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**A STUDY ON THE QUALITY OF THE INITIAL TEACHER
TRAINING PROGRAMS**

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Abstract

Initial teacher training is the guarantee of effective adaptation of future teachers to the particularities of the students' psychological specific age stages, their desires, adaptations, motivation on the one hand, and the dynamics of the pedagogical, psychological and sociological theories literature, on the other hand.

The paper aims to capture – based on a follow-up study – the impact that the initial teacher training conducted in a specific manner (it is a postgraduate course, the classes taking place during weekends) has on trainees who intend to become teachers. The following aspects are taken into consideration: the assessment of the way of harmonizing the time available to teachers and students and the amount of knowledge required; understanding the fundamental concepts and explanatory mechanisms of learning and teaching; the ability of managing specific situations occurring in classrooms; the way in which trainees developed during the training stage attitudes and special motivation, close to the requirements of the teaching profession.

By means of a brief investigation at the end of the course - opinion survey and observation grid - applied to a sample of N = 80 students, we aimed at synthesizing and interpreting the data collected from the students, most of them being graduates with different training profiles. Their assessment constitutes a good feedback for us in order to continue upgrading the quality of the courses we offer within our university.

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1. Introduction

Using students' evaluations on classes they attend in order to get some feedback on the teachers' way of conducting their courses and seminar has definitely become common practice all over the world. Some teachers prefer administering surveys to their students during the semester, in order to improve

what students consider not to go so well, other do it at the end of the semester in order to have an overall image of their lectures in order to improve their future teaching strategies and materials. From an institutional point of view, however, students' evaluations are used to inform the management on promotion decisions (Becker & Watts, 1999) and in those institutions that give great importance to research such evaluations are used to check the time allocated to teaching and research (Braga & Paccagnella & Pellizzari, 2014; De Philipps, 2013). Students' evaluations provide, based on direct observation, information on the teachers' ability to conduct their lectures, as well as on the organizational aspects of such classes.

However, there have been many discussions on the reliability of such results, taking into account the fact that some authors (Krautmann & Saunder, 1999) claim their accuracy, as students objectives are in most cases different than those of the administration. Normally students are considered not to be objective in their evaluations, as what they are interested in are their grades, while the university administration is usually interested in achieving its' teaching and learning goals, these two aspects not always being always correlated. (Braga & Paccagnella & Pellizzari, 2014; Carrell & West, 2010). Some authors (Krautmann & Saunder, 1999) even consider that teachers who give higher grades are likely to get better results when being evaluated by their students, therefore measuring the teaching process quality is quite difficult and several aspects should be taken into account when doing such a measurement. Obviously, teachers' quality is a great indicator of students' achievement and the way in which evaluate their teachers also depends on their final results, especially in the case of postgraduate students who train for becoming teachers. People attending such courses are highly motivated and the feedback that the administration obtains from them is highly important in order not only to improve the quality of the courses provided by the Teacher Training Department, but also in having more and more trainees for such courses.

In most cases, the evaluation of the teaching process is carried out by means of standardized forms, which have in view various aspects connected with the courses and teachers such as: the clarity of the lectures, the teachers' availability and accuracy of the assessment process, the learning outcomes etc. In most cases such evaluations forms are designed using a rating scale and although they are used by most universities, some authors (Murray, 2005) have noticed some limitations they might have. Some of them consist in the fact that they only assess those aspects noticed by the students, not putting great emphasis on factors that are not highly connected with the class itself such as lecture design, teacher's knowledge, and quality of assignments (Murray, 2005). However, one of their advantages is that they provide useful feedback to instructors and what should be kept in mind are that such evaluations are

- a. believed to contribute to student learning, based on evidence or logical argument;
- b. observable by students;
- c. widely applicable, and thus can be used in many different courses; and,

d. under the control of the instructor, and thus are justifiable for use in faculty personnel decisions on salary, promotion and tenure." (Murray, 2005, p. 2).

Moreover, the evaluations done by students are good indicators in three main areas of academic environment: the decisions taken by university members, the quality of teaching and academic standards as shown by Murray (2005). Thus, regarding the first point being evaluated by the students provides useful hints on salaries, promotions and some universities even give a lot of importance to such

evaluations, basing their decisions on academic staff on their results. The second point shows that students' evaluations do improve the quality of the teaching process, although some studies (Marsh & Hocevar, 1991) proved that this was not always the case. As regards the third point, the academic standards, so far it has been found out by researchers that such evaluations have had a negative impact, as some teachers are afraid by them taking into account the fact that the management can base some of their decisions on the results gathered from student evaluations, which is not the case yet in the universities in Romania. Therefore, the purpose of such evaluations in our universities is actually a positive one, that of improving the academic standards.

2. Methodology

2.1. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to capture and analyze how the initial pedagogical training program conducted under the form of postgraduate courses significantly marks and contributes to the training of future teachers' teaching skills, teachers who will be then enrolled in the compulsory education system. At the same time, we consider that the results of the present investigation is a good opportunity for getting constructive feedback and for improving the quality of each teacher's courses within this training program.

It is worth noticing that the area of interest moves towards initial pedagogical postgraduate training, whose fundamental objective is certifying specific skills of the teaching profession.

According to the Minister's Order 5745/2012 regarding the approval of the Methodology framework of organizing teacher training programs, this training module, called Level I (initial) "gives university graduates the right to occupy teaching positions in preschool, primary and secondary education, on condition that they accumulated a minimum of 30 transferable credits after graduating the pedagogical training program."

The organization of such courses has several features, namely: the courses take place during the weekend; a large number of courses and seminars are programed during one day and the enrolled trainees are graduates of university studies and specializations in various fields

The program's curriculum includes:

1. Subjects of fundamental pedagogical training, which are mandatory such as the Psychology of Education, Pedagogy I – fundamental elements of curriculum, Pedagogy II – elements of Instruction Theory and Assessment Theory, Class management);
2. Subjects of didactic and specialized practical (obligatory, too) such as Teaching/Didactics specialty, Computer assisted instruction, Teaching practice in the compulsory pre-academic system.

2.2. Participants in the Study

The study was conducted on a total of 80 trainees enrolled in the psychological and pedagogical training as Postgraduate studies - Level I - in the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiesti, all the participants being graduates with various academic profiles.

2.3. Research Methods and Instruments

Given the particularities of the context presented above, our study follow-up type is based on a administering a questionnaire of opinion addressed to the students and also the completion of an evaluation grid, based on observations made during their participation in the training module.

In our approach, we assumed that the structure of skilled teachers resides, besides their scientific skills certified already by the obtained diploma, in other skills as well, which are also important for their professional achievement, related to the teaching and the social skills. More precisely, the following have been thought of:

- Relational and communicational skills;
- Students' assessment skills;
- Psychosocial skills;
- Technological skills in the practical teaching activity;
- Educational management skills.

Thus, we are interested in some specific aspects, which, in our view, represent benchmarks for supporting the quality of the courses that make up the initial psycho-pedagogical training module. The issues addressed by the opinion questionnaire were the following:

- understanding the fundamental concepts and explanatory mechanisms of the learning and teaching processes;
- how the students could develop during the training program strong attitudes and motivation, close to what these mean for the teaching profession;
- how they have learned the elements connected with managing specific situations that occur in the classroom, in the student-teacher -parents relationship;
- assessing the harmonization of the time available to teachers and students with the amount of knowledge required;
- evaluating how technological skills were acquired through the activities of teaching practice.

For accuracy, this instrument was doubled by a grid of observations that trainees completed during their participation, grid that aims at checking the design, teaching, learning and evaluation activities of the course units, having the following observation categories:

- the adequacy of the course content to the objectives of the psycho-pedagogical training module;
- contextualization of learning;
- management of specific/concrete situations (course attendance, homework, projects support, participation etc.) generated by the course schedule;
- organizing teaching practice / collaboration with faculty mentors.

The data obtained were processed in a qualitative manner, which has a feedback value both for the trainers involved in this program and for the administrative management of such courses (learning spaces provided, organizing program etc.).

3. Results

By calculating the percentages of the data in the instruments described above, the following conclusions were reached:

- 90% of the students, who responded, appreciated the quality of the courses they attended. What is meant by this? The answers in the questionnaire refer to the following aspects appreciated by students and considered to be taken as a model in the future teacher training programs:
 - interesting topics, up to date bibliography, carefully selected content in agreement to the objectives of the psycho-pedagogical training module;
 - facilitating understanding by accompanying theoretical explanations with concrete examples taken from educational day-to-day practice (explanatory mechanisms of learning, teaching models, analysis of curricular documents, elements of class management, distortions / errors in assessing school results, motivation, elements of the theory of multiple intelligences analyzed taking into account differentiated instruction etc.);
 - the course distinguishes from the normal/current academic schedule, as a teacher meets his/her trainees for a high number of hours each weekend, which requires a sustained effort from both sides.

A percentage of 75 of the respondents appreciate how teachers manage the classes and create a balance between the stages of the activities, showing a high interest for triggering and also maintaining attention, arousing motivation and intellectual curiosity, calling upon strategies of co-opting and co-motivating students, providing them with appropriate examples for analysis, case studies, challenges, interesting situations from a real educational background;

A number of 45% of the students express their discontent on how the teaching practice is organized during their courses. It is, of course, understood that all the broad range of skills described above compose, on the one hand, the image of thorough preparation obtained by successive theoretical accumulations. On the other hand, it is very clearly outlined that the depth of pedagogical training is closely related to the responsibility shown for the practical training or teaching practice. This requires the involvement of all theoretical knowledge as well as of the mentors' availability to teach students and practical teaching skills of future teachers. In this respect, the students' comments refer to the lack of an organized and mainly controlled framework for the development of the teaching practice. The teaching practice activities in schools where mentor teachers do not always respond by signing agreements with the university providing the training program can generate, in some cases, lack of motivation, responsibility, commitment and professionalism.

4. Conclusions

The results obtained after analyzing the responses of the opinion questionnaire, backed by filling in the observation grid during the courses of the study program, firstly represent for all of us a good opportunity for reflecting on both the conception of courses and the way of presenting it to the students. The constant call for interaction, capture and persuasion and increasing motivation strategies for successful training remain a continuing challenge and goal at the same time for us.

The feedback on the performance of teaching practice activities leads us to new solutions in this respect. Based on students' opinions one can notice the need to value the practical training more by supervising the teaching practice by a team of professional coordinators, lecturers in the conducted postgraduate module.

We fully agree to the idea of establishing a more visible relationship of cooperation in the educational space university – application school for the benefit of a fully sound professional training, really enriched by valuable learning experiences for students, prospective teachers in the compulsory educational system.

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