

ABOUT SOME CHALLENGES IN THE PRACTICUM OF FUTURE TEACHERS AND KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS IN MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Abstract

This paper provides some suggestions for improving the practice of future teachers and kindergarten teachers for working in a multicultural environment from two aspects. One of these is in the frame of learning contents, and the second in terms of teaching strategies as a form of learning. This idea is a product of two situations. The first is related to a well-known fact that there is a gap between theory and practice. It is not uncommon to hear teachers and researchers bemoan the perceived problems associated with the theory-practice gap. From a research perspective there is a view that the complex and messy world of teaching can-not adequately be theorized by the teachers who are busy working in that world whilst, from a teacher's perspective, there is a view that theory is not necessarily helpful in responding to the need for ideas and activities that will "work in class tomorrow". Teacher-researchers bring to bear their expert knowledge and understanding of practice in research as they attempt to better understand their practice and its impact on their students. The second situation refers to the existing curricula. Namely, the analysis of curricula for teachers and kindergarten teachers shows that they offer a solid theoretical knowledge as a base to develop practical skills. But, this is not enough from the perspective of the multicultural environment so the suggestions in this paper are challenges in the practicum of future teachers and kindergarten teachers.

Key words: intercultural communication skills, cooperative learning.

Instead of an introduction

The existence of a gap between theory and practice is evident anywhere, anytime, in any attempt and in any period of educational reforms. All attempts even the most and deepest reforms have failed to overcome this gap, at least so far. This points to the complex educational sphere. We can consider teaching complexity from different angles, even when speaking from the angle of the teachers, for example a future teacher, teacher-novice, or experienced teacher. From here, the first step is made in the direction of teacher education. Namely, teacher education is currently facing a number of tensions as pressures have come from many quarters in the last decade, with perhaps the most intense focus being on the issue of teacher quality. This call for an improvement in the quality of teachers is welcomed by many, but there are inherent dangers too. Смит (Smith-Cohran, M., 2004) writes: Over the past several years, a new consensus has emerged that teacher quality is one of the most, if not the most, significant factor in students' achievement and educational improvement. In a certain sense, of course, this is good news, which simply affirms what most educators have believed for years:

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teachers' work is important in students' achievement and in their life chances. In another sense, however, this conclusion is problematic, even dangerous. When teacher quality is unequivocally identified as the primary factor that accounts for differences in student learning, some policy makers and citizens may infer that individual teachers alone are responsible for the successes and failures of the educational system despite the mitigation of social and cultural contexts, support provided for teachers' ongoing development, the historical failure of the system to serve particular groups, the disparate resources devoted to education across schools and school systems, and the match or mismatch of school and community expectations and values. Influenced by the new consensus about teacher quality, some constituencies may infer that "teachers teaching better" is the panacea for disparities in school achievement and thus conclude that everybody else is off the hook for addressing the structural inequalities and differential power relations that permeate our nation's schools.²

Our insights and experiences - analysis of the situation

Intending to contribute to the improvement of the practice of pre-service teachers and preschool teachers for working in a multicultural environment, we started from two aspects. One is in the frames of teaching material, and the other in terms of learning strategies as forms of learning. This idea is a product of two situations. The first is related to the well-known fact that there is a gap between theory and practice, and the second situation applies to the existing curricula. Both situations are closely linked and any separation of these two for purpose of easier study and analysis leads to partial solutions. Therefore we will try to analyze them in their unity in the text that follows. The first aspect of our analysis aimed at improving the practicum for pre-service teachers and preschool teachers for working in a multicultural environment refers to the analysis of the curricula for teachers and preschool teachers.³ The analysis of existing curricula for pre-service teachers and preschool teachers shows that they offer a solid theoretical basis for developing practical skills that are aimed at bridging the theory-practice gap. Namely, study programs feature contents such as religious systems, multicultural education, inclusive education, pedagogical communication within which intercultural communication is studied. But, this is not enough from the perspective of working in multicultural environments because they have a status of elective subjects, so a future teacher and preschool teacher may or may not decide to choose them. The results of the survey we have conducted at our Faculty are interesting.⁴ The data show that a large percentage of students (88.7%) come from multicultural backgrounds, and they chose content from multicultural education and pedagogical communication in the highest percentage (90.32%). Despite their experience as members of a multicultural community

²Smith-Cohran, M. (2004). *Walking the Road (Race, diversity and social justice in Teacher Education)*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, pp.3-10

³Study programs available at <https://www.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/mk/fakulteti/pf/pf-prv-ciklus>

⁴The survey was conducted in September 2014 at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Stip and Strumica, dispersed study, which involved 62 students of third and fourth year of the two departments, elementary school and preschool education.

and theoretical knowledge of multicultural education and communication based on their pedagogical preparation for their future profession, 54.83% still want to engage in activities for practicing work in a multicultural environment; the reasons for this are said to be new experience and insights about working in a multicultural environment. But we should not neglect the number of students (46.77%) who do not want, i.e. do not know, or are not sure that they need project activities for developing skills for working in a multicultural environment. These data again point to the gap between theory and practice. Previous experiences of involving teachers and students-future teachers and preschool teachers in projects involving multicultural cooperation and intercultural communication talk about certain weaknesses in the practice of future teachers and preschool teachers, from the time perspective (duration is precisely determined and limited) and from the perspective of the scope of human resources (the number of participants is limited both from the ranks of faculty staff and from among students - future teachers and preschool teachers). So we have a situation of new generations of future teachers and preschool teachers, as well as the fact that we are all members of a multicultural community, a community where we live and work. For these reasons we talk about the gap between theory and practice.

How to improve the practicum for future teachers and kindergarten teachers?!

The answer to the question of how to improve the practicum for future teachers and kindergarten teachers for working in a multicultural environment is contained in the next section of this paper. Our considerations are given in the form of proposals that we believe will be a strong challenge in the intention to improve the practicum future teachers and kindergarten teachers. The strategy of improving passes through several steps: know your culture; the ability for cultural responsibility (training to develop the ability of cultural responsibility); get to know the culture of others; the ability for intercultural communication and working in a multicultural environment. We will give a short description of each of them. The first step has already been made (which is quite evident and can be seen from the analysis of the curricula content for future teachers/kindergarten teachers, as in national history, language, educational system - organization, practice, attending educational institutions). As for the second step, it is obvious that the existing curricula do not pay enough attention to it. Because culturally responsive instruction is a term that lends itself to different interpretations (Au, 2009; Osborne, 1996), let's explain how it may be defined in the context of future teachers and kindergarten teachers. In our view, the goal of culturally responsive instruction is to promote the academic success of future teachers and kindergarten teachers of diverse backgrounds, to close the gap that typically exists between the achievement levels of these future teachers and kindergarten teachers and their mainstream peers. Studies indicate that an achievement gap exists even at the earliest levels of schooling and that this gap only widens over the years (Au, 2007). Culturally responsive instruction is central to a pluralist vision of society in recognizing that heritage cultures have a central place in a school's curriculum in all levels. In this way, culturally responsive instruction can help future teachers

and kindergarten teachers simultaneously achieve academic success while taking pride in their heritage cultures. Culturally responsive instruction is based on the idea that future teachers and kindergarten teachers of diverse backgrounds bring assets a skillful teacher can build on. Culturally responsive instruction is proposed as a way of narrowing the gap, by building on the values, knowledge, and behaviors that future teachers and kindergarten teachers of diverse backgrounds bring from the home. Culturally responsive instruction is not intended to limit future teachers and kindergarten teachers to content and learning activities they find comfortable and familiar. Rather, it involves giving children opportunities to find success in school by learning through means that are responsive to their cultural backgrounds, while at the same time introducing them to the new curriculum content and patterns of interaction needed for success in mainstream academic contexts. We know, however, that many teachers work with future teachers and kindergarten teachers from a dozen or more different cultural backgrounds. What can we do to bring culturally responsive instruction to our classrooms and later, future teachers and kindergarten teachers in their classrooms? Part of the answer is to plan lessons that foster a classroom environment where learners are provided with common experiences and knowledge, while simultaneously inviting future teachers and kindergarten teachers to make contributions from their various heritage cultures. In this way, a shared classroom culture can evolve to include and engage all future teachers and kindergarten teachers, as everyone in the class weaves a tapestry that represents expanding views of the world. With action, enthusiastic and explore, we can take advantage of this energy and curiosity to develop culturally responsive lessons that engage future teachers and kindergarten teachers in exploring the world together with their children in their classroom. This will encourage cultural responsibility and develop abilities for this skill. As for the third step - get to know the culture of others, as already mentioned, it also exists as a part of the curricula of future teachers/kindergarten teachers. The fourth step expresses applicability of the strategy we are speaking about. In this context, our proposals are related to the application of the method of play, especially dramatization and role play. We will not speak about the method of play and its significance here, but there is an interesting excerpt from an interview with Vivian Gussin Paley⁵ who, working with students-future teachers/kindergarten teachers, asked the question that led to an analysis of how boys and girls looked at each other and themselves in the kindergarten year. Someone in the colloquium with a great deal of anxiety said, "But how can we do this today, how can we examine kindergarten children the way you did, if we don't see them playing the way you did?" That is a good question. Perhaps these student teachers will discover for themselves ways to bring more play into their classrooms, and how to connect the storytelling and acting to play.

⁵ Vivian Gussin Paley writes and teaches about the world of young children. She examines their stories and play, their logic and their thinking, searching for meaning in the social and moral landscapes of classroom life. A kindergarten teacher for 37 years, Mrs. Paley brings her storytelling/story acting and discussion techniques to children, teachers, and parents throughout the world. Her books include *The Kindness of Children* (Harvard University Press, 1999), *In Mrs. Tully's Room* (Harvard University Press, 2001), *A Child's Work* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), and *The Boy on the Beach* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Anyhow, the most important pathways to this education were found in dramatic play. Being in a place where every kind of dramatic, verbal, social, literary, and cultural idea can be played out, where words themselves can be examined by a dozen learners at once...stories all around you, observing how problems are solved by so many different kinds of everyone coming from so many different places is essential. What a rich addition this is to our students-future teachers and kindergarten teachers in this technological age. Given that there's nothing we can do about the technology overwhelming us, I prefer not to spend my time thinking about it, but rather what are the cultural opportunities available if one takes advantage of the storytelling abilities of learners. As for picture books and stories, at the moment I suggest several that can be used not only in teaching in elementary school but also in kindergartens and in the practical training of future teachers/kindergarten teachers, such as: How did/didn't Friday complete his obligations?; The Story of Otto, Otto, and Otto; The Magic Comet; Goalkeeper Risko; Friday's Band.⁶ The second proposition is related to place-based education. Place-based education is a key to culturally responsive curriculum and entails strategies that can be used by teachers in diverse, multi-ethnic classroom settings. Developing a sense of place is a way to awaken learner's reflections of personal identity and connections to the environment, both natural and man-made. It gives learners the opportunity to investigate their potential and who they can be in the inclusive global world that surrounds them. They can begin to discover more about the importance of their culture and cultures through history with a respect for their own education and the future of their people. Also, revitalizing the culture creates new learning opportunities for families as well as their young children. They can share common experiences and access new knowledge linked to their ancestors and their history. They can redefine and reconnect with their sense of place on their land in their culture today. A basic cultural link is easily enhanced in content areas utilizing real artifacts or materials. In all cultural areas around the world, natural materials still link people with the land across time. The third proposition is related to working with literature. Literature from a heritage culture can also be a way of introducing an inquiry in a culturally responsive manner. With guidance from a cultural archivist and educator, a teacher experimented with using a historic chant to highlight examples of natural sources of water in the children's environment, for example. The chant provided a culturally responsive introduction to a science unit on the water cycle from a native perspective. The children were excited to discover that they drank water from the same sources as their ancestors. They identified sources where water could be found in the world of their ancestors, soon realizing that their ancestors were keen observers of their environment and practiced natural scientists. Children then considered sources of water in the present environment. They experimented with the water cycle and used modern resources, such as videos and brochures from the local water supply board, to find out more about what they could do to maintain an ample supply of water, as well as good water quality, in their home. The proposal we offer, called working with literature, is in service of learning through

⁶ Picture books are available on <http://www.sitesmeednakvi.org.mk/sub/3>

projects where collaboration among learners is encouraged by research, encouraging activity, and being in the spirit of constructivism and holistic approach to learning. If these suggestions become practice in the curriculum of future teachers/kindergarten teachers, we think that they will find application in their professional work.

Instead of a conclusion

In literature several approaches to the training of future teachers can be found, which mainly differ in critical dissonance and collaborative resonance. The first with the tendency to bolster utilitarian perspectives on teaching and ultimately to perpetuate existing practices, and the second with cooperative resonance and intensification of joint work for learning communities. However, the essential purpose of preparing future teachers is to think and work critically, which includes liberal education, and flexible strategies aimed at improving their practicum. Indeed, the preparation of future teachers and educators is a process of continuous learning and change, a process that brings together different ideas, thoughts and experiences, a process of collaboration and togetherness.

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