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## UNDERSTANDING PRE-SERVICE TRAINEES’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR TEACHER TRAINING EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract

Pre-service trainees are usually offered during their bachelor studies just a glimpse of what teaching entails. The pre-service teacher training experience allows trainees to put in practice the literature they have read and get familiarized with the didactic challenges they would have to overcome once employed in the public or the private educational system. In order to further understand pre-service trainees’ perceptions of their teaching experience trainees had to fill in a reflective journal which was evaluated from a qualitative perspective. This reflective journal was intended to help trainees reflect on their teaching practice in order to achieve professional development.

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### 1. The context of pre-service teacher training

The teacher training experience acquired during Bachelor studies at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, offers students the possibility to have a direct and genuine contact with the public and private educational system. Pre-service student-teachers experience the principles and practice of teaching English as a foreign language just for one semester which comprises 14 weeks of study. This limited period of time is the result of the double specializations that are offered to all our students. In fact, students perform a 14 weeks teacher training period for

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each specialization. Likewise, after graduating their BA studies and the teacher training program, pre-service trainees can become teachers of the two combinations of languages that they have studied, i.e. their major, as well as their minor.

During their teacher training practice students who are enrolled in the English language and Literature BA program have to perform the following activities according to the syllabus: to observe the way their mentor conducts his/her teaching activities with different age groups (10 lessons), to observe how other pre-service students teach their lessons (5 lessons) and to teach 5 individual classes to different age groups. Unfortunately, these lessons that provide either direct observation or proper teaching experience offer just a glimpse of what teaching entails. The complexity of the teaching profession cannot be comprised in a teaching practice semester, let alone summed up to a number of 20 lessons. Still, during the 14-week semester, student-teachers are engaged in various teaching activities that challenge them both professionally and personally. This first round of challenges experienced in the initial teacher education program help our students deepen their understanding of the fact that subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills and attitudes represent salient and interconnected elements within the teacher education field. However, to achieve professional development implies a lifelong learning experience which aspiring teachers need to acknowledge in the moment they consider embracing this career.

## **2. Becoming a reflective teacher**

The literature that tackles the topic of reflective teaching usually puts an emphasis on both the importance of reflection as an aspect of quality in teaching and on achieving professional development. Various authors (Dewey J., 1933; Schön D., 1983; Richards J. C., Lockhart C., 1996; Jay J.K., 2003; Pollard A. et al., 2005; Bocoş M., 2003; Chiş V., 2005;) state the importance of encouraging reflective practice among teachers.

Pre-service student-teachers enrolled in the pre-service teacher training program at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca use a Pre-service Teaching Practice Kit (Bretan & Petruş 2013) which has the purpose among other things to log the classes that have been observed and taught, the mentor's feedback and the final assessment of the classes that have been taught. In addition, this kit includes a section called reflective journal (Bretan & Petruş 2013, 84-85) where student-teachers write their experiences related to their training. The reflective journal section comprises 8 questions that aim to help students visualize the challenges they have overcome during their teaching practice and to become more self-critical about their teaching abilities. This journal also aims to offer student-teachers the opportunity to develop their reflective skills since "the accumulated wisdom through reflection on experience is an important aspect of teaching which comes to shape one's practice" (Loughran 1997, 61). Therefore, this understanding gained as a result of personal reflection would help student-teachers to put things into perspective and would provide a thorough picture of the goals that have been achieved and of those that need to be set.

In order to become a reflective teacher one needs to acknowledge that teaching is a two-way process which is not based on a mere transmission of knowledge but also on the learning component, i.e. learning from one's students and from each teaching experience that one has performed. Since the array of teaching strategies used by every teacher is content and context-dependent, the learning environment is continually undergoing changes in order to incorporate or to adapt to a specific didactic discourse or to certain social and cultural dimension. Therefore, from this perspective of the two-ways process, teachers can be perceived as lifelong learners.

The first step in becoming a reflective practitioner resides in the willingness to undertake such a reflection process. Peter Scales (2013, 20) suggests some characteristics of reflection in a professional setting: deliberate, purposeful, structured, it is about linking theory and practice, it is connected to learning and it involves change and development. Being a reflective teacher implies that one is self-critical about the level of his /her pedagogical and subject-matter knowledge and the suitability of his/her teaching strategies in a certain teaching context. This self-evaluation, if performed in an honest manner, can offer the teacher useful insights into the aspects he/she needs to rethink, to adapt and improve in order to become a professional.

As newcomers to the teaching profession, pre-service students need to consider the complexities of what teaching and learning entail. As stated above, reflection is connected to learning since through reflection one acquires knowledge and reaches new comprehension levels. The Pre-service Teaching Practice Kit proposed by Bretan & Petruş (2013) intends to offer students the possibility to value their learning experiences within the teaching practice program.

### 3. Professional and personal qualities

The course *The Didactics of the English language* provided pre-service students enrolled at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca with valuable information regarding the personal and professional characteristics that make an effective teacher. Before performing their teaching practice, trainees have already formed an opinion about this topic.

A generally accepted view is that while being engaged in their teaching activities, teachers need to exhibit a variety of roles in the classroom and demonstrate various qualities. On the one hand, they need to make proof of their professional qualities. Professional characteristics could comprise according to Shulman (1986 in Loughran & Russell, 1997, 65) some prerequisites: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. Likewise, teachers have to be knowledgeable in their field of activity, should demonstrate good classroom management techniques, provide clear instructions or be able to plan efficiently a lesson. On the other hand, they are human beings and therefore, personal qualities surface involuntarily. Personal qualities also bear a significant amount of importance because according to Hardgreaves (1998) both teaching and learning are emotional practices. It is the teacher's responsibility to make sure that the emotional climate in the classroom is conducive to efficient learning. Teachers need to be positive, confident, motivated, patient, warm or supportive. In addition, Hardgreaves (2001, 1057) suggests that all teaching is inextricably emotional, either by design or by default. Pollard et al. (2014, 5) also states that 'teaching is emotionally attached and value-laden'. Therefore, one could conclude that for teachers, the personal and the professional characteristics interrelate considerably and are complementary.

### 4. The reflective journal - data analysis and interpretation of results

The second part of this paper provides details about the data obtained as a result of interpreting the reflective journals that students had to complete after performing their pre-service teaching practice.

The details of the research are presented below:

- Purpose of the study: to investigate pre-service trainees' perceptions of their teacher training experience
- Location: The Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca
- Span of time: February 2015
- Participants: 3rd year students, specialization: English-major
- Recruitment: all the students had to submit their teaching practice kit portfolios
- Research method: survey; a questionnaire containing open-ended questions that were analyzed in a qualitative manner.

The reflective journal comprised 8 open-ended questions but only 6 open-ended questions have been selected for analysis in this paper. The rationale for this choice is that the other 2 questions did not necessarily focus on the topic of this paper. The list with the 6 open-ended questions is presented below:

Q1: Would you like to become a teacher? Why?

Q2: What would you like to know more about or be able to do differently during your teaching practice?

Q3: Which are the areas of classroom management that you would like to improve?

Q4: What challenges have you met during your teacher training practice?

Q5: What have you learned about yourself as a learner?

Q6: What will you do differently when you begin to teach after graduation?

When students take part for the first time in the course *The Didactics of the English language* at the Faculty of Letters, the majority of them state that they don't want to become teachers. They provide various arguments to support their decisions: being a teacher involves much hard work, teachers are underpaid in Romania, the educational system in Romania is very rigid etc. Still, they attend the course as a back-up plan. Pre-service student-teachers have been asked if they want to become teachers after they have experienced teaching in public or private schools. The results obtained for question no.1 are surprising. Out of a number of 60 answers only 8 students responded that they don't want to become teachers and other 4 stated that they are not sure. Their arguments target both professional and personal aspects. A number of 6 students wrote that they perceive teaching as being the hardest job they can imagine because it is demanding, time consuming and it implies a lot of responsibility. Two

students mentioned that they are not very patient individuals and therefore, are not suitable for this job. A number of 4 students stated that they are not sure if they would like to embrace this career but that they keep this option open if they don't find another job that better suits them.

It is surprising that a number of 48 students intend to become teachers. They provide the following arguments in order to sustain their points of view: they like to communicate and work with children; they consider that teaching is a rewarding job because one learns new things from one's students; they think that teaching gives one a sense of purpose and usefulness as one has the chance to share his/her knowledge. The pre-service teacher training practice has proven to be an eye-opening experience for most of the students. A verbatim account of one student [yes, I would like to become a teacher even if before my teaching practice I have never thought of this possibility] emphasizes the fact that the actual teaching experience has been more rewarding and meaningful in comparison with the theoretical aspects presented during the course *The Didactics of the English language*.

For question no. 2 students have suggested various possibilities of improvement. These elements can be grouped according to three categories: improvements that relate to their pedagogical knowledge, improvements that relate to their subject-matter knowledge and improvements that are linked to the development of their personal qualities. As concerns the pedagogical knowledge, students identified the following elements: speak louder and provide clear instructions, be able to motivate one's students, make use of a variety of teaching techniques, be able to control the classroom, provide suitable learning resources, employ various grouping techniques, create a positive learning environment and focus on differentiated teaching strategies. A significantly reduced number of items have been identified for the subject-matter knowledge group: making use of specialized vocabulary and English grammar. Students have identified several items for the personal qualities group: be friendlier, be less nervous, be motivated and be more spontaneous and dynamic. The data obtained indicates that students seem to be confident about their subject-matter knowledge and about their personal qualities. Therefore, they seek improvement mainly in the pedagogical knowledge area. They would like to know how they could connect better with their learners and get familiarized in a short period of time both with them and the teaching context. Pre-service student-teachers have understood that each teaching context is different and that each particular classroom is comprised of individuals who have diverse learning strategies and various interests as regards the learning of English as a foreign language. The multitudes of answers that are linked to the development of teacher-student rapport in the classroom suggest that student-teachers would like to improve their ability to connect with students, to build a relationship with them and to be responsive to their needs. In a similar vein, knowing one's students is fundamental in helping one to accommodate his/her teaching to the classroom context. A number of four pre-service student-teachers suggested that the 5 classes that have to be taught and the 15 classes meant to be observed are not sufficient in order to understand the opportunities and the challenges of becoming a teacher. The responses given by the pre-service student-teachers indicate that they are diligent learners who would like to further develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes toward teaching.

Students were requested to indicate for question no. 3 some areas of classroom management that they would like to improve. The data gathered for question number 3 indicate that pre-service student-teachers would like to become more knowledgeable in areas such as: grouping and pairing students, providing instructions before starting a teaching activity, handling misbehaviour and managing teaching time wisely. These were the most frequently encountered areas of classroom management that students would like to improve. Trainees also mentioned that they need to improve their blackboard management, be able to anticipate students' learning difficulties and become better communicators. Trainees might find challenging the task to group learners for different learning activities because the short period of time allotted to observe a particular classroom is not enough to get familiarized with the learners' learning abilities or their willingness to cooperate. Trainees don't know beforehand the learners' learning difficulties and once they engage learners in different activities, these problems begin to surface. It is for this reason that student-teachers would like to become more efficient in anticipating learners' needs. Kagan (1992 in Bangel et al. 2006, 342) suggests that this situation is encountered in most pre-service teacher training programs because student-teachers demonstrate a critical lack of knowledge about pupils. In addition, they bring in the classroom their prior beliefs about teaching which are most often embedded in theoretical, not practical teaching knowledge. The lack of teaching experience could justify student-teachers' willingness to improve time management skills and communication skills. They stated that they would like to be more confident when addressing learners or when providing explanations and be able to maintain eye contact when they are engaged in discussions.

Pre-service student-teachers have provided at question no. 4 various examples of challenges that they have met during their teacher training practice. The most encountered challenges refer to: adapting teaching resources to the learners' needs and their language level, managing disruptive behaviour, time management, earning learners' respect and encouraging learners to communicate or to provide feedback. A number of five students mentioned the fact they were very nervous, anxious and even scared during their first contact with the learners. They were worried about the unexpected questions learners might ask or about the fact that some learners would not want to engage in activities.

Question no. 5 provided pre-service student-teachers with the opportunity to reflect on their status as learners in the lifelong process of becoming professionals. The following verbatim accounts indicate the fact that this pre-service teacher training practice has been meaningful for student-teachers because it provided them with the possibility to make use of the theoretical knowledge they have previously acquired: [I have learned that it is sometimes difficult to put theory into practice], [I have learned that I have much patience with people and that I don't mind explaining things more than once], [I can build positive classroom dynamics], [I realized that I still have many things to learn in order to be a good teacher]. Student-teachers stated that before their teaching practice they were not fully aware of their personal qualities such as: patience, empathy, motivation, diligence or care.

Question no. 6 was intended to give student-teachers the opportunity to assess their overall teaching performance and consider some aspects that they would change when they begin to teach after graduation. Their responses targeted both professional and personal qualities. On the one hand, they would like to be better at explaining vocabulary and grammar points, be more diligent when it comes to planning their lessons or choosing didactic resources, improve their language level and be able to handle better misbehaviour in the classroom. On the other hand, as regards their personal qualities, student-teachers would like to be more creative and optimistic, more confident and patient, more flexible, more spontaneous and less nervous.

This reflective journal has been a valuable tool not only to record students' teaching experiences and feelings related to performing their teaching practice but also to provide feedback to the mentors and to the university lecturers who taught the courses *The Didactics of the English language* and *Pre-service teacher training practice in English*. This feedback is of paramount importance because it helps both mentors and university lecturers to manage better the teaching practice and to identify areas that can be improved.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper intended to evaluate pre-service student-teachers' training experience by using a reflective journal comprised of several open-ended questions. Students stated that they have had a meaningful teaching experience that has helped them improve both their professional and personal qualities. The reflective journal represented a valuable tool that allowed them to develop their reflective skills. The teaching practice has been a challenging as well as an eye opening experience for many students.

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