

## The teaching practicum and becoming a competent teacher

**Rezümé** A tanárképző intézmények hallgatói által iskolákban végzett tanítási gyakorlat elismerten az egyik legfontosabb elem a tanárrá válási folyamatban. Gyakorlatuk során a hallgatóknak sok segítségre van szükségük. Mindezt a mentoroktól kaphatják meg. Ők a diákok számára szükséges támogatás fő forrásai. Fontos tehát, hogy tanítási gyakorlatuk során a tanárjelöltek kompetens mentorokkal dolgozhassanak együtt.

Kutatásunkban felmértük, milyen igényeket támasztanak a tanárjelöltek a tanítási gyakorlattal szemben, milyen szakmai támogatásra számítnak, milyen segítséget kapnak a tanítási gyakorlatuk során. Felmérésünkben 49 angol szakos végzős főiskolai hallgató szerepelt válaszadóként 2008–2010 között, akik már teljesítették kötelező iskolai gyakorlatukat. Kérdőív segítségével három témakörben vizsgáltunk: a tanítás megtervezése, tanítási mód, szakmai kapcsolatok.

A kutatás eredményei alapján megállapítható, hogy a tanárjelölteknek több támogatásra van szükségük a gyakorlatuk során. Minden, amit a gyakorlók a tanítási gyakorlat idején megtapasztalnak az iskolában, befolyásolja tanárrá válásukat, mert ekkor alakulnak ki bennük a tanári pályához szükséges készségek.

*Kulcsszavak:* tanítási gyakorlat, gyakorlók/tanárjelölt, mentor/együttműködő tanár.

**Резюме** Загальновизнаний факт, що одним із найважливіших елементів у становленні компетентного вчителя є педагогічна практика, яку студенти проходять у школі. Під час цієї практики студентам необхідна значна допомога. Цю допомогу вони дістають від своїх менторів, тобто вчителів-фахівців, які керують практикою. Тому дуже важливо, щоб студенти співпрацювали з найкращими педагогами.

У статті розглянуто та проаналізовано запити студентів стосовно педпрактики, те, на яку професійну допомогу вони розраховують від менторів, і яку допомогу вони отримують під час практики. Учасниками нашого дослідження стали 49 студентів четвертого курсу ЗУІ спеціальності «англійська мова». За допомогою анкети ми опитали студентів про: планування навчального процесу, методику навчання, професійні стосунки.

Виходячи з результатів дослідження, можемо стверджувати, що студентам-практикантам необхідна ще більша допомога під час педагогічної практики. Все, що студенти-практиканти пізнають у школі, впливає на процес становлення вчителя-професіонала, тому що під час практики формується більшість навичок, які необхідні для цієї професії.

*Ключові слова:* педагогічна практика, студент-практикант, ментор.

It is acknowledged that one of the crucial elements in the process of becoming a competent teacher is the teaching practicum done by college or university students. During the practicum the pre-service or student teachers observe real learners, teachers and syllabi in their original contexts.

It is obvious that student teachers need plenty of help during their practicum. They can obtain it from their cooperating teacher or mentor. Farrell (2008) believes that these teachers are the main sources of the support needed by student teachers because they are “the most influential people” during the teaching practicum; they have probably the greatest professional impact on the student teachers. The student teachers’ task is to acquire the different aspects of the teaching profession during the practicum (Bárdos et al., 1994). Therefore, to achieve all the above enumerated issues it is of utmost importance that student teachers work together with the most competent mentors during their practicum.

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In Transcarpathia, the cooperating teachers are usually those who have the most teaching experience; however, this does not mean automatically that they are the best mentors. In most cases these teachers have not been trained to function as mentors who know how to 'deal' with student teachers, i.e. what kind of help and support student teachers need and expect from mentors. Tomlinson (1995) notes that some mentors, who were appointed to be mentors because they have a teaching experience of many years, are not necessarily aware of their roles and tasks. Tomlinson believes that it might be difficult for such teachers to explain to the mentees (student teachers) what they are doing because they are so experienced that they do everything intuitively. Johnson (1996) considers that the English teaching profession knows little about how student teachers interpret their own initial teaching experiences and what impact these experiences have on their professional development and their processes of becoming competent teachers. To fill this gap, the following research has been designed.

### ***The purpose of the research***

The main aim of the research was to investigate and survey student teachers' needs during their teaching practicum, the kind of support they expect from their mentors and other participants of the teaching process, as well as the kind of help student teachers obtain during their teaching practicum.

### ***Research participants***

Forty-nine English major students of the II. Rákóczi Ferenc Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute obtaining training for a bachelor degree participated in the research described in this paper between 2008 and 2010. The students had already completed their compulsory six-week long teaching practicum (Huszt, 2010) as indicated in the study regulations of the Institute in 20 different Transcarpathian schools with Hungarian language of instruction. These subjects were chosen to be research participants because they had their own views about the issues concerning the teaching practicum in the school; in addition, they were believed to have formulated their opinions about the kind of support and help student teachers expect and get in the course of the practicum.

### ***The research instrument***

A validated and piloted research instrument was used in the present study, the questionnaire applied by Farrell (2008) (see in the Appendix). It inquired about the student teachers views on planning the teaching process, how much help they obtained from their mentors, what kind and in what form. The research tool also aimed at surveying what kind of professional relations were formed between the student teacher and the mentor, as well as the student teacher and the members of the teaching staff of a certain school.

### **Research findings**

#### *Instructional Planning and Decision Making*

In the first section of the questionnaire, the student teachers were asked about issues related to planning the teaching process.

Question 1: "It is impossible to have a successful lesson that has not been well-planned in advance." The research participants' task was to evaluate on a scale from 1 to 4 how much they agreed or disagreed with the given statement (1 meaning 'I totally agree' and 4 meaning 'I totally disagree'). Most of the respondents (41 out of 49) agreed or totally agreed with the statement. However, despite the convincing majority of 41 student teachers, there were some thought-provoking comments, e.g. "I agree; however, there may such cases occur when because of lack of time the teacher does not prepare a written lesson plan. Certainly, the plan is ready in his/her mind." (R5<sup>1\*</sup>); "I agree; however, it also depends on the skills and knowledge of the teacher. The more experienced a teacher is, the easier it is for her to give a lesson." (R47)

Question 2: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Teachers should be more responsive to student needs than the set syllabus." A majority (43 respondents) totally agreed or agreed with the statement. There is some contradiction in the answer of Respondent 25 who agreed with the statement, but finally thought it important to mention that "For a teacher it is important both to keep the demands of the syllabus and to take into consideration the needs of the students." Another opinion by Respondent 49: "I agree but we should never forget that our students are different, therefore their needs also differ. It is often extremely difficult to meet everybody's needs in one and the same lesson."

Question 3: "During your Practicum, how often did you find you had to change your lesson plan?" The most frequent answers were 'sometimes' (17 participants) and 'seldom' (16 participants). Eight student teachers usually changed their lesson plans, while six others never altered their plans and two further respondents stated that they always changed their plans.

#### *Teaching Approach*

The questions in the second section of the questionnaire asked about the teaching approach that student teachers took, the participants' preferences were surveyed whether they preferred student-centred or teacher-centred lessons.

Question 4: "A class should be strictly controlled by the teacher and all lesson content should be directed by the teacher." Thirty-six of the respondents agreed or totally agreed with this statement, while 13 of them disagreed. For example, "I totally agree. I think students learn only in case they are controlled and tested and the teacher demands that they should learn the material." (R3); "I agree. If the teacher is not strict in the lesson, chaos will be formed and there will

<sup>1</sup> The excerpts are taken from the filled in questionnaires and translated into English by the author. Letter R and a number is the code of the respondent.

be indiscipline.” (R49); “I don’t agree. If the teacher is strict when conducting the lesson, the learners can become tense and in my opinion, they won’t be able to pay attention to the teacher’s explanation.” (R47).

Question 5: “In your Practicum, did you find that students learn English better through interaction with other students or through direct instruction from the teacher?” Three answer options were provided: 1. through interaction with other students, 2. through direct instruction, 3. no difference between the two. Half of the respondents (24) believed that children learned more easily and faster from each other, i.e. the first option was chosen. The student teachers commented this in the following way: “I experienced that children learned the taught material more easily when communicating with each other in the target language because in such cases they felt it was a familiar conversation and not hard work and learning.” (R25) Fifteen research participants were convinced about the extremely important role the teacher played in the lesson because the learners could only learn from him/her. Ten respondents considered there was no difference between the two ways, i.e. they chose option 3. The student teachers observed cases during their practicum when the learners learned from each other, and also situations when the children learned from the teacher’s explanation. “The children learned from each other after the teacher had explained the new material clearly.” (R48)

Question 6: “Would you describe your teaching style during the practicum as learner-centred or teacher-centred?” Four answer options were offered to the respondents: 1. very learner-centered, 2. mostly learner-centered, 3. mostly teacher-centered, 4. very teacher-centered. Most participants answered that their teaching was mostly learner-centred and only two student teachers stated that their teaching was very learner-centred. Seven respondents indicated that their teaching was mostly teacher-centred.

#### *Professional Relationships*

The questions in Section 3 of the questionnaire inquired about the professional relationships that the student teachers developed during their practicum.

Question 7: “During your Practicum, who was most helpful to you?” Most respondents (34) mentioned the mentor as the person they got the most help and support from during their practicum. Twelve respondents indicated the teachers of the school where they spent their six-week teaching practicum as the most helpful people, while one respondent referred to novice teachers who helped them most in becoming familiar with school life from the teacher’s perspective. One respondent reported on the fact that everybody helped them in the school, while another mentioned that they felt the children helped them most, because “they were patient and tolerant with me. They knew I was also a student like themselves.” (R4) It is interesting to note at this point that nobody of the participants mentioned the headmasters or the local educational managers for foreign languages as the most helpful people during their practicum.

Question 8: "Who do you think will be most helpful to you during your first few years of teaching?" It is interesting to note at this point that the mentor was mentioned only by six student teachers, while four of them indicated the novice teachers with one or two years of teaching experience or the local educational managers. Most student teachers (35  $\approx$  71%), however, believed that the most helpful people would be the more experienced teachers of the schools where they would start their teaching career. The headmaster of the school was not mentioned by any of the participants in this respect, either.

Question 9: "If you continue to teach English in the future, to what extent do you expect to be working closely with other teachers, e.g. to share materials or discuss teaching ideas?" Student teachers indicated in almost an equal ratio that they would help very much (22) or provide some help (20) to their fellow teachers, and would accept help from others, respectively. Seven participants answered that they would help their colleagues a little, but nobody refused to help others in the future. "I would willingly share the latest teaching ideas and techniques and innovations with my colleagues." (R27)

### ***Discussion and interpretation of findings***

A majority (84%) of the student teachers answered in relation to the planning of the teaching process that it is of utmost importance that all the lessons be well planned and that a lesson plan be prepared for every lesson as it means 'a life belt' for a teacher and they can refer to it any time when needed in problematic situations. 88% of the participants agreed with the statement that the teacher should rather consider the learners' needs first, and only then should they take into consideration the 'regulations' of the syllabus.

In the opinion of 73% of the participants, teachers should conduct lessons in a strict and demanding manner and monitor each and every minute of a lesson because only in such circumstances can the learning process be successful. Such a view completely refers to the teacher-centred teaching style and it is in contrast with the opinion of those numerous research participants who, when answering a previous question in the survey, answered that they preferred the student-centred teaching style. The reason for this inconsistency might be that the student teachers feel and know that teachers should always have learners' needs in sight; however, they think there must be a 'leader' in English lessons who conducts the lessons and organizes the learners' activity. This leader's role is resembled in the personality of the teacher.

Forty-nine percent of the participants experienced that the learners learned the language better, faster and more easily when they initiated oral communication and interaction with their peers, and not with the teacher. This is a kind of teacher-centred approach that the student-teachers experienced in the English lessons. Seeing this example, the research participants themselves preferred and mostly followed this approach in their lessons (86%). This ratio roughly coincides

with the one obtained in the answers to question 2 of the questionnaire about the preferred language teaching style of the student teachers, thus it proves that their attitude to their future career is serious and responsible.

The student teachers were asked about their future professional relationships. First, inquiry was made about the person who most helped them during the teaching practice. Sixty-nine percent of the participants answered that this person was their mentor. This percentage is not surprising as the student teachers spent most of their time during the practicum with the supporting teacher, they discussed the lessons to be taught and the ones that had been taught together, and they planned and reflected on the lessons given by the student teachers together. Twenty-four percent of the participants indicated the help and support of experienced teachers of other subjects. We cannot exclude the fact here that the students spent their practicum in general in those schools which they had left four years before, meaning that the teachers knew them well. The headmaster was not mentioned by anybody as a source of help. In this meaning, no educational manager was mentioned by the student teachers, although these specialists could also probably help much to teachers just about to start their careers. The fact is that in our context, in Transcarpathia, the higher educational establishments cannot afford to compensate the local educational managers for such help; therefore, the student teachers cannot expect such support from these experts, either.

The surveyed participants hope that they will get the most support from the experienced teachers of those schools where they are going to start their teaching careers. They do not believe that their former mentors will help them as novice teachers. Very often the reason for this might be that the student teachers start their real teaching career in a school different from the one they had completed their practicum at. It is a fortunate result that the future teachers look positively on the professional relations to be developed with their future colleagues. All the research participants declared that they would be of help to their novice teacher colleagues. Nobody refused the idea of sharing new methods and techniques with their colleagues, and reporting to them on innovations. Such attitude forecasts supporting professional relations.

### ***Conclusions and pedagogical implications***

The results of the research show that pre-service teachers need more help during their teaching practicum than they obtain; in addition, they also indicate that their mentors' support may positively impact the process of becoming competent teachers. Everything the student teachers see and experience in the school will influence their becoming teachers, because the teaching practicum is the time when the skills and competences necessary for teaching are formed in them.

1. Student teachers need support and expect help from their mentors concerning the organization of the teaching process; however, they are aware of the fact that they themselves also have to work hard to achieve

- success. By the research findings it is possible to learn more about the student teachers' needs, and this knowledge can well be applied during mentor training courses held for pedagogues of Transcarpathian Hungarian schools.
2. Both headmasters and local educational managers should take the teaching practicum of pre-service teachers more seriously and be more helpful and assist pre-service teachers more so that they could develop a more trustful relationship with the headmasters and educational managers.
  3. It would be useful if such a new teaching practicum model could be developed in which the local educational manager responsible for foreign languages could also participate and with their observation, experience and knowledge could help pre-service teachers in becoming competent qualified foreign language teachers.
  4. A further research direction could be the investigation of the reasons behind a controversy that emerged during the survey, namely, why only seven student teachers conducted teacher-centred lessons while 36 participants agreed that the teacher should always be the most important person in the lessons.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX

### TEACHING PRACTICUM QUESTIONNAIRE

The following short questionnaire is to be used as a part of a research project which aims to look at the concerns of English language teachers on school placement in Transcarpathia. Your responses will be kept completely confidential. Please take a little time to consider each item carefully and respond as fully as you can.

#### *Section I: Instructional Planning and Decision Making*

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please indicate by circling the numeral that corresponds to ONE of the four statements:

1. Absolutely agree
2. Quite agree
3. Quite disagree
4. Absolutely disagree

1. It is impossible to have a successful lesson that hasn't been well-planned in advance.

1 2 3 4

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Teachers should be more responsive to student needs than the set syllabus.

1 2 3 4

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

3. During your Practicum, how often did you find you had to change your lesson plan?

1. Always
2. Usually
3. Sometimes
4. Rarely
5. Never

#### *Section II: Teaching Approach*

Do you agree with the following statements? Please indicate by circling the numeral that corresponds to ONE of the four statements:

1. Absolutely agree
2. Quite agree
3. Quite disagree
4. Absolutely disagree

4. A class should be strictly controlled by the teacher and all lesson content directed by the teacher.

1 2 3 4

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

5. In your Practicum, did you find that students learn English better through interaction with other students or through direct instruction from the teacher?

1. Through interaction with other students

2. Through direct instruction
3. No difference between the two

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

6. Would you describe your teaching style during the practicum as learner-centered or teacher-centered?

1. Very learner-centered
2. Mostly learner-centered
3. Mostly teacher-centered
4. Very teacher-centered

*Section III: Professional Relationships*

7. During your Practicum, who was most helpful to you?

1. Fellow first-year teachers
2. More experienced teachers in school
3. Principal
4. Practicum supervisor
5. District English language methodologist
6. Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8. Who do you think will be most helpful to you during your first few years of teaching?

1. Fellow novice teachers
2. More experienced teachers
3. Principal
4. District English language methodologist
5. Practicum supervisor
6. Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

9. If you continue to teach English in the future, to what extent do you expect to be working closely with other teachers, e.g. to share materials or discuss teaching ideas?

1. Very much
2. Some
3. A little
4. Not at all
5. Others (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your answers!



*Tanévzáró és diplomaátadó ünnepség*

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