

# Model of Integration of Specific Early Childhood Teaching Methodology: Students' Perspectives on Their Learning in Authentic Environments

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## **Abstract**

*Theoretical backgrounds for the development of a university model of integrated teaching practicum (Teaching methodology of introducing children to the natural and social environment, and Methodology of teaching mathematical concepts formation) are learning about the holistic approach in the education of young children, as well as the pedagogical paradigm of an open preschool curricula and its co-construction. Through the analysis of data collected during this cycle within the framework of mix-method research, the paper is presented as a reflection of the implementation of the integrated teaching practicum. Quantitative data indicate a shift of students' insights into their own teaching competences towards greater objectivity, and in a sense, restructuring of their theoretical knowledge. Qualitative analysis indicates a shift from the emotional components (particularly uncertainty and fear) which overwhelmed students at the beginning of the cycle, to a greater confidence in their relationships with young children. Integration contributes to a number of positive effects on the development of general and specific teaching competency as well as on the students' self-confidence. On the other side, it raises new questions that need to be taken into account: primarily, it refers to the issue of the gap in "connecting" theory with/and practice, and equally, to the possibilities of students' participation in decision-making within process in the next cycle of the action research.*

**Key words:** *action research; affective and social components of learning; integrated teaching practicum; situated learning; university education.*

## Introduction

The contemporary professional and social context in which future preschool teachers are trained is related to the many changes that should be supported from the university process. Education and upbringing in early childhood has re-experienced the great public and political interests, which is credited by a discourse on investments in early learning and the accumulation of human capital from an early age (Cunha & Heckman, 2006). During the paradigmatic changes, social and academic understanding and professional restructuring are affected by the overall concern for the welfare of children in early childhood.

Although universities are carriers of progress, fragmentation is a long-standing problem in the education of future teachers and it is reflected by a set of unrelated university courses (Kosnik & Beck, 2009), which do not follow the needs of the educational process in early childhood education institutions and the curricula. In addition, education of preschool teachers in teaching methodology is often reduced to the so-called “diluted” version of the well-established teaching methodology of elementary school subjects, borrowing the scientific apparatus from didactics as the dominant and more developed pedagogical discipline.

Bearing in mind these limitations, as a theoretical background for the development of a university model which integrates the practical training within the specific teaching methodology in early childhood, we used the holistic approach to learning, as well as the pedagogical paradigm of the co-construction of the curriculum based on the open early childhood education approach. In addition, the university model is based on the idea of the continuity of students’ activities in the context of their future profession, which simultaneously contains two levels: physical and cognitive authenticity (A. Herrington & J. Herrington, 2006).

## Methodology

The choice of action research as the closest to the idea of co-construction (Slunjski, 2011), primarily related to the need to take into account the natural conditions in which the university model of practical training takes place, is emphasized by Hatch (2002) as an important characteristic of qualitative research in education. In addition, action research is an area that allows the transformation of knowledge through acceptance and re-affirmation of knowledge learned from previous cycles, but also a revision of the “practice routine” accepted and developed within one professional context, and not reflected much (Somekh, 2006).

Within this research framework, taking advantage of *mixed research design*, and using various techniques of collecting and analyzing data (Darlington & Scott, 2002), we observed, from multiple angles, students’ experiences in the context of their learning as a real event within the professional community. Consequently, this cycle of action research was supplemented using scaling techniques. Apart from ensuring the validity of research through triangulation, the broader framework is created

to generate a clearer picture of the research problem as a basis for planning and knowledge development about the university model. It was accepted that the mixed research design and the action research are congruent (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Norton, 2009; Phillips & Davidson, 2009), particularly because of their pragmatism and the fact that they allow a more comprehensive approach towards researched issues (Phillips & Davidson, 2009, p. 195). Through the “demands that the data [is to] be mixed or integrated, compared, contrasted, appraised and synthesised” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006, as cited in Phillips & Davidson, 2009, p. 205), quantitative data collection techniques and statistical analyses were included into the action research. The integration of data and a comparison with other sources of data (Creswell, 2009, p. 214) provided possibilities for broadening and deepening of knowledge, as well as for identifying various aspects of the practical training that have emerged from the data. Based on these assumptions, this cycle of the action research received features of *concurrent embedded strategy* (Creswell, 2009, p. 214), where, respectively, at certain time the qualitative and quantitative data were simultaneously collected and analyzed.

The cyclic process of planning, knowledge creation, research, reflection and action (Kalmbach Phillips & Carr, 2010; McIntyre, 2008) determines the cycle of the action research, which has emerged as a consequence of the previous one (Pribišev Beleslin & Vujić, 2013). Implications that followed from the first cycle, although contextualized and related to students who had already completed their studies, have indicated the need for an integration of students’ experiences at the level of university subjects, mostly keeping in mind the essence of the process of education of young children which is not divided into teaching methodology subjects, but encompasses a child as a whole. Furthermore, there was a need to establish teaching methodology training that will support a holistic curriculum of early education, which does not include teaching areas and school subjects. It was noted that such a step requires broader professional contacts of colleagues at the faculty (Pribišev Beleslin & Vujić, 2013), as well as the expansion of the network of university teachers followed by a mutual co-construction of themselves as researchers (Somekh, 2006), who started to open up to one another in order to change their teaching process.

*The current cycle of the action research.* During the 2013/2014 academic year, a new spiral of the action research emerged, including new university courses and co-operation of teachers (*Methodology of Introducing Children to the Natural and Social Environment, and Teaching Methodology for the Formation of Mathematical Concepts*). MacNaughton believes that action research “begins with hope, dreams and desires” (2008, p. 2), and in this case they are transformed into goals: to organize a better learning environment for our students, based on the ideas of the holistic, integrated approach to learning and pedagogy in early childhood; to provide students with enough time to establish relationships with children and preschool teachers, essential to building confidence and security, and mutual learning in order to verify their theoretical knowledge and connect it with their practical experience. In the context

of university teaching, an approach to situational learning in an authentic community of kindergartens is accepted. The university model was named *Integrated Teaching Practicum*.

In the planning process, different segments of the model were analyzed: overlapping of the contents, expectations and outcomes of university courses (lectures and practical training); mapping of the common teaching areas and tangent teaching competencies that can be transferable and shareable; a time frame in which the students' responsibilities and learning activities could overlap. In addition, a plan for Integrated Teaching Practicum involved a consideration of the number of levels, i.e. the time – content – competence dimensions:

- the timeline of activities that range from simpler to more complex ones, from activities that students have already practiced within the university environment to those that may be realized only in the authentic environment of the profession;
- problem situations that scaffold students, from establishing relationships essential for mutual acquaintance, towards the consideration of the students' activities and strategies in direct contact with children, which includes experience and knowledge of children's needs, abilities and interests in a group;
- integration of open-ended tasks for the development of specific teaching competences of students into the real lives and co-constructed curricula of the educational groups, without disturbing their process of learning, playing and development;
- supervision and continuous monitoring of the students' progress, which means incorporating the experiences of students, leadership in their "zone of proximal development" as well as systematization of empirical experiences into existing theoretical knowledge.

In addition, emphasis was placed on the process of university teachers' reflection and self-reflection, as an essential element and phase of action research (McIntyre, 2008). The mentioned notions were dominant in our study, particularly in the process of interpreting and generating knowledge about the model of practical training being carried out. Therefore, in the process of data analysis and interpretation, we used a focus group of students, in order to clarify qualitative and quantitative data, to provide new knowledge and to increase understandings from different viewpoints. Clark and Moss (2001) consider reflection as the wealth of experience, which allows the co-construction of knowledge between researchers and research participants.

*The problem* of action research was related to understanding the effects of situational learning in an authentic community on the enrichment of teaching methodology knowledge and experiences of students in the third year of Early Childhood Education program of study at the Faculty of Philosophy (University of Banja Luka). The research aimed to collect data and to verify the effectiveness and limitations of the model of university practical training in the specific context of the profession, particularly in the ways to support students' learning. The two research questions were set:

- (1) What is the relationship of students' insights (attitudes) on various methodological issues before and after their active participation and learning in the communities of their future profession?
- (2) What kinds of changes are expressed within the process of learning when students build knowledge and teaching competences in authentic learning environments (kindergartens) supported with clearly planned, integrated and meaningful tasks from two university teaching methodology subjects?

*Participants.* The study included 59 students, two university teachers and an assistant. The sample was not balanced by gender (58 female and 1 male student) due to the specific profession identity in our context, where mostly women elect to be preschool teachers.

*Ethical considerations.* The action research was based on active participation in real situations in kindergartens, where students, university teachers, but also children and their preschool teachers entered the study that was a part of the learning and teaching process. Therefore, a special attention to the ethical issues is considered in all stages of the research.

Participant *anonymity* and data *confidentiality* is provided, especially because students in some segments of the action research were exposed as individuals with their attitudes, opinions, disagreements, which they were supposed to express in front of their teachers (e.g. in the focus group). This led to another ethical issue: ensuring confidentiality of the students. It could be expected that students' answers, to some extent, were influenced and shaped by thinking about the "researcher's intentions and purposes" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 164), and accordingly, to give the "expected" answers. Certainly, the presence of teachers influenced the research situation and ways that students formed their answers, which should not be interpreted as a weakness, but as a basis for the exchange of relevant knowledge. In addition, the question of balance of power in the relationship between teachers as researchers and students as participants is considered, (different levels in mastering in professional competences, students' learning process through trial and error, colleagues' opinions, the context in which students are assessed, etc.).

*The context of data collection and analysis.* For the purposes of collecting quantitative data, we have constructed an instrument *Scale for Integrated Teaching Practicum (SITP)*. The instrument contains 46 items grouped into five sub-scales: *teamwork and skills*; *generic professional competences*; *students' insights on the implementation of the Program for early childhood education/national curriculum* (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007); *students' insights into the teaching aspects*; *attitudes towards early learning*. The sub-scale *Insights into the teaching aspects* was divided into *Theoretical teaching aspects* and *Teaching application* (teaching action competences). Cronbach's alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=0.928$ ) indicates a high reliability of the instrument. Calculating the *t* - value of the results obtained by testing students before and after the practical training, we obtained *t* - ratios that indicate differences in students' insights for the observed items before and after the Integrated Teaching Practicum experiences.

For the purpose of collecting qualitative data, an integral instrument for the SWOT analysis and the assessment of the usefulness of the university model has been developed. We investigated three elements: *the benefits and potential weaknesses of the model; students' perspective in situational learning; students' appraisal of the benefits for their own professional development*. The level of qualitative data analysis included the encoding process through "open coding", without pre-defined indicators, where the first categories were descriptive and of low inference (Punch, 1998, p. 206). Then, much more abstract and generalised categories were differentiated, and compared with respect to the initial and final state.

During the data analysis a focus group with seven students who represented a homogeneous sample (a group of people who have had similar experiences, Hatch, 2002) was organized. Students who have shown outstanding results during the Integrated Teaching Practicum were invited. A semi-structured group interview had several topics: *insights into their own learning and professional development, and benefits in linking theoretical and practical knowledge and experience*. The data were used to supplement and enrich the understandings emerged during the process of interpretation, and opened some new questions.

The research results are presented by integrating qualitative and quantitative data.

## Results

*Students' attitudes towards a variety of teaching issues before and after an active participation and learning in communities of future practice.*

Table 1 shows the differences in students' insights about their teaching competences before and after the realization of Integrated Teaching Practicum. *T*-ratios indicate a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level for access to *generic professional competences* of students and for *attitudes towards the importance of early learning*, and at the 0.01 level for *insight into all three teaching aspects* (theory, action and application of the Curriculum).

Table 1

*Differences in students' insights into their own teaching, theoretical and practical knowledge and competences before and after the realization of Integrated Teaching Practicum*

Variable	Initial			Final			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>		
Teamwork	32.92	3.36	0.49	33.15	3.36	0.49	-0.427	0.671
Generic professional competences	22.52	3.390	0.49	23.69	1.587	0.23	-2.058	0.045
Attitudes towards early learning	35.58	3.994	0.58	37.15	2.634	0.38	-2.137	0.038
Attitudes towards national Curriculum of early education	28.75	3.443	0.50	29.38	4.862	0.70	-0.744	0.467
Teaching competences - theory	48.75	6.360	0.92	53.94	4.615	0.67	-4.492	0.000
Teaching competences - action	27.19	4.296	0.62	30.54	3.464	0.50	-4.009	0.000
Teaching competences - curriculum application	75.94	9.825	1.42	84.48	7.718	1.11	-4.624	0.000

In all seven sub-scales, the  $T$ -ratio has a negative sign indicating that a statistically significant difference is in favour of the results of the final test. The students have a clearer and better understanding of their own professional competences,  $t = -2.058$ ,  $Sig. = 0.045$ ; the importance of early learning,  $t = -2.137$ ,  $Sig. = 0.038$ ; and teaching aspects and their application after the implementation of the Integrated Teaching Practicum,  $t = -4.492$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$ ;  $t = -4.009$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$ ;  $t = -4.624$ ,  $Sig. = 0.000$  respectively.

As can be seen from Table 1, the  $T$ -ratio which was not statistically significant,  $t = -0.427$ ,  $Sig. = 0.671$ , is related to the students' own insights on teamwork skills. This implies that the students have gained significant insights through teamwork and shared learning during the exercises and lectures in the classroom, and before the realization of the Integrated Teaching Practicum in the kindergartens. Also, prior to the implementation of the practical training, students got the opportunity to choose a colleague with whom they would cooperate in an educational group. Thus, well-established pairs of students were formed. Further, that explains this insignificant difference in the development of team skills before and after the implementation of field exercises. In addition, the students realized that in the authentic atmosphere of the kindergarten, teamwork refers to good functioning of the educational groups, and it is also one of the basic requirements especially in terms of curriculum co-construction (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2007; Slunjski, 2011).

*...It helps to practice working in the team. What to do when you are in the team with someone you do not know well? (...) We cannot choose our children or educational groups, but we have to adapt.*  
(Excerpt from the focus group's comments)

Similarly, the understanding of the planning and implementation of the National Curriculum has the same meaning. Although there are differences before and after practice, they are not statistically significant,  $t = -0.744$ ,  $Sig. = 0.467$ , as can be seen in Table 1. Thus, although students have better understanding and planning skills in accordance with curriculum instructions after the implementation of practical training, the differences are statistically insignificant. The reason for this can be the fact that students, during the regular lectures and exercises at the faculty, received knowledge about the Curriculum, and how to use it for planning and creating learning activities. On the other hand, the greatest contribution of the practicum is reflected in the mastery of teaching knowledge, better understanding of the teaching methodology principles and their more adequate and more meaningful application, as well as the development of professional competences and awareness of the importance of early learning. Table 1 indicates areas in which this university's model of practical training had an impact. This leads to the assumption that some of the knowledge and skills relevant to the professional development of future preschool teachers could be transmitted through lectures and exercised in the university classroom. This can be a good foundation for the development of professional security. However, field activities provide contextual learning; the adoption of situational knowledge and experiences which are invaluable

and irreplaceable for the development of students' competences. Therefore, direct contact with children, life atmosphere in the educational groups, and everyday life situations in educational institutions enable the construction of knowledge about children's learning and educational work in a new and qualitatively different way.

In addition, students indicated that the learning process is a two-way flow. One goes from theoretical knowledge to be reviewed in the direct relation to children, and the other shapes the course of diverse experiences that are incorporated without significant theoretical basis into the subsequent knowledge, thereby serving as a motive and descriptor of a theoretical knowledge which is easier to build. Therefore, we can assume that this model encourages a two-way process of learning:

*... For example, the thematic plan. During Practicum I had to ask preschool teachers about thematic planning, and later at the end of the semester [I] could shape it as more theoretical [knowledge]. - We have had some experiences, but we had no knowledge - we became more interested because we knew something about it. - I got a task about thematic planning on the exam, and at first I recalled the experience from the Practicum, and then I remembered the theory. - What we do, as little children, remains permanently in our minds, and what is heard and read, is forgotten... (Excerpt from the focus group's comments)*

The second issue we were interested in was related to a deeper understanding of the transfer processes from the theoretical knowledge to the practical skills. A *T*-test was applied to data about students' insights into personal teaching methodology theoretical knowledge and its application. The results indicate that in both cases there is a statistically significant difference in favour of theoretical knowledge. So, the students, both before and after the Practicum, found that they are better in governing theoretical than practical teaching knowledge (Table 2).

Table 2  
*Teaching methodology theoretical elements and their application before and after the Integrated Teaching Practicum*

Variable	Theoretical teaching knowledge			Proficiency in teaching application			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>		
Initial inquiry	47.71	7.36	0.96	26.27	5.15	0.67	36.66	0.000
Final inquiry	53.94	4.61	0.67	30.54	3.47	0.50	61.22	0.000

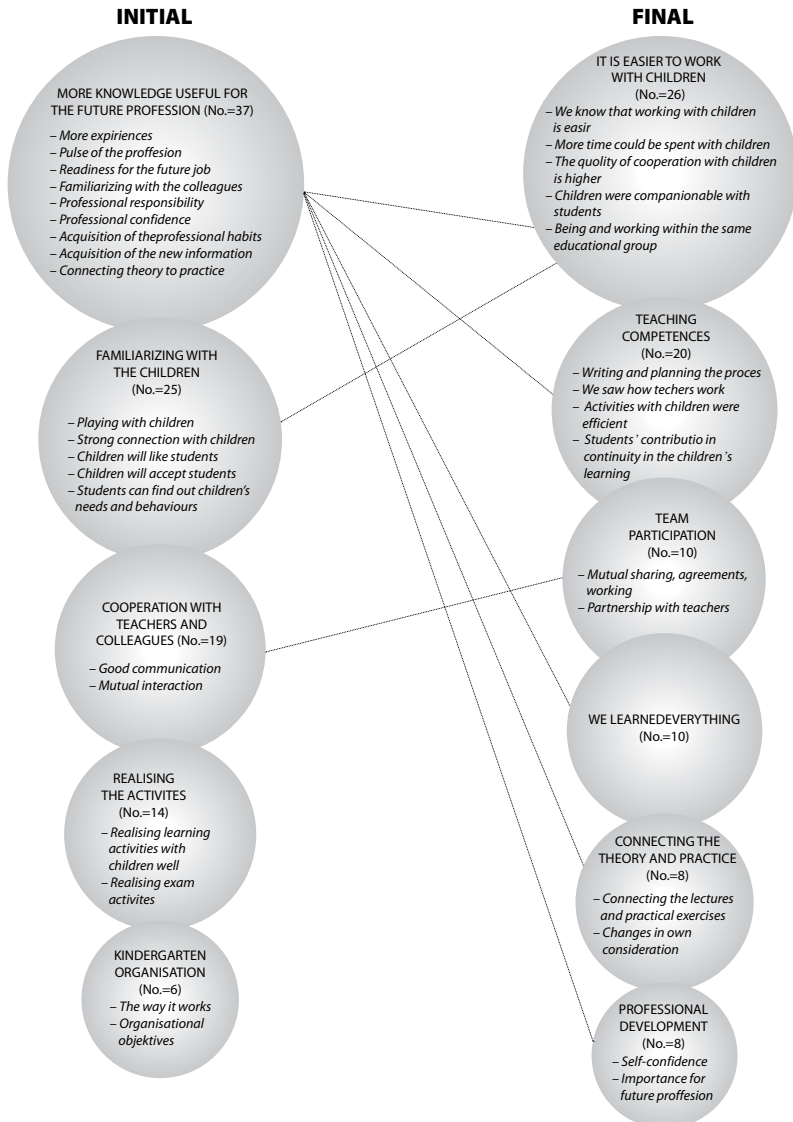
However, when we look at students' responses in the SWOT analysis, there is a shift in action competences and an increase in confidence in applying the teaching competences. In fact, at the beginning of the Practicum, students had concerns mainly related to *establishing a relationship with the children* (how to fit in with educational groups, whether children will accept students, how to direct the children's attention and establish a working atmosphere in a large group), and *the uncertainty about the quality of the implementation of the envisaged tasks* (whether they will succeed to "properly", according to one participant, do the activities with children). After the Practicum, the majority of students reported that they gained *great confidence*



in working with children (how to encourage children to learn, how to identify the children's needs, to draw attention to a large educational group), and *knowing how to co-construct the curriculum for preschool education for an educational group* (mainly in the field of planning activities). Testimonials such as: "Firm attitude and soundness in decisions", "Know how to recognize own mistakes", "Ready for professional duties" referred to the intensity of acquired skills and situational experiences.

Changes in the process of learning in authentic learning environment with clearly planned, integrated and meaningful tasks from the specific teaching methodologies.

STRENGTHS THE INTEGRATED TEACHING PRACTICUM



WEAKNESSES OF INTEGRATED TEACHING PRACTICUM

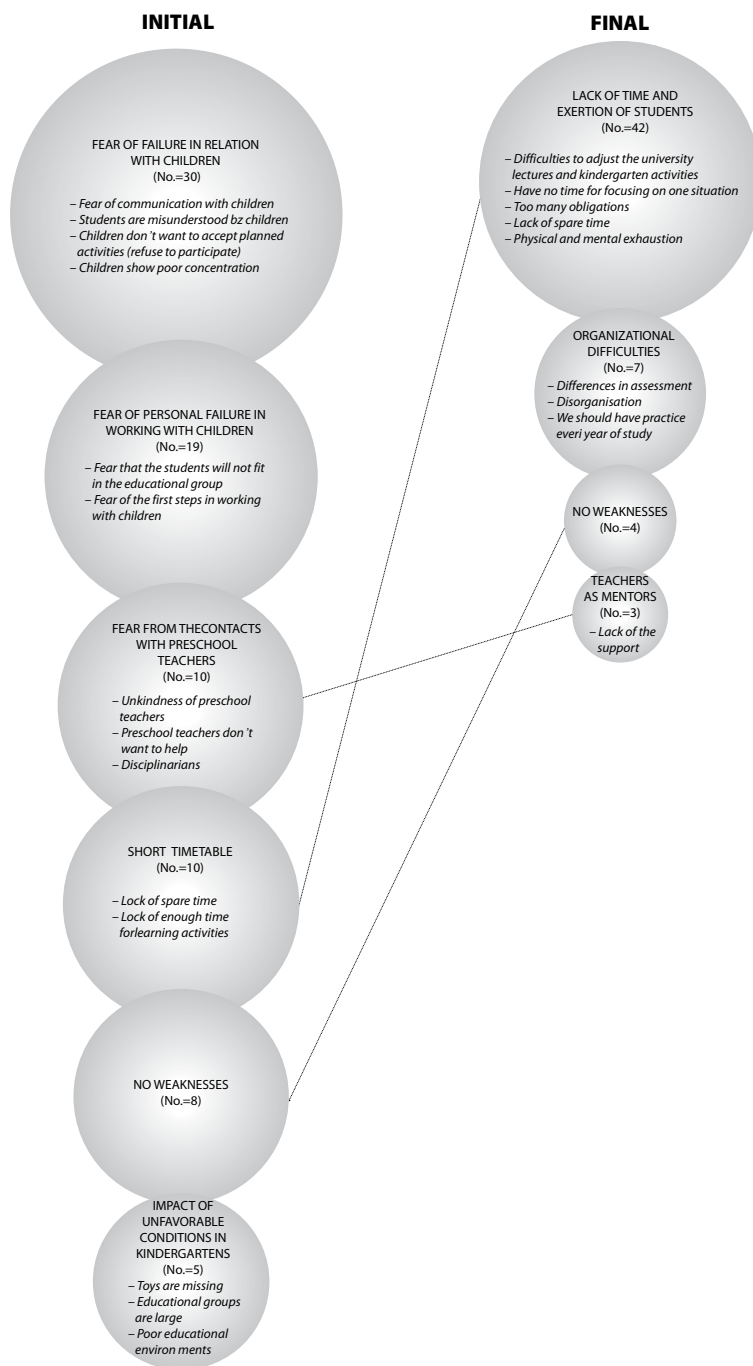


Figure 1. Description of the strengths and weaknesses of the university model

Figure 1 shows an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the university model from the perspective of students as experts of their experiences. Several conclusions can be formed:

- (1) Students' expectations that the university model would be useful for their future profession, in relation to the objectives of Practicum, were initially more general and vague. However, during the Practicum these expectations were differentiated into clear benefits for students: it is easier to work with children with whom we are familiar; immersion into the kindergarten environment provides opportunities for developing quality teaching competences, simultaneously connecting theoretical knowledge and experience, and teamwork facilitates the learning process.
- (2) Moving from the emotional component (uncertainty and fear) with which the students were overwhelmed at the beginning of the research cycle, towards a greater self-confidence in relationships with young children, indicates affective, and already confirmed, social component of the learning process in this university model. This suggests the possibility of a holistic approach to the university education of students, and a need for linking their academic achievement to emotional and social factors within a particular social context (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004).
- (3) Respecting the timeframe as well as the planned activities for students is a real problem in terms of simultaneous engagement in kindergarten and at the faculty (*"...It is pretty tiring: practice, lectures, learning. I don't have suggestions how to change it, but it was stressful ... (Excerpt from the focus group's comments)*). In addition, for the first time, students met their future profession as "real life", with working activities and their intensive implementation, which requires equal physical and mental engagement in direct work with children (e.g. increased investment in the relationships with children). At the same time, they met with the demands of continuous planning, preparation and implementation, as the real and complex requirements of the profession. There has been a complete and intense encounter with the dynamics of their profession, contrary to the university environment to which students are adapted:

*... Here, you learn what the water is, and then you are thrown into the well. You learn that water is made of particles, you know all about it, but in practice it is the same as in the well (...) The exercises [at the faculty] were like recreation, it was important but fun, [they were] informal. The exercises were entertaining, and the students did not understand their importance. (Excerpt from the focus group's comments)*

Although the students have already had the experience related to the environments of early education institutions, within the five-day teaching practice in previous years of their study (for example, observation, conversation with the pedagogue, etc.), this time the focus was on the direct and dynamic everyday activities with children.

## Reflection

*“Continually becoming” (Kalmbach Phillips & Carr, 2010, p. 1)  
We did not gain this feeling until the third year. Why couldn't it have been  
in the first year of the studies? (Excerpt from the focus group's comments)*

Boritko (2005) argues that future professionals, in the course of their university education, must undergo a phase of acculturation, that is, the introduction to the culture of the profession. Besides, Floden and Buchmann (1990, as cited in Kosnik & Beck, 2009, p. 4) emphasize the need for building a “network of beliefs” as a matrix for developing the professional image of future teachers. Certainly, it is a non-linear learning process within which students build themselves as a desirable teacher at a particular time. Therefore, the educational process must support the young person “to become an expert of their own experience (...) reflective on their own points of view, using the theory as a ‘trusted general experience’” (Boritko, 2005, p. 204).

Our experience shows that the authentic environment of the future profession represents a powerful (challenging) social environment for the development of those teaching skills that will truly serve. Furthermore, that kind of learning has the similar importance in relation to the decontextualized recommendations that are mainly transmitted to the students during theoretical lectures at their faculties. The process of shaping students' knowledge with the general theoretical ideas, with the contextualised knowledge and experiences as well as with the understanding of contemporary professional needs, implies the necessity of constructivist-based initial education of teachers (Richardson, 1997).

Participation in the team within a community of practice creates the opportunities for students to share knowledge through their joint work with children and preschool teachers in a particular social milieu, which is largely mediated by social interactions. Hence, the learning and development of students is no longer an individual person's activity in a cultural and social vacuum. It is a process of development through mutual influence - apparently that is not a one-way process of transmission from a professor as an expert to the students as the inexperienced. In that process, students should be equally scaffolded through planned activities, but also in the zone of their hidden, tacit knowledge. Consequently, a university teacher is placed in the same position as a preschool teacher when co-constructing a concrete curriculum for the educational group. The paradigm of listening to the students can greatly assist in this process. Hence, what does a formation of students' knowledge in the constructivist-oriented university programs mean, if we assume there are different ways of knowledge (re-/de-)construction and understanding, which is the purpose of a constructivist classroom (Richardson, 1997)? In this case, what follows is the question about the assessment of students' learning and what the evaluation process should look like. In particular, how to evaluate the joint construction of knowledge of the team, keeping in mind that, at the end, the flow of students' progression at the university is related to linearity and individualism. In other words, students' engagement in a particular

community of practice where they started to belong, and where they are no longer just occasional guests, largely determined the course of knowledge construction.

Summarizing the above, learning with greater involvement and empowerment of students to reflect on integrated university activities as a tool that serves as the structure for the future profession, is one of the relevant principles that should be addressed in the next cycle of action research. Greater student participation in decision-making about their learning, implies permitting them to estimate paths that they will choose and benefits they can get from the practicum so they could, within the predefined outcomes and expected competences, be more engaged both individually and as part of a team. Hearing the voices of the students, demands greater sensitization towards their learning perspectives, particularly in everyday experiences of kindergarten, which are an integral part of the construction of the students' teaching competences.

One day, I'm going to teaching practice, I have to go, but I do not feel like it. And when I enter the kindergarten, the room, when I put on slippers, it all starts. You forget about everything else... (Excerpt from the focus group's comments)

### ***Support between the Micro-Universe of Student Learning***

Existing contradictions between what students learn in a relatively quiet, dignified, even lethargic environment, how students describe the learning atmosphere at the faculty environment, and what they learn in a dynamic, multi-layered world of kindergarten, where there are no clear boundaries between activities can be overcome by linking these two contexts. An example would be through joint activities of preschool teachers, students and university professors, and by supporting (scaffolding) students in their "zone of proximal professional development." In this sense, for the next cycle of action research we should keep in mind the possibility of deviations from the one-sided design (from the faculty to the authentic professional community), and active involvement of preschool teachers in the process of planning and reflection as a part of their mentoring as "a joint participation in authentic activities" (Feimanu-Nemser & Beasley, 1997, p. 109), including teams of students and university professors. Another consideration is that action research has the capacity to undermine the reputation of the organization in which it is carried out (Darlington & Scott, 2002).

Therefore, the authors propose a development of a "dialogue culture" in which students incorporating their specific approaches and perspectives can reorganize the view of university teachers (Kosnik & Beck, 2009, p. 4), and the point of view of preschool teachers. Finally, preschool teachers also have their own understanding and vision of practical training because they are deeply immersed in it; after all, they have experiences and memories of being students when they built their teaching competences.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we presented contextualized knowledge that we generated through the implementation of the second cycle of action research within a university model,

bringing together two courses in the scientific field of Early Childhood Education Teaching Methodology, which we put in the context of a mixed research approach. The results showed positive sides and weaknesses of the Integrated Teaching Practicum, which is based on the idea of continuity of students' relationships with educational groups of children, in the authentic environment of their future profession, and providing meaningful tasks arising from the content of university disciplines as well as from the curricula co-constructed within the educational groups where the students practiced.

The greatest effects were observed in strengthening students' theoretical knowledge toward better teaching competences, indicating the possibility of constructing knowledge through situational learning. Also, learning in practice communities is a two-way process: one goes from theoretical knowledge to be reviewed in relation to real children and authentic environment, and the other shapes the diverse experiences acquired without significant theoretical basis into the subsequent knowledge. In addition, situational learning has its affective and social dimensions, which direct attention to the holistic process of professional development of future preschool teachers. Research has indicated that the students were deeply confronted with a realistic, dynamic and complex context of their profession, which has positive effects in terms of the development of their generic and specific teaching competences, but on the other hand, affected the perception of not having enough time.

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# Model integriranja posebnih metodika odgoja u ranom djetinjstvu: perspektive studenata o njihovom učenju u autentičnim okruženjima

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## Sažetak

*Polazne teorijske osnove za razvoj sveučilišnog modela integriranja praktične nastave posebnih metodika u ranom djetinjstvu (Metodika upoznavanja okoline i društvene sredine i Metodika oblikovanja matematičkih pojmova) učenje su o holističkom pristupu u odgoju djece i pedagoška paradigma otvorenih programa predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja kao osnove sukonstrukcije kurikuluma. Prikazuje se razvoj modela preko implementacije i refleksije u akcijskom istraživanju u kome se koristi mješoviti istraživački pristup. Kvantitativni podaci ukazuju na pomicanje uvida studenata o metodičkim kompetencijama prema većoj objektivnosti i restrukturiranju teorijskih znanja. Kvalitativna analiza ukazuje na pomicanje od emocionalnih komponenti (nesigurnosti i strahova) kojima su studenti bili preplavljeni na početku ciklusa prema većem samopouzdanju u odnosima s malom djecom. Integriranje doprinosi nizu povoljnih efekata na razvoj općih i specifičnih metodičkih kompetencija, a otvaraju se i nova pitanja koja treba uzimati u obzir u sljedećem razdoblju. Ponajprije se misli na pitanje jaza u „povezivanju“ teorije s praksom, kao i mogućnosti veće participacije studenata u odlučivanju tijekom sljedećeg ciklusa.*

**Ključne riječi:** *afektivna i socijalna komponenta učenja; akcijsko istraživanje; integrirani metodički praktikum; situacijsko učenje; sveučilišna nastava.*