The reflective diary, an effective professional training instrument for future teachers
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Abstract

Specialized literature of recent years indicates the reflective diary as an effective tool for teachers’ professional training. Used as part of the activities of pre-service teaching practice, it is a tool for descriptive, reflective and / or critical recording of professional experiences lived by the teacher trainee in teacher training situations. The reflective diary helps organise the activity of guided analysis of pedagogical practice experiences aimed at: identifying students’ own needs, interests, training motivation, the degree of mastery of past acquisitions, shaping an accurate image on their effectiveness in practical teaching situations. The analysis, processing and interpretation of such a structured reflective diary is focused on the following areas: characterizing the school climate factors where students conduct teaching practice; analyzing the relationship between the school mentor and student; identifying the strengths and weaknesses in terms of classroom management.

Keywords: reflective diary, teacher training, pedagogical practice;

1. Introduction

The process of initial training of future teachers at universities shows a constant concern for the orientation of the programs of study offered towards practice. From this point of view, some authors show how relevant it is that students understand the importance of their integration into concrete work situations where they can establish operational correlations between academic learning and actual working practices. The pedagogical practice activity is carried out in the professional field in which future teachers are to be integrated, and some of the specific activities of school teaching practice are: knowledge regarding the school, the organization of school space, the equipment, school documents, the organization of specific activities of the school; activities for knowing the students and school group; the drawing up of the psycho-pedagogical sheet of the student, of the psychosocial characterization sheet of the class, practicing ways to increase cooperation and creativity; didactic activities: observation and direct involvement in the design, implementation and evaluation of lessons, teaching activities complementary to lessons, activities of school management: observation of teaching process management, management of the educational institution.

Constant concern to improve teaching practice is also materialized in the emphasis laid on reflective practice, meaning the lived experiences and subjected to reflective questioning. Reflective practice is essentially heuristic, creative and it develops teacher autonomy. Introducing reflexivity in teaching internship can be done in multiple
ways. We mention some of them: reflective diary, reflective portfolio, mentor (tutor) of teaching practice as facilitator and reflective advisor, the reflective guidance of the student during the practicum, reflective evaluation (counseling and reflection type) as premise of the final assessments for pre-service teacher certification.

Used in observational teaching practice activities, we shall highlight features of the personal diary as a tool of descriptive, reflective and critical recording of professional experiences encountered in situations of practical training in the training of future teachers.

2. Literature review

Specialized literature of recent years indicates the personal diary as an effective tool for professional training (Korthagen, 2002) or for the development of complex and inter-disciplinary skills such as in-depth processing of information (Temple, 2001).

Although, according to studies, users consider completing their professional diaries an effort in itself which sometimes they are not willing to perform (Glava, 2009), the formative effects of using a diary are multiple. Being a complex form of communication with oneself and with others, the diary created for professional training represents an exercise of: awareness of own practical approaches, of beliefs, values and knowledge which formed their basis, of their emotional and behavioral reactions generated, significance and personal value of practical experiences; learning from experience.

Preoccupied with finding ways to prevent this risk, Eyler, Giles and Schmiede (1996) summarized as a result of a detailed investigation the following quality criteria of reflection, giving it its real function: continuity of reflection is given by the co-relation that must exist between moments of reflection, both in relation to an itemised practical experience and the overall process of professional development through teaching, a process which is being continuous in itself. This includes: explicitly planning of reflective moments and of use of the personal diary, implementation of moments of reflection before, during and after the involvement in a teaching exercise, concern for structuring a reflective culture at the level of the professional training institution.

Guidance of recording experiences and reflection. Although it represents a first step in the formation of skills related to the recording and reflection on practical experience, the surface, non-directive guiding of the trainer allows students to focus on relevant and/or original issues of their own educational practice, challenges them to justify decisions and experiences, suggests new questions for reflection, new possible connections. This requires the trainer / mentor to formulate questions and original reflection markers that may aim to (according to Eyler, Giles, Schmiede, 1996): deepen the experience exploring, identify additional arguments to support an opinion, reflect on points of view, create special reflection tools with different uses; provide a learning environment characterized by trust and respect, prerequisite for an efficient reflection. Contextualizing reflection involves ensuring compatibility between types and specific means of reflection proposed and the specific of learning situations that will be subject to reflection. Ensuring the contextualized character of reflection involves: formulation of general reflection questions (which can be transferred to any learning situation), but also specific to the particular learning situation in relation to which reflection occurs; formulation of open reflection questions, allowing contextualized observations; formulation of questions for reflection including guiding elements for learning in the specific learning situation.

The reflective diary represents an organizer of guided analysis activity of practical experiences which, according to the objective pursued, can have different degrees of structuring: the structured diary with various types of practical objectifying and various degrees of structuring: a. a set of standard questions; b. a set of varied and contextualized questions; c. more specific options: a diary organized around a critical incident the student selects and comments on or a diary written in terms of a specific role assigned by the teacher or self-assumed (e. g. the drawing up of diary pages from the perspective of an external observer of his/her own teaching); unstructured/open diary ensuring free, unguided from the outside reflection on practice, in this case the student undertaking a certain structure of his/her own diary.; projective diary which, based on a pretext, calls for reflection; diary - database or diary - resource - is a variant of the open diary in which the student collects itemized information about important events related to pedagogical practice, combining it with reflections and theoretical information useful for understanding specific educational action.
Although so varied in form, most reflective diaries have as common element the questions, whose main role is to steer the reflection activity. This guides the recording of various beliefs, experiences and reflections as follows (the classification of reflections adapted according to Taggart et. all, 2005, York-Barr et. all, 2006, according to Joița, 2008): technical reflections focused on the analysis of scientific and pedagogical contents, of teaching and training principles, of possibilities for applying the theory to solve practical problems, deliberative reflection on intentions, decisions, approach perspectives, outlined assumptions; contextual reflections on the manner in which various elements of teaching interacted, alternatives used, reactions of context; personalized reflections focused on asserting their own interpretation; critical reflections focused on the assessment and interpretation of actions by reference to ethical, social criteria; reflections focused on personal and professional development, self-evaluative judgments, reflections on the effects of actions on personal and social development.

3. Research methodology

The overall aim of the study is to identify the characteristics of the organizational environment of application educational units, outlining a realistic picture of professional and managerial qualities of the teaching practice mentor.

The goals we have in mind are: identifying their needs, interests, motivation training, degree of mastery of previous purchases on teaching practice, active involvement in their own learning through teaching practice and accountability for its quality and for developing own work, developing skills of perception and recording accurate details, situations encountered in teaching practice and their implications for their own training, interviewing, refining, restructuring their belief, faith, knowledge of educational practice.

In the context of training the future teachers within the “1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba-Iulia, we used the structured reflective diary as a tool for analysing the observational teaching practice. After the 15 meetings in the primary school environment, on the organization and development of teaching practice, we proposed a no. of 79 first year students, majoring in primary and pre-school pedagogy, to complete a diary that addresses some observational indicators.

The reflective diary is organized into three themes with structured questions: the characterization of the school climate factors of the institution where students have carried out their teaching practice, analyzing the relationship between the school mentor and the student, identify the strengths and weaknesses in terms of classroom management. For each of these directions, indicators with rating scale for measuring and interpreting percentages of students’ options are presented.

4. Findings

Quantitative analysis and processing of the opinions expressed in a structured journal completed by each student was done through assessment scales: satisfactory, good and very good. Along with selecting an appreciation for qualitative interpretation, we proposed the argumentation of the choice made, the identification of causes for the negative aspects and also the suggestion of solutions with improvement or perfecting character.

In the school climate characterization of the institution where the 79 students carried out their teaching practice, we proposed the analysis of three categories of factors: school structure, number of students and teachers and vocational training homogeneity in the category of structural factors; instrumental factors that target space / technical equipment and teaching materials; socio-affective factors, including here the management style, the involvement of teachers and climate characteristics. Student opinions are mostly positive, with a share of over 73% in terms of the homogeneity of the professional training of teaching practice mentors, the mentors being a model of professional conduct, but we found that 30% represent shortcomings determined by: the high number of students in primary school classes and the critical attitude of the institution’s management. Instrumental factors are positively appreciated by 63% for the neat appearance of classrooms, for the teaching materials used in facilitating learning, but the lack of digital technologies for each student and the sporadic use of the projector, etc. were criticised. Regarding the socio-affective factors, 71% appreciated the democratic teaching style of the involvement of the
teaching practice mentor and regarding the negative aspects, the degree of strain imposed and the requirements of the school management were highlighted. These results are presented in the figure below:

For the analysis of the relationship between the school mentor and the student, we keep in mind: the affective nature of interpersonal relationships is very good in 77% of cases, listing here empathy and cooperative behavior. Professional qualities, especially professional accuracy, are positively appreciated by 83%. The sense of professional satisfaction has a positive value of 75% and the motivation for learning techniques is effective for 72% of the respondents. Some criticism is proposed regarding the constraint of the criteria-based evaluation in motivating students. These results are presented regarding the constraint of the criteria-based evaluation in motivating students. These results are presented in the figure below:

Identifying strengths and weaknesses identified, in terms of classroom management: as strengths are stated educational space organization with a good appreciation of 78%; the conflict management is assessed as “very good” by 59%; and the effective use of positive disciplinary strategies is appreciated as “good” by 41%; identifying the didactic strategies used in teaching activity and implicitly the teaching methods used are organized in the following percentages: 62% cognitive, 29% active, 9% affective-emotional. All these aim at the way of reporting to learning tasks. We shall present these results in the figure below:

5. Conclusions and recommendations

In essence, the core value of drawing up the personal diary is personal reflection, which has the potential to enrich the training characteristics of a learning situation in general and to identify the characteristics of organizational environment of educational units in particular.

Connecting teaching practice with theoretical knowledge within reflection, on the one hand, involves the intern teacher trainees to practice the justification of their own educational practices by referring to theories and the literature. On the other hand, this requirement involves encouraging the students to formulate in their journals the particularities and generalities of their learning experiences in building functional personal theories. Moreover, another advantage of the request of completion of such a diary of reflection turns the students into real scholars of the educational practices and can be extremely useful in ensuring the transfer of their own experience in similar study situations.

We recommend preventing the risk of technical implementation of reflection focused on completing a protocol or clearly pre-established reflection steps without integrating reflection results in the broader approach to optimize their training.

We propose within teaching practice to use the personal diary with reflective character, especially for the training and professional development plan of future teachers. We mention the importance of the practice coordinator and mentor to help the student, future teacher, to structure correctly his/her indicators for identifying his/her own needs, interests, training motivation, in order to restructure his/her own convictions, beliefs, knowledge of educational practice.
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