

Teaching practice of student teachers: Czechs in search of ways forward.

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Abstract

This article will highlight some trends of education policy in Czech teachers' pregraduate education. We will outline the generally accepted theoretical base of practical teacher training, show selected examples of how such training is organized and present a brief discussion on recent challenges that the pregraduate education has been facing, including elements of its practical component.

Resumen

En este artículo se destacan algunas tendencias de la política educativa en la formación preuniversitaria de los profesores checos. Esbozaremos la base teórica generalmente aceptada de la formación práctica del profesorado, mostraremos ejemplos seleccionados de cómo se organiza dicha formación y presentaremos un breve debate sobre los retos recientes a los que se ha enfrentado la educación de pregrado, incluyendo elementos de su componente práctico.

Keywords

Initial teachers' education, practicum, curricular organization

Palabras claves

Formación inicial del profesorado, prácticum, organización curricular

1. Introduction

Every advanced society regards education as a basis for development and therefore strives for high-quality schooling. In many respects, the quality of a school depends on the good work and professionalism of its teachers, or in other words, on the quality of their own teaching education.

Teaching has traditionally been regarded as a profession for which not only a certain amount of academic knowledge is needed in order to “transfer” it, but more and more emphasis is put on the personal level of teacher advancement and in particular, on the development of various forms of work and behaviour that can support the learning processes of pupils. The ability to react to a continuously changing environment and various needs and behaviours of pupils (and not only them) means to have the power to efficiently change professional procedures and create one’s own evidence-based and reflection-based practice. These procedures are regarded by many as unlearnable by means of theory, as they often represent non-transferable experience. The acquisition of these procedures (or rather the competence to find and use such procedures) must largely take place in practice as such (cf. de Jong, Korthagen & Wubbels, 1998). This is why in the Czech Republic, like in many other countries, more intense pressure has recently been put on the practical part of the training of student teachers, during the pregradual stage of their studies, i.e. at universities.

In the Czech Republic, prospective teachers are educated at “teacher faculties”. From these, the faculties of education usually prepare students to become teachers at preschools and basic schools (ISCED 0, 1, 2) while the faculties of science, arts and informatics usually prepare teachers of various subjects for teaching secondary school students (ISCED 3).

In most cases, a student teacher is educated and trained in two subjects that he/she will be authorized to teach. For some time now and in accordance with legislation, teachers in Czech schools need to have a master’s degree in teaching. If a teacher is a graduate from non-teaching studies, he/she must obligatorily go through supplementary studies in pedagogics, usually for four semesters. In fact, there are no easier or faster ways for practitioners from other fields to teach, although it is an issue that has been discussed for some time now. Teacher education — including the system of teaching practice — has been strongly influenced by the structuration of pregraduate teacher training, into a two-level higher education programme - bachelor’s and master’s, which was implemented a few years ago due to the acceptance of the principles of the Bologna Declaration.

The practical part of pregraduate teacher training takes place in preschool, elementary schools and secondary schools. It is organized by both authorized teachers at universities (who stipulate the objectives, organize practical training and who also evaluate students' performances, communicate with schools in which teaching practices take place and organize so-called micro-teaching at the teaching faculties, as well as video analyses and group reflection of said practices) and by teachers at selected preschool, basic and secondary schools, usually called training teachers or accompanying teachers or, more recently, mentors. It is mainly the accompanying teachers who become model examples and inspiration for students; they introduce students to the operations of school and to their own work. In other words, they accompany students on site, during their practical training and give them feedback on their practical performance.

2. Teaching practice as a topic of education policy

The quest for the improved quality of teacher education has been an evergreen issue in Czech schooling since the 1990s, when fundamental changes were carried out in Czech education as a whole and logically, in teacher education. Critical discussions and objections pointing out the drawbacks of practical training are heard from schools with new teachers as well as from the teaching students themselves and the faculties they study at.

Practical teacher training has become a relatively hot topic in education policy over the last few years. The ratio of practical vs. theoretical subjects (just as that of pedagogical and psychological subjects vs. specialist blocks) has been specified normatively by the National Accreditation Bureau and is strictly checked before teacher training programmes are accredited. Additionally, there are requirements for the extent and quality of practical training, typically mirrored in the efforts to establish obligatory reflections of practice, in various forms, at teaching faculties. Furthermore, the creation of a system of 'faculty schools', where practical training would take place and focus more intensely on the preparation of training/accompanying teachers and mentors in schools, is required. Of the 120 credits prescribed for the master's programme completus, 20 must be dedicated to practical teaching and reflection of practice and 22 to the didactics of the subject taught. Respecting these requirements, higher education institutions (teaching faculties) decide which of the optional models they will choose. Subsequently, they construct their own forms of teacher training programmes.

The need for change in the practical preparation of prospective teachers has found its opening in project support, usually financed by European sources. Comprehensive projects have been implemented

at teacher training faculties in order to accomplish system alterations in teacher education, particularly in the system of teaching practice, supporting it in terms of both quality and quantity. Financial support has been obtained for the implementation of reflection activities at teaching faculties as well as at schools. Also, education and training of mentors, facilitators and lecturers who can promote reflection is supported. Schools can also carry out thematic projects on their own, using simplified applications for grants from EU funds to support the education of training/accompanying teachers and mentors. Mentoring is understood, in a wide sense, as a specific form of peer support, including guidance for new teachers and teaching students. Teaching practice is thus an important topic in today's discourse on educational policies in pregraduate teacher education.

3. Experience-reflection learning as a basis for teaching practice

It is generally accepted that practice without reflection does not make much sense or at least, does not intentionally and efficiently support the processes of learning. Without reflection, experience-based learning is rather intuitive and reactive, which may result in the teacher inefficiently memorizing short-time procedures, some of them even unprofessional (de Jong, Korthagen & Wubbels, 1998).

Hence, student teacher practice should really become methods and materials for learning and student teachers should be able to derive experience from practice and use it for reflection. Teachers/facilitators preparing the practice should create space for reflection and use questioning techniques to encourage reflection and sharing in groups (Kolář, 2013a). As Kolb says (2014 p. 23), the point is that student development should be "from the inside out". The tendency to build teaching practice/reflection on a strong theoretical basis seems to be characteristic of the Czech teacher education system.

If reflection in and on teaching practices is to be efficient, useful and supportive for the learning process, it has to minimally meet the following demands:

- Reflection should contain the change of meanings and the comprehension of phenomena occurring in practice.
- Reflection should be deep enough so that change can take place.
- Reflection should be a holistic process, thus also affecting the prospective teacher's personal development (not only should the student teacher gain unique experience but also use it to open up and be ready for reflection in future practice, on which peer support is based).

- Reflection works with the group effect, therefore reflection in groups is recommended as a basis for future peer support (Nehyba & Lazarová, 2014, pp. 19-20).

If reflection on practice (and the experience of prospective teachers) is to meet the requirement of learning from practice, it should be anchored in theories disseminated by Dewey, Boud, Jarvis, Kolb, Korthagen, Mezirow, Schön, Vermersch and others. In both theory and practice, we encounter notions such as reflective thinking (Dewey, 1933), experiential learning (e.g. Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 2010), reflective learning (Sugerman, 2000), reflection on practice or reflective practice (Schön, 1983), analysis of practice (Vermersch, 1994) and so on (cf. Nehyba & Lazarová, 2014, p. 14). These authors have provided some elaborate models of reflective processes that can serve as inspiration for facilitators and clarify the procedures they have to follow through on.

Using a simply described cycle: concrete experience — reflective observation — abstract conceptualization — active experimentation, Kolb (1984) describes how experience turns into learning. He points out that it is a process in which knowledge comes from the transformation of experience. Strong potential is seen in what he refers to as *conversational learning* (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002).

When guiding reflections, some facilitators and lecturers rely on ALACT, a specific process-oriented reflection model created by Korthagen (1985). According to this model, learning in practice takes place in five stages: action — looking back at action — awareness of essential aspects — creating alternative methods of action — trial. Also, Korthagen offers a model that depicts possible levels of reflection (the onion model). It is ideal for reflection to reach the deepest level, which represents the so-called core qualities (activating personal characteristics of a teacher) such as enthusiasm, curiosity, courage, attitude, flexibility in action and so forth (Korthagen, 2014).

Another element of reflection that has recently become important is in respect to the uniqueness of students' experience (Boud, 2014; Jarvis, 2014), which deprives facilitators of the credit to "transmit the truth". Freire (1992) emphasises the necessity to interconnect action and reflection. According to him, reflection without action, turns into "twaddling" and action without reflection does not support the processes of learning nor the necessary change.

The main points of a few theories mentioned above are outlined to highlight the importance of high-quality training for those who are in charge of teaching practice and reflection. It seems that this is one of the neuralgic points of a possible change in the system. People at teaching faculties in the Czech setting, who conduct student group reflections, have found a powerful anchoring of their efforts in these theories.

4. Examples of implementation of teaching practice

As mentioned above, some universities in the Czech Republic are reconstructing their systems of teaching practice for teaching students. For this, they rely on theoretical foundations of reflective practice (or rather theories of experience-reflection learning), current trends of education policy and project support. Apart from the mainstream elements of these efforts, alternative ways of teacher education that are outside the traditional system of higher education originate¹ and are looking for its place in the field of teacher training. The following chapter presents two specific examples of how teaching practice is organized: one is an example of a traditional but innovative system at the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University, the other is an example of an alternative form having functioned outside the system and being anchored in the mainstream of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Pardubice.

4.1. Organization of student teaching practice: two examples

The aim of the innovations started in 2016 in the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University is the effort for teaching students to start real teaching practice, as soon as possible. The focus is on an increase in lessons (of both obligatory and voluntary practice), new forms of teaching practices (e.g. catch-up classes for children of socially weak families) and, above all, the implementation of group reflection and interconnection between relevant theories and tasks that teaching students have to carry out in practice. (For instance, as for the theory of pupil motivation, teaching students get the task of observing teachers' strategies of motivation and relating them to the theory while taking notes. During final examinations, they may draw on their notes taken during their teaching practice.)

Since the beginning of 2018, the innovative system of teaching practice has been receiving support from a European project that focuses on closer contact among student teachers, accompanying teachers and faculty schools. Financial support is provided to accompanying teachers (in schools) and mentors (university teachers) who intensely cooperate in developing the Standard of Competency of students at practice, which consists in setting observable indicators that would make it possible for practicing student teachers to get feedback and to monitor their own development. Also within the project, the Standard of Quality of Cooperation among clinical schools, faculty schools and cooperating

¹ This is the supplementary form of teacher education, as above mentioned, which can be provided by alternative entities offering accredited programmes of in-service teacher training, besides traditional teacher faculties.

schools (which differ in the extent of involvement and scope of activity) is also being developed. The finances from the project are intended for professional development of accompanying teachers and faculty mentors in skills related to quality reflection of practice and mentoring. Remuneration for teachers who accompany practicing students has also been increased by this project.

Furthermore, so-called guarantors of teaching practice work in schools (clinical schools, faculty schools or cooperating schools, depending on the extent of the cooperation) to coordinate the courses of teaching practice with faculties. These guarantors, usually headteachers or deputy headteachers, designate teaching students to accompanying teachers, provide information and participate in regular, practice-related meetings at the beginning and at the end of every semester at the faculty.

As early as the second year of bachelor studies, students can opt for how they will fulfil their practice, consisting of 2 x 60 minute lessons. At this stage, they can (1) give remedial lessons (to individuals in socially weak families and recommended by non-profit institutions) or (2) work in schools as teacher assistants. Besides this, teaching students register for Self-experience Training for Profession I & II, where they can reflect on their practical experience. It is a block instruction of 2 x 9 lessons a year. Full time master degree students studying two subjects go through a total of three rounds of teaching practice of 60, 100 and 120 lessons and three reflective seminars for a total of 22 sessions. So a graduate from both types of study, bachelor's and master's, has undergone a total of 400 lessons of practice, 156 of which consist of direct teaching (*Změna...*, 2017; *Změny...*, 2018).

Cooperation with accompanying teachers in schools starts with the determination of targets, which are then recorded in Masaryk University's electronic information system. Nevertheless, practical activities are mainly given by rules stipulated by the faculty; it is direct and indirect work in the school/classroom. Teaching students work on portfolios of practice, write a diary of reflection, teach (individually or in pairs) and carry out other activities according to the needs of the school and instructions given by the subject didactics. Direct work in schools includes activities such as assistance in correcting written tests and pupils' exercise books, creation of teaching aids, individual work with pupils with special needs, accompaniment of pupils (together with a teacher) during educational excursions, preparation of projects and events, on-duty teaching during breaks, participation in parents' evenings, help with school/class documentation, preparation for class meetings, etc. Students are recommended to actively look for any activity that can boost their professional development (e.g. visits to the classes of various teachers, asking for feedback, introduction to on-line documents of the school, and so on).

An important part of the conclusion of teaching practice is self-evaluation and the evaluation of the student by the accompanying teacher. (*Pokyny...*, not dated). Self-evaluation and the evaluation of teaching practice are done with the use of the information system at Masaryk University. Students and accompanying teachers write a report, in feedback form, on whether they have achieved their targets and how they personally assess the practice. The teaching student can be observed during practice, by a mentor (a university teacher) who then provides feedback via the information system. An assessment, in the form of a questionnaire, was given to teaching students after the first year of implementing these innovations and has shown that most student teachers were satisfied. If they felt they were missing something, it was related to getting more support from the accompanying teachers in setting goals and measures for professional development, both in terms of specialization (subjects and didactics) and personal/social development (*Změna...*, 2017; *Změny...*, 2018).

Extract from instructions to keep a reflective diary

Your first task in teaching practice is to focus attention on yourself and the various pedagogical situations you will experience. Whatever you notice (no matter whether it is ideas, feelings, reactions, attitudes...), try to classify and clarify it by means of writing a reflective diary. In such a diary you are not obliged to keep a particular form; it is free writing. It all depends on your creativity: some individuals are brief while some individuals write verbosely and others like to write in the form of a story. The diary is not a chronological record of your activities during practice. The point is not to describe step-by-step what you have done or seen. Write about what is important for yourself or what sticks out in your mind, for whatever reason. It is not a seminar paper in which the argument must be carefully developed. The indicator of successful writing is its usefulness as you perceive it. In the course of the semester, you will create three records of approximately one A4 page in length. Before each teaching practice seminar, you will submit these records by deadlines agreed on with your teachers.

Extract from a reflective diary

As to what happened in the last two weeks, three particular events remain in my mind. One is about my sitting-in on a German class, which was in grade 9. My attention was particularly captured by one thing: the teacher didn't correct basically anything, although pupils were making mistakes, be it pronunciation or word order in the phrases the kids were to translate. I somehow didn't find the courage to ask after the lesson why that was. Frankly, I asked myself, 'what was the lesson good for?' What did the kids learn?' In any case, I got a bad feeling from it, although it's possible that I'm a bit naive if I think the teacher should conduct the lesson in some specific way. I'd

perhaps also give up. But why? Is it that one just gives up after some time? It may depend on who it is. Other classes have shown me there are great teachers who know how to spark interest and motivate, being energetic, and it seems they enjoy it. I don't really want to judge the teacher or typecast her, after all, it was the first time I saw her teaching. I'll see what it's like next time. It's interesting that in that respect, you always notice the shortcomings rather than what's done well. Well, I do. When I try to remember properly what the lesson was like, it's just the horrible pronunciation that I recall, over and over. On the other hand, with good teachers, you can immediately see what they're good at. Maybe it's all about what prevails. We don't see what's good because our sight is full of what's bad and the other way round. In short, next time it'll be better to have a chat with the teacher and see what she thinks about these things; it'll probably be better than just guessing. This is actually what makes me think of the other situation I wanted to write about...

4.2. Teach Live – an alternative from the mainstream

In 2015, a unique programme called *Teach Live* was started in the Czech Republic, implemented by a non-profit organization and financed by a Czech foundation. The aim of the project was to create, verify and attempt to implement a completely new concept of teacher training into the existing traditional system. A pilot study course was started in 2016 in the form of a supplementary pedagogical study.

The authors of the project established contacts with a number of important specialists in pedagogy, psychology and teacher education. Together, they have created a new concept of teacher education based on principles and values such as:

–We believe in an education that enables every individual to develop to their full potential, find their place in society and live a fulfilling life. In the end, each person must take responsibility for their own education.

–True self-fulfilment happens in fellowship with others. We learn from one another and high quality learning and personal development can only happen where there is mutual trust, safety, and meaningful stimuli. Sharing our experience, values and goals makes us stronger.

–High quality education is achieved on the basis of a natural desire to learn. We respond to pupils' real needs so as to work with this inner motivation. We believe that self-respect, responsibility and independence cannot develop without internal motivation.

–It is only by looking after one another that we can create an environment in which high quality education is available to all.

– Reflection on our own experiences is a powerful tool for learning and improvement. Scientific reflection and research provide us with information and collected practical experience in regard to

what is or is not useful. Teachers base their approach on their own reflected experience and latest research.

–The learning process is never complete, never finished. Any training course is only a part of life-long learning.

–Education crosses national borders. Cross-border cooperation and inspiration can speed up our development and enhance our know-how.

(Available at <https://www.ucitelnazivo.cz/en/about-us>).

Based on these values, the authors have defined several basic cornerstones of the programme: interconnection of theory and practice, interconnection of subjects, self-evaluation of teaching students' own development, guidance in teaching practice by accompanying teachers who cooperate closely with external lecturers, teamwork in learning, support for teacher guides, and mentors' observance and reflective support for students in institutions where the programme has been implemented.

It is pointed out that the teaching procedures should be evidence-based, therefore experience learning and reflective practice is strongly accentuated in the programme. This concept is based on close links to the school, the accompanying teachers and the mentors. Besides the teacher guides, who work in the schools where the teaching practice is carried out, student teachers can rely on support from mentors in the *Teach Live* centre.

Students go for practice two days a week, in a selected school. Once a week they have an all-day seminar, and four times a year they attend an intense teaching block over several days. Apart from this, they are offered study visits to interesting schools and other relevant places.

The authors of this article were asked to evaluate the project one year after implementation. It turned out that there were strong points promoting the process of learning such as:

– Students' needs, as based on reflected experience of practice (but not only that), are respected.

– The concept is based on equality and a community-like character of encountering; students live in a safe and transparent learning environment.

– Another important principle is safe support for students resulting in inspiration, positive communication and tolerance to work with errors.

– *Teach Live* provides proficient lecturers; it is important to choose good schools and accompanying teacher guides.

– Attention is focused on the development of the personality of the student.

– It is easy to experiment and promptly transfer inspiration and the outcome of reflection into practice.

– The concept offers an experience of "safe and pleasant learning" that can later be offered by teaching students to their pupils.

– The concept works with words as well as with experience and action. (Lazarová & Pol, 2017).

All this is enabled by good material background, which makes it possible to invite excellent lecturers and inspire high levels of motivation and devotion of students and other participants in *Teach Live*. Nevertheless, like in traditional teacher education at universities, there is the problem of barely feasible continuity of practice. Not all students (by far) actually work “full-time” in their designated schools. The difficult issue of harmonization between teaching practice and everyday tasks is sometimes hard to resolve for both the students and the guides. Students perceive the continuity of practice in very diverse ways. Some get the opportunity to work in the school continuously, to recognize the class and individual pupils and look at teaching in all its scope and forms, while others only search for such opportunities or do not experience them at all. Teachers are often hampered by their own plans or the plan of the school and must primarily fulfil their own duties. This may limit the continuity of teaching practice and restrict teaching students’ needs to “try something out” (Lazarová & Pol, 2017).

Also, the evaluation has shown uncertainty as to whether this concept, highly demanding in terms of time, finance and quality of lecturers, can be implemented in traditional teacher education at universities burdened by certain traditions, by culture and even by stereotypes. It seems that these efforts, undoubtedly interesting, have found some extent of application in teacher education at the University of Pardubice’s Faculty of Arts where a new Master’s programme for teaching English has been accredited and based on this concept. The ideas of a so-called clinical year, consisting predominantly of practice and reflection, were revitalised.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Generally, the following questions can be discussed: Is the quality of the teaching profession really anchored in the quality of the teaching student practice? Is the arrangement of practice and its reflection really one of the most important tasks of the teaching faculties? Should/could new teachers better reflect on their experience after they start a real teaching position, under and with good support of colleagues and the school they start working in? Are the efforts to prolong teaching practice as a component of study and to look for a compromise between theory and practice always going to result in confusion?

These and other questions indicate that the strong emphasis on practice in pregraduate teacher training in the Czech Republic has its challenges. The main objection is that there is too much practice at the expense of other elements of study and that schooling policy should emphasise the connection at the pregraduate stage with that

of in-service training. This would perhaps alleviate the load of students during pregraduate training and more realistically ensure their controlled and supported beginnings and gradual professional socialization into schools. In fact, teacher education is a life-long continuum so this is how we should look at the practical and theoretical components of the professional development of teachers.

However, the opposite perspective is also a matter for discussion: if teaching faculties really want to produce "ready-made" teachers with practical experience, is it better to build a model of education even more intensely connected to practice, as some headteachers urge? Could bachelor graduates teach during master studies, continually - a year-long say, as part-time teacher assistants or members of teacher "duos"? This would help schools recently suffering from a lack of good assistants. Also, teaching students could receive salaries corresponding to their involvement. The discontinuity of practice would also be solved, for a student who visits the school once a week and moves from one classroom to another, often cannot transfer the knowledge gained from reflection into practice and verify it. In that case, development is hardly monitorable. Does a reflection like this really meet its main objective?

Research has shown that there are various subjects of reflection: it can be didactics and the content of teaching (what and how to teach), the social context (what is happening around) and from within the personal domain (what shall I do with it) (Lojdrová, 2014, p. 95). It is thus evident that some of the subjects do require continuity. To a certain extent, the continuity of practice has been disrupted by the Bologna model requiring two degrees because practice has to be carried out on both the bachelor and master level (the latter time span being too short and not leaving enough time for both practice and reflection).

Other questions are related to the education of accompanying teachers in faculty schools and in regards to cooperation with these schools. Apart from temporary projects, teaching faculties usually do not have finances available to motivate accompanying teachers, whose care for students is a considerable workload. Sometimes, the attribute of being a teaching faculty school is motivation in itself, enhancing the prestige of the school in the eyes of the parents.

A really good reflection of practice and the whole arrangement of teaching practices require an enormous investment of time from faculty teachers, for reflection must take place in small groups and communication with schools and accompanying teachers is also a matter of investing a lot of time and energy. Moreover, to learn how to conduct good group reflection also requires training and practice, although most faculty teachers do not have it and work with their reflection groups rather intuitively. There is the risk that misguided reflection of practice and/or denying the necessary support, can be more harmful than helpful. It is only in practice that many teaching

students first realise whether the teaching profession is right for them and whether they really want to dedicate themselves to it.

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