

Perception of Teaching Practice of Croatian Students of Educational Faculties

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Abstract

Qualitative research in the field of pedagogy has been gaining in importance over the last few decades and is increasingly being applied in order to obtain a greater insight into the researched subject matter. In this paper, we used the phenomenological approach to establish how students who will become teachers perceive teaching practice. Students of the pedagogical departments who completed the survey had participated in teaching practice and as such are a valuable source of information about the subject. The study involved 307 participants, 102 male students and 205 female students. The participants were students of the following five constituent units of the University of Zagreb: Faculty of Teacher Education, Academy of Music, Faculty of Kinesiology, Faculty of Science and University Department of Croatian Studies. A purposive sample was used, which included students of pedagogical departments. The paper presents the answers to three open-ended questions. The analysis was conducted so that the collected statements of the participants were identified and sorted into categories in order to classify the empirical material. The results suggest that teaching practice has a number of positive influences on the work of future teachers, as well as numerous disadvantages. Students, as future teachers, presented a number of specific proposals to improve the quality of teaching practice. Students, as participants in teaching practice, should be constantly questioned and changes should be made based on their statements in order to help them become competent teachers who educate capable, satisfied, creative and happy students. This work could be a contribution to the development of a new Teaching Practice Rulebook.

Key words: *phenomenological approach; qualitative research; students; teaching practice.*

Introduction

It has become increasingly clear that the teacher (the term teacher encompasses educational professionals, such as primary and high school teachers and professors), in addition to knowing what knowledge to pass on to the students, has to know how to do so in order for the students to best understand and acquire that knowledge. This has led to the conclusion that teachers have to be institutionally prepared for their profession, which is becoming increasingly complex. Teaching practice presents a practical platform for future teachers so that they can practice what they have learned. It represents a shift from theory towards practice where future teachers have to prove their teaching skills, as well as comprehension of the material they are teaching.

Teaching practice is the link between theoretical knowledge about teaching and applied teaching. It is part of the comprehensive education and training for future teachers and enables them to acquire competences in various areas that will be necessary for their occupation. High-quality study programmes for pedagogical professionals must have a balanced combination of academic research knowledge and practical experience (Valenčič Zuljan & Vogrinc, 2012, p. 113). According to Maynard and Furlong (1993, as cited in Bizjak Slanič, 2013, p. 12), there are three models of training in professional teaching practice: apprenticeship, the competence-based model and the reflective practitioner model. In the apprenticeship model, the mentor takes on the role of the model; in the competence-based model the mentor's task is to monitor and provide information to students, taking on the role of the trainer; in the reflective practitioner model the mentor encourages students to question their beliefs, values, conceptions, and actions.

Teaching practice is of great importance in the professional education of future teachers. It revolves around three phases (Shahid & Hussain, 2011).

The first phase is the orientation phase (also called introductory) where students are introduced to more experienced teachers (mentors) they need to work with. Teachers ask of students to observe various activities in the school. At this stage, students and teachers collaborate and assist each other in understanding the school scenario.

The second stage is the participatory phase during which students start participating in individual teaching activities. They start interacting with pupils and performing certain activities in the classroom (e.g. they teach the pupils a particular shorter section of the teaching unit). At this stage, students identify various problems they face in the classroom and try to solve them with the help of the teacher.

The third phase is the independent teaching phase, in which students have much more freedom and independence (or autonomy) in creating and performing various curricular and extracurricular activities. At this stage, responsibility shifts from the teacher to the student. Students take on full responsibility for all classroom activities and take on the role of the real teacher. With the help of the teacher, they plan teaching and learning outcomes. At this stage, students receive feedback about their work. The

university professor and teacher mentor discuss various issues related to the students and their professional development.

Tatković and Močinić (2012, p. 53) point out that future teachers should practice critical-reflective skills in reports of professional teaching practice and in researching the relationship between theory and practice in order to gain a clearer picture of their own professional development.

Gedik and Göktaş (2008, as cited in Göçer, 2013) list the following duties that students, future teachers, should fulfil:

- attend class,
- participate in the duties of the counsellor,
- participate in classroom and outdoor activities,
- teach.

Teaching practice provides students with a gradual and professionally guided introduction to pedagogical work and trains them to teach one or more subjects. Through teaching practice, students develop general and specific skills which will help them adapt to their professional environment throughout their career. For students, future teachers, this is the only contact with applied teaching. It is of utmost importance how the mentors understand, plan, and conduct teaching practice with students. Teaching practice is aimed at training students to plan, conduct and evaluate the teaching of selected subjects. In addition to the knowledge of basic approaches, methods and strategies of planning and conducting class, and other pedagogical work in the classroom and school, students develop communication skills, as well as resourcefulness in class leadership (Herzog, Ivanuš Grmek, & Čagran, 2012). Cvetek (2005) points out that practice is essential for the education of future teachers and, accordingly, the mentor should be an expert who possesses, among other things, highly developed pedagogical competences, and is continually improving in their work. The mentor is a reflecting practitioner responsible for creating teaching situations in which students should develop their professional performance critically and creatively, and on the basis of personal pedagogical experiences widen and deepen their knowledge (Javornik Krečič, Grmek Ivanuš, Kolenc Kolnik, & Konečnik Kotnik, 2007, p. 3). Researchers emphasize that students, future teachers, want to acquire basic knowledge about teaching and develop their professional skills, effectively adapting them to the teaching process. In addition, according to the estimates of students, future teachers, teaching practice is a highly important part of their professional training (Valenčič Zuljan, 2000). In the research conducted at six faculties of South East Europe (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia) during the 2010/2011 academic year, students estimated that their qualifications for pedagogical work were significantly improved after teaching practice (Gojkov, 2012). It is believed that this could be accomplished most effectively during teaching practice through collaboration with the mentor (Saka & Saka, 2009).

The teacher mentor should give oral and written feedback to every student after their performance regarding the strong and weak sides of their teaching. Feedback should be in accordance with the following guidelines:

- feedback is given at the end of the lesson,
- feedback must be detailed, clear and understandable,
- students should be given the opportunity to evaluate their own teaching practice while receiving feedback,
- feedback should be given in the spirit of praise, constructive criticism and advice,
- feedback should be focused on the goal of the lesson, learning features, teaching process and student prerequisites (Göçer, 2013, p. 127).

Assessments by mentor teachers, but also self-evaluation techniques provide students with informative feedback that gives them an insight into their own performance, which can contribute greatly to their professional growth and development (Boshuizen, Bromme, & Gruber, 2004; Tillema, 2009).

The authors believe that the mentor is responsible for the students by setting an example in their own work, behaviour, and attitude towards the job, and also by encouraging students to carry out their obligations responsibly and thoroughly, as well as to participate in ongoing professional training and lifelong learning. According to Hargreaves (2003), a good mentor is the one who likes their job and motivates future teachers to work devotedly and responsibly. In addition to an adequately educated mentor, Govekar Okoliš (2014) points out that another important part of successful teaching practice are the students themselves, i.e. the scope of their knowledge, their skills, motivation, etc. A successfully implemented teaching practice requires a partnership between higher education institutions and employers (work organizations, institutions and institutes). This relationship should be based on trust, mutual assistance and responsibility shared by all participants (Kristol et al., 2007).

In the Republic of Croatia, the status of mentors (and counsellors) is regulated by the Regulation on the Promotion of Teachers in Primary and Secondary Education (Official Gazette No. 89/95, 148/99, 20/05). The teacher-mentor is a professionally trained person who leads students during their practical training at a higher education institution for teacher education, or a teacher who works with potentially gifted students (according to the State Pedagogical Standard of Primary Education System, Official Gazette 63/2008). According to the aforementioned Regulation on Promotion, teachers can advance in their profession and become mentors and counsellors. Elements for evaluating the competence and quality of a teacher's work are: success in working with pupils, extracurricular professional work and professional development. In Croatia, unfortunately, career advancement procedures are still not flexible enough and do not guarantee that the mentor is a fully qualified person who would serve as a role model for others working in educational institutions. Furthermore, a large number of teachers is not motivated to advance in their work. Therefore, due to lack of mentor counsellor teachers, their role is taken over by teachers from other vocations who are not fully trained to meet expectations and do the work assigned to them. The ratio between individual components of the curriculum differs in preparatory programmes for different types of teachers. The higher the level of the educational

institution which the teacher is preparing for, the lower the amount of comprehensive educational studies, i.e., as the level of the educational institution which the teacher prepares for increases, the share of basic education, pedagogical content and teacher education practice decreases (Pastuović, 1999, p. 493). Brkić-Vejmelka (2005, p. 106) emphasizes that for teaching faculties, or university departments, the way curricula of individual classes are constructed is very important, as the importance of acquiring pedagogical knowledge and competences can sometimes be diminished, even though they are important for the training of future teachers - professionals.

The objective of this research is to determine the students' (future teachers') perception of teaching practice, so the following questions have been composed:

1. What do you consider to be the greatest quality of teaching practice?
2. What do you consider to be the shortcomings of teaching practice?
3. Do you have any suggestions for improving the quality of teaching practice?

Methodology

Teaching practice is a complex phenomenon that is greatly influenced by communication and interaction among participants – pupils, students and teachers. This is why the authors believed it was appropriate to use the qualitative approach. Qualitative research in the field of pedagogy in the last few decades has been growing in importance and is increasingly applied in order to gain insight into research subject matter. Halmi (2005, p. 52) points out that the basic objective of qualitative research is to understand specific social situations and events from the lives of individuals, their families, social groups, organizations and communities and their interactions. We have opted for a phenomenological approach because “Phenomenological studies begin with the assumption that more realities are rooted in perspectives of subjects. Therefore, experience has different meanings for every person” (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2010, p. 31).

This paper will present answers to three questions formulated in open form. Open-form questions result in a wide range of answers, which are not given or moulded in advance, and provide an opportunity for participants to express their opinions and share personal experience without limitations through verbal descriptions. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, pp. 17, 18) emphasize that “the research question is of greatest importance - research methods should follow research questions in a way that will result in the best chances to obtain meaningful (and most integral) responses.”

In examining differences between asking the same question in closed and open form, Schuman and Presser (1981) point out that, in closed-form questions, answers are grouped within offered categories, while answers to open-form questions are significantly dispersed outside of foreseen categories. In spite of expected difficulties, we decided on open-ended questions about teaching practice, giving the participants an opportunity to respond freely so as to get a more comprehensive evaluation of teaching practice, as well as expand the range of responses.

Students of educational departments, who participated in the research, attended teaching practice and are as such a valuable source of information on the subject. The analysis was carried out so that the collected statements of the participants were identified and classified into categories in order to classify empirical data.

Participants

The study involved 307 participants, 102 male and 205 female students. The sample was purposive, and we included students of educational departments where the researchers (authors of this text) teach pedagogy or didactics. All students have to complete a five year graduate programme to acquire a master's degree. The participants were students at the University of Zagreb, attending the following five constituent units of the University: Faculty of Teacher Education, Academy of Music, Faculty of Kinesiology, Faculty of Science, University Department of Croatian Studies. Participants in the study were students of the final years of their studies (4th or 5th), since only students at the Faculty of Teacher Education attend teaching practice from their first year of study, while students at all other faculties are introduced to teaching practice much later: Academy of Music - 4th or 5th year of study, Faculty of Kinesiology - 4th year, Faculty of Science - 5th year and University Department of Croatian Studies - 5th year. All participants were acquainted with teaching practice, which is a prerequisite for the phenomenological approach, as participants are expected to comment on their own experiences, benefits and difficulties that they had during the realization of teaching practice and their own reflection on the possibilities of designing and performing quality teaching practice.

Procedure

Data were collected in writing, and the participants answered three open type questions which were devised by the authors for research purposes. It was important for the questions to be clear and comprehensible, but not suggestive. Before research was conducted, a pilot study was carried out at the Faculty of Teacher Education with a group of third-year students. They were already involved with teaching practice and could be participants in such a test. The research sample was 17 students. After the questionnaire was filled in, clarity and intelligibility of the questions were analysed in a group interview, and the questions were shaped into their final form used in the main research. Questions have been formulated so as to encourage participants to give answers in the first person, alluding to their personal experience (*What do you think of ...?, What suggestions would you make...?*). This way, participants were able to express their opinions, impressions, comments and suggestions.

The students answered the questions in written form, in pedagogy or didactics class. The study was conducted by the authors of this article, who are also lecturers at the aforementioned faculties. Students had unlimited time to answer the questions. In case of any ambiguity, the interviewees could refer to the examiner. The investigation was anonymous and voluntary, conducted in April 2017.

Data Analysis

Data obtained through the survey were analysed using the descriptive method. In order to become familiar with the data, all three authors of this article read the students' replies several times. The authors are academic professors who teach a set of pedagogical classes and have contact with students' teaching practice. Reading students' answers enabled the separation of key concepts, or dimensions, and relied on hermeneutics. Based on these terms and dimensions, categories were determined. For instance, while responding to the value of teaching practice, students were mentioning *opportunity to communicate with pupils, getting acquainted with pupils, hands-on teaching in a class full of pupils*, and this category was called Pupils. Before categorizing the responses, the authors reread all the participants' answers searching for the possibility of classifying them into predicted categories. During this process, some categories were merged, others were separated, and another category of Other was created for statements which could not be classified into any of the foreseen categories. The authors attached descriptions to formal categories, which made further analysis easier. After that, qualitative data processing followed, by encoding the participants' responses and categorizing them into predefined categories.

Results and Discussion

The students answered three questions presenting their point of view based on their experience of teaching practice. In this way three themes were highlighted:

1. The greatest quality of teaching practice,
2. Shortcomings of teaching practice,
3. Suggestions to improve teaching practice.

Within each topic, categories have been formed and presented according to the frequency of the allocated statements. The smallest number of statements was placed, within each theme, in the category Other which was presented last. By citing some of the most representative responses within each category, we will try to clarify how students, future teachers, perceive teaching practice.

1. The Greatest Quality of Teaching Practice

The first question the students were answering was *What do you consider to be the greatest quality of teaching practice?* Their answers, some of which are presented below, were grouped into six categories: Class, Self-evaluation for the teaching profession, Class atmosphere, Teachers mentors, Pupils and Other.

Class

Learning practical work skills in the classroom.

Gaining work experience.

Opportunity to teach class independently.

One of the main goals of teaching practice is to prepare students for independent work in the future. In no other way can this goal be reached other than by observing and teaching in the classroom. To most participants by far, this is the most significant category, explaining that in teaching practice they learn about hands-on teaching, combine theoretical and practical knowledge, apply what they have learned during teaching practice, directly engage in work and thus become independent.

Self-Evaluation for the Teaching Profession

Gaining perspective on what it means to be a teacher, seeing if it is for us.

It puts us in specific situations for our future jobs, we can see our shortcomings.

We gain understanding of the complexities of the teaching profession.

Many teachers have in early childhood, immediately after starting school, decided to be teachers. They continued their quest, succeeded and never regretted it. Some of the students, despite preparing for the teaching profession, are not fully aware of how demanding, complex, sometimes exhausting, but at the same time inspiring and creative the job is. By attending teaching practice, students have the opportunity to gain insight into the difficulty and beauty of the teaching profession, as well as the ability to assess whether this indeed is what they want to do. Some students start to realize their weaknesses, lack of competence, and change or reinforce their attitudes about their future occupation.

Class Atmosphere

Seeing what real lesson looks like, what the class atmosphere is like.

Getting to know the real problems.

Students are being prepared for teaching practice at faculties, but only by going to schools and the classrooms they have the opportunity to observe and apply teaching from a new perspective (of future teachers). Only now can they feel the positive vibrations, atmosphere of support and help or tension, difficulties and problems.

Teachers Mentors

Work methods of the teacher.

The mentor's advice for teaching.

Flexibility of the teacher.

The mentor's constructive criticism.

Pleasant cooperation with the mentor.

Students initially follow the work of the class teacher, and later, with the professional help and guidance of the teacher practitioner, they teach independently. Students' expectations are focused largely on the work of the teacher, who represents a desirable model of behaviour and action. Students are of the opinion that they can learn a lot and get useful advice, instructions, and suggestions from teachers whose methodological

work they are observing, or teachers who follow their work. Maturity in deliberation is reflected in the statement of *The mentor's constructive criticism* because students do not expect only praise, but also criticism, yet delivered professionally and in good faith. The students' attention is not only focused on the teacher's pedagogical work but also on humane, friendly cooperation.

Pupils

Contact with pupils.

Dealing with a class full of children.

Communication with pupils.

Teaching should be directed at pupils. Students are aware of this and see teaching practice through the prism of interacting with them. Contact, encounter and communication with pupils are values that can and should be realized among future teachers and pupils. One student states that *Dealing with a class full of children* is the greatest value of teaching practice, which indicates a dose of insecurity and uncertainty as to what this relationship will look like.

Other

I can experience everything that is only talked about at the faculty.

Recognizing that not everything is as perfect as in theory and that you have to find a solution yourself.

Nothing, I'm not interested in working at a school.

I am wasting my time; I could have studied for another exam.

In the category Other, there are claims that do not fully match any category. The claim *Recognizing that not everything is as perfect as in theory and that you have to find a solution yourself* points out that there is a kind of discrepancy between what the students are prepared for and what they expect from the actual classroom reality. One student finds nothing good and useful in teaching practice because school work does not interest him so it is to be expected that teaching practice will not be interesting. There is also the answer *I am wasting my time, I could have studied for another exam*, which points out to the marginalization of teaching practice as an integral part of the teaching profession.

It should be noted that 36 participants did not answer the question posed on what they consider to be the highest quality of teaching practice. We suppose that they could not distinguish any positive characteristics and therefore did not write anything in response.

2. Shortcomings of Teaching Practice

The second question posed to students was: *What do you consider to be the shortcomings of teaching practice?* After analysing the students' answers, seven categories were formed: Not enough teaching practice, Too much teaching practice,

Organizational difficulties, Teachers mentors, Content complaints, I have no objections, and the category Other.

Not Enough Teaching Practice

It is too short.

Not enough hours of teaching practice.

We only have one public and individual lesson; we should have more.

It is introduced too late; it needs to start earlier.

We only have teaching practice during the last semester.

A great majority of students think that the number of hours of teaching practice is too low, that is, teaching practice is not represented enough during their studies. Apart from its short duration, another shortcoming is its late introduction. This statement is not surprising, as at some faculties students are introduced to pupils for the first time when they go to schools to attend and teach classes in their final years of study.

Organisational Difficulties

Teaching practice overlaps with the exam period.

Teaching practice is poorly integrated into the schedule.

Teaching practice overlaps with lectures.

Too many students.

Poor collaboration between schools and faculties.

We cannot pick the school ourselves so we end up with overlapping schedule.

School is too far away.

A significant portion of the students have difficulties in the realisation of their teaching practice because it is held during the semester so it overlaps with lectures. Too many students were allotted to the same schools, resulting in the reduction of quality. Students also point at the poor cooperation between faculties and schools and the inability to choose the school where they will undergo their teaching practice. Introducing the option to choose the school might resolve the last remark about having to travel far to get to the school, which is surely considered a waste of time.

Content complaints

We are too passive.

Too much listening, students don't teach enough classes.

Required student written lesson plan notes are too lengthy.

Forcing students to adhere strictly to written lesson plan notes.

Lesson plan notes have to be written by hand, maybe it would be better to write them on the computer.

Teaching practice journal does not have to be written in such detail.

We do not have an opportunity to see the class register, write in classes and other documentation.

Bad working conditions, lack of equipment.

Pressure, having to constantly check the time so the timing is perfect.

Students resent that the curriculum is conceived so that they attend too many lectures in comparison to the number of classes they teach. For each lesson, students must write a written lesson plan, but consider the lesson plans to be unnecessarily detailed, binding and obsolete as they are written by hand in the era of advanced technology. Some students have to write a detailed journal during their teaching practice, and do not understand why they have to do it. On the other hand, some students complain that they are not taught how to fill in pedagogical documentation, which will be an integral part of their future work. Some students point at material working conditions of some schools as a disadvantage. The last statement within this category refers to the timing of the lesson. The lesson lasts for 45 minutes, and while performing the lesson, students feel frustrated trying to achieve everything they planned within the given time (neither too fast nor too long).

Teachers Mentors

Inadequate teacher involvement with public and individual lessons.

Teachers do not include students in their work and expect two weeks of passive attendance.

Outdated methods.

Unprepared mentors.

Teacher's dissatisfaction.

Irresponsibility of the mentor, not answering e-mails.

Assessment is not objective.

Students, as future teachers, come to teaching practice with certain expectations regarding teachers whose lessons they attend and under whose mentorship they perform. Part of the report is focused on the professional work of the mentor and is described in a negative context. Shortcomings were observed in the use of obsolete methods, insufficient inclusion and involvement of students, the mentors' inadequate preparation for work. In addition, there was also dissatisfaction with the communication with the mentor. Authors Miller and Aldred (2000) point out that discrepancies in theoretical scientific knowledge of teaching and practical teaching of future teachers are due to different educational conditions and activities to which they have been exposed. That is why it is important that teaching practice and the mentor's work are of excellent quality. Students also note the dissatisfaction of the mentors themselves. This poses a big problem as students are not to be blamed for their dissatisfaction, nor are they able to change the existing situation and increase the mentor's satisfaction. Students note another segment of the mentor's work, which is that assessment is not objective. Mentors evaluate lessons taught by students. Rightly so, students expect a fair and objective evaluation, but that is sometimes not the case, so students report it.

I Have No Objections

Nothing special.

There are no shortcomings.

Everything is fine, but I just do not care, it is too little money.

Some students have no objections regarding teaching practice, they find no deficiencies and their testimonies are formulated.

Too Much Teaching Practice

There is too much teaching practice.

Too many hours.

Only a few students believe that there is too much teaching practice during their studies.

Other

Public performance in front of students.

The teaching methodology lecturer should teach sample lessons.

The category Other has two statements, one regarding the fear of public performance in front of fellow students. The pressure of performance, according to this statement, is not due to the mentor and school students, but due to the student's colleagues. Peer expectations place pressure on some students, and this is noted as a shortcoming of teaching practice. The second comment relates to the necessity of a sample lesson which, according to the students' opinion, should be conducted by the teaching methodology professors at the faculty, and thus provide the example for the lessons that the students have to create. It would be more useful for students to observe their teaching, which would be a good teaching methodology template for the students' own work, and would better match their work with the expectations of the teaching methodology lecturer.

Seventy participants did not answer the question about the shortcomings of teaching practice.

3. Proposals to Improve Teaching Practice

The third, last question posed to students was *Do you have any suggestions to improve the quality of teaching practice?* The obtained statements were divided into six categories: Duration of teaching practice, Content of the teaching practice, Teaching practice schedule during higher education, Work of the teacher mentor, Material conditions and Other.

Duration of Teaching Practice

Increase the number of hours of teaching practice.

Reduce the number of hours because it sometimes hurts the quality.

Most of the students' testimonies referred to the length of the teaching practice. Due to the unequal number of compulsory teaching hours, depending on the faculty (ranging from 12 hours to 64 hours of teaching practice during the study), students suggested different ways of correcting the duration. Some of the students believe that curricula should prescribe more hours, while students who have a higher number of hours indicate the need for reductions in order to increase quality.

Content of the Teaching Practice

More information during lessons at the faculty to perform teaching practice better.

Less theory, more teaching practice.

Remove lectures, replace them with teaching practice.

Allow the students to teach lessons more independently.

More participation during class.

Participation in parental meetings, trips.

Introducing more classes outside of the classroom.

No one showed us how to write the lesson plan and work in a combined classroom.

Write documentation as in real life.

Reduce the number of lesson plans.

Remove handwritten lesson plans.

Change the teaching practice journal, writing the journal takes a lot of time, and I do not have the feeling that we learn more this way.

Suggestions focusing on the contents of teaching practice point to the width of contemplation and offer a number of specific proposals. The need for better preparedness at the faculty is suggested in order to better connect theoretical knowledge with practical work. It is also suggested that the ratio of the theory and practice is changed by increasing the practical part. Aside from the fact that students would like to participate more actively in teaching, they also want to get acquainted with specific forms of teaching, such as work in a combined classroom where two (or more) grades work simultaneously. They are also interested in teaching classes outside of the classroom, organising school excursions, being the class teacher and holding meetings with the students' parents. Students suggest that they should get better acquainted with pedagogical documentation and that they be responsible for it during teaching practice. Some students must keep a teaching practice journal where (according to the methodology teacher's instructions at the faculty) they must keep notes during class. Keeping detailed notes is considered unnecessary and useless, and they suggest that the teaching practice journal be designed differently.

Teaching Practice Schedule during Higher Education

Start teaching practice at earlier years of study.

Teaching practice should start earlier, not in the fifth year.

It should be held through all years.

Teaching practice should be held every semester.

Introduce weekly teaching practice.

It should be held during the last month in the semester.

One semester is for teaching practice only.

Teaching practice should be better integrated into the schedule.

Separate teaching practice so we can better devote ourselves to it.

Send us to school the whole last semester!

Students suggest that they start teaching practice earlier, in the first year of study, and not the last year. In addition, teaching practice should be better integrated into the schedule, and they suggest that one day, week or even a whole semester be separated for teaching practice. They believe that they would then be more focused on monitoring the activities that are taking place in their designated classroom, and that they could better prepare themselves for lessons they have to teach on their own. One student exclaimed: *Send us to school the whole last semester!*, obviously wanting more time allotted for teaching practice.

Work of the Teacher Mentor

Improved education for the teacher mentor.

Increase the competences of the teacher mentor.

Teacher mentors should agree on how to evaluate and view mistakes.

More successful communication between mentors and students.

More comments after teaching with students.

Since some students mentioned the work and competences of the mentor teacher, as a shortcoming of teaching practice, it is no surprise that some of the suggestions on the possibility of improvement are directed at them. Suggestions point to the need for better mentor training to improve their competences (especially regarding student appraisal) and the need for external evaluation of the mentor's work. Students also expect that mentors achieve more successful mutual agreements regarding the teaching practice and that mentors provide more insight into their work. The mentor's opinion is obviously important to students; they value it and think that a better quality analysis of their work by a mentor can be beneficial. Accordingly, this reflects the sentiment: "If the knowledge of teaching belongs in its essence to teachers, then it makes sense that teachers must be able to communicate what they know about their work with those who learn." (Freeman, 2002, p. 11).

Material Conditions

Provide tools to improve the teaching practice schools.

Better working conditions.

Equip schools with supplies and aids.

Choosing schools that are closer to the faculty.

Allow students to choose the school.

Exchanging different schools - primary, vocational, grammar schools.

Despite the intent to continually renew and equip schools, we are aware that this is not the case. Students are also aware of this and think that teaching practice schools, schools where teaching practice is held, should be better equipped with supplies and aids in order to achieve better working conditions, particularly students at the Faculty of Kinesiology who require specific equipment and aids for teaching (both in gyms and open spaces where physical and health education takes place). Students' suggestions also relate to greater flexibility when choosing the school, either in terms of selecting schools close to the faculty, choosing the school by themselves, or referring students to different types of schools.

Other

In my opinion, school teaching practice is good, but public lessons are terrible.

Cancel it.

Hire students with best grades.

One student wrote that the teaching practice performed by a mentor that she observes at school is good, but characterises public lessons conducted by students as *terrible*. Unfortunately, we cannot conclude from this statement why she considers public lectures to be so bad and whether it relates to her lectures, lectures of other students or both. One student thinks teaching practice should be abolished, probably not seeing any benefit from it. Finally, one positive statement suggests that teaching practice should be used as a criterion in the recruitment of students who were exemplary in its realisation.

The last question about suggestions for improving teaching practice remained unanswered by 98 students. Does this mean that students have no suggestions on how to improve teaching practice?

Conclusion

The beginning of faculty education represents the greatest turning point for most students and is often full of challenges and new tasks in real life. Higher education, compared to secondary school, represents a different education system that expects a higher level of knowledge and competence, greater autonomy and work responsibility from young people.

Wishing to gain insight into students' perceptions of teaching practice, we have opted for a phenomenological approach. After research and analysis of the obtained data, the following contemplations by students, future teachers, can be highlighted:

1. There are numerous advantages of teaching practice with regard to preparing students for future teaching job. The primary value of teaching practice is that it ensures conditions for students to attend class, realize it in realistic conditions and thus gain an understanding of the complexity and demanding nature of the teaching profession. In teaching practice, they have the opportunity to communicate with students and get useful professional remarks from the teacher

mentor whose classes the students attend, but under whose mentorship the students teach their own lessons.

2. Students also notice a number of shortcomings, primarily time constraints of teaching practice, but also organizational, material and human failures.
3. As expected, since most students have stated that there is too little teaching practice and that it is introduced too late in their education, it is no surprise that the most prominent proposal is to increase the number of hours of teaching practice and to introduce it earlier. Students also provide a number of concrete proposals to make teaching practice more comprehensive and set requirements for improving material conditions. It is no surprise that some of the students' comments also relate to the need to improve the work of the teacher mentors, who should be more competent professionals.

Many authors stress the importance of teaching practice for the professional development of future teachers (Caires, Almeida, & Vieira, 2012; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2012; Korthagen, 2004; Moran, 2014), and this research confirms such views. That is why teaching practice should be an integral part of higher education of students of educational faculties. By observing, actively participating and conducting teaching activities, students have the opportunity to gain insight into the actual situation in the classroom. Students had been participants in the teaching process as children, but during teaching practice they observe and analyse the teaching process from a completely new perspective, taking into account the pedagogical, psychological, didactic and teaching methodology notions. Their attention should be focused on the structure of the teaching process, the factors affecting teaching, and aspects of teaching and learning. As such, teaching practice proves to be a requirement for high-quality and successful teaching in the future. Teaching practice that is meticulously and professionally designed provides the opportunity to develop student competences in the field of educational and rehabilitation work.

It should be stressed that students, as future teachers, cannot acquire competences so easily since this is a process that requires time, initiative, creativity and self-motivation. In this process, it is necessary to consider important components such as: individual work experience, knowledge and skills for the development of professional competences (Dyrda & Przybylska, 2005).

Teaching practice is one of many prescribed student obligations. Students state that they do not participate in enough practical activities during teaching practice due to various constraints, especially in terms of time (Saka, 2001, as cited in Saka & Saka, 2009).

There is a question of what kind of teacher competences the students can reach with such an uneven number of teaching hours they have had during their studies, as is the case in these five higher education institutions. All of them prepare future teachers for teaching, and teaching practice, which presents an extremely important training segment for the future profession, varies greatly (looking only at the number

of hours). Of course, there are other factors, both material and human that may be considered. Improving material conditions is a necessity and requires constant financial investment. In order to improve teaching practice, there should be an improvement in collaboration between faculties and schools where teaching practice is held, as well as between faculty professors and teacher mentors in schools. Only with their synergy can teaching practice be improved. Students, as active participants in teaching practice, should be constantly questioned, and changes should be made based on their opinions in order for them to become competent teachers and educate capable, satisfied, creative and happy students.

In the Republic of Croatia, a new Ordinance on Training Schools is underway and this paper could be a contribution to its creation.

Research Limitations

Since the beginning of the research we were aware of the limitations of this research. The participants were asked open ended questions to be answered in writing. Such a way of gathering data brings with it the risk that a large number of questions will be left unanswered. These predictions proved to be true; the first question was left unanswered by 36 students, the second by 70 and the third by 98. Obviously, a large number of participants denied sharing their opinion and did not answer all the questions asked. Milas (2005, p. 453) suggests that thinking about the answer (which is not offered in advance) requires considerably more effort from the respondent, and it often happens that the participants withhold their opinion. That is why we have included a large number of participants in this research. We did not want to conduct the interview in focus groups because we felt that a written answer would give a more original, comprehensive and sincere view of teaching practice.

One of the observed shortcomings is the inability to accurately understand individual student answers, and we feel that face-to-face conversation would have eliminated this problem, so for future research we suggest talking with the participants after they fill in questionnaires in written form.

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Percepcija nastavne prakse hrvatskih studenata nastavničkih fakulteta

Sažetak

Kvalitativna istraživanja u području pedagogije posljednjih desetljeća dobivaju na važnosti te se sve češće primjenjuju kako bi se dobio sadržajni uvid u istraživanu problematiku. U radu smo primijenili fenomenološki pristup želeći ustanoviti kako studenti, budući učitelji, percipiraju nastavnu praksu. Studenti nastavničkih smjerova, koje smo intervjuirali, nazočili su nastavnoj praksi i predstavljaju vrijedan izvor podataka o njoj. U ispitivanju je sudjelovalo 307 ispitanika, 102 studenta i 205 studentica. Ispitanici su bili studenti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, polaznici pet sastavnica Sveučilišta: Učiteljskog fakulteta, Muzičke akademije, Kineziološkog fakulteta, Prirodoslovno-matematičkog fakulteta i Hrvatskih studija. Uzorak je bio namjeran, njime smo obuhvatili studente nastavničkih studija. U radu su prikazani odgovori na tri pitanja otvorenog tipa. Analiza je provedena tako da su prikupljene izjave ispitanika identificirane i razvrstane u kategorije kako bismo klasificirali empirijski materijal. Rezultati sugeriraju da postoji niz pozitivnih vrijednosti nastavne prakse za rad budućih učitelja, ali i njezini brojni nedostaci. Studenti, budući učitelji, iznose i niz konkretnih prijedloga u vezi s tim kako unaprijediti kvalitetu nastavne prakse. Studente kao korisnike nastavne prakse treba kontinuirano propitivati te na osnovi njihovih iskaza unijeti promjene kako bi oni postali kompetentni učitelji te odgajali i obrazovali sposobne, zadovoljne, kreativne i sretne učenike. Ovaj rad mogao bi biti doprinos izradi novog Pravilnika o vježbaonicama.

Ključne riječi: fenomenološki pristup; kvalitativno istraživanje; nastavna praksa; studenti.