

The Role of a Kindergarten Teacher Mentor from the Students' Perspective

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Abstract

Teaching practice is an integral part of education and training of future kindergarten teachers. Aiming to answer the question whether the initial education of kindergarten teachers is organized in accordance with the requirements of contemporary practice, this research examined the views and opinions of Faculty of Teacher Education students (N=235) in Zagreb on the implementation of teaching practice in kindergartens, while contemplating and analyzing the difficulties that are perceived and found in this area. The theoretical part of this paper discusses the relationship between the quality of kindergarten teacher education and the contemporary concept of the teaching practice, which is examined in the empirical part on the chosen research sample. By means of One Sample T-Test, positive attitudes of early childhood and preschool education students on the implementation of teaching practice were confirmed. In the correlation design area, a statistically significant correlation (Spearman) was confirmed between a particular year of studies and the assessment of practice or satisfaction of students and the success of teaching practice. Third year students differed from the first and second year students in that they expressed a lower level of satisfaction with teaching practice.

Key words: *kindergarten teacher mentor; professional development; teaching practice.*

Introduction

In the initial education of future kindergarten teachers, the basis lies in contemporary paradigms of child and childhood (Bašić, 2011; Jurčević Lozančić, 2016; Rogulj, 2018) and the contemporary role of the kindergarten teacher (Beckley, 2012; Krstović, 2009; Šagud & Jurčević Lozančić, 2012), who is expected to actively observe the activities and

note the child's possibilities, in contrast to following pre-made teaching methodology guidelines with the aim of achieving program goals (Vujičić, 2011). However, the current practice and numerous studies show that the initial education of kindergarten teachers is characterized by the divide between the theory and practice (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2003; Glenn, 2005; Jurčević Lozančić, 2005; Saracho & Spodek, 2013; Taguchi, 2010), meaning that the acquired theoretical knowledge often lacks in integrity and reciprocity, and thus the practicality and usability as well. According to the above mentioned, Stoll and Fink (2000) critically analyzed the fragmentation of initial education of kindergarten teachers. That is why it is important to think about how to organize the education of future kindergarten teachers so that it corresponds with the expectations of the contemporary role of a kindergarten teacher, the new paradigm of early and preschool education and the pedagogical theory arising from the active reflection, and research of the educational practice. In addition, it is necessary to look more closely into the importance of mentorship as a continuous and interactive process based on emotional commitment and professional guidance of a student (Chabot & Chabot, 2009). This organization and implementation of the teaching practice, which is part of the graduate program for early and preschool education students, is exactly what allows students to see the importance of the integrated way of child's learning and its implementation, to understand a child as a fully active and competent being with his/her own culture, needs, and rights, and one who actively interacts with his/her immediate surroundings.

The Aim and Sequence of the Research Process

The aim of this research was to determine whether there are differences in students' attitudes and opinions, with special attention being paid to the analysis of their assessment of the quality of teaching practice in kindergartens.

A questionnaire was constructed for the purposes of this research. At the beginning of this questionnaire, there is a standardized instruction on how to fill it in, in which students are told to answer the questions honestly, that there are no correct and incorrect answers, that the survey is anonymous, and that the results will be used exclusively for research purposes. The questionnaire consisted of 10 statements with which students expressed their agreement freely and anonymously, on a 1-5 scale: 1 - I completely disagree; 2 - I mostly disagree; 3 - I cannot decide; 4 - I mostly agree; 5 - I completely agree. In the first part of the research, the results obtained from the analysis of the questionnaire, which examined the students' attitudes towards the teaching practice, will be presented.

The research included 235 students of early childhood and preschool education at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb. The research was conducted during June 2017. The Questionnaire took between 20 and 30 minutes to complete. The results were processed in the statistical package SPSS, version 23.

Results and Discussion

According to the obtained data, 91 (38.7%) of the respondents were in their first year of study, 67 (28.5%) in their second, while 77 (32.8%) students were in their third year of study.

For the purposes of this paper, basic descriptive parameters are presented: minimum and maximum result (*min. and max.*), arithmetic mean (*mean*), standard deviation (*std. deviation*), *variance*, *skewness* and *kurtosis*. The basic descriptive values are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Descriptive Values (N=235)

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis				
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error	
v1	235	4	1	5	3.23	.083	1.271	-.310	.159	-.970	.316	
v2	235	4	1	5	4.24	.060	.923	-1.193	.159	1.056	.316	
v3	235	4	1	5	3.91	.063	.969	-.577	.159	-.256	.316	
v4	235	4	1	5	3.72	.072	1.111	-.585	.159	-.409	.316	
v5	235	4	1	5	4.76	.035	.534	-2.868	.159	11.664	.316	
v6	235	4	1	5	4.61	.045	.685	-2.064	.159	4.985	.316	
v7	235	4	1	5	3.89	.060	.922	-.701	.159	.515	.316	
v8	235	4	1	5	3.97	.069	1.056	-.951	.159	.310	.316	
v9	234	4	1	5	3.57	.076	1.163	-.522	.159	-.600	.317	
v10	235	4	1	5	4.10	.055	.846	-.666	.159	-.014	.316	
Valid N (list-wise)	234											

Legend: v1 – I have received enough information on teaching practice from the practice supervisor; v2 – Teaching practice has helped me to acquire new knowledge; v3 – Kindergarten teacher mentors have shown confidence and encouraged self-confidence in students; v4 – Consultations and collaboration with the experts working in the kindergarten; v5 – Communication with children; v6 – Teaching practice has helped me to get to know children; v7 – Teacher load within the teaching practice is optimal; v8 – Teaching practice has met my expectations; v9 – The requests and organization of the teaching practice is well adapted; v10 – Overall rating of the conducted practice.

The results of descriptive statistics (Table 1) show that students generally have positive attitudes towards teaching practice. Although the differences between the obtained assessments are not statistically significant, they are indicative. The highest assessment is expressed in relation to the item *communication with children* (v5; M=4.76), followed by the assessment in relation to the item *teaching practice has helped me to get to know children* (v6; M=4.61), *teaching practice has helped me to acquire new knowledge* (v2; M= 4.24), followed by the satisfaction with the *overall rating of the conducted practice* (v10; M= 4.10). Furthermore, an average assessment is visible in items *teaching practice has met my expectations* (v8; M= 3.97), *kindergarten teacher mentors have shown confidence and encouraged self-confidence in students* (v3; M= 3.91), *teacher load within the teaching practice is optimal* (v7; M= 3.89), while

lower assessments were found in items *consultations and collaboration with the experts working in the kindergarten* (v4; M= 3.72), *the requests and organization of the teaching practice is well adapted* (v9; M= 3.57). The lowest assessments can be seen in the item *I have received enough information on teaching practice from the practice supervisor* (v1; M= 3.23).

The results obtained by One Sample T-Test show that students are content with the teaching practice. The highest level of satisfaction is expressed in the item *communication with children* (v5) followed by *teaching practice has helped me to get to know children* (v6) and *teaching practice has helped me to acquire new knowledge* (v2), as well as satisfaction with the *overall rating of the conducted practice* (v10).

Table 2
One Sample T-Test

	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis			
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
v1	235	4	1	5	3.23	.083	1.271	-.310	.159	-.970	.316
v2	235	4	1	5	4.24	.060	.923	-1.193	.159	1.056	.316
v3	235	4	1	5	3.91	.063	.969	-.577	.159	-.256	.316
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v9	234	4	1	5	3.57	.076	1.163	-.522	.159	-.600	.317
v10	235	4	1	5	4.10	.055	.846	-.666	.159	-.014	.316
Valid N (list-wise)	234										

The results obtained by Spearman's correlation coefficient (Table 3) show that in the area of correlation values there is a statistically significant negative correlation between the year of study and the assessment of satisfaction and success of teaching practice. This means that with every new year of studies, students' assessment of satisfaction with the practice decreases, i.e. the satisfaction with and success of teaching practice is lower. Given that the students' competences are progressively developing during their initial education, it is reasonable to conclude that the expectations of third year students concerning teaching practice are higher because they are conditioned by the higher level of knowledge gained during their three years of studies.

The qualitative approach was used and described in the second part of the research in which students of early childhood and preschool education answered open-ended questions as to whether they are happy with the way the teaching practice is carried out in kindergartens and with collaboration with the mentor, and in which they also

Table 3
Spearman's correlation coefficient

			v1	v2	v3	v4	v5	v6	v7	v8	v9	v10
Spearman's rho	Year of study	Correlation Coefficient	-.478	-.372	-.152	-.134	-.222	-.375	-.201	-.440	-.328	-.350
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.020	.040	.001	.000	.002	.000	.000	.000
		N	235	235	235	235	235	235	235	235	234	235

mentioned their experiences and suggestions for the advancement of the teaching practice. The qualitative interpretation of the results had a starting point in the analysis of the answer to the following question: *“Provide suggestions for improving teaching practice in kindergartens”*. There were numerous specificities in the statements of individual students that are relevant to the topic being investigated, which is why some of them will be listed. By analyzing the answers, students most often emphasized the importance of *...choosing quality mentors who inspire, from whom you can learn... who warn you... being left on our own... Furthermore, as an additional difficulty they point out their dissatisfaction with unsatisfactory communication with mentors ... kindergarten teacher mentors are not clear in their expectations... do not show enough understanding and empathy for students... and at the same time they warn about ... the indifference and lack of interest ...of some of the mentors. Therefore, to solve this problem, they suggest ...motivated mentors who want and know how to work with students... should be chosen for this role. The mentor is a key person who provides valuable support to the students in developing their skills and competences necessary to realize their own potential, both personal and professional. However, it is obvious that there is still not enough attention paid to choosing kindergarten teacher mentors who would be willing to monitor students during the teaching practice and who, as can be seen in the above-mentioned examples, do not express readiness and desire to work with students. Students' opinions are a stimulus for modernization of the existing educational study programs, but at the same time for the development of professional training programs that will enable the acquisition of new and development of existing competences for mentoring and leading students, as well as better implementation of teaching practice in kindergartens. By further analysis of the answers collected, it can be seen that students point out difficulties, problems and obstacles in organization and implementation of teaching practice. Additional difficulties they encountered during the realization of their teaching practice were consequently caused by *...traditional methods in some of the kindergartens, opposite of what they learned at their faculty ... we had to fit into their practice ... we did not have the opportunity to express our ideas freely According to their opinions, work practiced at the faculty and kindergarten is often different, and they therefore warn about the lack of integration of theoretical and practical knowledge. Particularly, they warn about ... lack of clear instruction at the faculty concerning realization of activities in the kindergarten... and therefore suggest...**

better coordination between faculties and kindergartens... The students mention the difficulty and complexity of certain tasks which need to be done during the teaching practice *...we were not sufficiently trained to understand certain tasks... theory is one thing, but practice is something else...* They think that the tasks should be clearly defined so that they could think about the ways of their realization. In that sense, students suggest more opportunities for *...consultative work and reflection with mentors, but also faculty professors...* Today, reflection on practice is considered to be one of the essential competences of educators and the link between theory and practice. Furthermore, encouraging the research attitude and reflexivity is a fundamental starting point for modern education programs for kindergarten teachers, but also one of the biggest challenges as it is a highly demanding process both for many students and mentors (Senge, 2003; Šagud, 2006; Šagud & Jurčević Lozančić, 2012). In reflexive practice, learning does not only occur between an individual and practice, but also with other subjects. This is a process of aligning and developing the team's ability to create results that its members really want to achieve (Senge, 2003) and that are directed towards a common vision. By the aforementioned approach, students become more motivated in building a deeper understanding of their practice, accepting new ideas, developing overall competences, especially self-criticism and reflexivity. By analyzing the answers, it is evident that students express the need for reflection at the faculty and kindergarten, and feel it is not sufficiently included in the program. Furthermore, most students emphasize that the practice should be continuously carried out in a particular educational group *...rather than only several hours on a certain day of the week throughout the academic year, because that makes understanding of the children more difficult and reduces communication...* In general, most students emphasize the need for more practice during studying. Based on the analysis of their opinion, it is possible to conclude there is a need for linking teaching practice and other courses at the faculty, especially those related to teaching methodology... *teaching methodologies are not interrelated... we are not sure whether we acted in the right way... we need a lot of extra work and energy to overcome the differences...* The planning and realization of the project work was, for students, a valuable experience in direct work, which the students rated highly *...a child learns the most when he/she is active, by researching... when they are exploring, they are having the most fun...* Since children have inborn potential, openness, curiosity, and desire to connect with others and communicate with them, such learning experiences during early institutional education are not actually difficult to provide (Jurčević Lozančić, 2016). So, it is the project work that provides children with the possibility of participation, exploration, observation, discussion or assumption. Students' assessment of the quality of space and play materials and children's exploring is mostly positive. The answers have confirmed that students were most satisfied with having the possibility of trying out and developing communication... *with different children of different age...* From the analysis of students' answers, it can be seen that it is the teaching practice that allows students to learn

about ...*different pedagogical approaches...* and a good kindergarten teacher's work... According to the students' opinions, opportunities for learning and advantages of teaching practice are numerous; for example, it... *opens a lot of opportunities to face yourself in a better way...* and it represents *work on oneself... a unique experience...* which convincingly confirms the following opinion: *...every day spent in teaching practice is special, interesting, dynamic and permeated with smiles and joy, which definitely confirms that I have chosen the most interesting profession.*

Conclusion

This paper deals with the contemporary approach to education of kindergarten teachers according to the constructivist paradigm, which implies continuous questioning of the relationship between the main actors of teaching practice: students, kindergarten teachers and mentors in kindergartens, as well as faculty professors. The results of this research favor the positive attitudes of students to the implementation of teaching practice. According to the students' opinions, the qualifications and motivations of kindergarten teacher mentors are extremely important in the process of training of the students for their future profession. That means that the success of students' training is significantly influenced by the active role of mentors in the preparation and implementation of teaching practice. By application of quantitative and qualitative methodology and interpretation of the results obtained, the possibilities of understanding and evaluation of the teaching practice based on the contemporary paradigms and principles of constructivism are explained. Based on all the above, we can conclude that teaching practice needs to be organized in such a way that it becomes a continuous, dynamic and open system which at the same time includes reflection, orientation towards theory, collaboration and accountability, and which develops the skills and knowledge of students in all aspects of their future profession as kindergarten teachers.

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Uloga odgajatelja mentora iz studentske perspektive

Sažetak

Stručno-pedagoška praksa integrirani je dio obrazovanja i osposobljavanja budućih odgajatelja. U traženju odgovara na pitanje je li inicijalno obrazovanje odgajatelja organizirano u skladu sa zahtjevima suvremene prakse, u ovom su istraživanju ispitivani stavovi i mišljenja studenata (N=235) Učiteljskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, o provedbi stručno-pedagoške prakse u dječjim vrtićima, uz istodobno sagledavanje i analiziranje poteškoća koje na tom području opažaju i na koje nailaze. U teorijskom dijelu ovog rada propituje se međuodnos kvalitete obrazovanja odgojitelja i suvremene koncepcije stručno-pedagoške prakse, koji se u empirijskom dijelu provjerava na odabranom istraživačkom uzorku. Jednim One Sample T- Testom potvrđeni su pozitivni stavovi studenata ranog i predškolskog odgoja o provedbi stručno-pedagoške prakse. U području korelacijskog nacrtu potvrđena je statistički značajna povezanost (Spearman) između pojedine godine studija i procjene prakse, odnosno zadovoljstva studenata i uspješnosti stručno-pedagoške prakse. Studenti treće godine studija razlikuju se od studenata prve i druge godine studija u smjeru manje iskazanog zadovoljstva stručno-pedagoškom praksom.

Ključne riječi: odgajatelj mentor; profesionalni razvoj; stručno-pedagoška praksa.