

THE CONCEPTUAL AND SYSTEMATIC SETTING OF THE PRACTICAL TEACHING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA (MODEL AND EXPERIENCES)

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Abstract. Improving the quality of the practical teaching in recent years has gained greater significance among all the included parties of all the levels in the educational process. Consequently, this issue has been approached from several aspects in regards to the constitution of the conceptual, systematic, structural, and content physiognomy in the organization and conduct of the process of practical teaching. The successiveness in setting the research and its complete theoretical foundation starts with setting up a model for practical teaching, in which all the relative factors from the three educational subsystems simultaneously and actively help to develop it. This initiation is completed through the provision of educational support, and realization with a high level of activity, all in all accompanied by a continuous follow-up of the model. The action character of the research represents continual movement in the direction of changes, additions, revisions, and expansions, approached through analysis of the acquired knowledge, developed competences, and relevant viewpoints of the included interested parties. Due to the universality of the basic pedagogical concept for practical teaching, which is applied in this research, one of the ideas that the researchers had been for it to become a generator, i.e. a specific example for support of practical teaching in higher education through the development of various profiles. It primarily refers to that category of students who in the future will choose whether they want to work as kindergarten teachers, primary or secondary school teachers, or school pedagogues, in different levels of education.

Keywords: *Practical teaching, Conceptual setting.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Improving the quality of teaching in higher education is an existing issue that can be viewed through several phases. The specific teaching process that is analyzed was introduced after the European Credit Transfer System, and it implies a great degree of active student participation in the realization of the teaching. Thus it can be stated that since then the efficiency and quality of the teaching have been significantly enhanced, in addition to student activity regarding the practical teaching. There are still more questions that are left open, being of universal character, just as teaching itself is open. Considering the profession of a kindergarten teacher, a primary or secondary school teacher, and a school pedagogue, according to the European Commission (2009a), it is of high priority to have gained practical teaching experience, which plays an important role in the responsibility and preparation for the direct realization of the educational work. The recommendations of the European Commission are directed towards the idea that practical teaching should start from the very beginning of the initial education of the future kindergarten teachers, primary or secondary school teachers, and school pedagogues, especially through observation. Practical teaching would be more effective only when the students have received concrete tasks that they should focus on.

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• Review of the organization of student practical teaching at the Faculties of Teaching

Up until the Law for Higher Education was brought in 2010, at the Faculties of Teaching in R. Macedonia¹ there were realized different models in regards to the organization, realization, the dynamics of time, and program settings. Their realization is directly influenced by the accredited study programs.

With the Law for Higher Education of 2010, in Article 14 of the Law for Amending the Law for Higher Education, it is stated that the student is obliged in every study year to attend practical teaching classes, which must not be shorter than 30 days, hence being one of the conditions for attending the following academic year. The manner and conditions of organizing the practical teaching classes are given by the Sector Minister.

According to the Rulebook for the Manner and Conditions of Organizing Practical Teaching Classes for Students, there has been stated the setting of the practical teaching, wherein the institution of higher education should provide the conditions for collaboration with the appropriate partners for ordering such teaching.

The practical teaching must not last less than one class, or more than eight classes a day. According to Article 4 of the Rulebook, during the realization of the practical teaching, the student must be under the guidance of a mentor in an institution of higher education, who is responsible for the successful realization of the practical teaching classes. Additionally, in accordance with the Rulebook, the student is obliged to lead a diary of day-by-day activities during the realization of the practical teaching classes.

The consistency in the implementation of the new law regulative regarding the planning, programming, and execution of the practical teaching in higher education starts with setting up a new, contemporary model, which is initiated from the governmental and non-governmental sector, with the inclusion of experts-representatives of all the Faculties of Teaching in the higher education in R. Macedonia.

¹ “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” University, Faculty of Philosophy, Institute of Pedagogy (Skopje); “St. Kliment Ohridski” Faculty of Pedagogy (Skopje); “St. Kliment Ohridski” University, Faculty of Pedagogy (Bitola); “Goce Delcev” University, Faculty of Educational Sciences (Stip); and the State University, Faculty of Philosophy, Study Program of Pedagogy (Tetovo).

• A contemporary model of practical teaching at the Faculties of Teaching

The structure of such a system includes the vertical and horizontal inter-institutional cooperation, the mechanisms for development and establishment of standards for practical work, the development of standards for educational programs and training sessions, as well as the establishment of a system of accreditation and certification of programs, institutions and professional qualifications.

The application of the contemporary ways of realization of practical teaching, in which the students are continuously involved, is represented through a high level of activity on their part. Consequently, this positively reflects on the quality of their knowledge, the development of pedagogical competences, their being present in classes, while simultaneously presenting a possible way for overcoming part of the problems that arise when studying according to the European Credit Transfer System, which has been envisioned as quite an effective way of studying.

It is understandable that the importance of the theoretical knowledge is not marginalized, but it asks for more enabling of the requirements of the contemporary concepts in higher education. In the viewpoints of some, the practical teaching classes should take up even 50% of the total number of lessons. Yet it should be noted that there have been movements and changes in this direction regarding the Law for Higher Education, with which the practical teaching classes are becoming a mandatory element in all the years of studying.

The system interventions of more recent times in the field of education have resulted in conceptualizing a contemporary model for carrying out student practical teaching. Such an analysis has created the need to publish “Guidelines for Student Practical Teaching at the Faculties of Teaching” (OBSE Mission in Skopje, 2013, pp. 4-6).

The general aim of practical teaching is to direct the students and make them independent in regards to the active participation in the educational process. The modeling has been differentiated through three phases, concretized through a series of successive tasks. In the first phase, the students are introduced to the educational process, which is followed by the phase of immediate involvement as students are getting prepared for independent realization, so that in the phase of independent realization of activities, it is expected from the students to have developed skills and abilities

for independent realization of the profession of a kindergarten teacher, a primary or secondary school teacher, or a school pedagogue, so as to acquire professional self-confidence.

In the structuring of such a set model of practical teaching, the responsibilities and tasks of all the involved persons in the whole process are precisely determined. The entire process of practical teaching is supplemented by formative and summative evaluation by the assigned mentors (kindergarten teachers, primary or secondary school teachers, or school pedagogues), as well as by the assigned mentors of the institution of higher education, in addition to self-evaluation of the students themselves, through a developed methodological apparatus.

The mentors of the institution of higher education are obliged to prepare Programs for Practical Teaching for every study year, which is further given to the “mentor” institutions and students. In the process of realization of the practical teaching, the student continuously fills in the methodological apparatus (evidence sheets, observation protocols, models of operational preparations, evaluations sheets, and self-evaluation sheets), and writes narrative reports. On the basis of the accumulated instruments, the student then prepares a diary. The process of executing the practical teaching is simultaneously reported by the mentors and the involved educational institutions. In the end, the whole process is under the jurisdiction of the mentor from an institution of higher education, who in the final phase evaluates the students’ practical teaching, including the opinions of the mentors- practitioners.

The successfully realized practical teaching class, having been confirmed as such by the professor-mentor, is a prerequisite for the student to attend classes in the following semester.

The suggested concept for the realization of the practical teaching has consistently led towards building relevant sets of pedagogical competences. This leads to the idea that after the implementation of the contemporary model of practical teaching, the results will be quality knowledge and a system of developing pedagogical competences for all the involved persons in the process.

• Involved partners in the process of executing the practical teaching

The efficiency in setting up, organizing, and realizing the practical teaching according to the suggested model is also noticeable

through the inter-institutional approach, i.e. in all the stages, experts from the educational sphere are included (comprising the governmental and non-governmental sector). Respecting the contemporary tendencies in such management is reflected through the holistic approach of acting, on the part of the relevant state institutions (the Ministry of Education and Science – State Inspectorate, Bureau for Development of the Education in R. Macedonia), as well as the professors from the institutions of higher education, who have a long tradition in the education of the future kindergarten teachers, primary or secondary school teachers or school pedagogues, and practitioners, supported by non-governmental sector, or more precisely by the Department for Education through the OBSE Mission in Skopje.

In the process of developing the model for practical teaching, directed towards the students at the Faculties of Teaching, the experts have analyzed the states and challenges regarding this issue. Consequently, their team work has resulted in differentiating eight key areas of action: momentary states; challenges and perspectives in the process of executing the practical teaching and recommendations; goals of the practical teaching; responsibilities and tasks of the students when realizing the practical teaching; the role, responsibilities, and tasks of the mentor-kindergarten teacher/primary or secondary school teacher/school pedagogue and the mentor-professor²; evaluation of the realized activities of the student in the process of the practical teaching; and required documents for the process of executing the practical teaching.

Providing appropriate educational support simultaneously influences the strengthening of the pedagogical competences of the mentors from practice, and the developing of the didactic competences of the students, envisioned as moving towards the improvement of teaching in general. Programming the model

² In the context of executing the practical teaching, on the one hand, the mentor-kindergarten teacher/primary or secondary school teacher/school pedagogue is in fact a kindergarten teacher/primary or secondary school teacher/school pedagogue, employed full-time at the school (educational institution), who for the duration of their working hours observes and mentors the students from the Faculties of Teaching (or the Faculties of Philosophy), in collaboration with the relevant institutions of higher education. On the other hand, the mentor-professor is a professor who is employed full-time at an institution of higher education, and is responsible for following the student practical teaching (Ibid, pp. 5-6).

of practical teaching is the first phase of the educational support, followed by trainings and workshops held by the professor-mentors, and organized in two cycles: the first cycle covers the mentor-practicians, who in the midst of this process have the role of co-mentors, while the second cycle covers the students who have had the program presented to them, and as a logical follow-up, all the obligations and tasks that refer to the practical teaching.

If such a model of practical teaching is analyzed as premises, then it is inevitable to come to the conclusion that the characteristic of proactivity in teaching occurs as a significant factor for improvement of the quality of the teaching, and development of the pedagogical competences, especially since this “educational scenario” takes places in the sphere of the immediate practical work.

The process of setting standards for higher titles/positions of the teachers (primary or secondary school mentor, and teacher advisor) is an advantage for the initiative for the preparation of the “Catalogue of the Basic Professional Competences of Teachers.”

The determinants that represent the starting point in the preparation of the Catalogue refer to:

1. Cataloging the generic competences;
2. Covering the overall professional engagement;
3. Defining the competences for contemporary teaching;
4. Respecting the educational context in R. Macedonia.

The promotion of the new model of practical teaching (which presents a central theme in this research) and the Proposed Catalogue of the Basic Professional Competences of Teachers represent initiatives for intervening in the Law for Primary and Secondary Education, specifically in the section on professional and career development of the teachers.

This study also tends to give its own contribution and scientific support to the teachers, who take on the role of co-mentors with the students, according to the model of practical teaching, as a prerequisite in setting the standards for attaining higher titles of the teachers.

Employing contemporary methods of cooperation in which the students are included as equal partners requires a high degree of their participation, which positively reflects on the quality of knowledge and abilities, yet at the same time represents a possible way to promote the concept of “learning by doing.”

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subject of this research is the conceptual and systematic setting of the practical teaching in R. Macedonia. The research itself has the character of an empiric and action research, which is directed towards executing a contemporary Model of Student Practical Teaching at the Faculties of Teaching. The realization of the model includes individuals from several educational subsystems. Through surveying the views and educational needs of all those affected, the research subsequently gains empirical character. But considering that the received results, treated as “exit points” of the practical process, are incorporated in the improvement of the quality of the Model, the research hence gains action character.

The goal of the research is to examine the views and educational needs of the individuals that are directly involved in the process of realizing the practical teaching with the students, in the function of improvement of the quality of the suggested Model.

The character, layering, and extensiveness of such a research incorporate the realization of several tasks, which are grouped according to the proposed **action steps** that have been being taken during the research: participation in the formation of a Model of Practical Teaching; preliminary examination of the Model in practice; changes according to the preliminary realization; organization of training sessions and seminars for the persons involved; realization of the Model of Practical Teaching; summative evaluation through analyzing the views and educational needs of the co-mentors-kindergarten teachers/primary or secondary school teachers/school pedagogues and students; and integrating the received results in the direction of improving the quality of the model.

The goal of the research is concretized through the following **tasks**:

1. Examining the views, thoughts, and educational needs of the teachers co-mentors regarding the model of practical teaching;
2. Examining the views, thoughts, and educational needs of the kindergarten teachers co-mentors regarding the model of practical teaching;
3. Examining the views, thoughts, and educational needs of the school pedagogues co-mentors regarding the model of practical teaching;
4. Examining the views, thoughts, and educational needs of the students from the Institute of Pedagogy (Faculty of Philosophy

- Skopje) regarding the model of practical teaching;

5. Revising and reconstructing the model of practical teaching.

Research Hypotheses

• General Hypothesis

The conceptual and systematic setting of the model of practical teaching positively influences the views and educational needs of the all involved partners in the process of realizing the student practical teaching.

• Separate Hypotheses

1. The teachers co-mentors positively assess the effects from applying the model of practical teaching;

2. The kindergarten teachers co-mentors positively assess the effects from applying the model of practical teaching;

3. The school pedagogues co-mentors positively assess the effects from applying the model of practical teaching;

4. The proactive manner of practical teaching, through using an appropriate program and methodological apparatus, positively influence the views and educational needs of the students;

5. There is a need to revise and reconstruct the model of practical teaching.

Research Methods, Techniques and Instruments

This research employed several methods, which helped to provide quality scientific conclusions, i.e. analysis, synthesis, description, induction, and generalization.

In order to obtain relevant data, the following techniques and instruments were used:

Research Techniques: Analysis of pedagogical documentation, and surveying

Research Instruments:

1. Questionnaire for examining the views and thoughts of the teachers regarding the model of realization of the mandatory pedagogical practice (for the academic 2013/2014)(SE/QT)³

2. Questionnaire for examining the views and thoughts of the kindergarten teachers regarding the model of realization of the mandatory pedagogical practice (for the

academic 2013/2014) (SE/QKT)⁴

3. Questionnaire for examining the views and thoughts of the school pedagogues regarding the model of realization of the mandatory pedagogical practice (for the academic 2013/2014) (SE/QSP)⁵

4. Questionnaire for examining the views and thoughts of the students from the Institute of Pedagogy regarding the model of realization of the mandatory pedagogical practice (SE/QS)⁶

Research Sample

In this research, several samples are covered:⁷

1. A sample of teachers co-mentors from primary schools in the city of Skopje (N=33);

2. A sample of kindergarten teachers from primary schools in the city of Skopje (N=19);

3. A sample of school pedagogues from primary schools in the city of Skopje (N=13);

4. A sample of students from the 4 study years from the Institute of Pedagogy (Faculty of Philosophy, "Ss. Cyril and Methodius" University – Skopje) (N=97).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

On the basis of the analysis of the data received from the surveyed teachers and kindergarten teachers mentors, it can be stated that for the duration of the practical teaching there was continuous communication in the direction of educational support of the students (58,82%), as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Communication between the participants: kindergarten teacher/primary or secondary school teacher-mentor-students

QUESTION 1: During the realization of the practical teaching, was there constant communication between the participants: kindergarten teacher/primary or secondary school teacher-mentor-students?		
Statement	f	%
A) Constantly	30	58.82
B) Rarely	9	37.26
C) Never	2	3.92
N	51	100

The results of the qualitative analysis

4 Summative Evaluation – Questionnaire for Kindergarten Teachers Co-Mentors

5 Summative Evaluation – Questionnaire for School Pedagogues Co-Mentors

6 Summative Evaluation – Questionnaire for Students Co-Mentors

7 The persons in all the subsamples have participated in training sessions and workshops for the Model of Practical Teaching with the students.

3 Summative Evaluation – Questionnaire for Teachers Co-Mentors

are an advantage point for the positive experiences from sharing the practical experiences in the process of the preparation of activities and classes, for facing different teaching situations with the students, and for searching for different approaches and solutions in teaching. Such an approach enables student preparation for applying contemporary teaching techniques and methods in curricular and extra-curricular activities, for the possibility of linking the theory and practice, in the recognition, and in the planning of individual work with children/pupils who have special educational needs, as well as in the applicative activities of a different type. The effects of such organized practical teaching are visible even through the fact that the students have the opportunity to fulfill direct work meetings with the principal, and to get a close look at the programming and realizing of the other types of teaching as well, especially regarding additional and extra-curricular teaching.

With this suggested model, the practitioners co-mentors specifically focus on the possibility of the students to immediately participate in parent meetings, staff meetings, and meetings with representatives of non-governmental organizations and the local community.

There is also a separate part in the research in which the views of the co-mentors, primary/secondary school teachers and kindergarten teachers are analyzed, especially regarding the degree of their participation in the practical teaching with the students, as part of their own professional development. Using an evaluation scale (1-5), 35.84% of those surveyed give a grade of 3, 26.41% give a grade of 4, while 28.30% give the highest grade. Such information supports the statement that there exists the need for interventional measures in the legal decisions that concern the professional and career development of teachers.

For the purpose of more efficient “mentoring”, and as a result of the educational support that they gain through the Model (through workshops and training sessions), there is confirmation from the results illustrated in Table 2, according to which the highest spot is taken by the methodological instruments, which further help the co-mentor teachers to provide a systematic follow-up and evaluation of the work and activities of the students. Aside from this data, regarding the materials that they receive with the program for practical teaching, the school pedagogues co-mentors rank their practical work with the students very highly.

Table 2. The purpose of the materials that the teachers receive during the practical teaching

QUESTION 2: What is the purpose of the materials that the teachers receive during the practical teaching?	
Ranking	Statement
1	Preparation for practical teaching with students
2	Your realization of activities with students
3	Your practical work with students
4	Developing professional competences for teacher/mentor
5	Systematic follow-up and evaluation of student activities
N	43

From the received data it can be stated that the training sessions and workshops (Ibid), which are conceptually set up following this Model, are unique in their character and content, and refer to the strengthening of the professional competences of the co-mentors teachers for practical work with students. It is a notable fact that 90% of those surveyed have stated that they have the need for educational support in the form of additional trainings and materials, all for the purpose of strengthening the pedagogical competences of this field. As regards this question, the results of the surveyed school pedagogues’ mentors are nearly identical (83.30%).

They also emphasize the need for more frequent dynamics of the work meetings with the professors co-mentors from the institutions of higher education, with the goal of revising the program of practical work with students, receiving additional materials (instruments) for work with students, as well as suggestions for decreasing the number of students in the work groups (for the purpose of improving the quality of the practical teaching). The suggestions that the co-mentors teachers give in addition, as to how the practical teaching should be realized in the future, are affirmative (in regards to their own experiences).

In the conclusions in this part of the research, there is confirmation about the first and second separate hypothesis according to which the teachers’ co-mentors positively assess the effects of the application of the model of practical teaching.

Due to the specific nature and character of the professional tasks of the school pedagogues in the educational institutions, the most frequent forms of work with students in the practical teaching are group work (39.13%), i.e. individual work (34.78%), while individualized teaching covers only 8.70% (Table 3)

Table 3. The most common forms of work of the school pedagogue in the realization of the practical teaching with students

QUESTION 3: What are the most common forms of work of the school pedagogue in the realization of the practical teaching with students?		
Statement	f	%
A) Frontal	4	17.39%
B) Work in small groups	9	39.13%
C) Individual work	8	34.78%
D) Individualized	2	8.69%
N	23	100%

The inter-institutional cooperation suggested in the Model has also been confirmed through the received results, from the school pedagogues co-mentors in this study as a sub-sample through which the exceptionally high percentage (92.30%) of continuous communication and professional support in the relation between the school pedagogue-professor-student can be observed. This cooperation is noted in the mutual program conceptualization, as well as in the continual observation of the program documentation by the students, detected in the results with 53.84%, as the category of “always”, as opposed to the category of “never” (with 7.69%).

It should be taken into consideration that the systematic and conceptual setting of the model of practical teaching leads towards several exits, and the final “product” (expressed as a trained student with developed competences, recognizable in the labor market) will have a special place.

The received results yet once again confirm the third separate thesis, in which the school pedagogues’ co-mentors positively assess the effects of the application of the Model of practical teaching.

Examining the views and opinions of the students regarding the realization of the practical teaching, as linked to the views and comments as a sub-research sample, the starting point referred to the general statements that those surveyed in the research are somewhat mutually connected, and that aside from the contemporary approach in the conceptualization of the program based on the Model, there are still certain specifics in the realization itself.

Considering the fact that the research is of an action type, the received results in this study move in the direction of step-by-step changes that will reflect on the quality of the teaching, and the strengthening of the abilities and competences of the future school pedagogues, i.e. the kindergarten and primary/secondary school teachers.

Table 4. The degree of participation of the student in practical teaching (outside the Faculty teaching)

QUESTION 4: What is the degree of participation of the student in practical teaching (outside the Faculty teaching)?		
Grade	f	%
1	5	5.81
2	4	4.65
3	26	30.23
4	36	41.87
5	15	17.44
N	86	100

Forty-one point eighty-seven percentage of the students, having given their views on the possibility for practical training in the framework of this teaching, with a numerical grade from 1 to 5 (1 being the lowest, and 5 being the highest), have given the grade of 4 or 3 for it (41.87% or 30.23%, respectively) (Table 4 and Graph 2). If this is supplemented by the percentage of those who gave the grade of 1 (5.81%), it can be concluded that a largest part of the students actively participate in the practical teaching, outside the Faculty teaching).

By examining the views and opinions of the students, after the analysis of the results from questions 10, 12, and 13, from the data that arose it can be concluded that generally, the students positively assessed the practical teaching in the institutions of cooperation. The students suggested that through with the practical possibilities⁸, they are trained for a holistic approach in teaching, with expressed interaction and communication among all the involved person in the process, and through respecting their suggestions, which contributes to the development of their competences.

The given analysis, which has come from the initial views and thoughts of the surveyed students about the model of realization of practical teaching, leads towards confirming the fourth separate hypothesis, presenting the idea that the proactive way of practical work, through using an appropriate program and methodological apparatus, has a positive influence on the views and educational needs

⁸ For example: through conversational and work meetings with the school pedagogues and the other members of the administrative staff (the principal and teachers); through the presence at staff meetings and the possibility of direct participation in all the types of teaching; through a direct approach to the complete pedagogical documentation; through an independent setting of the teaching and activities; through participation in staff meetings and parent meetings; through inclusion in project activities and communication with the other members of the local community.

of the students.

If the attention is turned towards the results received from the empirical part of the research, including the relevant results from those surveyed in the direction of the process of complete evaluation of the conceptual and systematic setting of the Model, it can be stated that there is a need for revising and reconstructing it, as confirmed by the fifth separate research hypothesis.

The final results, being analyzed cumulatively, move in the direction of confirming the general hypothesis in the research, which represents the idea that the conceptual and systematic setting of the Model of practical teaching has a positive influence on the views and educational needs of the involved persons in the process of realizing the practical teaching with the students.

4. CONCLUSION

The final conclusion arises from the nature of the problem itself, and from the comprehensiveness of the conceptualization of the suggested model of practical teaching in higher education. The suggested concept for the realization of the practical teaching consistently leads towards building relevant sets of pedagogical competences, hence leading to the thought that after the implementation of the new model of contemporary teaching, that will result in quality knowledge and a system of developed pedagogical competences of the included persons in the process.

The conclusions from this study guide us towards the idea that in the future, there is a need to revise the conceptual setting of the practical teaching at every Faculty, in which "practical work" starts even from the first year at University. Consequently, this brings me to confirm to you that the highly-active ways of practical work, through their fragmented use or through their continuous and wholly didactic use, in the form of developed models, such as the case with this research, have a positive influence on the pedagogical competences and the quality of knowledge, especially in a multiplied format.

This study tends to give its own contribution and professional support to the teachers, who have the role of co-mentors with students, according to the model of practical work, as a prerequisite in the setting of the standards for gaining higher teacher titles.

In conclusion, as a significant exit point from this research, and keeping with the data

received in the section of this research that is "linked" to the students, there is the need for further research in depth on the quality of the practical teaching in higher education, and the views and opinions about the pedagogical competences, as educational needs of every student.

Conflict of interests

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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