

TEACHER COGNITION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION: BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Barbora POPOVIČOVÁ

Abstract

A teacher's career goes through particular phases from the initial decision of becoming a teacher until the phase when a novice teacher becomes an experienced teacher. Each period of this process is equally important because it has a key meaning in the teaching career. In general, these periods may be divided into three stages: education of future teachers, induction to teaching profession and the phase of real teaching. The question is whether the phase of education of future teachers can prepare the graduates for the following stages of their professional development, especially for the phase which follows directly the first one – the novice teacher's phase. The paper deals with looking for the answer on this question as well as the results of the author's own research which was carried on by the means of questionnaire completed by pre-service teachers and interviews with novice teachers. Pre-service teachers were expected to express their feeling about their readiness for future job and their ideas about their own role as a teacher; novice teachers, on the other hand, were talking about their problems connecting to their beginnings after start teaching. The results, as well as desk study of similar projects show that the problematic aspects may be divided into several categories which include undisciplined students and paperwork connected to pedagogical activities. Novice teachers are often surprised by those aspects because they do not feel prepared enough for them. They emphasized usefulness of preparation for those particular aspects which may be the source of some future research.

Key words: phases of teaching profession, stages of teaching profession, teaching practice, experience, pre-service teachers, study, teaching profession, novice teacher

Abstrakt

Kariéra učiteľa prechádza jednotlivými fázami od prvotného rozhodnutia stať sa učiteľom až po fázu, kedy sa zo začínajúceho učiteľa stane expert. Každá etapa tohto procesu je rovnako dôležitá, pretože má kľúčový význam v kariére učiteľa. Vo všeobecnosti sa tieto etapy dajú rozdeliť na tri stupne: vzdelávanie budúcich učiteľov, zasvätenie do učiteľskej profesie a fáza reálneho učenia. Otázkou je, či fáza vzdelávania budúcich učiteľov dokáže pripraviť svojich absolventov na ďalšie stupne ich odborného rastu, najmä na fázu, ktorá nasleduje bezprostredne po nej, teda na fázu začínajúceho učiteľa. Hľadanie odpovede na túto otázku je podstatou tohto článku, ktorého súčasťou sú výsledky výskumu autorky článku v podobe dotazníkov vyplňaných študentmi učiteľských programov a rozhovorov so začínajúcimi učiteľmi. Študenti sa vyjadrovali o svojich pocitoch pripravenosti na učiteľské povolanie i o svojich predstavách o budúcom pôsobení v úlohe učiteľa; začínajúci učitelia, na druhej strane, o svojich problémoch týkajúcich sa začiatkov po nástupe do školy. Z výsledkov výskumu, ako aj z výsledkov štúdia literatúry vyplynulo, že problematické aspekty súvisiace so začiatkami v učiteľskej profesii sa dajú rozdeliť do niekoľkých kategórií, z ktorých najvýraznejšie sú disciplína študentov a administratíva spojená s pedagogickou činnosťou. Začínajúci učitelia sú často zaskočení práve týmito dvoma stránkami svojej práce, pretože sa necítia byť na ne dostatočne

pripravení. Ako sami zdôrazňovali, privítali by viac prípravy práve v tomto smere, čo by mohlo byť predmetom ďalšieho výskumu.

Kľúčové slová: fázy učiteľskej profesie, pedagogická prax, stupne učiteľskej profesie, skúsenosti, študent učiteľských programov, štúdium, učiteľská profesia, začínajúci učiteľ

Introduction

To describe teachers' job may seem easy but, in fact, it is quite difficult since everything what teachers do in the classroom comes from their inside, their internal beliefs as well as from their knowledge and experience, yet it is influenced by external factors. It is much deeper than to stand in front of the class and explain a subject matter. To teach means to know teachers' competences and to learn wide spectrum of teachers' responsibilities.

The paper shows what is essential to know when becoming a novice teacher and what pre-service teachers go through during their preparatory and after graduation phase. The question is what the beliefs of pre-service teachers about the role of the teacher are and how well do they feel to be prepared for their future occupation.

1 Formidableness of novice teachers

Becoming a teacher requires several steps from preparatory phase (education) to school placement (teaching practice/training). The graduate is well educated and supposed to be ready to be a good teacher. However, after finding a job in a school, a lot of new things, which novice teachers may not be familiar with, come to light. It can be said that the preparatory phase of being a teacher is automatically followed by the phase of further teacher's development. K. Ch. Pang (2001) provides 'Triple – i model' of the phases of teacher development which consists of 'initial teacher education', 'induction of beginning teacher' and 'in-service teacher education'. When speaking about novice teachers, this 'ladder' may serve as a model of novice teachers' professional development and the first stage is the crucial factor which can affect their future career. Ryan (1986) introduces the phenomenon called "the curve of disenchantment" which he describes as the initial phase of teaching when the peak of initial enthusiasm changes rapidly because teachers change their attitudes toward teaching. He says that attitudes towards teaching are rising during preparatory phase of pre-service teachers, yet this positivism starts to fall during the first few months after an individual starts to teach.

Some researchers, dealing with novice teachers' needs during induction stage, were carried out (Bennet, Brown, Kirby-Smith & Severson 2013, Poom-Valichis & Mathews 2013, Parker, Ndoye & Imig 2009, Suan 2015) and all proved that the first year of teaching is very difficult period and it requires much support from teachers' environment. Parker Ndoye & Imig (2009) pointed out that mentors play an important role in the initial phase of novice teachers, in addition mentoring showed out as an effective way in improving some of the causes of the high attrition rate of beginning teachers. Poom-Valickis & Mathews (2013) add that "*individuals are*

well served when they are willing and able to suspend judgement while actively searching for supporting and conflicting evidence and, when reaching a conclusion to do so with temperance and a consideration of the potential short-and-long consequences” (421). Bennet et al. (2013) support this idea identifying the effectiveness of administration leadership and school environment as significant factors related to teacher retention. The fact is that being mentored is the part of teachers’ development, particularly when speaking about novice teachers. It can be considered as ‘the group approach to professional development’ explained by Les Bell and Chris Day (1991); however, according to them there exist other two approaches to teachers’ development: ‘individualistic approach to the professional development of teachers when the teacher behaves like isolated individual when setting his/her own goals; and ‘the school development approach to professional development’ which depends on the level to which teachers set their goals in development within whole school.

At the beginning novice teachers must struggle with matters that experienced teachers may see as bagatelle. As Cowley (2005), in her guide for novice teachers, says “*the learning curve during your first few years as a teacher is very steep indeed”* (3); moreover she adds that a teacher must go through all newness every time he/she changes a school because of different organizations of schools but when teaching more than a year at a certain school a teacher gets used to it and can enjoy the work as a teacher. Even Carpensen and Raaen (2014) admit that ‘teaching job following graduation is a shocking experience’. They compared how novice teachers and experienced teachers are able to cooperate with each other and they pointed out the importance of professional help and support from superiors. In addition, Poom-Valickis and Mathews (2013) also support the idea that the first year is critical for novice teachers, especially; they identified one of the most problematic aspects – discipline of learners. They say that “*the novice teachers first year of work is the year of learning when problem situations and cases should be treated as challenges from which to learn”* and they add that “*the learning depends on both the novice and support provided by his/her colleagues and other school staff members”* (431). Therefore, even though the first year is arduous for novice teachers, they may overcome a lot of obstacles when guided by a good mentor or a colleague. The teachers invited to the Bennett, Brown, Kirby-Smith and Severson’s research (2013) also alluded the effectiveness of administrative support especially for low-experienced teachers as well as assistance with negative students’ behaviour. Moreover, the professional support has, apart from a conductive character, also motivational function for novice teachers to remain in the profession. In addition, the research carried out by Parker, Ndoeye and Imig (2009) revealed that novices who were matched with mentors at least once a month for the specified activities, who were given assistance with the support investigated intended to stay in the profession. They claim that “*while it is vital to offer mentoring to novice teachers, it is equally as important to improve the quality of these experiences to help new educators become more effective and reduce beginning teacher attrition”* (330).

Apparently, one year or two years are needed to adopt essentials teachers’ duties and habits; this stage, regarding to teachers’ needs, is called ‘induction’ by King Chee Pang (2001)

and he defines the period as “*needs for support in adjusting to the profession and socialising into the new environment upon entry*”. Further Pang proposes other three stages of in-service teachers’ needs, as follows: ‘updating and retraining’ needs (needs for keeping du jour, looking for new information, implementing changes and innovation), ‘extension’ (need of further professional development and competences) and ‘conversion’ (receiving promotion or accepting new duties). This paper deals with the first ‘induction’ stage. Some authors call it also ‘the survival stage’. The name survival stage may seem too exaggerated, yet in fact it is the period when teachers are thrown in at the deep end and they need to survive all the changes and responsibilities expected from them.

1.1 Pre-phase in teaching career

Ryan (1986) determines that “*the psychological reality of teaching is very different from one period in a career to the next*” (10) and he identifies the following stages: ‘fantasy stage’, ‘survival stage’, ‘mastery stage’ and the ‘impact stage’. The fantasy stage, according to Ryan (1986), starts when the person starts to consider seriously about being a teacher. It can be said that the most students of teaching programmes, so called pre-service teachers, are in the fantasy phase because their expectations about their future teaching job are rather unrealistic. Those anticipations come out mostly of their experience as learners and are based on what they could observe, not on the real understanding of teaching job. Thirty four students of teaching training programmes, studying fourth year, were asked what their highest aspiration in teaching profession was. It was one of the questions of the document called *My personal declaration of principles of teaching* which was collected and supposed to be used as a part of pre-research of study dealing with teachers’ cognition. The answers of majority of respondents show that their anticipated ideas about teachers’ responsibilities differ from reality because they miss a lot of real duties. The most frequent words occurred in the documents were ‘friend’ and ‘help’. This points out the importance of those qualities for students; simultaneously it shows how they imagine their own role of a teacher. Following are some typical fantasies written by pre-service teachers:

My highest aspiration in teaching profession is to be someone who:

“...will be respected by students and maybe one day they will be thankful to me. I would like to be this kind of teacher whom students will appreciate not only as a teacher but also as a human. I would not only teach them language but also show them how to be a good person, to be fair and prepare them for life as much as I can. Although, I know that it is very hard however I would like to try it because I like this kind of teachers the most and they had taught me a lot.”;
“...understands students and helps them to get the best from oneself and develop as much as possible”;
“...will help children with anything and anytime.”;
“...can help students to be the best individual possible; someone who can help them to be smart, curious, kind, ambitious and self-driven.”;
“...is respected, is friendly, is favourite, is educated.”;
“...is patient, really good in what he is doing, who can handle different activities and projects, who can make lessons funny not bring but still highly educative”;
“...is in relationship with their learners and someone who

is ready to solve some problems. I can teach 'interesting' English and take attention of learners.”; “...would help students being authentic in using the English language in the real life.”; “...respects learners' different needs, emotions, to be human, understanding, someone who deserves learners' respect.”; “...will be always fair, full of energy and who will provide a great atmosphere in the class.”; “...will be inspiration for students but not only inspiration but also friendly, helpful and will be there for students every time”; “...whom students really love and respect...”

Apparently the answers are rather optimistic, however Ryan (1986) claims that “*pre service teachers often do not think about their future career in a careful analytical manner*” (11), it means that their ideas are usually far away from reality, as it is also seen from above responds. The fantasy stage is normally interrupted by the first teaching experience when students are given the opportunity to work with a real classroom. The ideas and expectations of students may be changed radically after their first teaching practice. Although those expectations are still in fantasy level, they are becoming more realistic.

The other part of the pre-research was focused on *Self assessment* of pre-service teachers in which respondents (the same 34 students of the 4th year of teaching training programmes) were expected to highlight the descriptors according to what the level of readiness for their teaching job. The questions and descriptors were concentrated on the different aspects of teaching containing their own development in education, preparing lesson plan, maintaining discipline, knowledge of learning styles and principles of language skills, qualities of the teacher, beliefs about teaching and beliefs about English. Students were asked to carry out the Self assessment twice, before and after their teaching practice. The self assessment was the kind of questionnaire where students of teaching programmes were asked to answer 11 questions related to their readiness for teaching . When comparing the self assessment of particular students, the results brought interesting findings because, paradoxically, some descriptors in self assessment done before the practice were rated higher than descriptors in the self assessment done after the teaching practice. This finding displays unrealistic ideas about teaching job which were changed after first contact with reality. On the other hand there were a lot of students who felt to be more ready for their career after teaching practice which is seen also in descriptors and supported by their comments. Following are some typical responses of students after their teaching practice:

“I still need to improve my teaching and I need more practice, however, I think that I am more prepared for teaching career than in the beginning of the semester (before teaching practice)”;
“It is better but I still need more experience”;
“I still feel I need more experience”;
“I feel much more prepared after this year plus teaching practice”;

Following are some responses of students before teaching practice:

“I don't feel my theoretical knowledge can, by any means, prepare me for real time teaching. Knowledge I gained cannot usually be directly applied and cannot prepare me for unexpected.”;
“I don't know whether I will ever be prepared... A teacher needs a lot of practice.”;
“I haven't had any chance to try it out so I think that I am not well prepared.”;
“I am prepared from

theoretical point of view, not from practical.”; “*I feel that I have enough theoretical skills which can be used but I don’t feel like a future teacher depending on how to handle students or what to do if...*”; “*I still have only some theoretical knowledge and no practice yet, so I think there is still something to prepare for and real experience will bring the real knowledge and preparation.*”; “*I don’t feel that I am well prepared. Being a teacher is really difficult challenge. And I don’t want to be a teacher in such conditions.*”

Apparently, pre-service teachers expected from teaching practice to gain the most essential part of their studies due to the fact they do not feel well prepared in practical way. Generally, before the first teaching experience, they rely on the teaching practice, however, during the teaching practice they realise the other aspects of teaching which they might not know before. This experience brings them not only new insight into the teaching profession but gives them opportunity to feel more self-confident. However, this experience may be a turning point. While for some students it brings the enhancement and self-confidence, some students after realizing all the other teachers’ responsibilities may feel not ready enough. For that reason they would probably welcome more teaching practice.

1.2 The initial phase when starting teacher’s profession

Firstly, it is essential to realize that full-time teaching differs from teaching practice carried out during the studies. It requires more responsibilities than teaching only few lessons a week. Also Ryan (1986) emphasizes the challenges and differences between teaching practice and real teaching, moreover he points out that pre-service students who do not realize those differences may have problems after start teaching. In Cowley’s view (2005), “*one of the key responsibilities of the teacher, outside of delivering the curriculum is for the pastoral well-being of his or her children*” (79). L. Ritchie’s (2001) view is that “*teachers were expected to establish rules and maintain safety, provide comfort when required, and generally ‘look after’ children*” (224). Oftentimes novice teachers are given their own classroom and tutorials what automatically puts them into the other roles different from teachers like for example tutors, mentors and ‘parents’. New roles cover new areas of duties such as administrative, social and welfare issues. Those are the issues which novice teachers often fight with because they are not experienced enough to know how to negotiate with undisciplined students or how to do all the necessary documentation.

Secondly, novice teachers might be confused by a huge amount of paper work and administration work teachers are responsible for. Moreover, they must be ready for detailed planning, especially long-term planning, because they are supposed to plan not only individual lesson plans, like during the teaching practice, but also lesson plan for whole academic year. Plan needs to meet the demands of government and state curriculum, which has been becoming even harder in respect to development new technologies, changing learners’ priorities, rising standards, increasing expectations and changing the world at all. According to Kosová (2012) “*the teacher is supposed to be a creator of the curriculum, which should ‘dynamise’ the development of*

competences of specific groups of learners he or she is responsible for". This implies that teachers need to create such a plan which will be in accordance to curriculum and simultaneously it will develop learners' competences to meet the demands of curriculum as well as students' needs. Besides, novice teachers may be surprised also by unexpected documentation they will become responsible for like 'triedna kniha', student tardiness, attendance, contact information of parents and emergency numbers. All of these things are new and in combination with remembering school rules, password for using computers, photocopier or to enter into the school electronical databases may be very exhausting for new teachers.

There exist six common problems of beginning teachers according to Ryan (1986) such 'the shock of the familiar', 'students', 'parents', 'administrators', 'fellow teachers' and 'instructions'. He describes each problem individually. The shock of the familiar contains the above mentioned points like paperwork and other functions of teachers apart from teaching. It can be said it is a natural reaction of new teacher when he/she comes to the environment he/she thinks is familiar with, because, after all, each teacher spent most of his/her life as a learner before, so that the school environment is known for them. They normally know how standard classrooms look like and the typical smell of corridors or classrooms. Despite that novice teachers are often surprised when being exposed to that environment from other perspective, especially after realizing all the activities a teacher is supposed to manage. The other surprising aspect is distress from students. Novice teachers tend to be keen and friendly, however not each student appreciates those enthusiastic approach. Sometimes teachers must struggle with undisciplined students or student with special needs and very often they are not prepared to work with such students. Namely ADHD or dyslexia may occur in the classroom and novice teachers are not ready to work with such students. Furthermore, as it was mentioned above teachers regularly assume also the role of parents or counsellor because each student is an individual with their own needs and problems and cannot be treated as with a robot. The teacher is very often one of the closest people in the student's environment. When talking about parents, it is the aspect which, in general, teachers do not think about during their teaching training; however meeting with parents and sharing the information about their children with them. The teacher should be ready to meet with people from different backgrounds and working in different fields.

To sum up, the most common problems can be divided into two main categories: disciplinary problems and paperwork, which is supported also by the additional data collected by means of the interview with novice teachers, Eleven teachers with the length of practice from one month to 4 years teaching at primary and secondary schools in Slovakia were answering the questions connected to their beginnings of teaching. The questions were concentrated on their very first experience with real teaching as well as on their readiness for teaching on the base of their university preparation. The following are some of the statements (translated from Slovak language): "University should offer more teaching practice and concentrate on work with students with special needs because working with them is not easy, especially when a student has ADHD and so on..."; "I was surprised mostly by the number of bureaucracy connected to pedagogical documentation"; I was upset by disciplinary problems and gaining respect"; "There

is quantum of additional duties (apart from teaching) which we are responsible for". The teachers also commented on the quality of their teaching programme and they agreed on necessity of practice. Moreover, some of them suggested doing the teaching practice whole academic year instead of few weeks. They presume that being involved into academic year from its beginning till the end would help novice teachers to deal with anticipated problems at the beginning of their career.

Conclusion

Becoming a teacher consists of several phases and it can be said that the whole procedure starts with the decision of being a teacher or initial thinking about this profession. Regarding to the fact it is a longitudinal process, the expectations of prospective teachers and in-service teachers are changing accordingly. However, after becoming a teacher, the process does not end because novice teachers must go through other phases until they become experienced teachers. The different authors named the particular phases in accordance to the changes in attitudes and ideas. The beginnings of novice teachers are not easy, so that they are called by several authors as the survival stage. This stage contains a lot of challenging changes in comparison to the preparatory phase during studies. It is vital for pre-service teachers to realise those changes in case to be well prepared for their future career. The paper represents different stages of teaching career and displays the readiness of pre-service teachers according to their own points of view. Moreover, it depicts the most significant problems the novice teachers are struggling with at the beginning of their career.

References

- COWLEY, S., 2005. *How to survive your first year in teaching*. Norfolk: Biddles Ltd. ISBN 0-8264-6465-3.
- CARPENSEN, Joakim et Finn DANIE RAAEN, 2014. Novice teachers and how they cope. *Teachers and Teaching*. 20:2,189-211. 23, DOI: 10.1080/13540602.2013.848570.
- KOSOVÁ, B., 2012. Kríza učiteľskej profesie a úpadok jej statusu. *Transformácia vysokoškolského vzdelávania učiteľov v kontexte reformy regionálneho školstva* (cit.2006-06-09). Available from: <https://www.minedu.sk/data/att/1903.pdf>.
- PANG, K.C., 2001. In-service Education Ladder for Teachers for the New Millennium, Teaching Effectiveness and Teacher Development: *Towards A New Knowledge Base*. The Hong Kong Institute of Education: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 111-139, ISBN 962-949-059-5.
- PARKER, Michele, A., ABDOU, N., Imig, S., 2009. Keeping our teachers! Investigation mentoring practices to support and retain novice educators. *Mentoring and Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*. 17:4, 329-341, DOI: 10.1080/13611260903391500.

POOM-VALICKIS, K., MATHEWS, S., 2013. Reflecting others and own practice: an analysis of novice teachers' reflection skills, *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 14:3, 420-434, DOI: 10.1080/14623943.2013.767237.

RYAN, K., 1986. *The Induction of New Teachers*. Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington.

Author: Mgr. Barbora Popovičová, full-time PhD. student, Institute of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Presov, Slovakia.

E-mail: barbora.popovicova@smail.unipo.sk