MEETING THE NEW CHANGES THROUGH THE TRAINING OF YOUNG PROFESSIONAL

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Annotation

Young professionals are facing greater challenges during the transition from the academic world to the professional one. This paper provides an overview of the current situation of pre-service teachers' professional internship, and it elaborates the main needs, shortcomings, and possible proposals. It inquires into the role of educational institutions in this process and recommends a potential model and an effective CPD program to support pre-service teachers in meeting the new changes and challenges.
Keywords: pre-service teachers, effective CPD, teacher readiness, internship.

Presentation of the problem

The teaching profession has an impact on a country's future generations and its development; thus, professional development programs need careful planning and consideration. The issue gains more importance when it comes to in-service training of young professionals who have just graduated. The transition from the academic world to the professional one comes with new changes and challenges that the young professionals need to cope with. The societal changes are ongoing and so fast that it makes it impossible for the university curricula to duly reflect them on its curriculum. There is a constant need for professional development, which is not only related to the fact that teachers lack the knowledge and skills, but also to respond to the latest development. For instance, the effectiveness of e-learning and ICT support learning has been subject of academic research well prior to the pandemic, as demonstrated by the E-Val project of European Commission (Attwell (ed.), 2006) and it gained more momentum when the whole educational world was caught off-guard, and everyone had to develop a new set of skills to cope with the unexpected changes (Gudmundsdottir & Hathway, 2020, Bozkurt et al, 2020).

There are also country specific requirements regulating the development of CPD programs. In Albania, teaching is a regulated profession and teachers must obtain a license prior to starting teaching in the classroom. This is a legal requirement stipulated by Law no. 69/2012, dated 21.10.2009 "On the Pre-University System in the Republic of Albania", as amended and law no.10171, dated 22.10.2009 "On Regulated Professions in the Republic of Albania". In application of this legal requirement, pre-service teachers should complete a one- year professional internship in a school approved by the General Directorate of Education for Pre-University Education. Following the internship, they must sit a state exam referred to as the 'state examination for the regulated profession of the teacher' organized by the Ministry of Education and Youth. This legal requirement is related to the importance of in-service training and learning as part of the CPD process, which falls within the broad category of lifelong learning. The need for supporting young professionals during their initial years of practice has also been confirmed by the Report on Professional Development Needs for Pre-University Teachers prepared by ASCAP (Quality Assurance Agency for Pre-University Education). The report confirmed that young teachers who have a few years of teaching experience and have non-satisfactory teaching outcomes should be supported by more experienced teachers within the school context, as well as through the relevant professional networks (ASCAP 20221).

Furthermore, Article 9 of the Regulation for the Organisation and Development of Professional Internship for the Regulated Teaching Profession foresees that Institutions of Higher Education, which provide a teaching-based curriculum have the obligation: a) *to cooperate with ASCAP to draft guiding programs for the professional internship* and b) *to distribute this program to students graduating as teachers*. Following the provision of this Regulation and based on personal observations and information gathered informally by discussing with Master students of the Department of English Language, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana, it was discovered that the faculty did not follow up the procedure of the professional internship. Further, the faculty did not maintain any further contacts with their cohort of pre-service teachers after graduation and while undertaking the professional internship. Other issues included the failure to organise any orientation session

neither a guiding program to provide information to graduate students/pre-service teachers on the professional internship or on any other related issue.

As for the above, to formalize the findings and the observations that were made through informal interviews and discussions, the Department of English Language decided to organize a two-day online workshop with all the involved stakeholders: pre-service teachers; previous teacher candidates who had already completed their professional internship; mentor teachers from various high schools of Tirana; as well as specialists from institutions such as, the US Embassy Education Program Advisor, Regional English Language Officer, a Specialist at General Directorate of Education for Pre-University Education, a representative from ASCAP along with the academic staff from the Faculty of Foreign Languages.

Considering all the above, the research problem addressed by this paper is to investigate a potential model that will provide support and continuous professional development to pre-service teachers. Thus, the research questions underlying this paper include the perceptions of pre-service teachers in relation to their professional internship; their acquaintance with the legal framework; their level of prerequisite skills and subject specific expertise to teach in the classroom; development of a potential CPD model that best responds to the existing and emerging needs.

Research goals and objectives

The main goal of the research is to use the data and the findings gathered during the literature review, the informal interviews along with the conclusions and recommendations arising from a two-day workshop in the light of developing a sustainable model to provide support and PD for young professionals, who must fulfill the legal obligations of completing the internship prior to sitting the state license examination. There is a twofold purpose of conducting this study, firstly, it seeks to explore further the perceptions of pre-service teachers in relation to their preparedness for the internship, their pedagogical skills for teaching in the classroom and their familiarity with the legal framework; secondly, it intends to investigate possible models to provide support and Professional Development to pre-service teachers during their professional internship and their early career as novice teachers.

Further, the study intends to elicit the necessary information and gather data by setting up a platform of cooperation and discussion amongst the main actors involved in the professional development process of young professionals. It intends to assess the needs that pre-service teachers have prior to and during the professional internship, such as getting acquainted with the legal documents and application procedure, the subject specific requirements related to teaching a foreign language and any other related issue which will be used to tailor a CPD program.

The country report from Eurydice reveals how the Albanian education system tackle challenges at all education levels, early childhood education and care, primary and secondary education, higher education and adult learning. According to this report, *the professional development of teachers is realized based on the needs of the teachers and is facilitated through training, professional networks, consultancy and short- and long-term courses. Trainings are conducted according to the "Request-Offer" system and training programs are accredited by the Ministry of Education, and Youth and can be provided by public or private institutions / operators*. Therefore, the contribution of this study will be in alignment with the national educational policies and inform them on the real needs of young professionals with the aim of smoothing their transition from the university to the classroom teaching setting.

Methodology

The overall approach employed for the purpose of this study falls under the principles of action research. Its scope is so wide that it can be used almost at any setting where a problem involving people, tasks and procedures require a solution. It can also be undertaken by an individual teacher, a group of teachers working cooperatively, teachers working alongside researchers, possibly with other interested parties (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007: 297) and one of the several types of action research includes continuing professional development of teachers.

Nevertheless, this study is conducted as a form of mixed research methods including qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative research method was used to collect data through unstructured interviews and by organizing a workshop, as a platform for promoting discussion and the exchange of views and experiences. A needs analysis was conducted with the participants of the workshop to collect quantitative data to corroborate the research problem.

The advantage of using both a qualitative and quantitative research method is that it provides researchers with more knowledge, and they can examine different aspects of an overall research question with a process such as the triangulation of data (O'Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2010). Brennan (2015) argues that researchers work with different types of data within the same research project and the way that these data are used will vary according to the phase of the research. In this light, it should be confirmed that the qualitative research was used to investigate some of the issues related to the professional internship and the quantitative research method was used to collect data and statistics, which could then be used to support the arguments raised.

The use of qualitative methods allows for a more holistic approach, i.e., looking at situations through the eyes of as many participants or stakeholders as possible (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007:34) because "the world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed-upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research" Merriam (2002) as cited at (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006). Thus, the qualitative methods used for this study included the interviews and the training workshop. There were conducted unstructured interviews with pre-service teachers who were about to complete their professional internship and mentor teachers. The information that was gathered during the interviews was later used to develop the training workshop and to define the topics and issues to be further explored, 'in pursuit of the goal of knowing more' (Moran-Ellis et al as cited at (Dupin & Borglin, 2020) under the 'analytical framework following a thread' (Dupin & Borglin, 2020), which ensures the analytical integration of data that comes from different types.

The objective of the interviews was to gather perceptions and opinions from this group who had experience with the formal application procedure for the internship along with their experience as teachers in the classroom under the supervision of mentor teachers. Since this study does not make any theoretical claims, but it tends to address a matter of interest such as the professional development of pre-service teachers, the discussion that took place during the workshop was also deemed as an appropriate research method to be employed.

Whereas the quantitative data were gathered from the questionnaires conducted online prior to starting the workshop and in the end where all the stakeholders introduced their findings and observations.

The sample population of the study includes the pre-service teachers, who were about to graduate from their master's program provided by the Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Tirana in 2021, with approximately 40-50 participants in each of the days of the workshop, as well as representatives from the institutions of interest.

Analysis of the results

The analysis of the results will be conducted based on a combined level of triangulation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), with more than one level of analysis including the three principal levels used in the social sciences, namely, the individual level, the interactive level (groups), and the level of collectivities (organizational, cultural, or societal). The analysis of quantitative data is carried out by using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data are analysed using content analysis. Triangulation best fits the purpose of this study as it makes an epistemological claim concerning what more can be known about a phenomenon when the findings from data generated by two or more methods are brought together (Moran-Ellis, et al., 2006).

The quantitative data results, obtained from the needs assessment, revealed that all master students had the intention to apply for the professional internship upon completing their studies. However, only 30% of them had some information on the institution where they were going to hand in the application. Whereas 55% of the respondents had the necessary information for the way how the application process is conducted with only 31% having partial information. When it comes to the criteria to be meet along with the duties and obligations to be fulfilled, 44% and 37% of the respondents respectively had that information, whereas 34% and 44% respectively had partial information.
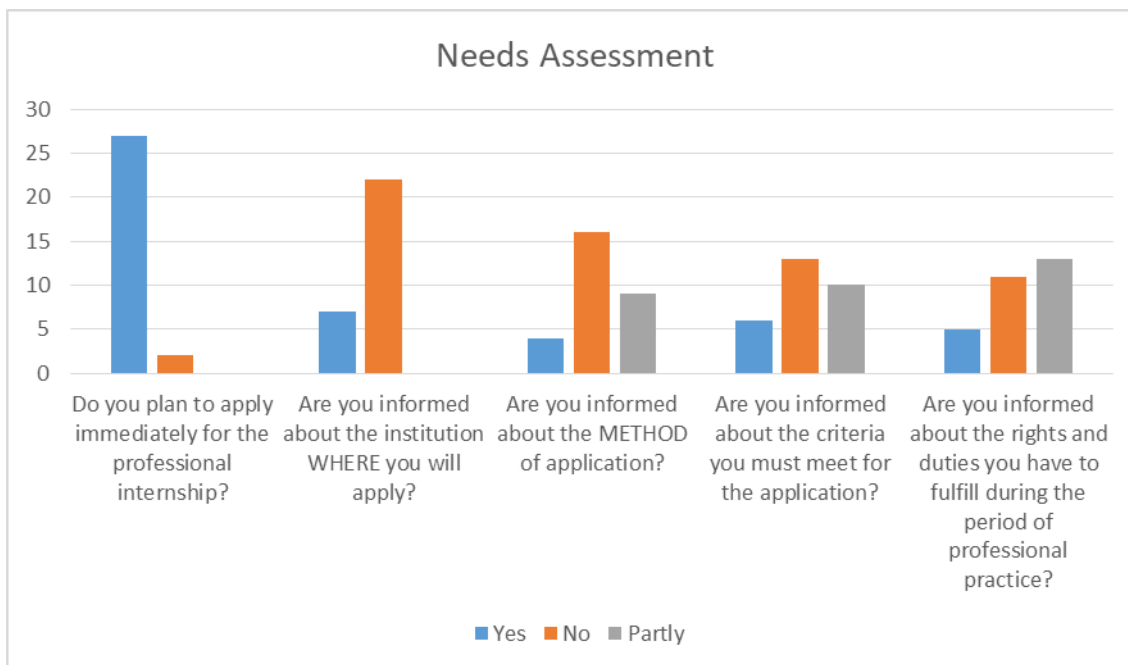
Figure 1. Needs Assessment

The results of the quantitative data corroborated the findings of the qualitative data obtained prior to organizing the workshop. However, corroboration of the results is only one of at least four possibilities when combining different methods of research (Brennan, 2005), with elaboration, complementarity and contradiction of data and findings listed as possible outcomes.

Initially there were interviews conducted with pre-service teachers who were attending their professional internship and with mentor teachers. Then the quantitative results revealed that the faculty had not provided any formal orientation or any guiding program, as the law stipulates.

As a result, the training workshop was organized with a view to further analyse the situation and to gather more information in relation to the research questions. The analysis of qualitative and quantitative data led to the identification of the main themes that could potentially be the basis of a CPD program. We conclude that pre-service teachers should be:

- introduced to the legal basis and application procedure
- equipped with general knowledge and skills for a successful completion of the internship
- trained on subject specific knowledge and skills in foreign language teaching; preparation of daily lesson plans by reflecting curricula requirements, individual assessment of students, competence-based assessment, designing tasks and projects; classroom management skills
- guided while developing their Portfolio and the evaluation criteria based on the 8 competencies that mentor teachers consider during their observation
- supported to establish a collaborative relation with mentor teachers

However, the above list is open to further suggestions based on the teacher readiness survey, which should be completed prior to developing a CPD program, as pre-service teachers have different levels of knowledge and experience. Zdonek (2016) states that this survey reveals what teachers already know and these results could also be used by mentor teachers to prioritize the areas of support. Furthermore, Burns (2014) notes that pre-service teachers should be actively engaged during the internship and should observe classes and reflect on teachers' behaviours and good practices. Active participation is also recommended by Darling-Hammond, Hyler and Gardner (2017) with the intention to engage pre-service teachers and guide them to design or try out teaching strategies. Mentor teachers should make sure to provide their feedback and invite pre-service teachers reflect on all the learning activities that they have used in the classroom. The sooner teachers cultivate their reflective thinking, the better it will be. The practicum is a crucial time to establish the consciousness of reflection. Only through learning to reflect can pre-service teachers continuously correct mistakes and keep exploring to step into a new realm (Wang, 2018).

Pre-service teachers should also be encouraged to take ownership of their professional development process (Goble & Horm, 2010) and they should be involved when developing CPD programs. Successful CPD outcomes are found when development efforts are made together with teachers instead of being designed as doing things to teachers (e.g., Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Nilsson, 2014 as cited at (Svendsen, 2020)). In other words, there has been a shift from teachers being passive participants to becoming active learners. The feedback that was received from pre-service teachers who were about to complete the professional internship was also shared with their peers. They emphasized issues such as time management, lesson planning, engaging students in the classroom, establishing a positive and cooperative rapport with the students, and getting acquainted with the legal requirements particularly for the preparation of the Portfolio, which is the basis of their evaluation. Some of these issues are taught during their formal university studies, however, they also require a set of skills, which are enhanced with experience and require the support of their mentor teachers. Internships are effective as it makes them familiar with the school environment and enhances their professional expertise. It provides observation and it equips them with professional skills and ethics and provides them with opportunities of putting theoretical knowledge into practice (Hussain & Mahmood, 2010).

Similarly, the role of mentor teachers is crucial during the professional internship. Mentor teachers frequently "talk out" their thinking and decision making for their interns, co-plan and co-teach with interns, observe, and critique intern planning and teaching, and participate as equal partners in evaluation of the intern's progress (Siebert, Clark, Kilbridge, & Peterson, 2006). During their internship, pre-service teachers should be encouraged to express their ideas and opinions without any hesitation. Their critical thinking is also promoted when the mentor constructively criticizes and evaluates their work. Most importantly, the mentor should provide emotional support and build a positive, collaborative relationship with their interns. Even though not explicitly, the mentor is showing their interns some unwritten rules and norms of ethical behaviour that they should establish with the class. However, the analysis of the qualitative data gathered during the interviews also revealed some problems in the rapport between mentors and interns, where there had been cases of the mentor teacher being exploitive and using pre-service teachers to fill in for them in class or mark students' assignments. There is also a tension that mentor teachers feel between encouraging and criticizing pre-service teachers. Mentor teachers constantly walk a narrow line between "teaching" or "guiding" the preservice teacher and "'evaluating" the preservice teacher (Siebert, Clark, Kilbridge, & Peterson, 2006).

Moreover, all educational stakeholders must collaborate in creating a new vision for education, and policymakers have a pivotal role to play in this process (Maurizio & Wilson, 2004), (Loeb, Miller, & Strunk, 2009). Similarly, professional development programs will not have the desired outcomes and effects if it weren't for the support that they receive from policy makers and other educational bodies responsible for the drafting of educational policies and reforms and this was confirmed by the Specialist of the Regional Educational Directorate and ASCAP during the workshop.

As Darling-Hammond & Mclaughlin (2011) state licensing, testing and evaluation of teachers must reflect new understanding about student learning and effective teaching. Whether formal or informal, all systems of professional development must be flexible and able to respond to the changing needs of teachers and professionals. Teachers must be at the centre of change and policymakers must be mindful that systems may work well for a period but then need revising as contexts change. The success of new policies and initiatives will depend on local responses to specific teachers and learners needs.

Conclusions and recommendations

In summary, there are five major outcomes that the CPD program for pre-service teachers should aim to achieve:

1. Responsible implementation of the requirements of the legislation and of the school documentation. There is a list of official documents that need to be consulted prior to undertaking the process of the professional internship.

2. Effective implementation of the foreign language curriculum/syllabus.
Pre-service teachers should be updated with the National Curriculum Framework of Pre-University Education and the new competence-based curriculum.

3. Application of effective pedagogical strategies, methodology and integration of technology in teaching and learning. Pre-service teachers should be encouraged and supported to apply new and contemporary teaching methods and activities.

4. Observation of ethical rules and communication to conduct the internship with professional commitment and seriousness. One crucial element is the etiquette that should be

observed by both mentors and interns in their daily communication and the ethical rapport that interns build with the students.

5. Proficiency in subject specific scientific knowledge. The University and academia should play an active role in preparing pre-service teachers. The academic curricula of teaching courses should be adapted to reflect the requirements of the professional internship and, most importantly, the agreed requirements of the foreign language teaching curriculum.

The relationship between mentor teachers and interns is also highlighted as of an importance. Even though the nature of this relationship is stipulated by the regulation, it is also based on good communicative skills and a positive attitude that both parties should have. The development of a cooperative relationship is crucial for the successful completion of the internship. It could be fostered through follow-up meetings and trainings. The mentor should be consulted throughout the internship because the development of the interns' Portfolio is an equally shared responsibility.

In general, there is a positive approach to help novice teachers transit from the academic world into their professional life without impairing the standard of quality. After all, good communication skills and possessing the most updated information will be a solid foundation to manage this myriad of complex relationships. A possible model to be set up to support the professional internship and design an effective CPD program (Cambridge Papers in ELT series, 2018) would include the collaboration of these actors:

School Mentor, the experienced teacher at the placement school who provides day-to-day practical support and help with integration at the school.

Academic Mentor, who supports and supervises progress throughout the internship and use the findings and observations for the improvement of Professional Standards for Albanian Teachers and reflects them on university course content.

A network/community of interns who share classroom best practice, emotional support, and collaboration towards the successful completion of the internship.

Overall, it is important that the involved stakeholders, i.e., the pre-service teachers, the mentor teachers, the faculty, and the relevant state institutions should be in frequent contact and contribute into facilitating the change and transition.

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