- The development of teaching staff competences according to fields of interest, with positive impact upon the quality of undergraduate education;
- Support for the beginning as well as the development of teaching career by encouraging attendance at training courses;
- Ensuring a effective functioning of training programmes for future academic teaching staff by focusing the whole instructional process on the development/improvement of teaching and learning competences;
- The undergraduate’s teaching staff’s contribution to research that would make a contribution to their professional training. (Russel și Loughran, 2007)

In our study programme, we have asked our Master students from two study programmes (Psychedagogy of Early Education and Young Schooling and Interactive Pedagogy) to rank the aspects that they find attractive in the teaching career according to a given list. The master students placed on top positions: the need for esteem, willingness to develop and improve, the chance for vocational fulfillment and the need to practice well the chosen profession (first place), on second place they mentioned: the need for esteem, the nature of profession itself, the possibility to obtain double certification, on the third place they have identified: increased chances for getting a more attractive work place, the possibility to train future generations, on the forth place they ticked job safety and on the fifth place, they mentioned autonomy. We consider that all these indicators are a mark of the need for self-fulfilment and professional training and are also intrinsic motivational factors in choosing teaching career.

**Table no1. Hierarchy of motivational elements for the teaching career**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The significance of teaching profession</th>
<th>PETSM</th>
<th>PI</th>
<th>Total group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to develop and improve</td>
<td>87,3</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>88,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for esteem</td>
<td>58,7</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>59,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased chances for getting a more attractive work place</td>
<td>37,5</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>32,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The chance for vocational fulfillment</td>
<td>73,6</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>68,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The possibility to train future generations</td>
<td>48,5</td>
<td>III</td>
<td>39,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The need to practice well the chosen profession</td>
<td>79,5</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>76,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nature of profession itself</td>
<td>65,4</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>69,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>19,5</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>16,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job safety</td>
<td>28,6</td>
<td>IV</td>
<td>25,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The possibility to obtain double certification</td>
<td>49,7</td>
<td>II</td>
<td>55,6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After graduating the Master programme Psychedagogy of Early Education and Young Schooling, students have mentioned a few aspects related to the quality of their training achieved through this programme. Below, we list some of its features:

- An extremely well-structured syllabus, adapted to the needs of modern education;
- Modules well-structured on units, which try to involve the student actively in learning activities;
- Connection between theoretical knowledge and their applicability;
- Availability for professional development of future teaching staff.
The goal of any university is the modernizing and improvement of educational act so that it would comply with the demands of knowledge based society, in times of competitive economic market and of a society based on European democratic values. (Bertram, T., & Pascal, C., 2002)

We have chosen a sample of students that have been observed throughout three years of bachelor studies. Our sample consists of teenagers with ages between 19 and 24. In psychopedagogic terms, this age is characterized by teenage but also young adulthood behaviours. We have investigated the manner they see the studies offered by our Bachelor programme in teacher training for preschool and primary school education. We have noticed differences in the way they see their own satisfaction year after year (Figure no 1.), in the importance given to pre-service teaching from one academic year to the other (Figure no 2) and the relationship between the academic training module. We have also investigated their fears related to their own academic training and knowledge (Figure no 3.)

**Students satisfaction regarding their preparation for future teaching profession**

![Students satisfaction regarding their preparation for future teaching profession](image1.png)

**Students’ satisfaction related practice**

![Students’ satisfaction related practice](image2.png)
The qualitative research conducted by us is more comprehensive but in this study we have revealed just a part of it. The data contained by this study don’t meet any measure procedures or statistical procedures. Given the fact that it is a „empirical approach”, its aim is to offer general information in specific contexts about the approached phenomenon. The qualitative research was conducted on three cycles: anticipatory cycle – planning (layout), productive cycle – execution and final cycle– research report. We have completed an exploratory research to collect information about the students’ curricular training. The data were collected through questionnaires applied during their years of study. The research focused on the educational act so that we would grasp the relationship between research objectives, empirical data and the conclusions. The experimental stage of our investigation underwent the following steps: selection and description of context / social framework which offered the data; application of methods and data collection; data processing and analysis and conclusions. The qualitative methods that we have used in the layout stage of our investigational project such as participative observation of curricular activities offered us material for our investigation. We have set conceptual guidelines for the methodology of developing professional competences of future teachers. These competences are required by curricular classroom activities. It has been proven that the success of curricular classroom activities depends on the existence of these professional abilities. They are developed at the interference of theoretical and practical training but depend also on the students’ vocation and involvement.

Conclusions
The training of future teachers for preschool and primary school education at high quality level is the desideratum of our university. All our efforts are channelled towards the achievement of this aim. Teaching is science, a science based on competence acquired in well-structured studies which combine theoretical knowledge with practical applications. Students develop abilities and competences and assimilate knowledge during their initial training in their own field of study. But three years are not enough for a thorough training. The Romanian Education Law stipulates the amendment that teachers who want to be well prepared for the challenges of the third millennium should continue their studies with a Master programme. Master studies develop supplementary competences to those assimilate in the first cycle. This article presents a Master programme financed by a European project. It provides an educational offer in compliance with the demands of high quality training in terms of theoretical and practical knowledge. The components of the Master programme entitled Psychopedagogy of early education and young schooling contained a curriculum adapted to the requirements of a competitive academic training. The courses and lectures are the result of relevant analysis on other educational models implemented by European countries. We are currently at the end of the first academic year and want to share the good practices achieved so far.

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