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**STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON THE ENGAGEMENT
EXPERIENCE DURING TEACHING PRACTICE**

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Abstract

Teaching practice is considered a reference point in teachers' initial training. Despite the fact that it is much appreciated by student teachers, most studies confirm the fact that they face teaching difficulties during the initial training stage. The preoccupation of the education sciences specialists to enhance the quality in the teaching practice activities is shown in the specialty literature which underlines differences in procedural stages and goals but offers congruencies on the influencing factors. The emergent factors which represent indicators of quality in teaching practice are the mentor teacher, the practical context in which the student teacher is placed and the student teacher. The aim of the study is to identify the perception on the relation mentor-student teacher in the learning engagement during teaching practice. The design of the study is a constative one, while the cumulated results can contribute to the completion in the depiction of the relational factors which influence the quality of teaching experience. The knowledge of the factors influencing the quality of the teaching practice can contribute to the development of an unitary model, useful for the teacher training policies, in the organization of teaching practice stages.

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1. Introduction

Considered as key players of the social and economic development strategies, teachers must reach a high professional qualification through the acquisition of those professional skills, which would allow them to fulfill professional roles for a quality education. The present-day teachers are those who facilitate knowledge acquisition through developing the skills to obtain knowledge, to elaborate on it independently, and to solve problems with it (Zanting, 2001). Thus, there is an urgent need to ensure a solid professional training for future teachers in order to meet the complex demands of teaching in current education. One of the key aspects in teacher education is practice teaching. Teaching practice as part of the training programs must reflect students' learning needs and provide the opportunity to adapt to the role of the new teacher - creative and empathic, who succeeds to facilitate knowledge of the world and a state of well-being for his pupils through didactic and communication skills. In order to fulfill their professional roles, student teachers should be prepared to integrate scientific contents, through combining theory and practice, to use teaching and evaluation didactic strategies appropriately in order to achieve class management and to manage educational crises.

2. Problem Statement

In the education sciences field, the specialists' concerns for teacher training have been intensified during the last decades; their research has explored the multiple facets of the process, the dynamics and the involved players (Caires et al., 2012), highlighting the determinat role of the teaching practice in teachers' initial training (Caires et al., 2012; Laker et al., 2008; Ulvik & Smith, 2011). Regardless of the approach in teachers' training, the approach in which the focus is on developing the practical teaching skills with a view to achieve an efficient teaching which would enhance pupils' performances or the approach focused on the process learning to teach, in which students teachers are encouraged to reflect over the teaching process during teaching practice activities or the current one, where the stress is placed on socialization (Laker et al., 2003), on the integration of the student teacher in the educational communities with a view to adapt to the school ethos, to rules, values and resources of the school community (Caires et al., 2012), teaching practice is unanimously considered the central point of teacher education (Wilson, 2006). Equally, teaching practice is highly valued by student teachers (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). Teaching practice offers the student teacher the possibility to develop a deeper understanding of educational keystones and of their learning implementation (Farauta & Amuche, 2013), to apply the learned teaching precepts (Barry & King, 1998), to develop the personal qualities a teacher should possess (Mudzielwana & Maphosa, 2014). The analysis made by Taib (1997) highlights the perception of student teachers about teaching practice, referring to the opportunity to adapt to professional roles (Wideen & Holborn, 1990), helping them to develop realistic perspectives about pupils and their own curriculum knowledge, to highlight their inability to adequately implement inquiry teaching, and to explore their own capabilities (Tisher, 1990) and to increase self-confidence in their own teaching skills (Rothenberg et al., 1993).

2.1. Factors of quality teacher practice

The specialty literature highlights the factors which explain the quality of strategies (Mitchell, 2014), among which we can mention the duration of practice stages (Ronfeldt & Reiningger, 2012), the certified expertise of the mentor teacher (AACTE, 2010), real partnership between the teaching school (school in practicum) and the university which provides teachers' initial training, the coherence between theoretical training and the practice stage. The rise in the quality of teaching practice stages is ensured by the mentor teacher to the utmost extent (Clarke et al., 2013; Fazio & Volante, 2011; Sayeski & Paulsen, 2012), through the degree of involvement manifested in the mentorship, through ensuring a real, adequate and constructive feed-back, through the inspirational model promoted, which also include professional qualities and personal attributes (Franklin-Torrez & Krebs, 2012), and through the activation of reflective processes on teaching with students teachers (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009).

Student teachers must learn to teach in an authentic educational environment. Starting from this challenge, one can note the practical learning environment factor (Mitchell, 2014), referring to practicum goals (Cohen et al., 2013), institutional connections and relations (Franklin-Torrez & Krebs, 2012), placement context, tensions and outcomes, whose action can affect the quality of the stage of teaching practice.

A factor, which appears in the specialty literature although insufficiently studied refers to personal attributes of student teachers. The study of Franklin-Torrez and Krebs (2012) which investigated the students' teaching characteristics showed that motivation, initiative, specialist knowledge and personal characteristics ensure the quality in the teaching activity.

2.2. Learning engagement during teacher practice

During the teacher practice activity in the initial training for the didactic career, the student teacher unfolds activities such as observation in the practice school, participation in the teaching and evaluation process, participation in the management activities in or out classroom, in an authentic environment where he benefits from the interaction and support of experienced teachers- mentor teachers.

During teaching practice, learning is based on the apprenticeship model learning who is described as learning by watching, imitation learning, or learning by demonstration (Collins et al., 1991). Apprenticeship learning is a guided experience, which implies abilities and cognitive and metacognitive processes of the student teacher. This process requires the mentor teacher and the student teacher to think and communicate externally in order to verbalize processes for feedback, scaffolding, and communication. In order to acquire practical professional competences it is necessary that during the teaching practice stage, the student teacher should manifest high levels of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation in the context of cognitive apprenticeship refers to embedding opportunities for learners to internalize the benefits of the learning experiences through interest or a self-motivating goal (Collins et al., 1991).

Learning engagement refers to the learner's active engagement and participation (Deakin Crick, 2012) to academic tasks and is utterly necessary for students to experience positive learning outcomes. In our study we approach learning engagement from the perspective of self-determination theory which

posits that people manifest a natural tendency towards curiosity, growth and development, which can be stimulated by the social environment they live in. When the learning environment fulfils the autonomy, competence and relatedness needs, then student teachers become self-motivated, which influences their learning engagement choices; when the environment does not support psychological needs, learning engagement is motivated by control (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-motivated learning has effects on learning performances, students manifesting self-confidence, enthusiasm and vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Mentors can support self-motivating forms of student teachers during teaching practice stages. The specialty literature does not offer relevant evidence with this idea, more studies are necessary in order to validate such intervention programs.

At the same time, one can observe in current practice that student teachers' engagement in practical learning has different levels, without identifying the characteristics of the social contexts, which can influence it. It has been proved that certain personal characteristics of the student teacher such as self-efficacy, meticulousness (Lee & Klein, 2002), as well as positive academics outcomes are associated with learning engagement. Lawson and Lawson (2013) suggest that engagement in practical activity can also be explained through the emergence established between the student teacher and the mentor.

3. Research Questions

The research questions that have guided my work are as follows:

- What are the student teacher's perceptions on the characteristics of the relation mentor-student teacher during teaching practice stage?
- How is the relation mentor- student teacher concerned in self-autonomous engagement during the teaching practice stage?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study proposes us to identify student teachers' perceptions on the relationship mentor-student during the teaching practice stage and to reveal their impact upon student's self-autonomous engagement in practical learning..

5. Research Methods

5.1. Sample

The sample is made up of 82 Romanian students currently attending initial training stage for didactic profession – 15, 1-st year of study, 42, 2-nd year of study, 25, 3-rd year of study: 5 males and 78 females, average age 22.32 years (SD=1.88). As concerns professional experience, 35 students work full time or part time and 47 students do not have professional experience.

5.2. Instruments

The following measures were used:

1. The Utrecht Learning Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2014) assesses students' academic engagement and it is composed of 17 items that assess: vigour (6 items, $\alpha = .89$), absorption (6 items, $\alpha = .93$) and dedication (5 items, $\alpha = .92$), each item is assessed using a Likert scale that ranges between 0 (Never) and 6 (Every day). Cronbach's Alpha for the total scale is .96.
2. Inventory of Experiences and Perceptions of the Teaching Practice – IEPIP (Caires et al., 2010), sub-scale learning and supervision - 10 items, $\alpha = 0.86$. The learning and supervision sub-scale examined the perceptions of the student teachers regarding the sources of learning and progress made throughout their teaching practice in terms of competencies, skills and knowledge. Each item was assessed using a five-point Likert scale 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree).
3. Questionnaire to identify student teachers' perception on the relation student – mentor during the teaching practice stage. The instrument elaborated by us contains 15 items, measured on a Likert scale from 1 – strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree.

5.3. Procedure

The design of the research is a constative one, and the method used was the questionnaire –based- survey. The evaluation of student teachers had been done at the end of the teaching practice stage. The questionnaires had been administered online, the participation being voluntary and unpaid.

6. Findings

The results of the study regarding student teachers' perception on the relation - student during the teaching practice stage are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, Person coefficients

Dimensions	M	SD	1	1	3
1. Learning engagement	83.21	11.62	1	0.580**	0.743**
2. Learning - Supervision	39.11	5.02	0.580**	1.00	.534*
3. Perception on the relation student teacher - mentor	69.37	5.20	0.743**	.534*	1.00

Notes: N=82, $p < .001$; ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Starting from the assumption that teaching experience during teaching practice represents the foundation in teachers' initial training, it is important to find out to what extent the student teachers are involved in the teaching practice activity. The analysis of the results of the ANOVA test according to the year of study shows the fact that there are no significant differences as regards engagement in practical learning in terms of the year of study $F(2, 71)=0.36, p=0.698$. As concerns the perception on learning and supervisory sources, no significant differences had been registered with student teachers in terms of the year of study $F(2, 71)=0.09, p=0.908$.

After Pearson correlation analysis, significant associative relations had been found between student teachers' engagement in the practical learning and the sources of practical learning- the mentor teacher ($r=.580$, $p\leq 0.000$), as well as the positive perception on the relation mentor-student ($r=0.743$, $p\leq 0.000$), which emphasizes the positive impact of the mentor in practical learning, through the received support and guidance. The relation with the mentor implies encouragement for self-autonomy, for self-confidence and in the quality of the knowledge about teaching acquired during teaching practice (Caires et al., 2012).

The importance of the relation mentor-practicum student had been analyzed by the frequency analysis of the student teachers' answers offered by the Questionnaire to identify student teachers' perception on the relation student – mentor during the teaching practice stage. It had been noticed that in the relation student-mentor, students appreciate a constructive feedback from the mentor during practice activities ($m=4.64$, $SD= 0.34$), encouragement and emotional support offered during teaching practice ($m=4.58$, $SD=0.73$), providing guidance ($m=4.47$, $SD=0.83$), as well as the promotion of a positive relation among student teachers within the teaching practice group ($m=4.40$, $SD=0.69$).

Student-teachers need a constructive feedback to achieve performances in the teaching activity during the lesson design stage and after the teaching activity. Feedback-ul refers not only to the approach of scientific contents or didactic techniques but also to class management, to group or individual activation. A constructive feedback offered by the mentor facilitate the involvement in activities, the student mobilizes his effort to achieve the activity with energy and dedication.

Student teachers need reliance, encouragement and emotional support from the mentor during the whole teaching practice stage. Being very complex, the teaching activity implies the exercise of a set of professional competences, which can determine multiple emotional effects for a student teacher. The mentor's emotional support produces the certitude and comfort that regardless any difficulties met by the student teacher in teaching, the mentor is there to offer guidance and help. The emotional comfort and support are factors which influence positively learning engagement.

The student teachers engages actively in learning when the mentor guides him, through offering instructions for achieving the tasks but also useful resources for the teaching activity. We refer not only to lesson plan models or to didactic materials but also to adopting and applying new didactic methods and strategies. To this purpose, the mentor should manifest receptivity and open- mindedness transforming the mentoring relation in a real partnership.

In educational practice, learning to teach cannot be achieved only by observing the mentor but also through peer-to-peer learning type, which proved to be very efficient. The mentor facilitates student's connection not only with pupils in the classroom but also with other student teachers, enabling professional connection as early as practice stages. Connections among students, communication and sharing ideas foster students' positive engagement in the learning activity of teaching.

Apart from the factors from above, we can mention other factors related to the relation mentor-student associated to the relation mentor- student which contribute to engagement in practical learning and which obtained high scores in our analysis: knowledge and experience ($m= 4.20$, $SD=0.65$), flexibility ($m=4.12$, $SD= 0.41$).

The relation mentor-student teacher represents only one of the factors which can explain student's engagement in the activity of practical learning along with the construction of the educational environment and personal factors of the student.

7. Conclusions

Ensuring the quality of teaching practice stage represents a challenge for the high education institution, which organizes initial training programs for teachers. Knowing the factors involved in the activity, the institution can develop intervention programs so that the quality of the teaching practice stage should not be affected.

The teaching activity of student teachers is a necessary component of teachers' professional training, which determines the need to obtain a real perspective of the realities in the practical activity (Cuenca, 2011) through the identification of its structural and functional component. The aim of analysing student teachers' teaching experience is to improve teachers' initial programs and to upgrade their training. It is also important to identify what are the factors (mentor teacher, learning environment, teacher student characteristics) which contribute to the learning endorsement of teaching practice with student teachers.

The specialty literature reveals that the factors student teacher, respectively mentor teacher have a significant contribution in maintaining the quality of the teaching practice activity. In our study, we have started from the idea that in order to answer the question how and why some student teachers engage in learning during the teaching practice stage, it is important to identify the characteristics of the relation between student teachers and teaching practice mentors and thenceforth to establish their impact on learning engagement during teaching practice.

The results of the study endorse the idea that the relation established between the mentor and the student teacher explains the self-autonomous engagement of the student teacher during the practice learning stage. A good relation between the two actors implies to give feedback, responsivity to the student's training needs, collaboration during teaching stage, to provide help and support during the whole practice stage while from the student it implies engagement, responsibility and resolution.

By determining the characteristics of the relation mentor- student teacher and the impact over student learning engagement, new directions of research can be opened through the validation of an intervention program which could exploit the identified characteristics and which can be applied in many universities.

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