Experience in Teaching Practice of Pre-service Teachers: Analysis of Written Reflections

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Abstract

Teacher training institutions have a mission of high responsibility to train competitive educators for change and future schools. Researchers highlight the need for relation between theory and practice as well as interaction between personal and professional experiences. The article reveals the characteristics of personal professional experience gained in accomplishment of objectives of teaching practice by students studying music pedagogy. The analysis of written reflections highlights positive and negative factors that may have impact on implementation of students’ pedagogical competencies during their teaching practice.

Keywords: pre-service teachers of music, teaching practice, written reflections, positive experience, negative experience.

1. Introduction

Modern pedagogical theory and practice get more and more focused on responding to the challenges of the 21st century – on implementing life-long learning, on assuring the quality of education, on training of individuals for successful professional activities in rapidly changing social and cultural conditions (Education and Training 2020). Teacher training institutions have a mission of high responsibility to train competitive educators for change and future schools. Works of researchers from different countries (Shaffer, 2004; Barkauskaitė, Pečuliauskiene, 2009; Black, Plowright, 2010; Raudeliūnaitė, 2010) highlight the significance of relation between theory and practice as
well as interaction between personal and professional experiences. These opportunities are revealed during teaching practice, when students reflect on their personal experiences (Pollard, 2008). Teaching practice is such a period of studies when the initial professional steps are made, when the attitude towards teacher’s activity, rights, obligations and responsibilities is shaped. It is the educational space where the quality of competencies acquired during the studies is revealed. Hence, the purpose of teaching practice is to help pre-service teachers acquire professional competencies and experience necessary for practical activity (Teacher Training Regulation, 2012). Pre-service teachers should be practicians who continuously analyse and contemplate, i.e., reflect on their activities (Pečuliauskienė, 2009). Reflection during practical studies enables self-observation, adjustment of one’s goals, learning achievements, weaknesses (Bubnys, Žydžiūnaitė, 2010). Analysis of real educational problems and reflecting on personal experiences allow pre-service teachers seek for fresh knowledge and competencies, which are needed for the improvement of teaching practice as well as for the increase of professional motivation (Rodzevičiūtė, 2008).

1.1. Problem Statement

Yet in Lithuania, peculiarities of music pedagogy students’ experience in teaching practice have not yet been evaluated to a wider extent and remain the problem of the research.

1.2. Purpose of Study

The aim of the research is to highlight the characteristics of pre-service music teachers’ experiences on the basis of their written reflections in order to accomplish the objectives of teaching practice.

2. Research design

2.1. Participants

Thirty four 3rd and 4th year students (pre-service teachers) involved in the programme of music pedagogy at the Lithuanian University of Educational Sciences participated in this research. The survey was anonymous. The reflections were written after the students’ return from teaching practice in schools. The research was performed in March 2013.

2.2. Data collection

The qualitative research method was chosen for this study, using semi-structured written student reflections (Yip, 2006), which prompted research participants to recollect, think over, reassess and describe in writing specific cases experienced during the teaching practice.

The article analyses the considerations of the research participants, with regard to the following questions formulated by the researchers: Describe the situations of the teaching practice, where you experienced success or failure, positive or negative feelings; What did the teaching practice mean to you personally, what did you learn about yourself as pre-service teacher of music? The research participants were free to choose the number of such situations to describe, to provide specific examples.

2.3. Data analysis

The content of the written reflections was analysed on the basis of qualitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). The qualitative content analysis enabled the definition of the ways that reflection authors treat a successful case of teaching practice, determination of the ways of their reasoning and understanding, positive or negative feelings revealed, the depth of the reflection. Qualitative content analysis is based on systemic realization of these steps: multiple reading of the text; identifying of manifest categories based on key words; dividing the categories into subcategories; interpreting of the categories with subcategories included their substantiation, based on extracted
2.4. Research ethics

The research ethics was grounded on the principles of goodwill, voluntarism, confidentiality (Miller, et al., 2008).

3. Results

Upon analysis of the students’ reflections on their experiences during teaching practice, 6 qualitative categories were distinguished, which can be subdivided into two groups (themes) – positive and negative experience of students during teaching practice (see Table 1).

Table 1. Results of analysis of the students’ written reflections

| Theme: positive experience of students during teaching practice | Theme: negative experience of students during teaching practice |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Category**                                                   | **Sub-category**                                              |
| Students’ positive experience in terms of relations with pupils | • Humane interrelationship, based on confidence, respect       |
|                                                               | • Ability to arise pupils’ interest in the music subject       |
|                                                               | • Effective lesson planning                                     |
|                                                               | • Class control                                                |
|                                                               | • Giving and getting feedback                                   |
| Students’ positive experience in terms of relations with the mentors, other teachers | • Close cooperation with the mentor                            |
|                                                               | • Partner interrelation with other teachers of the school      |
|                                                               | • Inducement of students’ self-confidence and setting of a welcoming atmosphere |
| Personality (self-) development and professional improvement   | • Self-assessment                                              |
|                                                               | • Self-improvement                                             |
|                                                               | • Gaining of new experience                                   |
|                                                               | • Increase of professional motivation                          |
|                                                               | • Lack of professional readiness (directiveness)               |
|                                                               | • Disappointment with the teacher’s profession                 |
|                                                               | • Lack of cooperation with colleagues                          |
|                                                               | • Boring, complicated university practice tasks                |

3.1. Characteristics of the students’ positive experience during teaching practice

3.1.1. Expression of positive experience in terms of relations with the pupils

Analysis of expression of positive experience in the students’ relations with pupils is dominated by such subcategories as humane interrelation (based on confidence, respect), ability to arise pupils’ interest in music as subject, effective lesson planning, class control, giving and getting feedback.

The research revealed that during their practice students succeed in establishing contact with pupils: „Children need love, understanding and support”. Respect, confidence were expressed by the pupils’ attentiveness, friendly disposition; they were frank, willing to cooperate. According to the students: „<...>if you talk to and treat children as equals, good results can be achieved”. The pupils’ confidence caused the students feel personally recognised („I felt wanted, I could and was able to help the children”). On the other hand, it facilitated more successful musical activities in class and allowed students feel good during the teaching practice.

3.1.2. Expression of positive experience in terms of relations with the mentors and other teachers
Upon analysis of expression of the students’ positive experience with the mentors and other teachers, the reflections revealed such subcategories as a close cooperation, partner interrelationship, setting of a welcoming atmosphere and inducement of the students’ self-confidence.

Mutual cooperation between the mentor, practice supervisor and the student is prerequisite in the attainment of objectives of teaching practice, as students often look for teaching examples they can follow around them. Moreover, a favourable atmosphere motivates students during their teaching practice: a welcoming reception and acceptance in a school, assurance of the conditions necessary to conduct practice tasks, self-testing in new situations of teaching activities, partnership, cooperation, effective feedback. It is assumed that thereby a psychological security, students’ higher involvement in educational activities at school is preconditioned.

3.1.3. Expression of personality (self-) development and professional improvement

The third category of the students’ positive experience reflects such subcategories as personality (self-) development and professional improvement of pre-service teachers of music (see Table 2).

| Subcategory                          | Fragments of reflections                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self-assessment                      | Self-assessment opportunities, self-cognition is revealed during the practice; you are able to feel whether you are accessible to pupils, teachers. |
|                                      | <...> during the teaching practice I learnt and experienced a lot. I saw my mistakes, I can correct them<...>.                                     |
| Self-improvement                     | The practice to me was like a challenge where I had to overcome myself, was able to better perceive my calling, acquire fresh knowledge and courage, pedagogical self-confidence. |
|                                      | I realised that teacher’s ongoing work with himself/herself is one of the key conditions. For this purpose children are the best teachers.                  |
| Gaining of new experience            | Practice is very important for a developing teacher of music.                            |
|                                      | Practice is a perfect thing as I gain so much experience; acquire new feelings, moods, knowledge. I improve my abilities and skills during the practice.    |
| Enhancement of professional motivations | I see my future as a teacher who is successful in performing                             |
|                                      | <...> I wish I could appear in school atmosphere again, as soon as possible, get acquainted with professional teachers and learn something new, which I will definitely need in the future. |

The content of the students’ reflections revealed that pupils, mentors and other teachers who students communicated and cooperated with during their teaching practice caused the change of the students’ attitude towards themselves as future educators: „Opportunities of self-assessment, self-knowledge open up during practice“. It is presumed that thereby the pre-service teachers of music could feel the value and meaning of educational activities; the development of professionalism and pride in the profession of a teacher of music were facilitated. In a certain sense, the communication with pupils, mentors is the foundation of formation of professional self-identification („Practice is very important to a developing teacher of music“). No doubt, such a positive experience motivates pre-service teachers.

3.2. Characteristics of students’ negative experience during teaching practice

Some students’ reflections revealed negative experience related to their teaching practice. In most cases it is associated with negative relations between students and pupils, students and mentors and other teachers, as well as lack of professional readiness (directiveness).

Analysis of negative experiences of the students with regard to their relations with pupils showed that experience of worry and distrust in oneself prevail in the reflections: „At the beginning of the practice, perhaps, worry disturbed me during the lesson“. The feeling of fear, distrust in oneself was mainly experienced by those students who were not able to control the class in cases of discipline problems: „<...> when exposed to unrest in the class, I did not know how to deal with it“. Pupils from senior classes were the most difficult to deal with for the students. Problems of conducting educational activities appeared when the students were unable to appropriately „plan the lesson timing“, „select the repertoire in accordance with the pupils age“, etc.
The negative experiences with regard to mentors, other teachers and fellow students are associated with the lack of cooperation, feedback. The feedback maintains the internal motivation to learn, encourages the student and mentor to cooperate, assess their own activities.

There were students whose reflections revealed disappointment with the teacher’s profession (”The undisciplined senior pupils caused my disinclination to work as a teacher…”). Obviously, the disappointment with the profession may be caused by a moderate teaching practice experience of the students, lack of communication, disability to deal with pupils’ behavioural, discipline problems.

4. Discussion

Most of foreign researchers focus on practical teaching activities (National System Overview on Education systems in Europe and Ongoing Reforms, 2011). Teaching practice is considered the most important part of pedagogical studies, which helps future teachers take a full part in the school life.

Results of the research conducted, in comparison to research data from other countries (Baskan, Yildiz, Tok, 2013; Fook, 2012; Güven, 2010; Li, Lowe, 2006), lead to the statement that teaching practice in different countries is related to both positive and negative experiences of students and is basically exposed to identical problems of accomplishment of objectives of teaching practice. They reflect pre-service teachers’ attitude towards teaching practice in school, the prestige, social status of the teacher’s profession in different countries. The above mentioned research data show that practical training of pre-service teachers should be enhanced and continuously improved.

Teaching practice allows students develop a distinct attitude towards their future educational activities. Such considerations are predetermined by multiple factors (desire to become a teacher, subjective approach towards studies, their goals, results, internal processes, which influence and comprise studies) (Martiauskienė, 2007). Analysis of written reflections actualised the importance of pre-service teachers’ positive experience during teaching practice, the transformation of their professional background into a role in a school community. The practicing students described teacher’s activities as very complicated and bearing high responsibility, requiring a good subject-related and psychological training, self-dependence, ability to reflect, person’s maturity, ability to perceive the importance of teacher’s personality in respect of values (Barkauskaitė, Pečiuliauskienė, 2009). Although some students have difficulties with metacognitive assessment, generally the students’ approach towards their activities and evaluation of teaching practice in school is quite favourable.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Upon analysis of the research material, the following areas of students’ experience during teaching practice were established: 1) relations with pupils, 2) relations with mentors and other teachers, 3) personality (self-) development and professional improvement.

Students’ positive experiences during teaching practice highly depend on humane interrelations (based on respect, confidence), ability to arise pupils’ interest in the subject of music, effective lesson planning, class control, giving and getting feedback, setting of a welcoming atmosphere. The positive purposefulness of personality (self-) development and professional improvement during teaching practice depends on students’ ability to assess and develop personal qualities, to gain new experience, to increase the motivation of choosing a teacher’s profession.

Students’ negative experiences disclose contradictory emotional experiences (lack of confidence in themselves, fear and dissatisfaction). The negative experiences of students’ relations with pupils, mentors which were gained during the teaching practice are generally associated with pupils’ destructive behaviour in class, lack of professional readiness (directiveness).

Therefore, in order to improve the organisation of teaching practice for pre-service teachers, the application of reflection should be enforced in the process of pedagogical studies as the basis for combining and integrating theoretical and practical knowledge, and for learning from the own experience. The contents of other subjects’ results should also be supplemented with measures designed to develop the above mentioned abilities.
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