

PPE1B – Spring 2009

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The importance of teaching practice in teacher training

Usus magister est optimus.

Marcus Tullius Cicero

The famous quote “practice makes perfect” certainly contains a lot of truth. However, the opinions on what proportion of practice should be involved in teacher preparation vary. Similarly, the extent of teaching practice experienced by future teachers depends on particularities of individual education programmes.

Why is teaching practice so important for a student of an education programme or for any future teacher regardless his or her professional background? The theoretical knowledge, high level of professional mastery or scholarship does not necessarily mean that a person will become a good and effective teacher. “The essence of being an effective teacher lies in knowing what to do to foster pupils’ learning and being able to do it.” (Kyriacou, 2001, p. 1) Theoretical foundations for building teaching skills are provided in lectures and seminars but the actual acquisition of the skills, with regard to their nature, should certainly be a matter of methodically controlled practice and not of trial and error performance during teaching itself. Kyriacou (2001) emphasizes three important elements of teaching skills: knowledge, decision-making, and action. (p. 5). But in his concept, knowledge is not restricted to theoretical knowledge of the subject matter but it also comprises “knowledge about the (...) pupils, curriculum, teaching methods, the influence on teaching and learning of other factors, and knowledge about the teacher’s own teaching skills.” (Ibid., p. 5) Acquisition of the skills is a process between knowing what to do and being able to do it. Controlled practice accompanied with appropriate professional feedback can help get over difficulties and move towards mastery. Valuable contribution to professional development of newly qualified

teachers can be provided through mentoring. “Mentoring is a term generally used to describe a relationship between a less experienced individual (...) and a more experienced individual known as a mentor. Traditionally, mentoring is viewed as dyadic, face-to-face, long-term relationship between a supervisory adult and a novice student that fosters the mentee’s professional, academic, or personal development (Wai-Packard as cited in Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000). Since mentoring provided to newly qualified teachers is not as widely spread in the Czech school environment as in other countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, special emphasis should be laid on teaching practice as part of teacher training.

The extent, content, and benefit of teaching practice vary in dependence on a type of teacher training programme. For example, the syllabus of a 5-year Teacher Training for Primary School programme held by the Faculty of Education at the Masaryk University of Brno incorporates two kinds of teaching practice. From the first to the fourth (and possibly to the sixth) term, students take part in so-called *Assisting teaching practice* which is held once a week throughout the term. The aim of this practice is to confirm student’s motivation for the studies and gain initial experience of school environment. Students acquaint themselves with the life of the school and basic school documentation. They observe development of cognitive processes of children, establish their teaching portfolio, and acquire direct experience in cooperation with other teachers and school management. During the third and the fourth term, they take active part in lesson planning and material preparation, assistance to individual pupils, analysis of pedagogical experience. In initial stages of teacher training, students benefit especially from observation. Observation of an experienced teacher “can stimulate your own ideas about your teaching. It may do this simply by acting as a model, either good or bad (...), observation is stimulating because of the creative tension caused by trying to match your own decision making about teaching with the decisions you infer your colleague

has made." (Kyriacou, p. 2) The other type of the programme's teaching practice is so-called *Continual teaching practice*: two weeks' practice takes place in the seventh and the eighth term, three weeks' practice in the ninth and the tenth term. This follow-up practice focuses on teaching performance, usage of didactic games, elements of creative dramatics, differentiated approach to pupils suffering from specific learning difficulties. The number of lessons taught independently during the practice increases from at least 8 lessons in each of the seventh and the eighth term to at least 15 lessons in each of the ninth and tenth term. Students gradually, throughout the five years of studies, take over the role of an observer, an active assistant, and finally a teacher. According to PhDr. Hana Filová, Ph.D., the Masaryk University seminar tutor, couples of students undergo practice at selected schools and are mentored by teachers who are trained and who cooperate closely with the faculty staff. This ensures consistency, continuity, and methodologically reliable approach (personal communication, March 11, 2009). The facts mentioned above imply that the amount of teaching practice allocated to the programme is reasonable and sufficient. The results of a survey conducted in 2000 – 2004 by Dokoupilová (2004) among 6th term students participating in two weeks' practice within the Teacher Training for Primary School programme show that the practice generally meets their expectations, is considered useful, and its timing is rather appropriate. However, on average 48.64 % of students do not consider the period of two weeks long enough for the practice.

According to Ondřej Liška, the Minister of Education, the crucial focus of changes reflected in the amendment to the Act on Staff in Education is a teacher (as cited in Böhmová, 2008). The amendment thus emphasises improvement of a wider context of conditions in education such as the system of career development, incentives, remuneration and working environment (Böhmová, 2008). Liška adds that the changes aim at finding the way how to support active, creative, and professional teachers (Böhmová, 2008). One of the requirements stipulated by the amendment is that primary, secondary, and higher education teachers must

have a Master's degree. Those who do not comply with the qualification requirements have to be attending a programme to acquire such qualification or enrol such studies within two years after taking up a teaching job; existing teachers have to commence their studies within five years. However, the exception to the rules is, among others, a foreign language teacher. Requirements on foreign language teachers restrict to a 'non-teaching' Master's degree, complementary teaching studies and an exam in the foreign language achieving the C1 level according to the European language portfolio at the minimum. This effectively means that university graduates who become language teachers may have undergone the minimum teaching practice: according to information from the Study Department of the Faculty of Art, the Masaryk University, the complementary teaching studies programme involves only 20 lesson of teaching practice, consisting of observation and teaching (I. Kolářová, personal communication, March 18, 2009). Comparison with the amount of teaching practice in the Teacher Training for Primary School programme clearly shows that the quality of teachers with the different educational background will be diametrically different.

Although there is a shortage of teachers in the labour market, the quality of teachers should be what matters as only quality teachers are able to deliver quality teaching. Kaplan and Owings specify *teaching quality* as "creating a positive learning climate, selecting appropriate instructional goals and assessments, using the curriculum effectively, and employing varied instructional behaviors that help students learn to high levels." (Kaplan & Owings, 2003) According to a 50-state survey carried out by Darling-Hammond in the United States in 2000, "teacher preparation accounts for 40% to 60% of the total variance in student achievement after taking into account the students' demographics." (as cited in Kaplan & Owings, 2003, p. 3) The survey showed that the following factors enhance student achievement: verbal ability, content knowledge, education coursework on teaching methods in their discipline, scores on state licensing exams that measure both basic skills and teaching

knowledge, teaching behaviors, including purposefully, diagnostically, and skillfully using a broad repertoire of approaches, ongoing voluntary professional learning, (...)." (Kaplan & Owings, 2003, pp. 3-4)

"No evidence suggests that, by itself, possessing content knowledge is enough to be an effective teacher." (Berry, 2001 as cited by Kaplan & Owings, 2003, p. 9) Although the proportion of practice differs and is subject of broad debate, it is still an essential part of teacher preparation which should not be underestimated. Hopefully, the current efforts of the team of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport led by Prof. PhDr. Karel Rýdl, CSc. to produce a professional standard of teacher quality¹ will not be the last and the nationwide debate over teaching professions will bring concrete results to contribute to improvement in teacher preparation and teaching practice in particular.

¹ In Czech "Vstupní dokument k diskuzi - Tvorba profesního standardu kvality učitele"

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Abstract

The essay deals with the importance of teaching practice in teacher training. It discusses essential teaching skills which are expected to be developed, trained and confirmed during teaching practice. It contrasts teaching practice experience gained in two different types of teacher preparation: the Teacher Training for Primary School programme and minimum requirements on a foreign language teacher in accordance with the new amendment to the Act No. 563/2004 on Pedagogical Staff. The differences are then interpreted as impact on quality of future teachers.