



## CHALLENGES IN THE REALIZATION OF FUTURE PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

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*Abstract:* Professional practice of future preschool teachers is one of the most sensitive areas in the entire structure of their initial education. Preschool institutions have an important role in the partnership between faculties and preschool institutions, because they implement professional practice with the aim of training students for practical work with children. The main goal of the research was to examine how preschool teachers-mentors assess the effectiveness of professional practice in order to connect the theoretical and practical training of students. The sample consisted of 150 preschool teachers from 6 preschool institutions in Serbia. A questionnaire developed for the purposes of this research was used to collect data on the efficiency of students' professional practice. The results showed that preschool teachers are not sufficiently informed about the goals and tasks that students should realize during their internship in a preschool institution. Also, the majority of preschool teachers (61%) stated that they were reluctant to accept the role of a mentor in professional practice, the most common reason being that students do not accept their suggestions and are not interested enough to get involved in working with children. The obtained results indicate the need for more intensive communication between a faculty and a preschool institution, converging of goals and tasks in professional practice, all that with the aim of better preparing students for their future professions.

*Key words:* preschool teacher, student, professional practice

### INTRODUCTION

Professional practice of future preschool teachers is an important dimension of their initial education. Apart from acquiring theoretical knowledge at the university, it is even more important to enable future preschool teachers to develop their potential for the profession and a readiness to respond to the increasing trends of changes in theories of upbringing and education, preschool institutions, and wider social changes. The duration and realization of professional practice are determined by the *Regulation*

on *Standards and Procedure for Accreditation of Study Programmes* (2019), which states that higher education institutions offering study programs in the field of education must provide pedagogical practice in pedagogical institutions in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> years of study, at least 90 hours per year. The content and the structure of professional practice as a course are determined by the professional practice course specification. At the Faculty of Education in Jagodina, the goal of professional practice is defined as: introducing students to the organizational structure of upbringing and education work in a preschool institution; introduction to upbringing and education methods, forms of work and realization of all forms of work with preschool children; introducing students to programs and to the model of evaluation of upbringing and education work in preschool institutions; training students to apply different research methods and techniques in working with preschool children; training students in systematic observation and analysis of social relations in a preschool institution (Course directory, 2014).

Although professional practice implies that future preschool teachers practically get to know their profession through active participation in various daily activities in the preschool institution, Vandekerckhove et al. point out that the level of education of preschool teachers is not a guarantee of quality work, but that it depends more on the staff's ability to create a high-quality educational environment that allows enough room for continuous professional development (Vandekerckhove et al. 2013). In *New Fundamentals of Preschool Education Curriculum* (2018), a model of future preschool teacher education presupposes the education of a preschool teacher as a reflective practitioner, which implies an active individual who explores different possibilities for solving practical problems. "A reflective practitioner creates, that is, builds a reflective practice based on his/her own reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action which is a characteristic of an excellent (reflective) practitioner" (Bubnys and Kairienė, 2016). Such a model of education includes the development of various abilities and skills of future preschool teachers, such as: inclination towards teamwork; independence and creativity in applying acquired knowledge, skills and abilities in practice; a proneness to introspection, critical thinking and self-criticism; autonomy in decision making and responsibility for one's own decisions and actions; openness to new ideas and adaptability to new situations and differences (Marković, 2014).

The necessary competencies for the job of a preschool teacher raise a question as to whether the initial education of preschool teachers develops these competencies in accordance with the set standards and requirements of the educational profession. Some authors point out that, in the initial education of preschool teachers, it is necessary to reduce the possibilities for

the effect of two powerful mechanisms that often negatively affect the professional work of future preschool teachers, namely: imitating the established routine practice and attitude towards a child and strong personal experiences of upbringing and education. In order to bypass these negative mechanisms which often affect young preschool teachers by inertia, Henting believes it is necessary to create study opportunities that will give future preschool teachers a possibility and freedom to develop and create their own ideas about their role before molding them (Henting, 1997). Preschool teacher education is characterized by the still present mechanistic approach, fragmentation, a gap between education and practice, a discontinuity between initial education and further professional development. A current state of preschool teachers' initial education in terms of their competence testifies of the lack of competencies developed in the context of practice but also a lack of competencies for taking on an autonomous role in education (Bubnys and Kairienė, 2016; Mićanović, 2010; Krnjaja, 2019; Backovic, 2019). The observed weaknesses in the initial education of preschool teachers include: insufficient harmonization of the initial education program with the competencies expected of a preschool teacher; the dominance of *ex-cathedra* teaching work with students, where the teacher's role continues to be reduced to knowledge transfer; insufficiently present integration of different methodologies; professional practice has not yet gained the importance and place it deserves, since the issue of practice rooms has yet to be resolved; the role and status of the preschool teacher-mentor has not been defined yet, nor has his/her education for performing the mentoring role, etc. (Markovic, 2014).

Considering that students - future preschool teachers are expected to abandon the role of passive knowledge recipients and those who accept and practice certain skills required for educational work, it is imperative to enable them to take on an active role and a responsibility for their own learning, and then also for applying knowledge in direct practice. This also requires changes in higher education and adapting the concept of studies and program outcomes to the needs of the modern educational staff (Mićanović, 2019). Accordingly, the guidelines for the conceptualization of the study program for initial education of preschool teachers should relate to the harmonization of study programs with the time in which education is realized; a study program requires a shift of emphasis from teaching content to a learning process; a learning process is enhanced through joint research of teachers, students and practitioners; interconnecting courses, areas and knowledge into a harmonious whole that would reduce the problems observed in preschool teachers education related to the lack of synthesis and usability of knowledge (Goodnough, Falkenberg & MacDonald, 2016).

In order to avoid present discontinuity between initial education and later professional development caused by insufficient cooperation of these institutions, it is necessary to establish a partnership between a higher education institution and a kindergarten. An additional reason for the reconceptualization of a relationship between a higher education institution and a kindergarten in Serbia towards partnership, according to Krnjaja (2019), is related to harmonization with the two new educational policy documents, Fundamentals of preschool upbringing and education program 'Years of Ascent' (Rules on Fundamentals..., 2018) and Standards of competences for the preschool teacher profession and their professional development (Rules on Standards..., 2018). In addition to the fact that the partnership implies the involvement of kindergartens in the field of providing professional practice, where kindergartens provide co-mentors-preschool teachers in whose educational groups students plan and implement program activities, it also involves collaboration, sharing power, sharing responsibilities, mutual trust and joint participation in creating educational practice (Mićanović, 2019; Pavlović Breneselović, 2010).

Through cooperation and partnership relations between faculties for the education of preschool teachers and preschools institutions, the key elements related to quality training of students for work should be defined. In addition to harmonizing the curriculum with the current program for preschool upbringing and education, and familiarizing preschool teachers-mentors with the contents of professional practice and students' obligations, it is necessary to clearly define the role and tasks of a preschool teacher-mentor. There should always be exchange and reciprocity in the mentoring relationship between preschool teachers and students. In traditional forms, mentoring is 'a form of professional development in which a more experienced and knowledgeable person helps and guides a less experienced and knowledgeable one' (Miškeljin, 2016: 397). In this model, there is a one-way exchange from the more experienced (mentor) to the less experienced (trainee). The new mentoring model implies a common action of individuals, groups, research and educational institutions of all levels of the education system and its broader surroundings (Vujičić and Čamber Tambolaš, 2017; Stipičić and Prlić, 2019).

Many studies point out the problems that arise in training students for their future profession. In their study of how students at teacher training faculties and their professors see the relationship of theory and practice, Polovina and Pavlović (2010) came up with the results showing that the experience of a 'split' in university teaching prevails, as university programs are almost exclusively equipped with theoretical knowledge, which students consider an inadequate preparation for work. Both Rajović and Radulović

(2007) talk about the fact that the theoretical knowledge acquired in initial education does not develop into relevant applicable knowledge. Practitioners say that their professional learning is associated with its verification in practical situations, and according to the research results, those educational programs that integrate theory and practice have the greatest impact on their professional development. In a survey conducted at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Užice, the most common students' remark related to practice was dissatisfaction with the time provided for practice and insufficient engagement during practice, a passive role, or merely observation of the educational process. Students' suggestions were to increase the time for practice and to provide opportunities for more active participation (Nikolić, 2008). In the research conducted by Stepić and Prlić (2019), the results show that participation of students and preschool teachers-mentors in professional practice is oversimplified, which is summarized as a simplification of participation in professional practice by reducing preschool education to realization of pre-planned educational work; practice and professional practice to a set of activities; activities to planned learning situations; mentoring to practical training of students to fit into the existing kindergarten culture through adequate forms of behavior in practice. In general, the focus is on performing an activity, rather than on joint participation in practice, as well as on managing children's learning, rather than on building relationships with all participants.

Fulan (1993) believes that these problems related to the realization of professional practice, and a consequential mentoring relationship in the preparation of future preschool teachers, can be overcome by the paradigm shift which includes participation of all subjects - inclusion of quality preschool teachers in student education and student participation in these changes, theoretical knowledge but also new learning strategies - action research and reflective practice.

Starting from the importance of professional practice and the role of a preschool teacher-mentor in the process of practical training of students-future preschool teachers, we consider it justified to study the attitudes of preschool teacher mentors about the concept, goals, and challenges in the realization of professional practice in a preschool institution.

## METHOD

### *Research Problem and Objectives*

The research problem is defined through the following question: how do preschool teachers-mentors evaluate a concept of professional practice that

takes place in preschool institutions and to what extent are they motivated to perform a mentoring role?

The main objective of the research is to examine the attitudes of preschool teachers-mentors about the effectiveness of professional practices in order to link theoretical with practical training of students, future preschool teachers.

### Research Sample

The research included 150 preschool teachers from six preschool institutions in Serbia.

### *Research Instruments*

The instrument used in the research is a survey created for the purposes of this research which contains open and closed type questions and within these, questions of descriptive attitude scale and ranking types. The survey contains six questions that examine the attitudes of preschool teachers about students' competence to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, about the problems they face when fulfilling the mentor role, about the reasons for accepting or not accepting the mentor role and suggestions for possible strategies to improve the quality of professional practice.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To examine the attitudes of preschool teachers-mentors about the goals of professional practice, the first question was to rank the goals of professional practice, on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates the goal they consider to be the most important one. Table 1 shows the results obtained for this question.

Table 1. Ranking the goals of professional practice by importance

<b>Professional practice goals</b>	<b>Ranking</b>
For students to connect theoretical knowledge with practical experience	1
For students to gain some practical experience	2
For students to adapt to the kindergarten environment	3
For students to be trained to solve specific problems in direct work practice	4
For students to form their own pedagogical style through practical activities	5

The preschool teachers' answers show that they understand the importance and significance of linking theoretical knowledge with practice in preparation for their vocation, as they put this goal in the first place, i.e. they valued it as the most important goal. The second most important goal for students was to gain practical experience. The preschool teachers ranked adaptation to a preschool institution and solving specific problems third and fourth, respectively. What especially attracts attention is the goal ranked 5, and that is the goal that refers to the formation of one's own pedagogical style through practical work. The fact that the preschool teachers-mentors define this goal as the least important can be interpreted by the presence of the 'imitative' model of realizing professional practice in which students observe their more experienced colleagues and repeat what they see (Stojanović, 2009). In order for the student to accomplish the set tasks, in addition to respecting the knowledge of a more experienced preschool teacher, he/she should rely on the acquired knowledge about educational work and try to apply the relevant principles in his/her own way to given circumstances, which means to adopt the proper investigative, critical approach to the social and educational contexts in which he/she operates. This also means that he/she will not passively adapt to what he/she finds in the institution, but will instead try to change something, as students are introduced to the culture of practice through their own participation. The practice is first observed to be understood and then one participates more actively in it through some of the selected practice repertoires (Chizhik et al., 2017).

When we asked the preschool teachers about the problems they encountered during the fulfillment of their mentoring role, we got the following answers: the insufficient knowledge of preschool teachers-mentors about the program, the goals and tasks of professional practice; insufficient knowledge of students about the institution and the rules of conduct; clearly defined tasks that students need to accomplish in practice and the students' attitude towards children and parents. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Problems during the fulfillment of a mentoring role

<b>Problems</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
I am not familiar with the concept of professional practice	98	65%
Student behavior	24	16%
Realization of tasks students received from their teachers	24	16%
Students' attitude towards children and parents.	4	3%

The results showed that more than half (65%) of preschool teachers do not know enough of the concept of professional practice and are, therefore, not familiar with the tasks students have in each year of studies, which is what they stated to be a basic problem in the realization of professional practice. This information indicates the necessity of establishing better communication between the faculty and the preschool institution for the purpose of mutual familiarity with the program and the goals of the professional practice course, but also about the concept of work in the preschool institution, in order to more successfully overcome this problem. Only through the partnership between these institutions can students prepare well for their future vocation (Krnjaja, 2019; Marković, 2014; Mićanović, 2019). Inadequate student behavior as a problem in the realization of professional practice was identified by 16% of surveyed preschool teachers. On this occasion, the preschool teachers did not state what these behaviors were and how they hindered the process of educational work. The following difficulty was the realization of tasks that students received from their teachers, in terms of a lack of knowledge about these tasks. Only 3% of preschool teachers stated the attitude of students towards children and parents as a problem. We can interpret these results in light of the problems we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and that is the insufficient knowledge of preschool teachers-mentors about the concept, the contents, and the ways of realization of tasks students should accomplish in practice. We assume that if preschool teachers had information on when and what students should do, preschool teacher-student communication would be of better quality, and their relationship would be more of a partnership in its nature.

Asked if preschool teachers (if they could choose) would accept the role of mentors to students within professional practice, 31% of preschool teachers answered affirmatively, and as many as 69% of preschool teachers said they would not accept this role. The questionnaire provided an opportunity, in case of a negative answer, for the respondents to state the reasons why they would not accept the role of a mentor. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Reasons for not accepting the mentor role

<b>Reasons why preschool teachers do not accept the mentor role</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>N</b>
No answer	61.1%	91
Mentoring is a big obligation for preschool teachers	19%	29
Students do not accept advice and suggestions	14%	21
I do not have enough work experience to be a mentor	3.4%	5
Students are not interested	2.5%	4



The fact that a large number (69%) of preschool teachers would not accept the role of a mentor indicates unresolved mentoring status, insufficient training, and insufficient motivation to accept additional commitment on top of regular tasks (Miškeljin, 2016). More than half of the preschool teachers did not give an explanation for not accepting this role and it can be assumed that the reasons of these preschool teachers are diverse. The obtained data raises the question: what happens in practice if the majority of preschool teachers are not motivated to help students or do not do it appropriately? One of the solutions to be considered is a legally regulated status of mentoring work, which would appreciate and reward educational experience and additional effort, as well as the appropriate training of preschool teachers to perform mentor roles. A number of preschool teachers, 19%, stated that the reason for not accepting the mentoring work is the additional obligation without any compensation, whether material reimbursement or professional satisfaction. Also, 14% of preschool teachers answered that students do not accept advice and suggestions, showing that they view the preschool teacher mentor-student relationship as a relationship of power, a relationship in which those who know should advise and suggest, rather than a partnership in which they should participate together and build educational practice jointly (Chizhik et al., 2017).

In the end, we asked the preschool teachers-mentors to give suggestions about the ways and effective strategies that could improve the quality of professional practice. Since it is an open type question, we classified the answers into three groups and showed them in Figure 1.

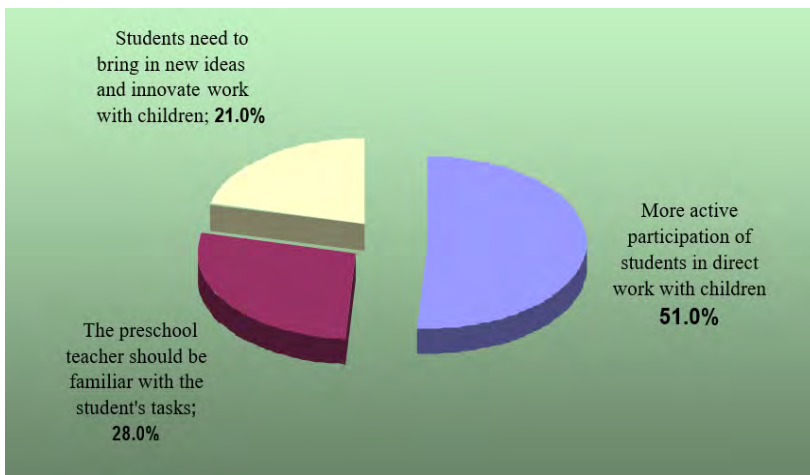


Figure 1. Proposals and suggestions of preschool teachers on the strategies for improving the quality of professional practice

A half of the surveyed preschool teachers (51%) believe that more active participation of students in direct work with children would contribute to their training in practical work and contribute to more efficient connection of theory and practice. A number of preschool teachers (28%) stated that professional practice would have been more successful had preschool teachers-mentors been familiar with the tasks that students should accomplish during the practice, as preschool teachers could thus adapt their work to the given tasks, help students and guide them. This comment of preschool teachers again points to the problem we have defined, and that is insufficient mentor awareness of student tasks (Markovic, 2014). By analyzing the responses of 21% of preschool teachers, we came to the results that show their expectations of students to bring in new ideas and innovate work with children. This shows the need for a number of preschool teachers to improve their own work, to come to new knowledge and ideas, and they expect students to be a source of such information.

Summarizing the obtained results, we can notice that the surveyed preschool teachers notice problems in the realization of professional practice for students and hold higher education institution, faculty teachers, and most often students themselves accountable for these problems. None of the preschool teachers' answers concerned their own role and responsibility in performing the mentoring role. For example, preschool teachers did not state that, in addition to the legally regulated status of a mentor, they needed training for the realization of this role, additional knowledge and skills, etc. All of the above shows that fundamental changes in conception, organization, and realization of professional practice of students are needed; that it is necessary to establish partnership relations between preschool teacher education faculties and preschool institutions; to establish cooperative relations between preschool teachers-mentors and students based on two-way communication, joint learning and building educational practice. This is precisely the preschool teacher mentor-student interaction that should be the center of professional development of future preschool teachers.

Despite the limitations of the research (we are not familiar with the criteria for selecting preschool teachers to be mentors, a suitable sample, etc.), we find these research findings relevant as they show the current state of professional practice from the standpoint of preschool teacher practitioners. Although many authors and researchers recognized these problems in preparing future preschool teachers for the profession, the changes that are recommended or necessary to overcome the problem are either too slow or non-existent. We hope that this research will provide a better view of challenges in the professional training of students and allow the necessary progress to the resolution thereof.

## CONCLUSION

More attention should be paid to practical training of students within the initial education as only through an appropriate system of professional training and development can preschool teachers capable of optimal developmental stimulation of children be prepared.

The research results indicated key shortcomings in the implementation of professional practice, from the aspect of a preschool teacher-mentor. Although preschool teachers understand the importance of practical training of students for the future profession, the fact that they ranked the goal: for students to form their own pedagogical style through practical activities - as the least important, clearly shows their attitude that students should work according to the 'imitation' model, rather than reflecting and researching the educational practice itself. Preschool teachers-mentors state a lack of information about the very concept of practice, the tasks that students should realize and, finally, students' behavior in the educational group as the key shortcomings of professional practice. Two-thirds of preschool teachers-mentors are not motivated to accept this role for various reasons, the strongest one being the burden this role implies. As far as suggestions for improving professional practice are concerned, the surveyed preschool teachers pointed out greater students' engagement in working with children and better knowledge about the goals and tasks of professional practice.

The obtained results lead us to the conclusion that partnerships between preschool teacher education faculties and preschool institutions are yet to be established, and therefore the common general goals and specific tasks of professional training are still not set. Also, there is still no effective communication among the relevant factors in the process and that should contribute to the practical preparation of future preschool teachers. Moreover, some new questions have been raised, such as harmonization of the goals of professional practice with the New fundamentals of the preschool program, resolution of the preschool teachers-mentors status, involvement of preschool institutions and preschool teachers-practitioners in the process of planning and organizing the practical preparation of future preschool teachers, etc. These and other issues should be addressed in future research aimed at better and higher-quality practical training of future preschool teachers.

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