Pedagogical Knowledge Acquisition During the Practicum: Individual Reflection and Mentoring Interactions as Ways for Teacher Learning

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ABSTRACT

Teacher reflection is widely considered as an important process that provides in-depth learning experiences to preservice teachers. Portfolios and teachers’ diaries are commonly used teaching tools to funnel one’s own critical thoughts about practice. It is also common to analyse the teaching practice in the practicum through the guidance of expert teachers who act as mentors. Both ways are crucial to organise preservice teachers’ practical knowledge acquired in the schools. The objective is to determine under which learning situations (individual reflection vs. mentoring interaction) knowledge is better acquired and determines the differences between preservice teachers. Five preservice teachers were recorded giving a regular lesson to primary school students. Data was analysed by following the PDA model that divides the content in narrative and inferential. Main results reveal that practical knowledge is mostly elicited with the help of a mentor and mostly inferential. There were minimal significant differences among preservice teachers.

KEYWORDS

Degree In Primary Education, Individual Reflection, Inferential Knowledge Mentoring Interaction, Mentoring, Narrative Knowledge, Practical Knowledge, Reflection, Teachers’ Reflection

INTRODUCTION

The Bologna process has introduced a university reform in European Union countries that highlights the importance of teacher training programmes and thus strengthen the Practicum as the cornerstone of the teacher education programs (Plazaola, Ruiz & Iriondo, 2018; Rosselló, Ferrer & Pinya, 2018). The Practicum, as part of the academic training for preservice teachers, enables the acquisition of the necessary skills and abilities to perform the teaching work within a given set of quality criteria (Criado, Marcos, García & Martínez, 2009).

As part of their internship period preservice teachers must prepare a portfolio in which the most significant events of their practice are described, providing personal evaluations and reflections. Thus, developing critical thinking typically helps to analyse and solve problems that arise during the teaching-learning process, especially if they can transfer knowledge of practice to future teaching situations (Rico, 2010).

Reflection is usually a natural and spontaneous process, but the reflective practice ‘is a learned activity that requires a methodical, regular, instrumented, serene, effective analysis and that is
acquired with a voluntary and intensive training.’ (Domingo, 2013, p. 139). Therefore, preservice teachers are encouraged to reflect critically and analytically to resolve the most significant events about their own practice. In addition, reflective practice helps to improve practice by making results more effective (Reich, 2017).

This reflexive process integrates theory into practice, allowing preservice teachers to elaborate and reconstruct their practical knowledge and connect their school practices with theoretical concepts (Neira & Hernández, 2012). We can consider explaining significant events for practice and eliciting practical knowledge the main aim of teacher reflection (Bereiter, 2013). Sonmark, Révai, Gottschalk, Deligiannidi, and Burns (2017) show that practical knowledge is a key factor for quality teaching.

Preservice teachers usually can rely on a mentor to accompany, guide, and advise them in their teaching work as individual reflection alone seems to be insufficient (Government of Castile and Leon, 2017). Mentoring can be defined as ‘a developmentally oriented interpersonal relationship that usually takes place between an individual with more experience (i.e., the mentor) and a person with less experience (i.e. the apprentice)’ (Eby, 2010, p. 505). Bejar (2018) adds that this mentoring ‘helps students maintain a personal, intellectual, community and social balance.’ (p. 53).

A mentor’s role relies on being a facilitator who reflects on significant events of preservice teachers’ practices and maintains a positive relationship in the teaching-learning process (Bjuland & Helgevold, 2018; Hudson & Hudson, 2018; Mena, Hennissen, & Loughran, 2017). Therefore, for preservice teachers to acquire practical knowledge during their practicum, critical reflection and mentoring interactions are necessary. In this study, we aim to determine which condition (reflection or mentoring interactions) is better for acquiring practical knowledge and to identify the main differences between the two.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Practicum in the Teacher’s Degree in Primary Education

The Practicum represents an indispensable part of the preservice teachers’ training as a period to acquire skills and knowledge from the school context. The Practicum is defined as a formative period where knowledge, skills, and competencies are developed to use in daily practice (Palomares & Alarcón, 2018; Rosselló et al., 2018). In addition, research concluded that preservice teachers must have the necessary content knowledge, the skills they will use, and the ability to argue their decisions. Therefore, it is necessary to reflexively analyse their practice.

The number of hours devoted to the Practicum has increased after incorporating the University Educational System into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This corresponds to approximately 20% of the total teaching load (Llopis, 2017). In the Curricula of the Teacher’s degrees of the University of Salamanca, the Practicum has 44 assigned credits, distributed between the 3rd and 4th year, called Practicum I (20 credits) and Practicum II (24 credits; USAL, 2017) respectively.

Preservice teachers should know, participate, and reflect on what happens in a real classroom during their period of school practice, acquiring the necessary practical knowledge for classroom management (León, 2017) and learning a set of competencies, especially reflexive competence (Rosselló et al., 2018).

The preservice teacher must achieve the following competencies, according to Order ECI/3857/2007:

- Acquire practical knowledge of the classroom.
- Know and apply interaction and communication processes.
- Control the educational process.
- Relate theory and practice to educational reality.
- Participate in and reflect on the teaching activity.
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