FIRST-CYCLE STUDENTS’ REFLECTIONS IN THE ASPECT OF THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

S. Kovienė, A. Plaušinaitienė
Šiauliai University (LITHUANIA)

Abstract
Pedagogical practice performed by first-cycle students in educational institutions helps to improve the training of future educators – teachers, tutors, social pedagogues, organizers of non-formal activities. In the university model of pedagogical practice three stages are distinguished that reflect a consistent change in roles of a student who performs the practice – from an observer or a pedagogue’s assistant working under the care of a mentor and a practice supervisor to an independent worker under the supervision of a mentor and a practice supervisor. The first pedagogical practice in the first year of studies is performed in preschool educational institutions, in preschool education groups. During the second semester students already perform the practice in 1-4 grades of primary school. After the completion of the practice students are encouraged to reflect on their experience, to notice its positive and negative sides, the successes and failures they faced, to rethink the acquired competences and to project the ways and means of their professional development.

In the article the experiences and insights of first-cycle students’ pedagogical practice in primary grades for the improvement of the model of practice will be analysed. To achieve the aim of the research and to collect the data of the research the method of written reflection has been used.

Keywords: pedagogical practice, future pedagogues, reflection, improvement of the organization of practice.

1 INTRODUCTION
One of the main objectives of the State Education Strategy 2013-2022 [1] of the Republic of Lithuania is achieving the majority of pedagogical communities consisting of reflective, constantly improving and productively working professional teachers. With the changing education system in Lithuania, the most important task of educators is to prepare a creative, innovative, original teacher, capable to work successfully and get foothold in the constantly changing labor market. Thus, the teacher is not a technician who has learned the strategies, but a reflective, critical thinking intellectual [2]. V. Lukavičienė [3] argues that socio-cultural, economic and political factors that determine changes in teacher training have always led to the need for new skills, roles and competencies that influenced the quantitative and qualitative change of the study process by modeling the development of practical professional skills at university studies. A. Hargreaves [4] thinks that there is a need for the concept of "new" pedagogical professionalism - educators as catalysts who: "promote deep cognitive learning; learn how to teach how they were not taught; commit themselves to continuing vocational training; work and learn with collegial teams; consider parents as learning partners; develop and build on collective intelligence; develop the ability to exchange and take risks; promote confidence in processes “ (p. 35).

The process of training prospective teachers in Lithuania is regulated by various normative documents: Description of Teacher Training Model [5], Description of Teacher Professional Competence [6], Teacher Training Regulation [7], State Education Strategy 2013-2022 [1] and others. These documents emphasize development both general skills and values involving the links of the curriculum with real life. The above-mentioned documents pay great attention to pedagogical practice, its change, responding to the needs of today society. Pedagogical practice is not only a part of the study process, but also a factor that promotes the professional progress of the student, the educational institution in which he / she is practicing and the higher education institution that prepares the future teacher. Pedagogical practice is defined in the Teacher Training Regulation [7] as a compulsory part of the study aimed at the development of vocational competencies, implemented at a practice institution. The Pedagogical Study Module consists of 60 ECTS credits study subjects necessary for the qualification of a teacher (pedagogy, psychology, didactics, etc.). These credits, at least 30 ECTS credits are allocated to teaching practice.
The Teacher Training Regulation [7] states that educators in this field are trained by the strongest universities in the country, and Siauliai University is becoming one of the Teacher Training Centers, whose aim is to build on high-level research, educate future educators contributing to a sustainable inclusive society, teacher training system that meets the highest European standards. Educators focus on the importance of educating the teacher on theoretical and practical competencies, starting from orientation towards theoretical knowledge towards the process of learner skills development. The development of these competencies is better achieved through pedagogical practice [8]. In pedagogical practice, the student can relate the theoretical knowledge obtained during the studies to the practical activity [9].

Pedagogical practice in educational institutions by first cycle students at Siauliai University helps to improve the preparation of future educators - teachers, educators, social educators, informal activity organizers. It has been prepared in accordance with Siauliai University, Lithuanian and international documents and teacher training regulations. Pedagogical practice is based on an integrative-systemic approach, encompassing two aspects of the practice process: the unity of theory and practice and a unified system of three parts of the practice enabling the development and deepening in general-professional, subject and personal competencies. The University Practice Model distinguishes three phases that reflect the change of roles of a student in a consistent practice from an observer, teacher assistant, under the auspices of a mentor and practice supervisor [9]. Such an organization of practice, which allows students to engage in practical activities from the first semesters, is a positive thing for international experts. According to V. Lamanauskas [8], students’ activity during the pedagogical practice is an analogue of the professional activity of the teacher, therefore it should be consistent, covering the whole period of studies as well as flexible in its form and content and performed in a real educational environment. After practicing, the student is encouraged to reflect on his/her experience, see positive and negative sides, successes and failures, rethink acquired competences and design ways of professional development [10].

The procedure for organizing pedagogical practices is applied to students studying in the curriculum of primary education pedagogy and pre-school education implemented at Siauliai University, when the practice is started in the 2nd semester of the 1st year. First practice is carried out in pre-school education institutions, pre-school education groups. In the next semester, the students of this study program complete their pedagogical practice in grades 1-4 of primary school.

During the pedagogical practice students carry out cognition and assessment of pedagogical, psychological, health education practice and subject didactics tasks, prepare practice reports based on them, reflect on acquired experience.

The article will analyze the experience of the Bachelor’s study program Pedagogy of Pre-school Education and Pre-school Education in the Initial Classes of Student Pedagogical Practice and the insight into practice improvement.

The aim of the research is to reveal the experience and insights of the first cycle students of Siauliai University who have completed their practice in primary school, significant for improvement of practice organization.

The object of the research is the representation of the experience of students who have completed their practice in primary school.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 General characteristics of the study

Applied research methods - analysis of the content of scientific information sources and legal acts (for the theoretical context), student reflection (collection of empirical data) and content analysis (empirical data analysis).

The study is based on the principles of social constructivism in which constructing cognition and thinking of reality is an active process during which acquired knowledge is applied in different situations and the learning process takes place on the basis of knowledge and experience which has already been acquired [11]. In this case, the students apply the acquired theoretical knowledge in practice, thus constructing new knowledge and gaining experience. The study is also based on the humanist attitudes that each personality is active, creative, constantly aspiring to grow and develop, open to new experiences [12] and the philosopher Dewey's attitude towards reflective thinking:
“thinking is the best feeling which is the basis of everything and influencing our beliefs”. Reflection of thinking is the key to reflective practice [13].

2.2 Sample of research

The sample of qualitative research consisted of reflection on pedagogical practice of 15 informants of the first study cycle of Šiauliai University, future educators of primary education who had practiced in the primary school. The analysis of the content of the students’ reflections was used to respond to the research goal. The sampling of the research is non-probability (convience).

2.3 Research tools and procedure of research

Informants were asked to reflect to the experience gained during the practice in primary school, emphasizing the possibility to apply the acquired theoretical knowledge in practice, the acquisition of new experience and competences, the acquisition of educational process’ organization and achievement in assessment abilities. Informants were asked to reflect on their activities in practice, involvement in the institution's activities, communication with the mentor, changes in motivation to work in primary school. It was also asked to identify the difficulties encountered in practice and the practice aspects to be improved.

The ethical principles of the study were followed in the investigation. All participants were informed about the purpose, confidentiality and anonymity of the study. Research ethics was used as a basis for conducting research, analyzing data and publishing research results.

The survey was conducted in 2019, February-March.

The results of the research are not representative, but it helps to observe certain relevant tendencies that will help to improve the organization of pedagogical practice.

2.4 Data analysis

Reflection of writing material has been analyzed consistently, by inductively distinguishing meaningful units, by formulating them into sub-categories, later merging into categories illustrated by quotations from reflection texts. A category is a statement that encompasses the meaning of the text of the sub-categories (short statements) associated with the common content [14], [15]. The merged categories form topics that describe the phenomenon in question. In addition to the student presentations (more typical examples), the figure represents the number of the reflexive nature report assigned to it by the investigators. The conclusions of the research were formulated basing on qualitative content analysis.

3 RESULTS

Reflection helps all participants in the educational process to see perspectives; better understand your strengths and identify weaknesses; find out your core values, hopes and expectations; identify potential inconsistencies or areas for improvement. The analysis of the content in students’ reflective practice reports reveals a practice assessment from the student’s point of view, when the first practice is identified as a source of new knowledge and experience (Table 1).
The coherence of theoretical and practical knowledge

Possibility to apply theoretical knowledge in practice

“Practice for the student is good because he /she can compare theoretical knowledge with real practice” (9)

“Advantages of practice: applicability of theory in practice…” (13)

Summarizing the data presented in Table 1, it can be stated that the first (supervised) practice for students is to acquire new knowledge and experience. If some students have identified new knowledge and experience without describing them, e.g. "Through this practice, I gained new experience (2)," others highlighted what new educational methods were learned or the forms of conducting activities ("... how to apply physical activities for children’ abilities and development of physical capacity"(9)). It is also important for students to be able to ascertain how the theory works in practice.

Some students have identified the methods used to organize the process of education and assessment of achievement and personal progress in practice. For future educators, it is important to be able to recognize both educational situations and the methods used in them, so the latter experience should be seen as a positive aspect of practice (Table 2).

Table 2. Methods used in the organization of the educational process and in the assessment of achievements and progress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>More typical examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New knowledge and experience</td>
<td>Educational methods</td>
<td>&quot;I was able to talk to primary school teachers about children, what methods they use, how they tame children when they don't listen, how they are interested in children&quot; (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching methods</td>
<td>&quot;learned the primary school procedure, the methods used in the educational process&quot; (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;This allowed me to see different teaching methods and better understand teachers’ work&quot; (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child-centred education</td>
<td>&quot;... I realised that the effectiveness of training depends very much on appropriate planning and well-chosen educational methods and interesting activities for pupils&quot; (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;It is a professional knowledge, the ability to apply different methodologies, to know each and every educational motivation, to choose the most appropriate forms of education, methods and tools&quot; (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summarizing the data presented in Table 2, it can be stated that one of the abilities that students should acquire during the internship is to recognize and be able to apply the methods, organizing the educational process and assessing the achievements and progress of the children. The methods of education and training mentioned in the students' reflective reports are more often oriented towards the organization of the educational process. It should also be noted that the students also perceived the features of child-centered education applied in educational institutions, when activities are planned for each learner and its uniqueness.

Pedagogical practices must be organized in such a way as to respond to the gradual change of student roles from the trainee to the supervisor, the teacher assistant, under the auspices of the mentor and the supervisor until the self-employed supervisor and mentor supervisor. Therefore, in practice, students are not only taking the position of observers, but are also actively involved in the activities taking place in the institution, assisting the teachers working in the classroom ("I substituted the teacher who had left" (4); "I participated in various classes" (4); "I participated and organized a lot of activities" (8); "music, physical education, English lessons" (11)).

The fact that students can try themselves in different roles during their internship also influences their motivation for the teacher's professional activity (Table 3).
Table 3. Motivation for the professional activity of the teacher

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>More typical examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Projection of future professional activity | Principles and values of future teacher work | ’For me, as a future teacher, the most important thing I will focus on educating children will be love and encouragement’ (2)  
’In the future I would like to become a good educator and a good friend for children’ (2)  
“I will use my knowledge later to work as a teacher” (6)  
“Practice has provided a lot of knowledge and new competencies that I will apply in the future as a future educator” (11)  
“I have received a lot of advice, tutorials that I will use to work as a teacher in the future” (15) |
| Applying foreground in the future     |                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Practice as a confirmation of being on the “right track” | Motivation for working with children | “Children helped me understand that I have not made a mistake choosing such a profession” (3)  
“During my practice I realized I am really in my place and want my workplace to be near the children” (6)  
“At first, it seemed frightening, but day after day I realized I was on the right track and that it made me even happier” (7)  
 „I am glad practice allowed me to know myself better, I am feeling stronger and have no doubts I am on the right track” (13) |
| Self-cognition                         |                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

Motivation for Teacher Professional Activities includes several aspects (Table 3). First and foremost, students begin to design their professional future in practice, indicating what knowledge they will apply in the future or what pedagogical principles and values will follow. Practice is also seen as a confirmation of being on the right track. The fact that the students felt on the right track could also be determined by the collective where the practice was conducted. In all the reflective and analyzed practice reports the students evaluated the internship and staff team positively (Table 4).

Table 4. Participation of trainees in the life of the institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>More typical examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Community / participation in the life of the institution | Becoming part of institution | “I myself would like to get into the “life” of the school” (2)  
“A second week of practice walking along the school corridors seemed to have been there for a long time” (3) |
|                                       | Becoming part of a group community       | “I felt good at this school, kids welcomed and waited for us to show up again” (6)  
“We joined the class life, the teachers asked to give our activities for the children, called us new teachers, I have to admit - I felt elevated” (7) |

In addition, in the practice reflective reports, the team of practice institution is named as friendly, warmly welcoming, and also distinguished by the fact that during the internship students felt themselves part of the institution or group community.

Students highlighted the successes and difficulties of practice. In both the most successful and unsuccessful aspects, the trainees distinguished themselves with their children. Attention should be drawn to the fact that students have identified not only the lack of practical skills but also the age of children as reasons for unsuccessful communication. For example, two students indicated that it was easier to work with early and pre-school children. Meanwhile, communication with older children has caused difficulty. Based on such experience, the trainees decided to link the professional activities to the education of pre-school children.
Table 5. Benefits of the practice and aspects to be improved

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>More typical examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advantages</td>
<td>Meaningful tasks</td>
<td>“The tasks of this practice were interesting and meaningful” (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspects to be improved</td>
<td>Excessive task scope</td>
<td>“Too many tasks” (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“In my opinion, there were too many tasks for practice” (14).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“To reduce the scope of practice assignments, because abundance of tasks does not allow to relax and immerse into communication with children, institution’s community” (15).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The lack of information and knowledge</td>
<td>“The was a lack of information and knowledge on some issues” (11).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“The report on Psychology was very complicated, because I have not gained enough knowledge on the child psychological development” (14).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are more advantages of the students’ reflective practice reports than aspects to be improved. Part of the students’ practice assignments were identified as meaningful, involving theory and practice. Meanwhile, the areas to be upgraded include the optimization of the provided task’ number; often linked to the fact that students had too little preparation time for their implementation. The results show that students lack the knowledge of psychology, for example, “I should still learn a lot to avoid conflict situations, learn to apply child cognitive methods” (2).

4 CONCLUSIONS

During the practice, students had the opportunity to feel a part of the community of the educational institution in which they practiced, and many of them were able to answer the basic question: did they choose the right profession. In practice, prospective educators had the opportunity to be not only observers, but also assistants, and sometimes independent teachers, to get acquainted with the methods used in the educational process, the assessment of achievements and progress. During the practice tasks (pedagogy, psychology, etc.), students highlighted positive and negative sides of the practice.

The ongoing discussions of practitioners seek to draw attention to the students’ thoughts about the difficulties involved in performing practice assignments, and the reasonableness of the difficulties encountered. It is also one of the requirements for students to prepare not only the whole practice but also the reflex part of individual tasks. This allows practice coordinators to find out the “hard” task locations and to explain them in practice during the briefing. If practice assignments are useful for future educators but they lack theoretical knowledge - this again leads to attention to the content of the subjects taught.

REFERENCES


