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Pedagogical Practice as a Foundation Course for the Development of Professional Skills

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The study aims to identify the factors that have contributed in the student teacher's professional preparation through the students' attitudes towards pedagogical practice. The study is quantitative based on the descriptive-correlative design. The instrument used for data collection is the questionnaire. The respondents that participated in the research are students from two study programmes (Primary and Preschool) in the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina" and also students of two programmes (Preschool and Primary) in the University of Gjilan "Kadri Zeka". The total of the respondents in the research is N=280 students. The results from Pearson's correlation show very strong positive correlations between students' opportunities to practice their knowledge with preschool and primary students, favourable school environment and their support from mentor teachers. The results also reflect other factors that contribute to the professional preparation of student teachers such as: the sufficiency of the days/hours of pedagogical practices, the subjects that have contributed to their professional knowledge, the challenges they have encountered during the pedagogical practices, as well as the satisfaction they have experienced during their studies. The research is important as it identifies and describes the factors that contribute to the professional preparation of student teachers.

Keywords: pedagogical practices, reflection, mentoring, professional preparation, student teachers

INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical practice is the course that guides student teachers and makes them independent for active participation in the educational process. The Pedagogical Practice Program at the Faculty of Education in Pristina and Gjilan is designed in such a way that it is developmental. This means that the professional training of the students can be done gradually, so the students start by observing and helping others and then

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gradually take on the responsibilities of holding the lesson /or leading the activities. Pedagogical practice as part of the program for the preparation of future teachers will offer students the opportunity to observe teaching models, engage in teaching, receive constructive feedback and learn about teaching as a teacher and as a reflective self-evaluator. Teaching practice includes two separate and closely related components: pedagogical practice in the faculty and pedagogical practice in school.

Pedagogical practice at the faculty has two objectives:

- To offer students the preparation they need to be successful in the classroom;

- To offer them time and space for reflection and discussion, to enable them to learn from the time they spent in class.

During these lessons, students will:

-give careful consideration to the role of teaching and the teaching profession;

- receive information related to teaching;

- study and experiment with observation strategies in classrooms;

- discuss what they observed and learned in schools;

- engage in reflection and self-assessment of professional development (Winsor, 2004).

The student has to cover all the above instructions for professional preparation according to the manual of pedagogical practice. All these instructions that are defined in the manual of pedagogical practice are often not strictly implemented because they depend on many other factors such as: support from mentor teachers, favouring the school environment, duration of pedagogical practice, various challenges as well as the satisfaction they experienced during their studies.

If, previously, the university's major aim was that of providing students with certain types of knowledge that they were expected to apply later, universities today focus primarily on 'life skill'. Our aim is to teach students to obtain knowledge by themselves and to work in ways that enable them to come up with new ideas. Generating new ideas is a key principle of modern society. We need professionals who are competent, talented, innovative and creative problem-solvers, skilled and critical thinkers. New technologies give an opportunity to encourage critical thinking (Olga Nessipbayeva, 2012).

Literature Review

Research on successful preparation of teachers has demonstrated that organized, guided, and supervised pedagogical practice experiences are vital to the development of successful teachers. This means that students, through the pedagogical practice course, are given the opportunity to learn the rules, to apply their knowledge in practice, to get used to the school environment and students, and the opportunity to reflect and the need to be mentored.

In the implementation of teaching and practical activities with students, several partners are involved, such as: faculties, schools, kindergartens, etc. The main partners in the realization of pedagogical practice are students, mentors-kindergarten teachers, school teachers and supervising professors.

Each party involved in the process of teaching and practical activities has a specific role and responsibility, as follows:

- Faculties: Sustainable realization of the study program, through two components lectures in the faculty and practical activities in kindergartens, schools;

- Clear definition of the responsibilities of supervisor-professor from faculties and mentor-kindergarten teacher, school teachers in educational institutions, kindergarten, primary school.

- Ensuring the conditions, in accordance with the mutually signed agreements between the Municipal Education Directorates (MED) and the faculties.

- Preparation of a mentoring plan for the needs of teaching/practical activities in schools and kindergartens;

- Joint planning for the professional development of the mentor, kindergarten teacher, school teacher and student;

- Formative and summative assessment of students' practical teaching;

- Continuous monitoring of student's teaching and practical activities in educational institutions;

- Assessment and verification of realised teaching and practical activities.

While the quality of cooperation depends on the degree to which the parties involved will fulfil their obligations to achieve the goals set for successful instruction and the introduction of students to their future profession.

According to the European Commission (2009), only a great practical teaching experience can prepare a kindergarten teacher, a school teacher and a pedagogue to be responsible in the realization of educational work. Teaching and practical activities should begin in the initial education of future kindergarten and school teachers through observation. In the Faculty of Education in Prishtina and Gjilan, teaching and practical activities start from the second semester and last until the last semester (eight). In most cases, students follow several stages in carrying out practical lessons, activities, such as:

- Initial phase: Informing and sensitizing students about the environment in which the educational process is organized and carried out. This phase is related to one of the goals of teaching and practical activities, i. e. introduction to the educational process.

- The phase of direct participation, namely the participation of students in the realization of a part of teaching and practical activities in the educational process. This stage is related to one of the goals of practical teaching, namely the gradual involvement of the student in the learning and teaching process and educational work.

- The phase of independent realization of planned teaching and practical activities for students. This phase is related to one of the goals of teaching, practical activities, that is, to independently carry out the teaching/learning process and activities by the student.

The total number of teaching hours observed by students in the first year of studies is 40 teaching hours (two weeks) per semester, in the second year the student observes 80 teaching hours (four weeks) per semester, in the third year 120 teaching hours (six weeks) per semester and in the fourth year eight weeks or 160 teaching hours.

The entire pedagogical practice during the years of study is a total of 400 teaching hours (Winsor, 2004).

Pedagogical practice describes the application of knowledge acquired during studies in a certain situation. The link between practice and theory is important because it shows the student's ability to use evidence that increases understanding of key concepts and justifies decision-making **(**Flinders Unversity, 2022).

According to the study of (Ünver, 2014) the connection between theory and practice depends on the support of mentors, the observation of the teaching of a mentor teacher with students, the preparation of lesson plans, discussion, self-evaluation as well as carrying out the tasks, respectively obligations. These activities provide student teachers with knowledge to understand how to develop teaching methods in real classrooms and to reflect on their practice to improve their teaching performance.

Mentoring describes a combination of coaching, counseling and assessment where a teacher in a school is delegated responsibility for assisting pre-service or newly qualified teachers in their professional development (Mbugua,2011).

The mentor plays a critical role in the student teacher's learning experience. The students observe their mentor teachers and their achievements depend on the instructions of their mentors. Therefore, open communication between the mentor teacher and the student teacher is essential.

Pedagogical practice is the culmination of any study programme for teacher education, and student teachers report that it is the most critical element of their preparation. Pedagogical practice represents their best opportunity to apply the research, theory and best practices they have learned in university classrooms, receiving support and frequent feedback from mentors while reflecting and learning from their practice (College of Education and Human Development- Temple University, 2014).

The purpose of pedagogical practice is for students to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to be a teacher/kindergarten teacher. This includes developing the skills to create and manage a nurturing and supportive learning environment and to plan and maintain it according to the school/preschool institution plan.

Pedagogical practice is a form of practical pedagogical training in which a student spends a certain time period according to the study program in a kindergarten or school, where the student will:

-be familiar with the organization and way of working
-observe and reflect on teaching methods,
- observe and reflect on the organization of the teaching / learning process from planning and student assessment implementation;
-observe and reflect on parents' meetings as well as the activities organized in and outside the school;
-help the mentor and provide learning support for students.

The pedagogical knowledge base of teachers includes all the necessary cognitive knowledge to create effective teaching and learning environments. Research suggests that this knowledge can be learned during studies (Guerriero, 2014).

Another important skill that teachers need to learn as a means of continuous professional development is reflection. Reflection refers to thinking about one's practice, analyzing and synthesizing it then using this new understanding to reform or improve performance. Reflection can be on-action, in-action, about action and for action (Schon, 1983). According to (Hammerness and Shulman, 2006), reflections help to develop teachers' visions as they strive to become quality teachers. In a holistic practice-based approach, academic knowledge of theory and research is used in making interpretations and translations of students' knowledge for developing appropriate pedagogical practices and creating supportive social situations for learning (Etta R. Hollins, 2011).

There are many ways to configure the knowledge content that teachers may need to render their services professionally (Darling-Hammond, 2006). In addition, the data from TALIS 2008 suggest that teachers need development in key areas, including pedagogical practice, which means that the pedagogical practice is considered one of the main courses in which all the knowledge of the student teacher is interwoven.

Hypotheses

H0- There is no relationship between students' ability to apply their knowledge in practice and the supportive environment;

HA- There is a positive relationship between students' ability to apply their knowledge in practice and the supportive school environment;

H0- There is no relationship between students' ability to apply their knowledge in practice and the support of mentor teachers;

HA- There is a positive relationship between students' ability to apply their knowledge in practice and the support of mentor teachers.

Research questions:

- How much do students value the support of mentor teachers in their career preparation?
- How much do students value the supportive school environment in their career preparation?

- Which courses/subjects do students consider most important in their career preparation?
- How important do students consider pedagogical practice in their career preparation?
- How much do students value the hours of pedagogical practice during their studies?
- What challenges do students face in pedagogical practice?
- How satisfied are students with the way they study at their university?

METHOD

Research Design

For the realization of this research, the quantitative research approach was used. Quantitative research is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationships among variables. In the quantitative approach the researcher tests a theory by specifying narrow hypotheses and collection of data to support or refute the hypotheses. The data are collected on an instrument that measures attitudes and the information is analysed using statistical procedures and hypothesis testing. (Creswell, 2018).

A non-experimental form of quantitative research is the correlational model in which the researchers use correlational statistics to describe and measure the degree or relationship between two or more variables (Creswell, 2018). Correlation helps to find an answer to two questions. First, whether the relationship between the variables is positive or negative. Second, how strong is the correlation. The values of the correlation coefficient are in the range between -1 and 1. 0 means that there is no correlation between the studied variables. The closer to the indicator that results in extreme values, the stronger the relationship (negative or positive). Lack of correlation indicates the coefficient from -0.1 to 0.1.

The Pearson coefficient was used to measure the relationships between the variables according to the following values:

Correlation r

0.00 - 0.25 very weak bond

0.26 - 0.49 weak link

0.50 - 0.69 secondary bond

0.70 - 0.89 high bond

0.90 - 1.00 very high bond (Albayrak, et al., 2014)

Population and sampling

The population of the study is the third year and fourth year students of the Pre-school and the Primary Programme of the Faculty of Education, University of Hasan Pristina - Prishtina and the Faculty of Education, University of Haxhi Zeka - Gjilan. The sample

was randomly selected so that all students had equal and independent chances to complete the questionnaire. The participants in the study are a total of N=280 students, 140 from FE University "Hasan Prishtina", Prishtina, and 140 from FE of "Kadri Zeka" University, Gjilan.

Research instrument

A questionnaire was used in this data collection research. The questionnaire was designed in accordance with the information and study plan of the primary and pre-school students in the two universities. Firstly, we piloted the questionnaire to identify possible errors in the questionnaire (Creswell, 2018).

The instrument contains the part of demographic variables (study programme, year of study and university of study), as an opportunity to make various necessary analyses. The second part includes the closed variables with five degrees of liquor and the open variables that are collected and coded according to the respondents' answers.

The following four alternatives were used to assess students' attitudes: 1-Not at all, 2-Slightly, 3-Medium, 4-Very much; and to assess the importance of the subjects in the development of professional skills five degrees of Liquor were used: 1-Not at all influential, 2- Slightly influential, 3-Slightly influential, 4-Very much influential, 5-Extremely influential.

To test the reliability of the measurement instrument for students preparing for the teaching profession was done according to the Alpha Cronbach model, where in 15 evaluation items the value is defined, 846 which proves the reliability of the instrument.

Table 1
Alpha cronbach's models

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,846	15
Valid	280

Data collection procedure

The procedure of data collection by students was carried out at the Faculty of Education in Prishtina and Gjilan. The students met in groups without hindering the learning process. Clarifications were first provided regarding the research and the purpose of the data collection. As the questionnaire was anonymous, students were free to express their opinions. The questionnaire took 10 minutes to complete.

After data collection, a database was created in the SPSS program, Statistical Package for Social Science - SPSS version 20, where the data was entered and various statistical analyses were performed.

Data analysis

The analyses used in the study are: descriptive analyses, such as frequency, mean and standard deviation. The average is one of the most commonly used statistics in the social

sciences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The average means the measurement of central tendency, i. e. the point at which the data concentrate, separating fifty per cent of the cases from fifty per cent of the other cases. Standard deviation is the statistic used to measure the distribution of the data and its deviation from the mean. The greater the dispersion of the data from the mean, the greater the standard deviation (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Correlation analysis, also known as bivariate analysis, is primarily concerned with finding out if there is a relationship between variables and then determining the strength of that relationship (Bates, 2021).

FINDINGS

We have statistically processed the obtained results.

Table 2
Students participating in the research according to the grades of study

Grade	Frequency	Percent
III	104	37,1
IV	176	62,9
Total	280	100

Table no. 2 shows the participants in the research, 104 students of the third year of both Primary and Preschool programs and 174 students of the fourth year.

Table 3
Students participating in research according to the University

University	Frequency	Percent
Hasan Prishtina	140	50,0
Kadri Zeka	140	50,0
Total	280	100

Table no. 3 shows the students participating in the research according to the Universities, that is, there are a total of 280 students, 140 of them are from the Faculty of Education of the University "Hasan Prishtina" and 140 students from the Faculty of Education of the University "Kadri Zeka" Gjilan.

Table 4
Students participating in research according to the Study Program.

Program	Frequency	Percent
Elementary	191	68,2
Preschool	89	31,8
Total	280	100

Table no. 4 shows the students participating in the research according to their study programs, 191 of them are from the primary program and 89 from the preschool program.

Table 5
The correlation between the opportunity to apply knowledge in practice, the favorable school environment and support from the mentor teacher

Correlations

	During the pedagogical internship at school I was able to apply the theoretical knowledge in practice.	The school environment during the pedagogical practice has been favorable for my personal development.	The mentors were supportive and willing to help me.
Pearson Correlation		,995	,991
Sig. (2-tailed)		,000	,000
N		280	280

To identify the level of relationships between them, Pearson's correlation analysis was performed. The results show that there is a very strong, meaning statistically significant relationship between students' opportunities to apply their knowledge in practice and the favourable school environment (r=.995 and sig. p=.000) and there is also a very strong relationship, meaning statistically significant between students' opportunities to apply their knowledge in practice and their support from mentor teachers (r=.991 and sig. p=.000). According to the research of (Yıldız, 2018), schools with bureaucracy and limited relationships do not favour student teachers. Consequently, it can be seen that student teachers prefer schools that promote a warm and sincere environment where effective relationships prevail.

Table 6
Students' attitudes about the courses which have helped in their professional development
Report

Study program		Pedag.	Psychol.	Lang.	Math.	Na.sciences	Arts	Ped.practices
Elementay	Mean	4,738	3,890	3,675	3,6283	3,0314	3,7120	4,748
	N	191	191	191	191	191	191	191
	SD	,5375	1,184	1,353	1,286	1,251	1,300	,6404
Preschool	Mean	5,7303	5,460	4,3146	4,0000	4,0000	5,3034	5,898
	N	89	89	89	89	89	89	89
	SD	10,029	10,075	10,225	10,275	10,270	10,130	9,997
Total	Mean	5,053	4,389	3,878	3,7464	3,3393	4,2179	5,114
	N	280	280	280	280	280	280	280
	SD	5,668	5,789	5,857	5,870	5,877	5,837	5,665

The results show that the mean values of the subjects are different. Pedagogical practice has the highest mean value m = 5.114 and a standard deviation of 5.665, after practice, pedagogical courses are generally in the lead with a mean value of m = 5.053 and a standard deviation of 5.668.

According to the mean values, immediately after pedagogical courses, psychological courses are listed with the value m = 4.389 and the standard deviation of 5.789. Then Arts are listed with the mean value m = 4.217 and a standard deviation of 5.837. Language and Literature with the mean value m = 3.878 and the standard deviation 5.857. Mathematics with a mean value of 3.746 and a standard deviation of 5.870 and

finally Natural Sciences with the lowest mean value of 3.339 and a standard deviation of 5.877.
Based on the results, students of the primary program and students of the preschool program consider pedagogical practice one of the most important courses in their professional preparation.

Table 7
Presents the correlations between the basic courses for the professional preparation of student teachers
Correlation

In my professional development influenced.	Psycholog.	Lang.	Math.	Na.sciences	Arts	Pedag.	Pedag. Practice
Pearson Correlation	,977	,968	,965	,967	,968	,991	,998
Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
N	280	280	280	280	280	280	280

In table no. 7, the results show that there is a correlation of a very high level between the professional preparation of the students and the basic courses they attended during their studies. This correlation is statistically significant for pedagogical practice with the highest value of r=.998 and sig. p=,000, pedagogical courses with values of r=,991 and sig. p=,000, for psychological courses r=,977 and sig. p=,000, for Arts r=,968 and sig. p=.000, for language and literature courses r=.968 and sig. p=,000 and for mathematics r=,965, sig. p=.000. All courses according to the table have a very strong relationship between themselves for the professional preparation of student teachers.

Table 8
Challenges faced by students during teaching practice

Code	N
Lack of materials for school work.	21
Classroom management and plan preparation. Managing situations when children cry.	46
Adaptation to all children.	5
Dedication to the profession.	9
Access to children with special needs and involvement of students in activities.	23
School environment unfavorable for the development of practice.	6
Narrow classroom space.	38

Table no. 8 shows that one of the main challenges faced by the 46 students during their teaching practice is "Classroom Management". Another challenge for the 46 students was "Managing situations when children were crying". Then, for 23 students, the challenge was "Approach to children with special needs and inclusiveness of students in activities". For 9 other students, the challenge was "Commitment to the profession". For 6 other students, the challenge was "The school environment is not favourable for the teaching practice".

In addition to the pedagogical challenges, the students also had technical challenges, such as: 21 students stated that they had a "Lack of materials for school work", 38 students had a "Narrow space in the classroom". The urban schools in Kosovo generally have a high number of students in one classroom, so in the urban schools of Prishtina and Gjilan, the number of students in the classroom ranges from 27 to 45 students in a classroom, so no matter how big the classrooms are, it is still a challenge in managing certain situations and students in general.

Table 9
Adequacy of pedagogical practice is insufficient or excessive

Code	N
Sufficient	139
It is not sufficient	59
Excessive	7

Table no. 9, shows that 139 students have declared that the time period of pedagogical practice is sufficient for their professional preparation. While 59 students have stated that the time period of pedagogical practice was insufficient. These students, who have been research respondents for one semester, have followed the pedagogical practice online, due to the Covid19 pandemic, and this may be one of the main reasons that student teachers perceive the time period of the pedagogical practice as insufficient. In the same way, the study of (Bayır, Dulay, & Teke, 2022), points out that student teachers have had difficulties in the development of pedagogical practice during the period of the Covid19 pandemic. On the other hand, 7 students have considered the pedagogical practice excessive.

Table 10
Attitudes of the students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Prishtina and the Faculty of Education of the University of Gjilan regarding with satisfaction of their studies

University	N	Mean	SD
Total	280	2,9250	,80194

In table no. 10, it can be seen that the average value is high M= 2,9250 and the standard deviation value is SD=, 80194, which means that the students are moderately satisfied with their studies in the respective universities.

DISCUSSION

Our findings identify many factors regarding the pedagogical practice that contribute to the professional preparation of student teachers, such as: favourable school environment and mentor support. The study (Gobena, 2018) says that if teachers do not feel important by the society, they also lack confidence in their professions. The study of (Tóth & Szivák, 2022) gives importance to the mentoring of the student teacher in the beginning of their career. Other factors are: the pedagogical practice course the sufficiency of practice days during studies, other pedagogical, psychological, linguistic, artistic and scientific courses that contribute to enriching the knowledge of student

teachers and some other challenges they encountered during the practice. According to the study of (Ünver, 2014), for the connection of theory with practice, the most important factors are: the feedback from mentors, the observation of the teaching of a mentor teacher, the preparation of lesson plans, trials for specific teaching methods, self-evaluation, discussions, as well as conducting tasks.

The findings show that the application of students' knowledge in practice is highly dependent on a favourable school environment and their support from mentor teachers. This finding verifies our alternative hypothesis. According to the study of (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021), organizational support and climate have an impact on teachers' sense of ownership. So, students will have the opportunity to apply their knowledge in practice if they are supported by their mentor teachers and if the school environment is favourable.

Our findings show that students consider the pedagogical practice course the most important in their professional preparation. According to (Zhao & Zhang, 2017), the development of pre-service teachers' professional identity during teaching practice further promoted their professional commitment, that is, promoted their emotional evaluation and confidence in the teaching profession.

Our findings also show some of the challenges that students face in the pedagogical practice course, such as: class management and preparation of the plan, materials and work tools, management of situations when children cry; approach to children with special needs and inclusion of students in activities. These challenges help student teachers to understand teaching methods, how to develop teaching methods in real classrooms, how to make some reflections on their practice and how to improve their teaching performance (Ünver, 2014). The study of (Kihwele & Mtandi, 2020), says that pedagogical practice is an essential part that helps to consolidate theoretical skills in practice by helping in the way of planning, the way of selection, preparation, and use of materials and teaching aids.

Another challenge mentioned by student teachers was "The school environment is not favourable for conducting the practice". According to the research of (Yıldız & Gizir, 2018), schools with bureaucracy and limited relationships do not favour student teachers. Consequently, it can be seen that student teachers prefer schools that promote a warm and sincere environment where effective relationships prevail.

Based on all the findings of this study, our student teachers consider pedagogical practice one of the most important courses in their professional preparation. This finding is also supported by the study of (Mufidah, 2019), according to which, pedagogical practice helps student teachers in the development of professional competences. Our findings show that, on average, students are satisfied with the studies offered by their Faculties.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, we can conclude that the study highlighted the general factors that contribute to the professional preparation of student teachers such as: pedagogical courses, arts, language subjects, mathematics courses, natural courses and in particular

the pedagogical practice as one of the main courses. We can also conclude that the study highlighted other factors related to pedagogical practice that contribute to professional preparation, such as: the support of student teachers from their mentors, the favourable school environment, the opportunity to apply knowledge in practice and the challenges which student teachers face during practice. According to the study of (Oladele & Jamiu, 2018), the exercise of pedagogical practice and the assessment of student teachers by their mentors had a positive impact on student teachers in their professional advancement.

The findings of our study can serve as an opportunity to improve subjects and esspecially to improve pedagogical practices, starting by organizing, structuring, planning and mentoring of student teachers.

LIMITATIONS

The research is limited since it is based only on the attitudes of student teachers for pedagogical practice as one of the basic courses in their professional preparation. This study can serve other researchers as a starting point for other broader research of this nature that will contribute to the improvement of pedagogical practices.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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