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Luminița Mihaela DRĂGHICESCU*, Ana-Maria Aurelia
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The Students' Pedagogical Practical Stage between Problems and Solutions

Luminița Mihaela DRĂGHICESCU^{1*}, Ana-Maria Aurelia
PETRESCU², Laura Monica GORGHIU³, Crinela DUMITRESCU⁴

Abstract

In strong relation to the multiplication of the roles of those who embrace a didactic career, their initial and lifelong training should be designed and implemented as a coherent and consistent approach, intended to form and develop all professional and transversal competencies necessary for a successful fulfilling of the teaching profession. One of the fundamental components of any psycho-pedagogical training programme dedicated to the teaching career is represented by the teaching training activity. All the actions related to this stage ensure, in a holistic and systemic manner, the necessary basis for the formation and development of the skills required to assume such a complex mission: to be a teacher. Starting from those premises, this paper tries to carry out a qualitative and quantitative analysis on the perceptions of the students who are preparing for the didactic career, on the one hand, and the perceptions of their teacher-mentors from the application schools in Dambovită County, on the other hand, concerning the multitude of aspects implied by the teacher training activity. Another purpose of this investigative approach is to identify some concrete methods to optimise the students' teacher training, both from a macrostructural perspective, in terms of education policies and current teaching methods, and a microstructural perspective, according to the existing educational practices.

Keywords: *quality of education; training for the didactic career; teacher training activity; professional competencies; transversal competencies.*

¹ Valahia University, Târgoviște, Romania, lumidraghicescu@yahoo.com

² Valahia University, Târgoviște, Romania, anapetrescu2007@yahoo.com

³ Valahia University, Târgoviște, Romania, lgorghiu@gmail.com

⁴ Valahia University, Târgoviște, Romania, dumitrescucrinela@yahoo.com

* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

Associated with *excellence*, *quality* should represent a benchmark for the education system, in general, and the psycho-pedagogical training programmes, in particular.

The development of a healthy, sustainable society decisively depends on the extent to which the education system is capable to ensure a quality education process, at all its levels.

The quality of the education takes shape in a series of professional and transversal competencies and also in specific acquisitions of our alumni: values, beliefs, attitudes, etc.

In fact, those lead into the concretisation of four fundamental objectives of education. Therefore, through the developed behaviours, the trainees have to demonstrate that [1: 69-74]:

- *they know (they are acquainted and they understand)*, and also *prove* that they have general knowledge and specialised knowledge;
- *they can do/make* and also *(re)act* rationally and efficiently, based on the acquired knowledge;
- *they can be themselves*, by displaying honest self-evaluation, self-knowledge and self-esteem attitudes;
- *they can cohabit*, accept and respect diversity.

In strict reference to the didactic career, to the *quality* of this process coordinated by dedicated departments from universities, we consider that teachers' professional training should be improved on an ongoing basis, especially in terms of teacher training.

Training professionals in education compels us firstly to create instructional contexts which should allow aspiring teachers to form/develop specific professional and transversal competencies. Such a context is represented by the teacher training.

2. Problem Statement

2.1 The Role of the Teacher Training in Shaping Competencies related to Teaching Profession

As fundamental component of any psycho-pedagogical training programme, the teacher training represents a didactic activity by which students may practice, directly, monitored and guided by a teacher-mentor, the skills acquired in various disciplines, which are essential in pursuing the teaching mission: that is to shape personalities, provide suitable assistance to

any child throughout their process of becoming.

The professional competencies - aimed by the training process for the teaching career - are: designing educational activities; managing and monitoring the learning process; assessing educational activities; using digital technologies; getting to know the trainable, counselling and proving them with differential treatment, and also managing the education group. All those play a major role in approaching various situations circumscribed by the education activity, in efficient and effective conditions.

The psycho-pedagogical training programme also ensures transversal competencies such as: application of principles and norms of professional conduct substantiated on explicit value options in relation to the future teacher; efficient cooperation within professional, interdisciplinary teams pertaining to conduct of education projects and programmes and use of efficient lifelong learning methods and techniques intended for permanent, personal and professional, formation and development.

If we analyse this “picture” of *teaching competencies*, we may see that the activities relating to teacher training enable formation / consolidation / development of all types of competencies, derived from the functions and the roles played by the teacher.

In order to demonstrate that teacher training represents a key component in shaping genuine professionals, Sirotová [2: 530] is stating the following arguments:

- teacher training activities foster an experience-based learning and allow students to develop professional and personal skills, under the circumstances of the praxis connected to application schools;
- it provides the context required to form one’s own teaching style and develops self-knowledge, self-evaluation and reflection capacities;
- it represents the framework to apply and verify the cognitive and methodological competencies in real conditions of the education process;
- it facilitates the development of a positive attitude towards the teaching career;
- it enables the development of a collaboration with the teacher-mentor within application schools and the professor who coordinates such activity in the university;
- it ensures formation/development of fundamental professional competencies, such as: capacity to plan, design and perform the didactic approach in an effective manner, abilities to manage the class, concretised in establishing a positive environment in classrooms and maintaining discipline etc.

2.2. Considerations concerning the Collaboration between the Main Actors of the Teacher Training Process

In order to ensure an efficient teacher training, it is important for all the factors involved in this process to collaborate. The factors referred here are: teacher-mentors, teacher training coordinators, students, and, last but not least, teachers of pedagogy, psychology and didacticians. In this respect, few studies are focused on teacher training issues [3: 424; 4: 817], highlighting in particular on:

- the importance of the feedback provided by the supervisors of this activity and the need to allocate more hours in this regard;
- the need to train the teacher training supervisors with regard to the methods used in providing feedback and to promote mainly the non-directive and non-prescriptive feedback;
- the need to integrate the reflective training in the teacher training activities;
- the importance of increasing the number of assisted courses, held by each trainee, in order to ensure the necessary support towards the improving of teaching;
- the suitable, balanced distribution of teacher training activities;
- the need to support and guide the trainees efficiently, in order to optimise the results of this approach;
- the need to establish a strong cooperation between application schools, teacher training coordinators and the decision-making factors involved in the education system;
- the need to optimally harmonise the theoretical training, especially the one intended to form skills used in managing the class, with training conducted in relation to teacher training.

We are aware of the decisive contribution of the teacher training and in particular the relation built between the main actors involved (student-trainee and teacher-mentor), to the process of training for the didactic career. Therefore, we are seeking to monitor carefully the activities related to this endeavour, throughout the entire process, and to analyse their efficiency, also through a series of feedback questionnaires.

3. Research Questions/Aims of the research

The investigative survey aimed to highlight the perception of the students from Valahia University Târgoviște, who are trained to become teachers, as well as the perceptions of the teacher-mentors within the

application establishments in Dâmbovița County, with regard to a series of aspects involving the teacher training activity.

Another goal consisted on identifying concrete methods to optimise teacher training activities, both in macrostructural terms, in connection with education policies and methodologies in force, and in microstructural terms, with reference to current education practices.

4. Research Methods

The main research method used was the questionnaire survey. *Two questionnaires* were elaborated and applied. One questionnaire was intended for the students-trainees and the other for the teacher-mentors. They both aimed aspects pertaining to teacher training of which we mention:

- the relation established between the two main actors in the teacher training process: student-trainee and teacher-mentor;
- involvement of students-trainees and teacher-mentors in organizing and conducting this approach in an effective manner;
- identification of issues relating to various activities falling under the teacher training and some concrete methods to solve such issues etc.

At the end of the first term of the academic year 2017-2018, the questionnaires including both closed-ended and open-ended questions were applied on a sample of 260 students-trainees and 27 teacher-mentors.

The data collected based on those *questionnaires* were processed statistically and interpreted in correlation with the ones recorded in relation to the two *focus-groups* conducted with students-trainees and teacher-mentors included in the research sample.

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the collected information generated a series of *interpretations* which are presented below.

5. Findings

In the beginning, there are presented the most relevant data collected through the feedback questionnaire intended for students-trainees.

Therefore, when asked to what extent they consider that the teacher-mentor provided them with sufficient information on the curricular documents required for didactic design for the specialised disciplines, 98% of the students responded that the teacher-mentors assisted them in their curricular research to a *great* and *very great extent* (figure 1).

The responses provided by the students-trainees confirm the concern of the Teaching Staff from the Teachers' Training Department, the

School Inspectorate of Dâmbovița County, and the managerial teams from the application schools, to thoroughly select the people involved in teacher training activities based on criteria specified in the documents which regulate this activity.

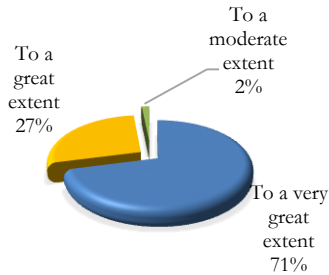


Figure 1. Students' perception on the support provided by teacher-mentors in their research activity

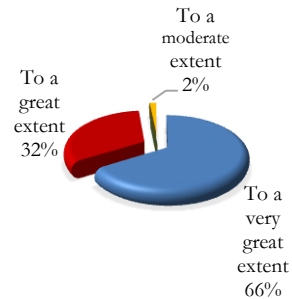


Figure 2. Students' perception on the support provided by teacher-mentors in their didactic design

Another relevant item in terms of efficiency of teacher training activities aimed to the extent to which students considered that the teacher-mentor supported them in designing the lessons and finding/elaborating the didactic materials when they needed them.

The didactic design is initially seen by students as an approach of high difficulty. To avoid failing situations which may demotivate the persons who meet for the first time with the requirements of the teaching profession in real life, it is necessary to have a genuine collaboration and a constant support of the teacher-mentors.

We can see again that in a very high percentage (figure 2), i.e. 98%, the students-trainees confirm the consistent support of the teaching staff acting as mentors in designing the first didactic activities coordinated by them.

In reference to the support of the teacher-mentor with regard to identification of the issues encountered when designing and conducting the courses in class (figure 3), the students-trainees provided answers which indicate two important aspects:

- the lessons are analysed with responsibility and professionalism;
- the objective, constructive and operative feedback provided by the teacher-mentors helps the students to become aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the courses they coordinate, and also their own professional and transversal competencies.

In addition, we consider that the data collected confirm that the two main entities acting in the teacher training process are engaged in a reflective approach which is essential to optimise the didactic activities.

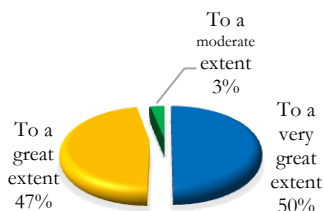


Figure 3. Students' perception on the collaboration with their teacher-mentors to identify - in the best manner possible - some issues related to holding courses in class

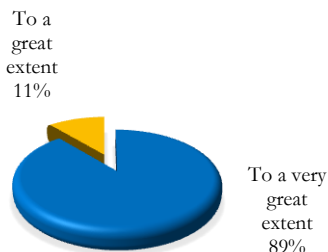


Figure 4. Teacher-mentors' perception on the collaboration with teachers who coordinate the teacher training activities

A selection of the most relevant items included in the feed-back questionnaire used on teacher-mentors triggered the following results:

According to the evaluation of all teacher-mentors questioned, their collaboration with the teacher-coordinators of teacher training activities within the Teaching Staff of Teachers' Training Department is *to a great and a very great extent* efficient, productive, in the sense that latter provide the instruments necessary to conduct teacher training activities in good conditions (figure 4).

In this context, we mention that the Teaching Staff of Teachers' Training Department along with the faculties from the University, have always attached special importance to the selection process involving the teacher-coordinators of teacher training activities and laid emphasis on their experience connected to initial and lifelong training of the teaching staff.

When questioned concerning the extent to which students/trainees attending the teacher training activities assume responsibilities and duties related to their capacity of student/trainee set by the teacher coordinator, according to the specific sections in the Disciple Chart for *Teacher Training*, 94% of the respondents consider that students assume responsibilities and duties relating to teacher training activities to *a great and very great extent*, which demonstrates a positive attitude of the future teachers to the profession chosen and also a mindful choice of such professional route (figure 5). 6% of the respondents believe that the students are aware *to a moderate extent* of their future duties. This percentage may be explained by the

fact that the students we are referring, come primarily from faculties without a didactic background (e.g. Engineering Faculties).

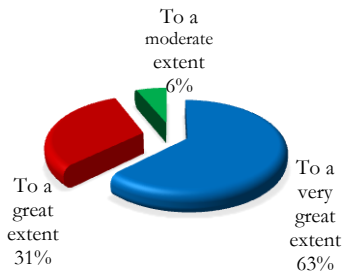


Figure 5. Teacher-mentors' perception on the students' attitude towards their own responsibilities and duties in relation to teacher training

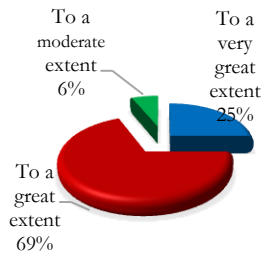


Figure 6. Teacher-mentors' perception on how aware students are of the issues relating to teacher training

When they were requested to value the extent to which the students/trainees attending teacher training activities promptly signalled the issues identified in connection with management of the courses, as well as management of the class, 94% of the respondents consider that the trainees had a reflective attitude, identifying and pointing out the issues/dysfunctionalities at this level (figure 6). In this regard, such attitude may only be the “outcome” of a good psycho-pedagogical training.

Orienting the discussions within the focus-groups towards measures/recommendations/solutions in order to optimise and conduct the teacher training activity, the teacher-mentors and students advanced the following proposals:

- to correlate the teacher training programme and the teacher-mentor's timetable;
- to increase the number of hours assigned to teacher training according to the curriculum intended for psycho-pedagogical training which is unitary nationwide;
- the teacher-coordinator should set some clear deadlines with reference to what the student is expected to accomplish in relation to teacher training activities;
- to simulate some courses during the seminars conducted for other disciplines;
- the teacher-coordinators should monitor more vigilantly the students' involvement in the teacher training activity etc.

6. Discussions

The main difficulties/limitations of the conducted investigative approach were:

- the management of the questionnaires intended for the students of Valahia University Târgoviște and the teacher-mentors in Dâmbovița County has generated results which may not be generalised and deemed valid for other higher education centres;
- the low numbers of students and teacher-mentors included in the research sample up to this point in time, limits the possibility to extrapolate the actual results, if only for the case under discussion, namely the teacher training of students from Valahia University Târgoviște;
- the teacher-mentors' tendency to "improve" the information provided with a view to maintain their mentoring status and to demonstrate that they responsibly assume their duties;
- the request for personal identity data had an impact on the degree of objectivity in relation to the responses given by the respondents.

In accordance with the limitations of this approach, we believe that the data collected have enabled us to outline an edified picture of how the teacher training is conducted in Valahia University Târgoviște. The data proved to be useful in identification and implementation of some targeted measures designed to optimise this activity.

7. Conclusions

The investigative approach allowed to outline the following *conclusive ideas*:

- the teacher training represents a fundamental component of the psycho-pedagogical training programme;
- in the context of the teacher training activities, it is necessary to have a good collaboration between the teachers/coordinators, teacher-mentors and students;
- in order to form some professionals in the field of education, the students should have suitable conditions to form and practice their professional and transversal competencies which should place them in successful academic situations, and later turn them into successful teachers;
- the approaches circumscribed to the teacher training allow students to get acquainted to elements pertaining to the education environment, to how the education process is organised and

conducted, and to include in best practices the skills acquired in relation to disciplines they studied, disciplines which are integrated in the psycho-pedagogical training programme and the bachelor's studies programme;

- the teacher training activity is perceived by the all involved actors to be as maximum importance for training future teachers, given that this activity ensures the direct contact with the education realities.

Acknowledgment

The contribution of the authors to this paper is equal.

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