Teaching practice and student mentoring

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Abstract

Practice in relation to theory developed in classrooms is currently a very significant aspect in the formation of teacher-students. The priorities of education as a lifelong process for the individual orient the study programs towards life training.

This paper deals with the lecturer-mentor relationship as an essential factor in developing teaching practices during the years of study.

We have used thew qualitative research methodology, focusing on meta-analysis of previously conducted research in this field and study program materials. Semi-structured interviews and meta-analyses of documents, processes, and professional attitudes are also included.

The paper manages to understand that the lecturer and the mentor are disconnected from the focus on the student, from the theoretical to the practical preparation, from the method to the curriculum and from the pupil to the student. This separation is also reflected in the distancing of education faculties from schools and lecturers from teachers.

The reasoning comes from the analysis and comparison of the practice development processes, from the competencies of the lecturers who develop the practice, the physical time and the lecturer's responsibility. On the other hand, the mentor teacher does not feel motivated in this process. He feels worried that the student's involvement in the lesson disrupts the process and the result of the class.

The paper contains recommendations addressed to the faculties of education, departments and pedagogues who lead the practices as well as schools and mentor teachers who are involved in this process.

Keywords: *teaching practice, mentor teacher, practice leader, professional training*

Theoretical context

Teaching practice with students pursuing studies in teaching programs is a very significant aspect in the formation of teacher students (Gani. 2015). The priorities of education as a lifelong process for the individual orient the study programs towards training and equipping with life skills. This orientation is also supported by the priorities set by the Commission of the European Communities (Commission of European Communities, 2005). Today, as evidenced by all the political documents on education, importance in the preparation of teachers is given to the formation of competencies and the development of their performance (Sina, 2014). In European countries, the teaching profession is considered " *a profession with real qualifications, a profession placed within the context of lifelong learning, a model profession and a profession supported by numerous partnerships* " (Commission of European Communities, 2005).

In this paper, the lecturer-mentor relationship is treated as an essential factor in the development of successful professional practice in the preparation of new teachers.

Internship and mentoring

Universities and faculties in their study programs that prepare teachers have designed programs, guidelines and manuals for the implementation of teaching practices within the frameworks, standards and academic requirements. The

supporting materials are plentiful and elaborately handled. However, from the assessments made to these materials, they mostly seem theoretical and often not applicable in the realities where the relevant practice takes place (Suaib, 2022). These programs need annual improvement. Pedagogy as a science is facing the challenges of change, therefore practice programs must reflect its development by awakening teachers' sense of self-efficacy and attitudes towards their profession (Sasson, Kalir & Shamir, 2020).

The efficiency in the performance of teachers should reflect the goals of education in a democratic society, the embodiment of civic values and legal responsibilities towards the environment, society, man and the environment where he lives (Conklin et al, 2021).

Teaching practices in support of theoretical academic activities support the formation of pedagogical competencies, which form the basis of the new teacher's performance. Pedagogical competence affects the evidence of meeting the standards necessary to undertake certain professional roles during a career in education (Channa & Sahit, 2022). These competencies are developed and shaped throughout the professional life of teachers. They cannot by any means be satisfied only with university studies but must be supported with continuous training and with the addition of various pedagogical materials (Beqiri, 2024).

Studies have proven that there is a statistically significant correlation between the extrinsic motivation of student-teacher candidates and the student's perception of teaching during practice. Teaching students gain experience from teaching practices, exercise during the process and understand the essence of teaching by being involved in institutional and social networks, which contribute to the development of their teaching competencies (Kaldi & Xafako, 2017). Through experience, new concepts for teaching must be reconstructed during the dynamics of practice forming cognitive schemes of their pedagogical formation (Figueroa-Martínez, E. et al, 2021)

Professional development requirements and recommendations require teachers to change teaching methods and strategies from traditional methods to methods based on the real engagement of students in the learning process. (Aglazor, 2017).

This change should be instilled in teachers during their training in universities. Teaching practice is a good opportunity to face this process of change. The design of teaching work schemes and the design of the teaching task based on the constructivist approach is the genesis of the practical methodological change in teaching (Ben de Souza, 2017).

The student's cooperation with the mentor should be constructive and developmental. The mentor must make the student-teacher candidate understand and convince them that their teaching is effective in terms of student learning and classroom management. The mentor must follow the formative assessment of the

student's activity throughout the dynamics of the practice. Faculty of education are tasked with supporting mentors and student leaders for the effective implementation of active learning practices (Williams, 2020; Kaldi & Xafako, 2017).

Methodology

Qualitative methods and techniques were used in this paper. The main paradigms are related to the most treated notions and concepts in various studies in this field. The first paradigm is related to the treatment of the continuous process of teacher training and professional development. Professional development is seen as a whole and not divided and as an independent responsibility of different institutions or individuals. The second paradigm is related to the concept of the teaching profession as about the personal and individual mentoring of the future teacher. Another paradigm is the relationship between theory and practice in the professional training of teachers. The other paradigm is related to the mentor and mentee relationship. The roles, responsibilities and strategies related to this paradigm clarify the roles and create the institutional environment and climate for the development of the mentoring process. The relationship of the mentee with the student, the curriculum, and the school is a paradigm that draws attention to many studies on mentoring.

The paper also looks at the manuals or manuals for the development of teachers' professional practices in accordance with the legislation and regulations on this process. The teaching profession is a regulated profession, therefore the role and place of professional training and development, along with theoretical training and development, becomes an integral component of high scientific and professional importance and discipline. Argumentation through meta-analysis enables the treatment of the problem in the regulatory context of the process.

Semi-structured interviews with mentors, managers, mentoring supervisors and education lecturers bring arguments on evaluation and attitudes towards this issue. The argument comes from the analysis and comparison of the practice development processes, from the competencies of the lecturers who develop the practice, the physical time and the responsibility of the lecturer.

Results of the research

Law No. 80/2015 on higher education and scientific research in higher education institutions in the Republic of Albania, among others as its mission emphasizes the education and training of senior specialists in accordance with the country's

development priorities (Article 1, b) by creating sustainable quality assurance mechanisms in higher education institutions, in accordance with European standards (Article 2, ç).

Lifelong learning remains an important framework for the aims of the academic learning process and the content of the study programs. The law allows the introduction of continuing education study programs, which help people enhance their qualifications and professional abilities and grants higher education institutions to this authority (Article 81/1).

Law no. 69/2012, for the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania, legitimizes the development of teaching by the teacher with the aim of mastering basic competencies, based on learning standards and choosing between the best contemporary methods and practices, local and foreign (Article 56/1). This requirement in the performance of the teacher requires knowledge, training, information and high professional competences. For this reason, the law gives importance to the development of the teacher's profession from the university formation to the one-year professional practice and to the licensing according to the law of regulated professions (Article 57).

Even the Law on pre-university education conceives the professional development and training of the teacher in the framework of lifelong learning. In Article 58 of this law, continued professional development is emphasized based not only on the dynamics of the development of educational policies or the needs arising from the reformation process but also on the "demand-supply" system.

The implementation of the law and the normative provisions are supported by the by-laws a) "On the criteria and procedures for the qualification of teachers" b) "On the functioning of the system of continuous professional development of educational employees" c) "On the organization and development of professional practices for the regulated profession of teacher" as well as the relevant instructions of the Ministry of Education (MAS) and the Regional Directorates of Pre-University Education (DRAP).

Professional qualification according to Law No. 10 171, dated 22.10.2009, for professions regulated in the Republic of Albania, Article 4, defines it as qualification certified with a study title, a certificate of ability or a professional experience. With the interpretation of this legal space, *the paradigm of dealing with the continuous process of teacher training and professional development is connected.* The process of professional teacher training in a continuous qualification extension means that the process does not start with the certification of the profession, nor with the graduation yes, from the moment when he starts the real studies for his professional training. So professional training cannot be separated into segments, as it is like a whole. The treatment of training and professional development is necessarily designed as a progressively well-structured process on a scientific basis. Of course,

the main attributes of this process cannot be given to anyone but the university authority. Training agencies, in the case of the concept of continuing qualification, must develop their training activity at the second level, within the institutional authority of the universities. Certification of credit-trained teachers is a delicate detail. The value of the credit cannot be different from the value of the credit in the teaching practices developed during the year of studies in the faculties that develop programs in the field of teaching (Instruction no. 15, MES. date 04.04.2008) If we are to maintain this credit value, then only an institution of higher education can certify the credits. Without question, training agencies can offer training according to the needs of institutions or specific teachers without becoming part of the column of formal or informal professional training measured by credits.

The professional training of the teacher is related to the curricula and the environments where the practice will take place, as well as to the organization of the actors who will develop this process. Mentors are considered the most important actors, as they will develop the mentorship, which is considered a personal relationship with the mentee. The mentor in this relationship has the role of teacher, advocate, friend and facilitator (Neary, 2002). Therefore, during the work, the paradigm *of personal and individual mentoring of the future teacher* was taken into consideration. In addition to deep knowledge of the program, text and teaching techniques, the mentor must also know well the needs, characteristics and tendencies of the new teacher or the student developing the teaching practice.

Between theory and practice, there is an inseparable logical connection. This is an important paradigm in the study of this topic. They serve each other and cannot be disconnected or as two parallel lines (Nichols & Amick, 1995). In fact, referring to interviews with internship supervisors and mentor teachers, in today's Albanian reality, a deep lack of cooperation and interactivity is found (Gani, 2015).

According to the opinions gathered through interviews, our faculties remain literate. Literariness is used in the sense not only of filling curricula with subjects and lectures of a more scientific-theoretical nature, but also of little sensitivity to the implementation of practices as a process that belongs more to teaching practice and the state exam. Practices are often considered complementary to the teaching load. Departments in many cases consider them second-rate. The supervisors, in most cases, are lecturers who do not have proper methodological and didactic training but need hours to complete the teaching load.

Even the Law on Higher Education (Law No. 80/2015) gives much more importance to the lines of teaching and scientific research. In the case of teaching as a regulated profession, the keyword used in the objectives of study programs in this field is the word "competence". Competence is related to the profession, which, in addition to general scientific, moral and civic training, contains especially professional training. The tendency of the organization of the departments of

the faculties of education is to design them based on subjects, not professions. The organization of departments based on profession would make the quality of teacher's professional training an object of evaluation and competition in the market. The energies and focus of the evaluation would not be closed simply with the theoretical and practical part of the work, but with the product: At what level do the teachers of this faculty come out? How do they perform in the labour market and how competitive are they? In this case, the departments, the development of teaching practices would give due priority not only to those that develop during the years of study but also during the development of one-year practices.

The conclusion is clear: strengthening the faculty-school, supervisor-mentor and mentor-student relationship makes practice and mentoring an important part of the evaluation of study programs. This approach extends the evaluation process over all the components that precede the teacher's professional training. This spirit and platform prove the care for the quality product and the effort to decently compete in the labour market.

Another paradigm that constitutes the context of dealing with the issue is *the mentor and mentee relationship*. Mentor-trainee relationships appear in three interactive dimensions. According to their study on mentoring models and theory, they are structured in the socializing dimension; in the dimension of task development and in that of long-term sustainability development. (Johnson, Geroy & Griego, 1999). The mentor, dimensioning the work according to this model, must guarantee the quality of mentoring. His profile is presented in the Regulation on the Organization of Teaching Practices *(MES Order, No. 336, dated 14.07.2011 "On the organization and development of professional practices for the regulated teaching profession").* According to this regulation, the mentor teacher is an experienced teacher who has obtained the second category of teacher qualification in the relevant subject. The students of the mentor teacher must have achieved high and stable results not only in the classroom assessments but also in the Matriculation or Graduation Exams, if the subject is included in these exams. He stands out for his professional and civic values and competencies.

The mentor considers himself a lifelong learner working for his continuous professional development. In this context, mentoring is a serious responsibility, and its effectiveness depends on the training and supervision of the mentor himself (Levin, Hammer & Coffey, 2009). On the other hand, the mentor himself must have an interest and be motivated for the professional development of mentoring (Ghani, 2015). The continuous study of the mentor teacher should be encouraged and motivated with internal and external incentives (Viersraete, 2013).

Mentor teachers say that the teacher has a lot of workloads. Routines, bureaucratic requirements, working with students, meetings with parents, activities with the class, meetings with the school principal, preparing plans, preparing the diary,

preparing tests, evaluations, completing files, reports and many other obligations are barriers to mentioned by them in the professional development of teachers. Relief from the teaching load if you mentor four new teachers, according to the mentor teachers, it seems that it is not enough. Moreover, mentoring in the case of students coming from the faculties is considered unpaid work.

Mentor teachers require pay adjusted according to job category or compensation with reduced hours, payment from universities or payment of the value of training credits. On the other hand, the supervisors of intern students suggest the support of mentors by reducing the teaching load for each new student or teacher, the opportunity to grow professionally not only by active participation in various trainings and workshops, but also by becoming an active part of collaborations and participation in different working groups enabling continuous professional development (Viersraete, 2013).

Students and new teachers state that they generally find the necessary ground to exercise professional practice, but often feel abandoned by mentors, lecturers and school leaders. Mentor teachers express reservations towards. Often when they see that students or new teachers do not have the necessary training, they do not allow them to teach because, according to them, they feel endangered for achieving the expected results of the students.

The relationship of the mentee with the student, the curriculum and the school is a paradigm that draws attention in many studies on mentoring. The classroom is the arena where theory meets practice. The mentees state that they make more efforts to achieve learning objectives and learning outcomes. Mentors recognize that mentees have an obvious dependence on text material. They try to reproduce all the material, without being able to make a dynamic organization between the teaching material and the level of the student. This creates a certain detachment from the students, which creates difficulties in managing the class and the lesson. This situation is confirmed by the interns themselves. They explain this with the reason that the students are used to their teacher and that the authority of the intern is not like that of the teacher.

Various researchers explain this situation by examining three important aspects of teacher professional development: (i) teacher competencies, (ii) teacher performance and (iii) teacher effectiveness (Howey, 1988). New teachers have not yet formed the habits of harmonizing these three elements. They will either imitate their favorite teachers, or they will follow teaching methods that are disconnected from the effectiveness during implementation, or they will focus on the teaching material, which is not yet fully known and mastered. Their uncertainty with the development of the lesson during practice has also been proven by Gani (2015).

From the guidelines for the development of teaching practices in some universities (University of Pristina "Hasan Prishtina"), the practical teaching

program is designed in a developmental way. The student must practice in the auditorium. Course assignments, seminars or didactic subjects should contain illustrations and improvisations of situations where teachers perform in the role of teacher. Direct observations in the classroom and discussion of situations among students is an opportunity to reflect on the competencies in the performance of the new teacher. In this way, the interactivity in the discussions on the teacher's effectiveness depending on a performance based on competencies helps to create the didactic beliefs of the teacher. This interactivity should also take place between the mentor and the new teacher.

In their paper on the practice models of young teachers Petersen & Walke (2012) describe the practice organization model on creating partnerships. The model of training and methodological schools, which have been followed as models in the years in the development of practices by pedagogical schools in Albania, would be a very good opportunity, but in terms of economic opportunities, infrastructure and capacities, there are difficulties in implementation. The new model of creating partnerships can create better opportunities for creating effective environments. In the partner schools, the interests of all actors with an impact on the development of teaching practices are united. This interest sums up all the energies of the actors, which provides a highly effective synergy for solving the problem.

Conclusions

In conclusion, mentoring remains an important issue of reformation, and the policy should evaluate it as a complex issue. Its complexity requires careful and responsible planning and monitoring, as teachers are protagonist factors in education and their effective performance is the basis of quality improvement of the teaching process and successful implementation of educational reforms.

Caring for the training of aspiring teachers requires careful supervision, as the successful start of their careers increases their desire and commitment to the profession. To help these teachers, it is necessary to support their classroom performance from the beginning of their teaching career when they are still students through to their continuing qualification.

Based on the interviews with mentor teachers, the paper manages to understand that between the lecturer and the mentor, there is a disconnection from the focus to the student, from theoretical to practical preparation, from method to curriculum, and from student to student.

Creating the learning climate and environment remains one of the most worrying problems for the heads of faculties, heads of education departments, and heads of schools. This separation is also reflected in the distancing of faculties from

schools, and lecturers from teachers. On the other hand, the mentor teacher does not feel motivated in this process. He feels worried that the student's involvement in the lesson disrupts the process and the result of the class.

Recommendations

The paper dealt with teaching practices by examining the limits and barriers that appear during the development of the relationship between the supervising lecturer of teaching practices and the mentor as a reflection on the practitioner. Within this circle of relations, possible alternatives to solve the problem were found. The institutional convergence of these energies of these actors through a unique professional system realizes the expectation for a synergy of quality assurance in the development of teaching practices.

The paper contains recommendations addressed to faculties, departments, lecturers who lead the practices as well as schools, mentor teachers who are involved in this process.

Faculties of education, we recommend continuously improving the programs of relevant subjects and the organization of teaching practices by cooperating with the ZVA and mentor teachers. Faculty and practice leaders should train and collaborate interactively with each other to improve the practice process.

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