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PRACTICAL TRAINING OF FUTURE TEACHERS – A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SINGAPORE AND SLOVAKIA

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ABSTRACT Pedagogical practice is the most important and useful part of university studies; it is an integral part of teacher training. Due to the fact that Slovak pupils achieve average to below average results in international studies, and the education of the younger generation is the task of the teacher, the paper deals with practical training of future teachers in Singapore – one of the best education systems in the world. It describes the practical training of students in Singapore, compares it with the practical training of Slovak students, and offers incentives for innovation in the current education system.

KEY WORDS: *Initial teacher education, Practicum, Singapore, Slovakia*

INTRODUCTION

Teaching profession entails many unexpected situations and challenges for which no textbooks nor theoretical knowledge can prepare us. Flexibility in responses, adaptation to new situations, professional and deliberate approach are all advantages required in many professions. An Indian proverb says that a gram of practice is better than a ton of theory. This proverb may be applied to all professions – especially the pedagogical one because of the fact that a teacher is a person who prepares other people for their future professions.

Pedagogical practice is a very important part of university studies; it is an integral part of teacher training. Through direct interaction in a classroom, students – future teachers – get a chance to deal with situations that are not covered in their scripts or textbooks. They acquire new experiences and competences that are useful not only to pass the studies but more importantly to perform their profession. Kosová, Tomengová et al. (2016, p. 47) state that the aim of pedagogical practice is to create suitable conditions for future teachers to acquire professional experiences, opportunities to interconnect them with their theoretical knowledge into their own concepts of professional thinking and acting by enabling them to: learn real models of teaching, educating and everyday school life; better understand the pupils, their learning processes, contexts of their development and of relationship building; create bases of their professional competences, responsibility and behaviour; get professional feedback on their own teaching, self-reflexion, self-evaluation and new prerequisites for further improvement; get experience with communication with parents, to test their potential to exercise the teaching profession.

The best educational systems in the world are aware that the key and means to high-quality educational performance of pupils are pedagogical employees – teachers. Social status of a teacher in a given country indicates the role/standing of education within the value system of the country. In most of the world's best educational systems the teaching profession is highly esteemed and prestigious. One of the factors, thanks to which the teaching profession is so well respected, is the strict selection of individuals admitted to Faculties of Education. Considering that excellent teachers are not born but made, future teachers are continuously educated and supervised.

It is a well-known fact that those who want to be the best should learn from the best. This contribution provides an overview of the practical training of future teachers in Singapore – the country that for several decades keeps its top position in international studies in the area of education; its subsequent comparison with the practice of future teachers in Slovakia and it also offers incentives for innovation of the current educational system

PRACTICAL TRAINING OF FUTURE TEACHERS IN SINGAPORE

National Institute of Education (NIE) is an autonomous institute of the Nanyang Technological University. It is the only institution educating teachers in Singapore and one of the world's best institutes educating teachers. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, NIE is an integral part of education in the Republic of Singapore. It educates teachers on all levels, from programmes of initial education up to programmes of professional development of teachers and programmes of executive management for school directors, heads of departments and school management. Programmes of Initial Teacher Preparation NIE train teachers for all state schools, from primary to Junior College (JC). This institution manages the post-gradual programmes that lead to obtaining higher degrees (MA and PhD.) (Lim, 2013). NIE states that the programmes of Initial Teacher Preparation (ITP) prepare students for pedagogical career, the programme develops the knowledge and skills that are required in teachers in order to competently fulfil the tasks and challenges connected with the dynamic work of teachers. Each of the mentioned programmes develops specific knowledge and skills for teaching on primary or secondary level. ITP programmes provided by NIE are: Bachelor of Arts (Education) (BA[Ed]); Bachelor of Science (Education) (BSc[Ed]); programmes to get a diploma (Dip), and postgraduate study - Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE).

Bachelor programmes BA[Ed] and BSc[Ed] last four years and after graduation students get an academic degree in art or natural subjects with pedagogical qualification to teach on primary or secondary level of education. These undergraduate programmes provide the following teaching careers: generalist teachers for primary or secondary education, teachers of Chinese/Malay/Tamil language on primary or secondary level of education,

teachers of art subjects on primary or secondary level of education. NIE provides many Dip. programmes (one- or two-year long) that lead to Diplomas for future teachers on primary and secondary level of education. There are two versions of the Dip. programmes: the General and the Specialisation track. The General track prepares student teachers to become generalist primary school teachers while the Specialisation track prepares student teachers to become specialist before being posted as primary or secondary school teachers. The postgraduate programmes aim to provide students with knowledge and skills necessary for teaching school subjects and to better understand the teaching profession in Singapore's educational context. There are two versions of postgraduate programmes: one for teaching academic subjects – PGDE, and one for teaching Physical Education – PGDE PE. PGDE is a sixteen-month programme that prepares its graduates for becoming primary, secondary or JC teachers. Student teachers in the PGDE (Primary) and PGDE (Secondary) tracks will be equipped with the knowledge and skills to teach two school subjects (or one in the case of single-subject specialists). Those in the PGDE (Junior College) track will be equipped to teach one subject at the JC level and one at the Secondary level (except for Economics and General Paper). Postgraduate programmes enable the following careers: Generalist teacher of primary education, secondary education or JC, teacher of Chinese, Malay or Tamil language on primary or secondary level of education or teacher of art subjects on primary level of education. PGDE PE is a two-year programme for PE teachers. Students are trained for PE teaching on primary and secondary level. Dual-level teacher preparation should help students to understand growing and motor development of pupils and its impacts on education and learning (NIE; MOE, 2020).

Practicum Handbook of the National Institute of Education (NIE, 2020) states that practice is a very important part of all programmes of Initial Teacher Preparation at NIE and it is compulsory for all student teachers. On practice students apply their knowledge and skills for the teaching subjects they are trained in and develop their teaching competences under the guidance and supervision of cooperating teachers, school coordinating mentors and university lecturers. From experienced school mentors they learn about the schooling process, they prepare themselves for their roles and responsibilities in teaching. Teaching Practicum covers four types of school practice: (1.) School

Experience – SE, (2.) Teaching Assistantship – TA, (3.) Teaching Practice – TP1 and (4.) Teaching Practice - TP2.

Table 1: Types of teaching practice in Singapore

Programme	Type of practice	Length/type	Period	Assessment
BA/BSc (Ed)	school experience (SE)	2 weeks (not final)	before sem. 1, year 2	satisfactory/ unsatisfactory
	teaching assistant (TA)	5 weeks (not final)	before sem. 1, year 3	passed/failed
	teaching practice 1 (TP1)	5 weeks (not final)	before sem. 1, year 4	passed/failed
	teaching practice 2 (TP2)	10 weeks (final)	sem. 2, year 4	distinction/ credit/passed/ failed
PGDE (Pri/Sec/JC) (16-month programme)	teaching assistant (TA)	4 weeks (not final)	sem. 1, year 1	passed/failed
	teaching practice (TP)	10 weeks (final)	sem. 1, year 2	distinction/ credit/passed/ failed
Dip Ed/PGDE PE (Pri/Sec)	teaching practice 1 (TP1)	5 weeks (not final)	before sem. 1, year 2	passed/failed
	teaching practice 2 (TP2)	10 weeks (final)	sem. 2, year 1	distinction/ credit/passed/ failed
Dip in Art/Music/CL/ HE Ed (one-year programme)	teaching practice (TP)	10 weeks (final)	sem. 2, year 1	distinction/credit/ passed/failed

1. SE is the first one of the four types of school practice. It takes 2 weeks and consists of one week at primary school and one week at secondary school. It is an observing type of practice – its aim is to allow students to observe lessons at schools, get to know a wide scale of pupils, teaching and educational experiences at schools. Students are required to observe, make notes and learn from teachers and school administration workers, whom they watch and discuss with. Each student has an assigned cooperating teacher who helps him/her with his/her professional development throughout SE by discussing the matters concerning schools, syllabus/plans of work, sharing in lessons planning, observing the performance of teaching duties – planning, managing, communication, instruction, assessment, and by guiding the observing activities of students. Students do not teach in this period and they are not formally assessed. At the end of SE, the school writes down a summary report on SE in order to give feedback to NIE on the overall performance of the students – whether it was satisfactory or unsatisfactory.
2. TA is the period of intensive observing and reflexion of the teaching profession by the teacher students. The aim of TA is to provide students with an opportunity to observe their cooperating teacher and other experienced teachers who teach and guide their classrooms. BA/BSc (Ed) have 5-week practice and PGDE 4-week practice (in which they spend 4 days at school and 1 day in NIE). TA requires teaching “with support” from 3rd to 4/5th week: in the 3rd week students can teach some part of a lesson with the cooperating teacher. They should plan the teaching together. From the 4th week students should be able to teach the whole lesson. Students are not formally assessed for their teaching; they just assist their cooperating teacher. The cooperating teacher uses “Teaching assistantship checklist on teaching competencies: feedback for student teacher” as a guidebook to provide students with feedback. Students are also required to perform the TA tasks – Reflections for teaching assistantship: guide for student teachers every week and to hand out reflexions (Rubric for assessing reflections) to their supervisors for comments and guidance. At the end of TA, there is a phase of final assessment and termination. TA enables students: to develop their practical awareness and appreciation for the role of teachers; to enhance

their experiences and to understand the reality of teaching and learning at schools; to understand their pupils and to develop their skills in order to respond appropriately to their needs, interests and capacities; to develop skills and capacities to observe/reflect education; to develop their awareness on work expectations and professional norms; and in case of PGDE students also to connect the theory they have learned in NIE with experiences they gained at schools.

3. TP1 is the third type of teaching practice. This 5-week period helps students to acquire initial pedagogical skills for independent teaching, with help from their cooperating teachers and supervisors through systemic observations, assistance and counselling. First two weeks of TP1 are a period of intensive observing and reflexion of teaching by students through observing the cooperating teachers. In these two weeks students have to fill in the Reflection Journal , that should be submitted each week to their supervisors for comments and guidance. The last 3 weeks of TP1 are a period in which students get practical experience by helping their cooperating teachers plan lessons, prepare resources, manage pupils and assist in some guided teaching. Thanks to these experiences they develop their understanding of the role of teachers and of the challenges of teaching in Singapore's educational context. In the last 3 weeks students are assessed for their teaching by their cooperating teachers and supervisors by the means of the Assessment of Performance in Teaching form . TP1 enables students: to apply and practice the principles of teaching and learning in a classroom; to develop practical understanding and appreciation of the main tasks of teachers and to acquire competences; to enhance their experiences, understanding and awareness of realities connected with teaching and learning at schools; to understand pupils and to develop their skills to appropriately respond to their needs, interest and capacities; and to develop their professional attitudes and qualities that are expected of the beginning teacher.
4. TP and TP2 are periods of intensive development of students that enable them to acquire initial teaching competences. Cooperating teachers and supervisors provide them with guidance and assistance by the means of systemic observations, help and counselling. Students have

an opportunity to actively participate on all aspects of the school programme. They take full responsibility for teaching and managing in the classroom by teaching full lessons in intact classrooms. Based on these experiences they learn to interconnect theory with practice and to get understanding and competences necessary for effective teaching in various classroom situations. Thanks to TP/TP2 teacher students have opportunity: to apply and practice principles of teaching and learning in a classroom; to develop practical understanding and appreciation of the main tasks of teachers and to acquire related skills; to enhance their experiences, understanding and awareness of realities connected with teaching and learning at schools; to understand pupils and to develop their skills in professional decision-making and capacities for reflective education and self-assessment; and to develop their professional attitudes and qualities that are expected of the teacher students (NIE, 2020).

COMPARISON OF PRACTICAL TRAINING OF FUTURE TEACHERS IN SLOVAKIA AND IN SINGAPORE

In Slovakia, unlike Singapore, there are several institutions dedicated to preparation of future teachers and pedagogical employees. Universities have high autonomy and each of them works out and organises its own teaching practice more or less independently. They have similar and different features and due to this fact it is impossible to select one specific model on the basis of which practice is organised.

Table 2: Comparison of teacher education in Singapore and in Slovakia

	Singapore	Slovakia
Number of universities providing pedagogical education	1	7
Average percentage of pedagogical practice during the study	20%	5 – 8%
Qualification required of primary and secondary school teachers	Bachelor	Master
Standard length of study to obtain qualification to teach at primary and secondary schools	4 years	5 years

According to Kosová, Tomengová et al. (2015, p. 41-42) and NCEE (2017, p. 6), in international comparison Slovakia belongs among countries with lower share of practical preparation in education of teachers. In 2012, a project group of the developmental project of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic analysed study programmes and discovered big differences in proportion of practical preparation on individual Slovak faculties. On the one hand, there are faculties on which presence at schools, analyses and preparation for teaching takes more than 15% of the study, students spend more than 140 days of their 5-year studies directly at schools – they teach on more than half of them. On the other hand, there are faculties that organise three types of practice (observation, continuous, or block sequential output practice and continuous output discontinuous practice in 3 non-consecutive semesters) in an abbreviated form. Pedagogical practice and preparation represent less than 5% of the study, students spend approximately 60 days of the 5-year study at schools – more time observing than teaching themselves, facilitating guidance and reflexion of practice is disregarded, the practice is even concluded with a test. The Singapore educational system offers to its students 4 types of practice that follow up one another, have developmental character and each of them is structured to gradually enhance the teaching competences of the candidates. Students are guided by cooperating teachers and supervisors and reflexion is considered a very important component of the preparation – students reflect their own practice individually and they also get feedback from the teachers. It also reflects the cooperation among schools and NIE and the support provided to teachers by the Ministry of Education. Education of future teachers in Singapore includes extensive clinical experience in form of practical exercises. Practical component makes up to approximately 20% of the Bachelor programme and 35% of the postgraduate study, while in Slovakia, due to the predominance of faculties with lower proportion of practice, the average practical component makes up to approximately 5-8% of the studies. Slovakia has no university training schools of its own where all types of guided pedagogical practice could take place, where students can come on every-day basis, where mutual research and education can be undertaken, where mutual teaching of university experts in didactics and cooperating teachers at the training school and university can take place etc. Despite unfavourable circumstances, there are in Slovakia some

workplaces that “has for many years thoughtfully addressed the pedagogical practice of students and its scientifically verified building, with steady network of training schools, with close cooperation with cooperating teachers and their professional preparation. However, their number is disproportionally small in relation to the number of universities preparing future teachers.“

Based on the above mentioned facts we can say that Slovak students lack sufficient practical preparation, insufficient attention is paid to students’ self-reflection, and consultations with teachers from either primary school or university are strictly limited in time, sometimes almost non-existent. When looking at the practical preparation of teachers in Singapore we can notice many interesting and inspiring ways of organising the teaching practice within the studies that can become examples for our pedagogical institutions. Besides the number of days assigned for practical preparation, a very logical step is to overtake the role of pedagogical assistants between observation and teaching practice. In that way, students proceed in smaller steps, build their confidence and are able to directly cooperate with cooperating teachers. Gradation of preparation has positive impact on the personality of individuals in all professions. In relation to other innovations in pedagogical training we agree with the opinion of Kosová, Tomengová et al. (2015), who recommend future primary and secondary school teachers to dedicate 145 hours to consulting, professional feedback and reflection of practice at school and 138 hours to home preparation, reflection of practice and preparing practice outputs. Another significant factor within practical preparation is the quality of the cooperating teacher. In Singapore, due to the strict selection of candidates accepted to teaching programmes and their further high-quality guidance and lecturing, it is assumed that each pedagogue is highly qualified. In Slovakia, there is no strict initial selection of candidates, but the selection of suitable adepts for cooperating teachers may be ensured by close cooperation with primary and secondary schools. Such changes in practical preparation of teachers would significantly contribute not only to future teachers but to their future pupils as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers are the largest source of knowledge to pupils, they have strong influence on pupils. Despite the ever increasing demands on the work of teachers,

in Slovakia it is generally accepted that certain important competences and knowledge will somehow be “caught up” in practice – in direct exercise of the profession. Teacher preparation is focused more on academic performance than on practical competences. This is proved by opinions of students and graduates of teaching programmes who criticise high amount of academic preparation and insufficient share of practical preparation. Research of Faculties of Education (Prešov, Nitra, Banská Bystrica, Bratislava) prove that future teachers feel unprepared in the area of practical teaching competences. Professional associations as well as researches of universities among teachers and cooperating teachers express the following reservations about teacher training: insufficient interconnection of academic and professional preparation, preparation is strongly academic; inability to transform the contents of education into the curriculum of corresponding age groups in a didactic way; inability to process feedback from pupils on curriculum; awareness of ICT but inability to use them as didactic tools; unpreparedness to deal with educational problems, with discipline in a classroom; unpreparedness to support personal development of pupils, to deal with socio-pathological problems of collectives, to evaluate pupils, communicate appropriately with pupils and parents; insufficient teaching competences – to manage the organisation of lessons, to use interdisciplinary relations (narrow specialisation), to work with pedagogical documentation etc. All the mentioned reservations are the results of insufficient practical preparation (Kosová, Tomengová et al., 2015).

Practice, as we have already mentioned, is the most important part of the future teacher training. Considering the average and below average performance of Slovak pupils in international studies and that the education of younger generation is the task of teachers, we considered it adequate to point out the practical preparation of teachers by one of the best educational systems in the world, compare it with the preparation of Slovak students and seek in it suggestions and inspirations applicable in the Slovak school system. If teachers are well prepared during their studies, they enter their job with more experiences, higher confidence and better chance to avoid many mistakes. Even though academic preparation is a significant component of studies, we should not underestimate the importance of practical experience.

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