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**Education, Reflection, Development****STUDENTS' ONLINE TEACHING PRACTICE WITHIN THE  
PANDEMIC CONTEXT - CHALLENGES AND ADVANTAGES**

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**Abstract**

A main part of the teacher training program within university has always been represented by the teaching practice courses. Supporting quality teaching practices has also been a main aim of the higher education system, in general, especially in the case of the teacher training programs. Due to the pandemic, the teaching practice courses were temporarily conducted online, making use of the possibility to communicate with students during synchronous didactic activities. Participating in online teaching practice courses was special both for students, teachers and mentors and the need to adapt the didactic approach to this specific context of online environment emerged. The current study explores students' insights after participating in online teaching training courses during a semester. The participants were part of a group of pre-service teachers, for both preschool and primary school education. A questionnaire was used to gather their opinions. The questionnaire included both open-ended and closed-ended questions. The obtained results were used both to propose new ways of ensuring students practical preparation and to identify if their specific competences related to this field have evolved and to what extent.

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*Keywords:* Online didactic activities, pandemic context, teaching practice courses

## 1. Introduction

During the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022, the teaching practice courses conducted in Romania at the Department of Educational Sciences of the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca have undergone some main changes. The students studying in their second year, bachelor level, at the Preschool and Primary Education specialization, had to participate in their teacher training courses exclusively online. Direct access within the educational institutions was forbidden due to the public policies that prioritized public health and safety in the pandemic context.

If this situation had not appeared, students would have gone to kindergartens and would have taught preschool children's short moments of different didactic activities. But the new situation led to the need to adjust the didactic approach to the context of the online environment. A new approach was created to reduce the gap between the strict regulations and the need to ensure students' practical and professional preparation (Truta & Chis, 2021).

The transition from face-to-face, synchronous activities to online synchronous ones was challenging for all educational actors - students, on the one hand, and mentors and tutors on the other one. One of the positive effects of this transition was the improvement of the collaboration between mentors and tutors from the university with the ones in the kindergartens. Following activities were chosen for the students: observation of didactic activities conducted with the preschool children (in real time) by the preschool teachers, creation of digital instruments for preschool children that can be used in various educational contexts and teaching short moments of didactic activities via online communication platforms. Students received constant guidance and support, both from the mentor from the university and the tutor from the kindergarten. Assistance was provided before, during and after each meeting.

## 2. Problem Statement

The activities conducted within the pedagogical practice offer pre-service teachers the opportunity to practice different teaching strategies, so that they prepare themselves for the real context of educational practice and teaching profession (Mannathoko, 2013; Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

Perry (2004) mentions that pedagogical practice can be conducted for the pre-service teachers in many different manners. At the Educational Sciences Department of the Babes-Bolyai University, the students enrolled in the Preschool and Primary Education program go through the following phases: in the first year of study the students conduct observation of didactic activities conducted and complete observation sheets for each activity they take part in, discuss their notes with mentors or tutors and get grades for them; in the second year of study the students begin to teach short moments of a didactic activity and get graded for this and in the third and final year, they have to teach a whole activity. The teaching practice takes place during each semester, weekly for at least four hours (Pedagogical Practice Syllabus, 2020). The first semester of each academic year, students participate in pedagogical practice in kindergartens and the second semester they practice teaching within primary schools. The mentors of the teaching practice course establish a solid collaboration with the tutors from the educational institutions in which the didactic activities are implemented. Class control is gained gradually, starting with class-

teachers observation, and receiving constant support until teaching a whole class. Special attention is given also to the process of teaching planning, before effectively teaching in front of children.

Pedagogical practice offers students the possibility to concretely implement the fundamental concepts, theories and knowledge gained within other main disciplines studied at the university. Students can also develop a clearer perspective of the different children's' learning needs and the teachers' role (Hattie, 2009). Silva (2021, pp. 117-125) characterizes the teaching practice as "the union of theory and practice in the exercise of teaching and apprehending knowledge, in pedagogical action". Another important aspect that pedagogical practice can develop refers to the development of communicative competence, since the kindergarten group or the classroom represent a unique communication space (Muste, 2016).

When approaching the subject of pedagogical practice, the role of mentor or tutor must also be mentioned. Stan (2020) shows that the support offered by different mentoring and professional counselling activities has a main impact on the development of professionalism. During the pedagogical practice courses, students can discover once again the main role of the teacher as a key figure that supports the learning process.

The specific features of the online learning environment can influence students' learning experience and outcomes (Cuc, 2013, 2014, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Wulin & Qin, 2021), so there is a need for a continuous effort to improve the context in which students' preparation is conducted.

### **3. Research Questions**

The research questions of the present study were:

1. Which are the main advantages and strengths of the teaching practice identified by students?
2. Which are the main challenges or limits of teaching practice identified by students?
3. Did their knowledge and skills develop by conducting teaching practice didactic activities in an online environment?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the current investigation was to investigate students' opinions related to the teaching practice didactic activities in which they took part, and which were conducted within the online environment in the period of their first semester of the academic year 2021-2022, namely from October 2021 until January 2022.

### **5. Research Methods**

The type of study we aimed to conduct was an exploratory one, completed by a series of proposals for improving the organization and implementation of teaching training courses.

A questionnaire was created by the teaching practice mentor to receive students' feedback regarding their participation in the online teaching practice activities conducted in kindergarten. The questionnaire included 12 items, both open- and closed-ended. Besides completing demographic data,

students were asked to mention the following aspects: three of the main positive aspects of the teaching practice, the main advantage of participating in teaching practice during their studies, the main acquisitions they think they acquired during the teaching practice, the main limits of the way the teaching practice was conducted. They were also asked about their communication with their mentors, both from the university and kindergarten, and to mention some suggestions regarding the conduct of the teaching practice in the future. A Likert scale with five stages was used to help participants express to what extent they were satisfied with the practical skills acquired during the teaching practice course. In the end, students had to give examples of three elements (skills, information, competences, etc.) they studied in courses or seminars previously and that they used during the teaching practice.

The questionnaires were delivered online, and the responses were anonymous, to increase the fidelity of the obtained answers. The participants (N=44) were students in their second year at Preschool and Primary Education bachelor program, studying at the Educational Sciences Department of Babes-Bolyai University, Romania.

The attempt to improve educational process, even if it is conducted under special conditions within the online environment, should be based on the main beneficiaries needs (Cuc, 2013, 2014; Walker, 2018; Cuc, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). This fact supports our option for including a high number of open-ended questions in the questionnaire (8 questions), to identify students' opinions, perceptions and needs. The answers were gathered and analyzed qualitatively.

## 6. Findings

The obtained answers were grouped around the main themes followed by the current investigation and will be presented for each one of these.

The first aspect research referred to the advantages and strengths of the pedagogical practice conducted in the online environment perceived by students. According to the students' opinions expressed in their answers, the main advantages of their teaching practice included: the possibility to involve in different interactions with preschool children (44 answers), although these took place online, at distance; receiving support from mentors (35 answers) and knowledge enrichment (27 answers). 25 students mentioned that the online environment helped them to overcome more quickly the emotions specific to the first teaching activities, which can mean that they perceived this environment as being safer than the physical one. Getting used to the atmosphere specific for a kindergarten group came along with learning different class management techniques or how to grab children's attention or time management. Lesson planning was also mentioned among the elements that students gained knowledge about (12 answers). Learning more about lesson planning was facilitated by practice within kindergarten and one of the things that cannot be fully learned in other context than pedagogical practice.

The second aspect investigated among students' opinions referred to the challenges/limits of the teaching practice that students were able to identify. The main limit mentioned by all students involved in the current study was the fact that the practice was conducted online and no direct interaction between them and preschool children or teachers was possible. Besides this aspect, which didn't depend on the mentor from the university or on the students or on the kindergartens, the students mentioned the presence of technical difficulties (32 answers), which sometimes interrupted their activities during the hours of

pedagogical practice. Although the mentoring classes were conducted only online, students mentioned that the guidance received from their mentors eased the online communication and strengthened and maintained their learning motivation (29 answers). After each observation or teaching session the activity was analyzed by students together with their mentor, which offered explanations and for each new task that the students had to prepare, the mentor offered different suggestions or solutions.

The third theme synthesized after gathering students' answers referred to the skills, they developed by conducting their pedagogical teaching practice in the online environment. Most of the students in the investigated group (39 answers) mentioned that their digital skills developed a lot. They learned to prepare digital didactic materials and consider that this skill will be very useful for them in the post-pandemic period as well. Other aspects mentioned in the collected answers related to knowledge enrichment were: using different teaching methods (17 answers); completing children's observation sheets (11 answers); establishing operational objectives for each didactic activity (9 answers); curriculum implementation (7 answers). Students expressed that their knowledge regarding these subjects was enriched through pedagogical practice, completing what they have already learned at courses and seminars at the university.

An important suggestion that all students made was to allocate more hours within the academic teaching plans to the activities of pedagogical practice. This should be a matter of concern for the stakeholders involved in establishing the hours spent by students within their professional practical preparation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Taking the above presented results into account we can observe that students' opinions are worthy of being considered to improve the educational approach used to prepare them for the teaching profession within preschool and primary institutions.

The way pedagogical practice is conducted and the learning experience they gain during each semester will, for sure, influence their perception and attitudes towards teaching practice and, the way they will approach their future students when they become teachers.

The online environment of the pedagogical practice during the pandemic period was challenging for students, but helped them also in gaining different skills, specific to this context, which maybe they will use in the future in different situations (for instance preparing a digital content for their students). The challenges referred to the specific context of online communication (like technical difficulties or lack of direct social contact with peers and teachers). The transition of pedagogical practice from face-to-face activities to online ones can also be approached as an opportunity to explore new and effective online teaching models.

The way pedagogical practice is conducted should represent a matter of concern for all categories of actors involved in this complex process. Students should benefit from guidance and support, in the form of different demonstrative activities, practical advice and training sessions, to develop their adjustment capacity and also their practical professional skills. The development of a series of guidelines for online pedagogical practice would be very useful in contexts such as the one described within this paper.

The present study has a series of limitations, regarding the sample of involved participants, whose perspective should be completed with the one of the mentors involved in this unique experience and regarding also the unique perspective offered by the research instrument used in the current case. Further studies can be conducted by using a variety of both qualitative and quantitative research methods to improve the results validity. Another aspect that can be approached in different future studies refers to a complex assessment of students' acquisitions gained during this period, since their skills developed during the special pandemic period, but not optimally.

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