

## PROSPECTIVE CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY SPECIALISTS' EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TRENDS IN PRACTICAL STUDIES AT THE UNIVERSITY

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### Abstract

Learning from one's experience is directly related to the prospective childhood pedagogy specialist's motivation to act thoughtfully, enabling oneself to continuously improve, taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions. The aim of the research is to disclose the trends of experiential learning of students who have chosen childhood pedagogy studies (pre-primary, pre-school and primary education) during their pedagogical practice. The study was attended by 119 prospective educators in the senior years of study who have chosen study programs of pre-school and primary education and childhood pedagogy at 4 universities of Lithuania. Research data were collected using structured survey, applying structured modified research instrument – the questionnaire made of concrete statements.

Research results reveal the peculiarities of experiential learning in practical studies at the university, highlighting the very student's autonomy and independence trends during practice. The aspects of students' practice objectives and assignments to be performed as well as of usefulness of practice assignments and their importance for future professional activities are assessed. The aspects of the student's practical activity while reflecting on personal experience as well as of experiences undergone during practice in the relation with other participants of the educational process and oneself as a trainee are revealed.

**Keywords:** *University, childhood pedagogy, experiential learning, practical studies.*

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### 1. Introduction

The change in the system of education, new societal needs determine initiation of change in the education system, in the teacher education area. Challenges in higher education are also related to new challenges and requirements raised for the teacher to continuously learn and improve, acquiring abilities corresponding to new professionalism requirements that are directly related to the future pedagogical activity. Learning from one's experience is directly related to the prospective pedagogy specialist's motivation to act thoughtfully, enabling oneself to continuously improve, taking responsibility for one's actions and decisions through learning from one's experience and reflective practice (Harrison et al., 2005; Huntley, 2008; Sellars, 2012; Gao, 2015 and etc.). The higher education institution puts emphasis on two structural parts of the study process, namely: the transfer of the basics of the profession in a theoretical way (acquisition of knowledge) and formation of the necessary professional abilities, employing practical activity trends (in the auditoriums and educational institutions) and methods. Pedagogical practice is a compulsory part of studies, intended for the development of professional competencies, implemented at the practice institution, grounded on an integrative-systemic approach, which emphasizes the unity of theory and practice, providing students with the possibilities to participate in various types of practical activities (reflection and learning from one's experience, research-analytical, observation and assessment of the educational environment, organizational-managerial and the like). The scope of childhood pedagogy studies practice at higher education institutions of Lithuania is not less than 30 study credits. Practice is done at educational institutions and (or) non-governmental organizations implementing educational programs, which provide possibilities of integrating practical training and studies and ensure the necessary assistance to the trainee student (Teacher Training Regulation, 2018). Pedagogical practice is based on students' direct participation in the professional pedagogical activity. The purpose of pedagogical practice is to create conditions for the student to seek unity of theory and practice by helping the future teacher to acquire professional, general and special competencies and experience necessary for practical pedagogical work throughout the whole study period. Practical studies preparing teachers cannot be based solely on basic knowledge of the subject and pedagogy. The results of studies conducted by many researchers demonstrate that it is necessary to develop the teachers' ability to

constantly analyze and reflect on his professional activity (Caires et al., 2012; Thaba & Kanjere, 2014; Kelemen, 2015; Winterbottom & Mazzocco, 2016; Kwenda et al., 2017; Yeigh & Lynch, 2017). It is important to create possibilities for learners to explore and discover on their own so that ideas and knowledge result from real solutions related to learners' personal experience.

The aim of the research is to disclose the trends of experiential learning of students who have chosen childhood pedagogy studies (pre-primary, pre-school and primary education) during their pedagogical practice.

## 2. Research methodology

### 2.1. Sample

The study was attended by 119 prospective educators in the senior years of study who have chosen study programs of pre-school and primary education and childhood pedagogy at 4 universities of Lithuania. The respondents were selected applying targeted-criterion selection method; i.e., students in their second, third and fourth year of study who have done at least one pedagogical practice, encompassing the entire population. All respondents who participated in the study were women. The average age is 22,9 years. By the year of study the data were distributed as follows: students studying in year two made up 35,3 percent; year three, 41,2 percent; and year four – 23,5 percent.

### 2.2. Research methods

Data were collected using a modified questionnaire<sup>1</sup>. It contained 22 statements reflecting university students' learning peculiarities and the significance and importance of the students' experience in this process. Questionnaire statements that did not satisfy statistical reliability indicators were not applied for the data analysis. The survey was conducted meeting the respondents and by electronic means. The collected data were analysed performing statistical analysis (using SPSS 21.0 software): a) quantitative descriptive statistics of the research data; b) the multidimensional statistical method – factor analysis, based on the analysis of the correlation between the variables and transformation of the initial space of the variables to the space of smaller measurements (factors). To process the research data, an exploratory factor analysis was used, which establishes the number of factors and the variables constituting a factor, while the latter help understanding what these factors mean.

## 3. Research results

Having performed the factor analysis of the data on future childhood pedagogy educators' learning trends at the university, four factors were distinguished. The identified factors reveal the trends of future specialists' experiential learning, directed to cognition of the study area through cooperation, adaptation in the profession, performing the assigned tasks and combining theoretical and practical knowledge during practice. The data of the factor analysis and the rating of the suitability and reliability of the scales are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor variables and statistical validity indicators.

Name of factor	Number of statements	Factor weight (L)	Descriptive distribution of the factor (%)	Cronbach $\alpha$
<b>KMO = 0,86</b>				
Practice tasks as a tool promoting successful adaptation in the profession and experiential learning	6	0,57-0,80	21,7	0,84
Trends of learning from one's experience, reflecting and combining theoretical and practical knowledge during practice	5	0,52-0,78	19,4	0,78
Students' pseudo-reflectivity as a result of pointless actions and assigned tasks	4	0,66-0,82	14,3	0,79
Cognition of the study area, learning from experience through observation and collaboration	3	0,65-0,80	12,8	0,69

<sup>1</sup> Some of the statements given in the questionnaire in previous studies were presented to other groups of respondents. For more information, see: Bubnys, R., Gudonis, V. (2009). Prospective Special Educators' Reflection on Personal Experience and its Integration in Practical Studies in Higher School. *Special Education, No. 2* (21), 91–98.

The coefficient 0.86 of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) scale shows that the matrix suits the factor analysis well. The distribution typical for the scale 68.2% (from 21.7% to 12.8%) shows that all factors explain not less than 10% of the distribution and can be interpreted. Internal consistency coefficient of the factors of the scale (subscales) Cronbach alpha ( $\alpha$ ) fluctuates between 0.84 and 0.69, this shows that the scale is homogeneous. The variables of all factors satisfy the condition  $L \geq 0.5$  and are solid from the point of view of methodology.

The first factor “Practice tasks as a tool promoting successful adaptation in the profession and experiential learning” reveals the value of practice tasks as the tool promoting experiential learning, seeking to successfully adapt in the profession in future (see Table 2).

Table 2. Practice tasks as a tool promoting successful adaptation in the profession and experiential learning.

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	Completely agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Completely disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Many tasks that I had to do, writing the practice report, created possibilities to learn from my experience	22	18,5	48	40,3	23	19,3	19	16,0	7	5,9
Tasks that I had to do to account for practice will help me to adapt to new conditions in the future more successfully	13	10,9	56	47,1	27	22,7	18	15,1	5	4,2
Doing practice tasks, I found answers to my questions	16	13,4	49	41,2	31	26,1	17	14,3	6	5,0
I know the purpose and benefit of notes that have to be filled in during practice	20	16,8	53	44,5	33	27,7	11	9,2	2	1,7
Prepared practice tasks promote learning of new things	18	15,1	57	47,9	24	20,2	13	10,9	7	5,9
In many practice situations, I could successfully apply knowledge acquired in my studies	29	24,4	60	50,4	15	12,6	11	9,2	4	3,4

The results show that most students involved in the study agree that assigned practice tasks enabled them to learn from their experience outlived during practice. The majority of them state that in many practice situations, they could successfully apply knowledge acquired during studies, while the tasks promoted to learn new things. It is noteworthy that during practice, more than a third of students found answers not to all questions they had, part of them found it difficult to understand the purpose and benefit of the notes that had to be filled in during practice.

The second factor “Trends of learning from one’s experience, reflecting and combining theoretical and practical knowledge during practice” emphasizes the possibilities of learning from experience in practice, reflecting on the activities that had to be performed, combining theoretical knowledge acquired at the university in practice (see Table 3).

Table 3. Trends of learning from one’s experience, reflecting and combining theoretical and practical knowledge during practice.

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	Completely agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Completely disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
During practice, I had time to think over how it would be possible to behave better in one or another situation	24	20,2	78	65,5	10	8,4	5	4,2	2	1,7
During practice, I would think over those activities that I had to do	36	30,3	68	57,1	8	6,7	7	5,9	-	-
Going to do practice, I knew its aim and what I should learn	43	36,1	57	47,9	8	6,7	10	8,4	1	0,8
During practice, I could successfully apply the knowledge and novelties which I was introduced to in my studies	31	26,1	64	53,8	14	11,8	9	7,6	1	0,8
I applied knowledge that I gained while studying in practice	20	16,8	71	59,7	20	16,8	8	6,7	-	-

The majority of students indicate that during practice, they were provided with conditions to reflect how it would be better to behave in one or another situation. It should be noted that before starting practical studies, the aim of practical studies and the results to be reached were not clear only for a small share of students. It can be assumed that students' activity during practice was not impulsive and spontaneous, because almost all students involved in the study would think over the activities they had to perform. The results demonstrate that during practice, most students were able to successfully apply knowledge and novelties which they were introduced to during university studies. A similar number of students applied knowledge acquired during their studies in practice.

Table 4. Students' pseudo-reflectivity as a result of pointless actions and assigned tasks.

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	Completely agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Completely disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Many things that had to be done during practice were pointless	12	10,1	38	31,9	16	13,4	35	29,4	18	15,1
During practice, I applied only general problem solving principles, without trying to select them according to a concrete situation	17	14,3	31	26,1	23	19,3	34	28,6	14	11,8
Practice tasks that had to be done were "vague"	21	17,6	42	35,3	18	15,1	31	26,1	7	5,9
Many things in my practice diary are "the result of fantasy"	12	10,1	33	27,7	8	6,7	39	32,8	27	22,7

The data of the latter factor reveal quite contradictory results. About half of the students involved in the study agree or hesitate about meaningfulness of many things that had to be done during practice. It is likely that many activities that had to be done during practice were not related directly to practice tasks that had to be done and presented in the reports. There is a trend that students still find it difficult to realize the uniqueness of every situation in the practical activity and therefore apply only general problem solving principles.

Table 5. Cognition of the study area, learning from experience through observation and collaboration.

Variables of the factor (statements of the questionnaire)	Completely agree		Agree		Don't know		Disagree		Completely disagree	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
After practice, I began to perceive my study area more clearly	45	37,8	57	47,9	5	4,2	10	8,4	2	1,7
Observing practitioners of my area in practice, I could learn a lot from them	47	39,5	54	45,4	9	7,6	6	5,0	3	2,5
During practice, professionals were interested that I learn from their experience as much as possible	36	30,3	55	46,2	15	12,6	10	8,4	3	2,5

Although previous results revealed that not all practice tasks were understandable, the majority of students indicate that after practice, their studied area became clearer for them. Professionals whom students met during practice and from whom they could learn a lot also contributed to that. The results reveal that the environment in which the student was present was supportive and collaborative, which resulted in more effective processes of learning from one's experience.

#### 4. Conclusions

Addressing the issue of lifelong learning, it is necessary that the higher education institution should educate the student as the reflective practitioner who constantly develops competencies required for successful learning and performance of the future professional activity. Studies at the university and at the practice placement are two structural parts of the study process that are interrelated and complement each other. The results of the conducted study demonstrated that during practice, future teachers who have chosen childhood studies at the university had possibilities and conditions to learn from their

experience. Practical experience was not limited only to technical skills and impulsive actions; during practice, students successfully applied knowledge and novelties that they acquired studying at the university. On the other hand, mostly applied general problem solving principles alone show that, improving the study process, it should be worth paying more attention to integration of reflection on practice and theoretical studies at the university, which is the essence of learning from experience, linking theory and practice.

It should be assumed that, performing the assigned tasks, quite stereotyped problem solving ways, which do not promote not only experiential learning but also successful problem solving, are still applied. The evaluation of meaningfulness and clear understanding of practice tasks shows that this area requires more attention during studies, placing more emphasis on the analysis of the purpose and benefit of practice notes while studying together with students.

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