

## TEACHING PRACTICE: GOALS AND „CHALLENGES”

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**Abstract:** *In a more extensive research on the initial preparation of teachers, we tried to identify what students want to learn in their practice teaching, which are the objectives they set for this discipline. The open question is part of a questionnaire constructed by us, questionnaire seeking more dimensions: self-evaluation / self-appreciation on didactic abilities formed by following psycho-pedagogical mandatory training; self-evaluation / self-appreciation on personality characteristics involved in didactic behavior; perception on initial psycho-pedagogical training and assuming the role of teacher.*

**Keywords:** *mentor, teaching practice, focus group*

### **Introduction**

Teaching practice for students is conducted in application schools, chosen by inspectorates along with higher education institutions, according to the needs of initial training for the teaching career. The role of teaching practice is to introduce practicing students in the atmosphere of school education by familiarizing with curricula, school order and discipline, and with the organization and operation of schools. Also, practitioners are faced with the actual situation when they will have to face the theoretical aspects of pedagogy, psychology, sociology and methodology, with real situations in class and in school. These situations materialize through effective participation in the educational activities that take place throughout the teaching practice. This "stage of initiation, apprenticeship, seeks placing students in the middle of the act of teaching-learning mechanism, the drafting technique of teaching lessons or activities in technology development and use of training facilities, etc." (6).

Pedagogical practice purpose is "harnessing theoretical knowledge and laying foundation for their practical training, by providing specific skills of the teaching profession for those who wish to practice a modern education" (1). Pedagogical practice goals are: training student's ability to work with information from specialized disciplines of science and education, targeting students in the use of framework plans, programs and textbooks; developing student's skills to use specialized materials; initiating students in the technique of laboratory or office activities; the acquisition of skills by students for the teaching profession.

In the stage of teaching practice, the didactician, the mentors and all those involved in teaching activity seek to ensure that students achieve the following abilities: (3)

- knowledge of the organization and functioning of pre-university schools;
- knowledge of education documents and how to use them;

- direct observation and analysis of the educational activities organized by school teachers involving students;
- exercise the role of teacher by students, under the guidance of the mentor, by designing, creation and self-evaluation of some the educational activities with students;
- practical skills training through teaching activities, conducted by students under the guidance and in the presence of mentors;
- ability to develop communication with students of different ages and intellectual potential through the practice of various scientific language in lessons;
- develop initiative, creativity and responsibility to work through the development of teacher tests, experiments, means of education;
- acquisition of confidence regarding the management of educational activities by: a proposal of learning tasks in accordance with the curriculum and accessible to students; determining appropriate teaching strategy for each type of lesson; establishing operational objectives; the correct and effective use of means of teaching; conducting appropriate evaluations and self-evaluations;
- develop flexibility and adaptability to the reality of class as a result of the merger of expertise to the psycho-pedagogical and methodological knowledge;
- acquiring specific skills for the teaching profession as occupational standard.

### **Experimental Part**

The questionnaire prepared for students contains 18 items, both open and closed. In structure, it has three dimensions, including several variables as following: **dimension A**- Self-evaluation / self- assessment of the teaching capacity formed after attending mandatory psycho-pedagogical disciplines; **dimension B** - Self-evaluation / self- assessment of personality traits involved in teaching behavior; **dimension C** - Perception on initial psycho-pedagogical training and assuming the role of a teacher.

The subject sample consisted of 280 students in the third year of the University "Aurel Vlaicu" of Arad, students attending the classes in Department of Teaching Staff Training.

### **Results and Discussion**

Following implementation of data collection instruments (questionnaires sent to students, assessment test) two types of data were obtained: quantitative and qualitative, depending on the type of question. Analysis of these data was made separately, and the results of these analyses will then be interpreted complementary.

In the following pages we try to make an analysis of subject's responses to the question "*What would you like to learn during the activity of teaching practice?*" connecting these results with those obtained from quantitative interpretation of questionnaire items.

We start with a negative result in our opinion, namely high frequency of situations in which subjects did not answer that question (about 20 percent). The explanation of this situation is probably that the students did not put on serious thought on the question of the personal goals which they pursue by following teaching practice before completing the questionnaire. It is the situation of the student who follows this

activity without interest, regards it as a simple binding activity in its initial training, from which he or she can not expect much. This finding fosters responsibility that during training intervention we try to change that perception and to inform students on the role and importance of teaching practice in the training of a teacher in accordance with training standards, needs and requirements imposed by the education reform and characteristics of contemporary society.

In the same vein, we find a large number of very general answers and that can just as well be interpreted as non-responses at all. It is the kind of answer: *"how to become a good teacher"*, *"How can I train as a future teacher"* or *"everything that can help me to become a better teacher"*. And these individuals show either a lack of clear objectives for teaching practice or just a lack of interest in completing the questionnaire.

Another important category of responses relates to the desire of students to enrich the knowledge acquired during the theoretical training through teaching practice and to implement them.

Frequent responses such as: *"to pursue a teaching activity"*, *"ways of teaching"*, *"how to teach students"*, *"how to teach a lesson and how to draw up school papers"*, *"to achieve educational projects"*; *"to assess pupils' skills"* are encountered. These responses show an interest in improving the psycho-pedagogical training, especially since it is noted that the students focuses on the preparation / design / organization / conduct of teaching approach and on some aspects of student assessment and implicit self-assessment of their own performance. We should also note here a significant number of subjects who said they want to learn about content and practice of new teaching methods: *"interactive teaching methods and assessment"*, *"modern teaching methods"*, *"lessons that they claim to be more attractive and interactive"* or *"learn to make lessons attractive and flexible to work with students"*.

Again we find that students declared their interest in the new teaching methods, but a sense of fear of their implementation still stands, students preferring to "experiment" these methods in the relative safety of teaching practice where they know they are receiving support from the mentor and the teaching practice coordinator. These findings correlate with the results of quantitative interpretation. We concluded then that the students appreciate that they have a high receptivity to the new ( $M = 4.41$ ), but on the other hand they don't perceive themselves as resistant to the stress that the implementation of novelty items involves or to criticisms inherent to the application of innovative methods and concepts. We consider encouraging that students want to try new methods of teaching-learning-assessment and we will try during intervention training to encourage this trend and to increase acceptance, primarily by understanding and personal experimentation of new teaching methods.

Another category of responses is one that captures the concerns of students on learning how to interact with the class of students, this problem being clearly a major concern for the subjects. Thus we illustrate that students want to learn *"how to communicate with students"*, *"how to interact with children"*. That concern is commendable and in a more in-depth analysis of some of the responses we can identify a number of problems that would have gone unnoticed and unrecognized by them

expressly. Thus we easily see the existence of emotional discomfort inherent in first contact with the class of students *"learn to master my emotions"*, *"to master my emotions in front of the class"*, *"learning to be relaxed"*. Not surprisingly, the stress factor has been identified also in the quantitative interpretation of responses from other items of the questionnaire.

Remaining at this category of responses, it is interesting to observe the immediate reaction of subjects to the discomfort caused by contact with the class of students. Two trends can be noted, one correct and the one that should be encouraged and one which we appreciate as inappropriate behavior. Thus we have a sub-category of responses which shows that student's reaction experiencing the class are reflected in that it seeks an appropriation of students and initiate closer collaboration to overcome the initial stage fright and track approach to teaching. Exemplified by the following responses (mainly appreciating the terms used) the student wishes to learn during teaching practice: *"how to attract students' interest"*, *"to learn how to become an effective and enjoyable teacher for students yet respected"* or *"how to be a pleasant person and understand the position that you have"*. This approach to the students and the attempt to send the message clearer during a specific emotional state in early career seems fair to us and we try to encourage it.

But, we also observe another side to this situation, unfortunately a reaction noted in a larger number of subjects. Namely, when the student is faced with a tense situation for him, he is trying to impose in front of students by authoritarian means: *"I would like to learn how to better master the students"* or *"how to master students"*.

Not surprisingly these conclusions also resulted in the quantitative interpretation. We note as an interesting aspect that those questioned consider that they can take all the roles involving some position of authority of the teacher to student. But the situation is opposite when the student is placed in a position to lose this position of authority. Thus respondents are not so sure that they could take the role of negotiator of student's activities or receiver of educational messages. The most trenchant result in this regard is the lowest result obtained ( $m = 3.37$ ), on self-evaluation capacity in terms of which the teacher's role is valued by students, exactly when the ratio of "power" is reversed in disfavor of the teacher. The conclusion that we learned it was that the respondents still can not easily accept an equal footing in relation to students and even less to be placed in a position to be evaluated by them.

Lastly it would be important to note on this item, a smaller number of responses demonstrating a concern for familiarizing with the school seen as an institution, the team of teachers and effective work in an educational establishment. It is reflected in responses like: *"contact with education, school, and teachers of different specialties"*. It is also in our view an appropriate concern arising from the interest of students to pursue a professional career.

We continue the data analysis with qualitative interpretation of the responses to the question "What do you consider the most "challenging" / difficult aspects of the teaching profession?" (Item 18). In a general analysis of the responses obtained in this item we can easily find a predictable result, one that we had in mind when drafting the questionnaire, namely that some issues that some students regard as a challenge are

appreciated by others as difficulties of the teaching profession. It is an expected result as we said, the difference between groups of subjects being only in attitude, perception. Of course, any difficulty can be seen as a challenge, and if there is the willingness, the difficulty can be transformed into a productive or "challenging" factor.

Also we noted that answers to these questions overlap somewhat with answers in the teaching practice objectives items, the subjects setting these goals by what it considers difficult in educational activities, the fears or expectancies they have regarding the practical work with students.

So, not surprisingly, the main challenge and difficulty of the teaching profession, is generally considered by subjects to be the actual work with students, communication and interaction with them. Answers like: "*class interaction*", "*communication with children*", "*working with students*" or "*relationship with students*" appear quite frequently. Indeed, for a future teacher, first contact with the class of students is always a moment so eagerly expected, but also with justifiable emotion and "stage fright". Subjects are concerned about relational aspects and the ability to teach knowledge effectively. A positive aspect revealed by the analysis of responses is that students generally appear to be optimistic in terms of overcoming these initial moments of "accommodation", trusting in their own abilities and psycho-educational skills formed during initial training.

We also note that the subjects realize the responsibility that a teacher has, both in the relationship with students and the other relationships they establish with colleagues, parents, community members: „*responsibility to start again with each generation*”, "*more responsibility to students and parents*", "*responsibility for what is said and done*". In direct relation to this responsibility, another difficulty that is recognized by the students is the mentally fatigue that teaching activity involves. We believe that by reducing or removing the cause i.e. stressors, it is possible to overcome this difficulty.

Also note that some of the subjects recognize the dynamic nature of the teaching profession and they regard it as a challenge: "*renewal and permanent addition to knowledge*", "*need to be always aware of everything and all*", "*unlimited access to new information*", "*the course is the same but always different*".

Another feared and perceived difficulty by students is the ability to integrate in the school environment. We refer here to the interaction and relations with other colleagues in the school. We find that they view that contact with colleagues, particularly with the most experienced with some fear, the cause for this attitude being their lack of experience recognized and accepted, comparing with the rest of the school teachers: "*Working with experienced colleagues*", "*my lack of experience*". This fear is normal in our opinion, but in this we should try to get a positive result, namely the determination of young teachers to call and make use the expertise of senior colleagues in the teaching career.

We conclude the analysis on this item showing a response category that regards as a major difficulty in the teaching profession on the one hand the insufficient material resources in most of the schools and on the other legislative instability in the organization of the educational system in general: "*lack of teaching materials*", "*frequent changes in education*", "*lack of resources in schools*". In this respect we can

highlight that the perception of students is justified, the problems raised by them are obstacles in the teaching career, but resolving them is beyond the reach of this study.

### **Conclusion**

Students perceive entering the teaching profession as a new beginning, a very important "episode" in their life and careers. Like any new start is seen both with excitement and with fear. Anxiety most future teachers feels, and is constantly revealed in our analysis, is linked to the first contact with the class of students. It is undisputed that pedagogical practice has its place here in the initial training of students, its purpose being exactly overcoming this opening stage, by providing a first contact with students in a controlled environment under the supervision of a mentor, the student having the support and advice which they wish, the opportunity to have access to a person with experience and expertise.

In the future career in teaching, students will have to face two types of situations. A class of repetitive and ritualized situations for which the teacher have in its repertoire the necessary professional skills to address and resolve quickly and efficiently. And a second category, which includes new teaching situations, often unusual, creative, demanding new solutions for which the teacher lacks the skills necessary for addressing and resolving rapidly. The latter situation forces him to a time of reflection and exploration, to some hesitation, the fear related to their capacity and ability to overcome them.

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