

Increasing effective students' engagement in study

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Abstract

The study stresses out the interest that pedagogy specialist's show towards education and mostly tries to find proper methods to improve pre-service teacher training. A career in teaching and education has become unattractive for new generations of graduates and we will point out the reasons that led to a low interest for this career: the low social value of teaching profession, low income and lack of students' interest for learning. More and more specialists draw attention to the fact that education and educational institutions are in a serious crisis. It is a warning for both theoreticians and practitioners. We believe that education is more than a science; it also contains elements of art because it involves judgements, feelings and values. It is necessary for the future teachers to be aware of the role and importance of metacognitive self-training in becoming good professionals.

Keywords: Didactic carrier, formation, study, improving formation, metacognition, empiric research.

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1. Introduction

We find more and more frequently in the pedagogic literature that the practitioners' and researchers' concern for the students' effective involvement in a continuous and perseverant study (11 points) (Kuh, 2009). Numerous studies in the field of pedagogic literature highlight the psycho-pedagogic determinations that favour the students' desire to learn.

The opinions are manifold; The Higher Education Academy (2010) in the UK supports the idea of three important elements that actually belong to each student's personality. These are: 'individual student's engagement in learning, student engagement with structure and process and student engagement with identity'. Krause (2012) believes that students' serious engagement in learning and study is determined by the formal and informal curriculum, by the year of study or learning task. Weimer (2012) considers it a 'popular buzz phrase' while others see a learning phenomenon like a 'meta-construct' (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

1.1. Relevant research literature

Academic learning has a strong cognitive, emotional and social components and success in the technological era is determined by the ability of the educational environment to stimulate students' motivation and interest for study and knowledge (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). Proper management of learning activities is extremely complex and important; it involves modern teaching methodology and elements of incentive teaching craftsmanship. Working in a school involves specialised professional training. It also means knowing how to work in an organisation with a certain hierarchy and cultural organisation as well as possessing classroom management skills. Teaching is one of the most complex professions and the students need to prepare thoroughly for this profession. It involves shaping future personalities, and the teacher's influence on the development of students' personalities is decisive. We believe that the initial training of future teachers is extremely important and it should, therefore, be carefully considered. The quality of pre-service teacher training should increase. The teacher is a trainer, a promoter of knowledge. Teachers stimulate students towards new acquisitions; they motivate students in their own training.

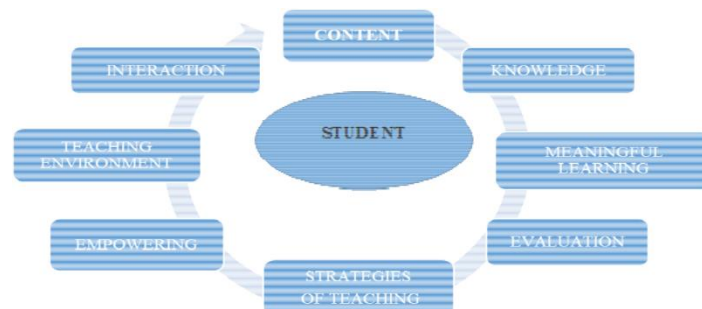


Figure 1. Managing learning

Recent studies have been oriented towards the identification of mutual features found in students who are motivated to learn and acquire knowledge in their field of study. Thus, some of them are study-oriented because they have: 'confidence in their ability to perform well in school (Feather, 1969; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990), because of their self-efficiency (Bandura, 1977; 1988), their goal orientations (Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1984), the differ-entailed concept of ability that emerges with age (Nicholls, 1978; Nicholls & Miller, 1983) and their attributions for success and failure at academic tasks (Weiner, 1979; 1986), (Nukpe, 2014)'.

Tollefso (2000) supports the following idea: 'An indication of academic engagement can be achieved when a student is seen to have combined getting along with teachers, having interest in the

subject matter and related behaviours and attitudes with activities such as effort to work both inside and outside of school, doing assignments, meeting deadlines and maintaining good class attendance (academic participation)'.

2. Meaningful learning

Researchers ask the question of how we can improve the quality of students' learning, be they are secondary or high school pupils or university students. First of all, we can do it by a thorough understanding of concepts, and by connecting newly acquired information with older ones. This thing can be achieved only through logical processing of information, connection with already processed information and extrapolation to new situations which could be adapted to other applications. Therefore, learning material must be carefully selected and considered relevant for the debated topic. It should have a meaning that links older information to newer ones in a logical manner. The material under discussion should awaken the students' attention and curiosity and possess a very few redundant, time consuming or boring elements. These elements which have been signalled by us can be applied by the teacher during a proper learning process. Teachers should adapt educational strategies according to their long-term or short-term objectives. Educational policies at a micro and macro level should also be adapted.

At the micro level, each higher education institution according to its institutional autonomy can interfere and make some changes in terms of school curricula: improve the curriculum, plan the syllabi according to international requirements in that field of study, alternate theoretical with practical learning activities, formal with non-formal activities, tutoring classes in the timetable of learning activities so as to consider the students' time-effort curve and their individual features:

1. Curricular changes adapted to universal requirements with a high level of interest;
2. Motivating students to study through continuous learning;
3. A closer relationship between theoretical and practical training with an emphasis on applying theory to teaching activities;
4. Use of different teaching methods combined efficiently: interactive lectures, applied seminars and classroom teaching practice: observational, agglomerate, voluntary, etc.

We believe that it is important for students to be not only aware of their rights as future teachers but also of their responsibilities. Thus, they could be more engaged in their own training. This first step involves thorough knowledge of methodologies and regulations such as methodology on granting scholarships, regulation for granting scholarships, Erasmus scholarship regulation, regulation for students' professional activity based on transferable credits, regulation for acknowledgement of studies within unregulated mobility programmes, student organisations, etc. Knowledge of curriculum used in their study programme, of syllabi and contents would also be in the students' best interest. They should be familiar with their responsibilities and assessment requirements for the end of the semester or academic year, as well as the minimal bibliographical requirements.

We also want to underline the importance of metacognitive learning. It regards the instructive-educational activity as an active process during which the students assign meaning to their own learning. Didactic comprehension is an active process which sees students' learning as an apprenticeship of knowledge. Metacognition brings about thinking and learning models based on awareness, action and motivation. Students manufacture a set of strategic elements that can be used independently in building competences by reflecting upon the actual learning process. Such competences are of real help in the teaching profession.

3. An empirical research

We have elaborated a questionnaire to help us conduct a study concerning the level of students' involvement in their own development and training as future teachers. The questionnaire was applied in the academic year 2013–2014 on a number of 360 students enrolled in the study programme—Pedagogy of Pre-school and Primary School Education. We have applied the questionnaire on a number of 130 students for each year of study. It consists of the following questions which were answered anonymously by the students (to maintain a higher level of honesty):

1. Why have you chosen this study programme?
2. What teaching in pre-school means to you?
3. What teaching in primary school means to you?
4. What do you think are your responsibilities as a student enrolled in this study programme?
5. What would you like to know about this curriculum?
6. How many hours of study do you take on daily?
7. How many hours of teaching practice do you consider necessary for a good preparation?
8. Do you consider enrolling in a volunteering activity in your field?
9. Are you interested in taking part in a project conducted by your faculty?
10. How do you picture yourself in a year?

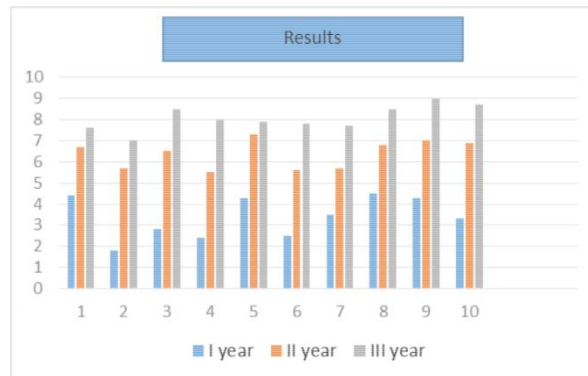


Figure 2. Results, academic year 2013–2014.

The following questionnaires have been applied to students at the end of academic year 2014–2015:

1. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much have lectures helped you in your professional training?
2. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much have seminars helped you in your professional training?
3. On a scale from 1 to 10, how much has teaching practice helped you in your professional training?
4. How would you define your expectations after a year of study?
5. How do you think one can improve the students' rigour towards their studies?
6. What improvements would you bring to the curricula?
7. What would you do for a better professional training?
8. Have you taken part in the projects conducted by your faculty? If yes, how useful were they on a scale from 1 to 10?
9. Have you been involved in volunteering activities for a better professional training? If yes, how useful were they on a scale from 1 to 10?
10. How well prepared do you think you are on a scale from 1 to 10?

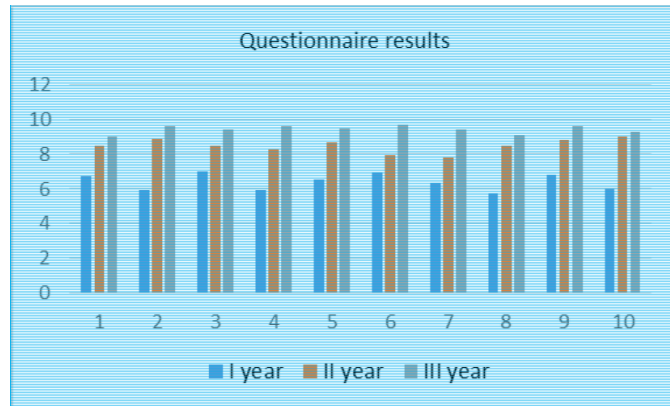


Figure 3. Results, academic year 2014–2015.

4. Data interpretation

The answers given by students throughout their academic studies reveal that their expectations towards the teaching profession are very high in the beginning, sometimes even unrealistic. They tend to have an ideal picture of this profession and of their training possibilities. As study years pass by, and they acquire new experiences in terms of professional training, their answers become more and more objective and precise. Thus, in the answers given by students concerning the following items:

- instrumental orientation;
- personal culture;
- professional interest;
- personal expectation;
- attitudes;
- competitiveness;
- personal skills;
- coping adversities;
- cognitive features;
- intrinsic motivation,

we notice significant differences. If the answers had a certain value in the first year of study, the students changed their perception of these components in quality and quantity terms, as they passed from a study year to another. We can see this in Figure 5. Third-year students are more objective in their answers, which are more realistic and of higher awareness.



Figure 4. Evolution of awareness in self-evaluation of professional features

At the end of the third year, students received one last questionnaire with the following questions:

1. How well prepared do you think you are: 1—very well; 2—satisfactory; 3—unprepared.
2. What do you intend to do in the future: 1—teach; 2—continue my studies with a master programme; 3—work in another field/have a different job.
3. In what part of your studies do you think you are less prepared: 1—theory; 2—methodology; 3—practice.
4. If you started over with your studies, what would you do: 1—spend more time with theoretical studies; 2—spend more time with the study of methodologies; 3—spend more time with practice.

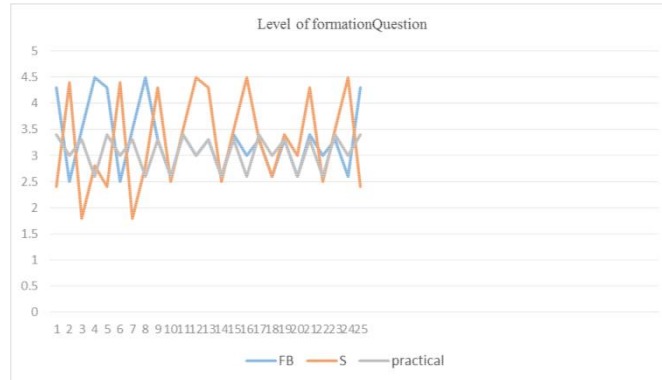


Figure 6. Level of formation

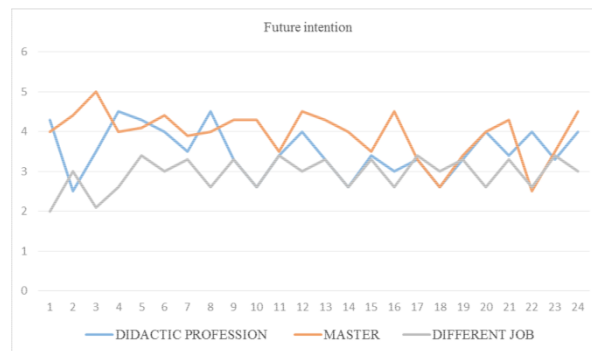


Figure 7. Future intention

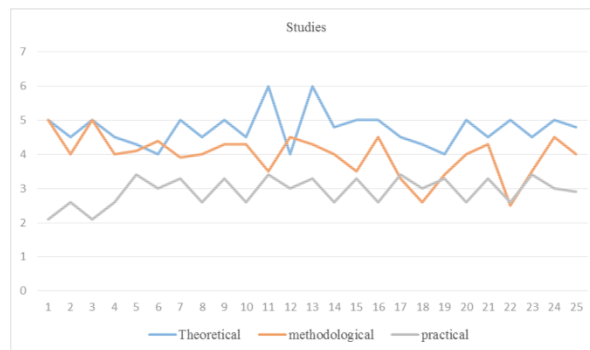


Figure 8. Studies results

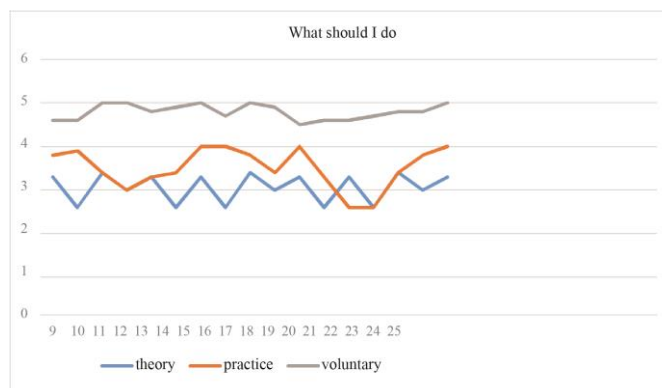


Figure 9. Response to the question what should I do

We have noticed in our study that students' self-evaluation of their own training is pretty objective. They divide learning as training activity into three levels: theoretical, practical and voluntary and they rank positively all of them. As revealed by the above-presented charts, students consider as important all the three types of activity but they are certain that practice plays the most important role in their training.

They are also aware of the importance of voluntary activities. Students who realised that they lack abilities for teaching career have chosen another profession in a different field.

Students also consider that master studies are necessary for a thorough professional training.

5. Conclusions

We have observed that the students' attendance at lectures, seminars and other activities organised by the faculty is very important for their training as future teachers. Students become aware of their strong points but also their weak points, which are seen as opportunities for a proper future training. Thus, gaps can be filled and the time allotted for initial training can be managed better. Students are willing to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills if they are convinced that they haven't made enough effort to train properly and integrate socio-professionally. Knowledge and skills are necessary to plan, conduct and control teaching and learning situations, to develop their competence in using modern communication and information technologies because the complexity of this profession calls for high-quality teacher training. Metacognitive self-training is also necessary to make changes at the individual level. Their aim is to blend professional development and personal development which leads to a balance between individual and professional needs.

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