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**ORGANIZING THE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE OF FINAL
YEAR STUDENTS IN THE PANDEMIC CONTEXT**

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Abstract

The qualification of the students of the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education specialization is a teacher for primary education/ teacher for preschool education. The professional competencies of the students of our specialization refer to: *the management of the instructive-educational process and of its specific activities in primary and preschool education and to the management of the class of students and the group of preschoolers*. The discipline or disciplines that correspond the closest to these competencies are the disciplines of Pedagogical Practice (observational and teaching practice). The pedagogical teaching practice ensures the students' familiarity with the specifics of the didactic activities in primary education, facilitating the practical application of their knowledge regarding the methodological stages of carrying out activities specific to the instructive-educational process in primary education. The purpose of this discipline is to offer students the opportunity to practice the application of teaching principles and methods specific to teaching activities in primary education. The question we tried to answer through this endeavour was how to effectively organize, in the current pandemic context, the pedagogical practice of students? The solution found was to move even the students' teaching practice in the online environment.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The problematic of competencies

At a European level, there is an increasing debate about adapting graduates' qualifications and competencies to the needs of the job market as well as increasing the percentage of people in different forms of basic or lifelong learning. European policies, also adopted by Romania, focus on the competencies acquired by graduates rather than on their knowledge. Romanian higher education has adapted to these new European requirements and standards; in essence, the training and evaluation of future specialists trained in Romanian universities is founded on the competencies and qualifications required by their future profession.

The optimal development of the educational process is conditioned by a series of factors, of which the competence of the teacher carries significant importance (Bocoş & Jucan, 2019; Cristea, 2000; Muste, 2016). The progress of students depends to a large extent on the professional training of the teacher and, in effect, on his entire personality, the results obtained reflecting the level of his performance, his pedagogical mastery, his professional competence. The organization and execution of the didactic activity requires, on the part of the teacher, certain pedagogical competencies that will allow him to act successfully in the education of the students. The teacher's professional success depends on mastering various ways of approaching teaching-learning activities, the appropriate use of a wide range of teaching strategies, the development of communication and relationship skills with students, class and time management skills (Muste, 2019) etc.

1.2. Qualification and competencies of students of the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education specialization

The qualification of the students of the Pedagogy of Primary and Preschool Education specialization is a teacher for primary education/ teacher for preschool education. The professional competencies of the students of our specialization refer to: *the management of the instructive-educational process and of its specific activities in the primary and preschool education and to the management of the class of students and the group of preschoolers*. In this context, we mention the learning outcomes specific to this competency, outcomes that we consider important: the graduate designs learning programmes or educational interventions for primary and preschool education in order to carry out educational interventions with a compensatory, corrective, ameliorating, formative role, etc. Furthermore, the graduate plans educational activities and learning situations for primary and preschool education in order to create learning experiences that are beneficial to the learner; the graduate undertakes and conducts educational activities specific to primary and preschool education, in compliance with teaching standards, in order to achieve educational goals. The graduate performs the required steps of documentation, online documentation, selection, processing, adaptation, and accessibility of curricular content, capitalizing on current educational paradigms (focusing on the educable, focus on competencies, curricular approach, integrated teaching, active learning, differentiated teaching, virtual education paradigm, etc.). The graduate applies and adapts different teaching strategies to the particularities of the

class of pupils/ group of pre-schoolers (age and individual particularities, general level of education, knowledge and skills, etc.) in order to personalize the training. The graduate also uses strategies, methods, techniques and tools to observe, monitor, and evaluate learning processes, learning outcomes, and academic progress of pupils/ preschoolers in a formative sense, in order to optimize educational processes.

2. Problem Statement

The disciplines that correspond the closest to these competencies are the disciplines of Pedagogical Practice (observational and teaching).

In the current context, generated by the presence of a large number of infections with the SARS-CoV-2 virus (March 2020-May 2021), a period in which teaching activities took place almost entirely online, we had to rethink the organization and implementation of students' pedagogical practice.

3. Research Questions

Our question was how to effectively organize the students' pedagogical teaching practice, in the current pandemic context, given that all the teaching activity was achieved online (pupils at home in front of their laptops, teachers at home in front of their laptops, students at home in front of their laptops)?

4. Purpose of the Study

We mention the fact that the discipline Pedagogical Teaching Practice in primary education provides specific information and facilitates the formation and development of competencies for the design, organization, and development of teaching activities in primary education. The Pedagogical Teaching Practice discipline ensures the familiarization of students with the specifics of teaching activities in primary education, facilitating the practical application of knowledge regarding the methodological stages of activities specific to the instructional-educational process in primary education (Gama, 2005; Ionescu & Chiş, 2001). The purpose of this discipline is to offer students the opportunity to practice the implementation of teaching principles and methods specific to teaching activities in primary education (Iucu, 2001).

5. Research Methods

The solution for organizing the pedagogical teaching practice in a pandemic context was a better documentation (through the study of the specialized literature) and then its organization in an online system. The entire organization of the teaching practice was done by the teaching practice coordinator (university professor) and by the teaching practice mentor (the teacher from the class where the student is doing their practice). In this way, better coordination and supervising was achieved. The responsibilities of those involved were clearly delineated.

5.1. Responsibilities of the practice coordinator

The coordinator of the pedagogical teaching practice, the person designated by the faculty to carry out the coordination, guidance, and evaluation of the students' practical activities, had the following responsibilities:

- To monitor and guide the development of pedagogical practice activities online.
- To ensure the good implementation of the online pedagogical practice.
- To provide online support to students regarding the completion of the documents from the pedagogical practice portfolio.
- To evaluate and objectively grade the content of the pedagogical practice portfolio.

5.2. Responsibilities of the practice mentor

In order to carry out the pedagogical teaching practice with success, the practice mentor must:

- Introduce the student to the pupils, online.
- Facilitate the student familiarizing themselves with all of the pupils in the class, in an online environment, in order to establish effective communication and cooperation relationships.
- Present to the students, in an online environment, the curricular documents specific to primary education and to guide them in completing the pedagogical practice portfolio (planning, design, daily programs, etc.).
- Establish the rules that the student must follow in the online pedagogical practice activity.
- Present the information necessary to complete the pedagogical practice portfolio and to offer any additional explanations as required.
- Guide the student in designing certain didactic materials necessary in their future professional activity.

5.3. Responsibilities of the student

The responsibilities of the practicing student derive from the following attributions:

- They must participate, in an online environment, to all the activities carried out during the pedagogical practice period.
- They must respect the online programme of the pedagogical practice, the schedule and the programme of the class where they carry out their pedagogical teaching practice, as well as the norms proposed by the mentor teacher.

6. Findings

At the beginning of the semester, four online meetings were organized on the Teams Platform between the students and the pedagogical practice coordinator.

Thus, at the first meeting, the discussions comprised of:

- The importance of pedagogical practice for the training of future teachers.
- The manner of organizing the activities within the teaching practice in schools.

- The objectives provided in the course syllabus.
- The competencies targeted for improvement during the semester.
- Compulsory bibliography (and presentation of bibliographic materials).
- The responsibilities of all parties involved in the organization and implementation of pedagogical practice activities.
- National Education Law and Order of Ministry of National Education no. 3371 / 12.03.2013 on the approval of the curriculum for primary education and the methodology for the implementation of the curriculum for primary education

During the second meeting, the curricular documents for planning and designing school activities were presented and aspects related to the curricular areas, disciplines, thematic units, lessons, types of lessons were clarified.

The third meeting was dedicated to the presentation of the characteristics of children's development between 5/6 and 10/11 years, as well as the viewing of certain recorded integrated lessons and their analysis.

At the last meeting, the manner of conducting the teaching practice in the pandemic context was discussed in detail.

The students will be assigned a teaching practice position by the practice coordinator and the representative of the Cluj County School Inspectorate. Students will begin their practice in the first week of the semester, on the day communicated by the practice coordinator.

The students had the obligation to participate in the EXCLUSIVELY ONLINE teaching practice in a state school under the guidance of a mentor with a teaching certification of level I or level II; the students did NOT physically enter the schools (the students being at home during this entire period). The teaching practice took place over 12 days, namely 48 hours. A minimum of 6 hours had to be hours of online teaching performed by the student, while the remaining 42 hours were hours of online observational practice. Attendance at the practice was mandatory.

Throughout the practice, students had the obligation to keep the webcam on and take notes on the entire activity of the mentor and their pupils.

During the practice, the students developed a practice portfolio, this being the method of assessment for this semester.

7. Conclusion

The pedagogical teaching practice portfolio was elaborated by each student and included:

- Grades received for the activities taught online – grades given by the mentor, with the signature of the mentor and the director.
- Drafting observation sheets for all the observed lessons.
- Drafting in a word document of 12 lesson plans for the class where the student completed the teaching practice. These plans had to be descriptive, detailed.
- Creating lesson analysis sheets for the lessons taught.
- Other teaching materials relevant to the teaching activity in school.

A brief analysis of the students' pedagogical practice portfolios shows that the grades of the activities taught online by the students are grades of 9 and 10. The observation sheets are complete and detailed. The lesson plans made by the students are detailed and methodologically correct.

The feedback received from the mentor teachers was a positive one, they appreciated the students' activity even in its online version. Mentors considered that students are familiar with the specifics of school life and activities: types of educational institutions, activity regime, programmes, material resources, human resources, educational factors involved, the system of extracurricular activities. Furthermore, even in a pandemic context, through online activities, students managed to familiarize themselves with and study the school documents that form the basis of the organization and management of the teaching process and know the specifics of the teaching activity in primary education. The mentors stated that the students are familiar with the scientific contents of the existing disciplines in the curriculum for primary education as well as the existing competencies in the school curriculum.

The analysis of the lessons taught by students clearly shows that they identify the components of the educational process as well as the interdependence between them at the level of a lesson, they know the main types of lessons, they are familiar with the different ways of integrating content and the stages specific to each type of lesson; they are familiar with and can implement the defining notes of the documents specific to didactic design: annual/ semester plans, design of the thematic units, lesson plans.

Students developed the ability to observe (globally and focused) the teaching activities of the mentor, the extracurricular activities, as well as the behaviour of the pupils. (Muste, 2014) Overall, the students developed the competency to solve specific situations of class management and formed a positive attitude towards the profession of teacher for primary education.

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