

## Institutionalizing University-School Relations in Order to Strengthen the Role of Teaching Practices

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### Abstract

The formation of future teachers' professional competence necessarily goes through the development of teaching practices, which are defined and valued as activities that create opportunities to gain experience related to the profession. Every initial professional forming views work experience in real-life situations as an integral element of competence development and professional identity. Studies carried out in recent years in Albania by various institutions: MAS, IZHA etc., have highlighted the great role that teaching practices play, by valuing them as one of the most important elements in the initial teacher training, but on the other hand, teaching practice, as an integral part of the initial teacher training program, representing an important period in a teacher's professional development, has faced issues such as: • Lack of a framework for the competences of the new teacher to enable the alignment of the initial teacher training curricula in different IALs; • The lack of a regulatory and supervisory document for the practice and its evaluation; • The mentoring system is present very little throughout this important process; • Lack of links between different stages of teacher professional development: initial training, professional practice / internship, and continuous professional development (IZHA, 2016; Haxhiymeri E., Mita N., 2015). This study aims to highlight the importance of institutionalizing university-school relations to enable the qualitative improvement of teaching practices, as well as to provide recommendations on how to achieve this relationship based on the opinions and suggestions of the specialists of this field. The study was conducted through the Delphi method by contacting scholars, practice supervisors, mentors, directors and specialists of the education department, middle school principals as well as university students. The findings of the study emphasize the necessity of institutionalizing university-school relations by crossing their present-day stage and provide concrete suggestions on how to regulate these relationships.

**Keywords:** teaching practices, university-school relationships, institutionalization, initial teacher training

### Introduction

#### The context of the study

Studies carried out over the years by various institutions: Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, Institute for education development etc., have identified quite a number of problems related to initial teacher training, in particular with teaching practices, such as: lack of a framework of teacher competencies that can enable the alignment of the initial teacher training curricula in different higher education institutions; lack of a regulatory document and oversight of the practice and its evaluation; the role of the mentoring system is lacks throughout this important process; lack of links between different stages of professional teacher development: initial training, professional practice / internship, and continuous professional development (Institute for education development, 2016; Haxhiymeri E., Mita N., 2015).

Existing relationships between higher education institutions and schools for the development of teaching practice by students of teaching faculties rely mainly on goodwill. Universities sign agreements with Regional education directory/ Education Office to develop practices. If one seeks the legal basis of this relationship, he or she will find out that it remains unclear: Law no. 80 dt. 22/07/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Republic of Albania", which does not express anything related to teaching practices; Ministry of Education letter no. 27, dated 28/08/1992 "On the designation of kindergartens and schools and the norms of teaching work in these schools"; Ministry of Education letter no. 2879, dated

25/05/2005 "On the development of pedagogical practices" or even early decisions and instructions, most of which are not available in an electronic format. The lack of this legal clarity seriously impedes the qualitative realization of teaching practices.

### **Introducing the idea for the regulatory framework**

The progress of teaching practice and the achievement of its training objectives implies the need to develop a relationship regulator between Higher education institutions and schools where the duties and responsibilities of the parties can be clearly and directly formulated. Various studies have addressed the lack of a structure that establishes a continuous relationship between the two institutions, recommending its necessity to establish a common functional system that guarantees continued support, joint monitoring and coordinated training of the student during its deployment in teaching practices in host schools. The term "legal regulator" is used in this study to address the need for a written document regulating these relationships (legal engagement, separated duties, parties involved, etc.).

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of this study is not only to address the need for drafting the legal regulator of university-school relations, but also recommendations for its content, aiming to go beyond merely ascertaining the situation, based on the evaluations, opinions and suggestions of field specialists. It can serve to foster an inter-institutional cooperation process (between universities and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports) to enable the existence of this important document.

### **Methodology**

The study was conducted through the Delphi method by contacting scholars, practice supervisors, mentors, directors and specialists of the Elbasan education department, 9-year school principals and students. There were a total of 8 respondents who were considered to be experts in teaching practices, given their status, engagement in teaching practice studies, their work and direct role in central and local institutions for teaching practice, supervisors and mentors with many years of experience. They were asked to provide opinions on the legal status of this document, the parties involved in this relationship, their rights, duties and responsibilities, the level of standardization of this relationship. Opinions were collected through a structured questionnaire in order to identify an appropriate model of legal regulators.

### **The findings of the study**

The questions addressed to the participants in the survey were summarized as follows:

- What do the participants at the expert level think of the current state of functioning of teaching practices?
- Who should be held responsible for teaching practices?
- Why do you need a regulatory document?

From the processing of expressed opinions, some evaluations are drawn, which are organized as follows:

- 1 Direct positive effects on the development of teaching practices (N = 5)
  - 1.1 In preparing real students to become teachers through: (N = 4)
    - 1.1.1 Install a global student performance evaluation system- behavior, attitude, non-preparation- monitoring of absences
    - 1.2 promotes student self-efficacy in their vocational training process
    - 1.3 penalties in case of violations
  - 1.4 In regulating the university-school-mentor system by making it efficient through: (N = 2)
    - 1.4.1 Establish a written document (agreement) for regulating inter-institutional relations between institutions participating in teaching practices (N = 3).
- 2.1 Correctly define and implement the duties and responsibilities of the parties involved (N = 2).
- 2.2 The functioning of the mentoring system (N = 2),- focusing attention on the continuous qualification of mentor teachers
  - ensuring a better quality of mentoring (N = 1).- making mentor teachers record their negative and positive experiences by

contributing to studies,- promoting reflection on new changes / projects at local / regional and national level (N = 3),- regulating the mentor's workload,-to financially motivate him.

3.1 Establishing some concrete standards for initial teacher training (N = 1)

3.1.1 Encouraging new and very ambitious educational perspectives (N = 1).

## Discussion

Almost all participants in the Delphi survey share the belief that the regulatory document for teaching practices will have direct positive effects on its development by turning it into a functioning system from a dysfunctional one as it currently is.

What are the positive impacts of the regulatory document mentioned by the respondents?

1. Making the University-Regional Education Directory-School-Mentors system efficient
2. In real preparation of students

Some have mentioned the impact of the regulator on setting concrete standards for initial teacher training and stimulating new and ambitious education projects and practices.

Regarding the effectiveness of the regulatory document, first of all, participants (N = 5) believe that only through a written document and reaching an agreement between the parties can their correctness and responsibility be increased to meet the obligations of the institutions and guarantee that students' rights to obtain the appropriate professional knowledge that will serve its professional development.

Secondly, respondents (N = 6), believe that it will directly affect the functioning of the mentoring system. Mentoring teachers do not enjoy the rights of mentors set out in Professional Practice Regulation no. 336, dated 14/07/2011. Most respondents believe that this directly affects the professional preparation of student-teachers, as they encounter mentors whose engagement is a matter of personal conscience.

Do students deserve to be treated under the terms of a mentor's goodwill or good humor? Is it not legitimate for their contributions to receive mentorship (eg, tuition reduction), moral (eg university recognition) and financial recognition, such as additional payroll treatment for mentors?

The participants in the survey state that better financial treatment alone would not strengthen the functioning of mentoring. Most of them believe that attention should be paid to defining the criteria for selection of mentors and their continuous qualification. The experts surveyed consider the mentoring effect of the regulatory document to be one of the strongest, given the frequency of this opinion by most of them.

## How can this be interpreted?

Firstly, it is an indication that in the development of teaching practices, mentoring is a delicate link. Secondly, mentors so far have been viewed as the Higher education institutions' goal-serving elements in terms of teaching practice. Experts think this perception should change. The regulatory document itself will guarantee a change in this perception of the role of the mentor, from servant to associate. The mentor, only in a clearly defined mentoring system, can feel responsible for his or her professional training and be encouraged to develop to respond to the duties of his or her position. He may be able, after reflecting on his own positive and negative experiences, to contribute to the study of specific aspects that include the relationships between the actors in teaching practices, but also others related to educational processes. Experts believe that mentors, by the very nature of their obligations in the mentoring function itself, develop a reflection on practice-metadata that should be accumulated by researchers and people involved in improving education processes and practices.

Concerning the effect on the actual preparation of students, participants (N = 4) believe that the regulatory document will positively influence it to achieve their professional training standards. The arguments developed by them about this impact can be interpreted as their sense of weaknesses in current teaching practices. Specifically, weaknesses in the current way of functioning make student evaluation unclear, not including all components of student performance in practice. Secondly, there is a lack of continuous monitoring of students in practice, thus abusing their presence. Furthermore, the current system is a system where the principle of functionality prevails, where the student is expected to be passive and encouraged as such, while general teacher standards guide the student's critical thinking. What the respondents address is that the

current system does not develop the capacity of student self-efficacy. He should feel motivated to work and make progress and this can only happen within an environment that is willing to expect and value his contribution to school work. Finally, respondents feel that the regulatory document will enable the parties not to be impotent in each other's judgments and opinions, e.g. students from tutors and mentors; mentors and tutors from students etc. By establishing clarity in the rights and duties of the parties, each party seeks to instill respect and responsibility for the other through infringement and grievance procedures. The final moment brings the discussion of the regulatory document to the level of ethics. The lack of an inter-institutional regulatory structure to date may have been the cause for disagreements and abuses of position by not contributing to the dissemination and installation of principles of justice, freedom and responsibility.

### Conclusions and recommendations

University-School relations require an immediate restructuring. They should become operational and serve the qualitative realization of student-teacher education. It is required to move beyond the relationship of goodwill to their institutionalization, with each party having clearly identified rights, duties and responsibilities. It is necessary to draft a legal regulatory framework that will institutionalize these relationships. The scope of its functioning (national or local) should be defined, along with the parties that will represent all institutions and individuals involved in the process of teaching practice. Universities may be represented by the Conference of Rectors (the latter required to complete the regulatory basis of its operation). The teacher's order, on the other hand, would best represent the possibility of institutionalizing relationships by modeling their functioning in different developed countries. The evaluation of mentors as important partners in the realization of the purpose of the teaching practice would have positive effects on its results. Universities must on the other hand continuously devise and implement methods in preparing mentor teachers. It is of crucial importance for good mentoring practices to be spread through functional and active school departments, professional networks or through other means and ways.

### Literature

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