

## **MASTER APPLIED STUDIES FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHERS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE DURING THE COVID 19 EPIDEMIC**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the circumstances caused by the epidemic of the Covid 19 virus, higher education institutions in Serbia, as in most countries, are facing numerous challenges and changes in their regular functioning. The paper presents the results of the research aimed at establishing the opinion of students about the conditions of distance learning as well as what obstacles they face during the implementation of professional practice. The research was quantitative and qualitative, relying on primary and secondary data sources. The sample consisted of students of master applied studies at the Department of Studies for Preschool and Nursery Teachers in Sabac, who evaluated the study conditions and the quality of teaching, with special reference to the success of professional practice. Survey and analysis techniques of professional practice diaries were applied, which were a source of data on online communication with families whose children did not attend kindergartens. Based on the obtained results, the authors analyze the effects of the combined model of online learning and live teaching, the specifics of the organization and the way of realization of professional practice during the epidemic. The combined teaching model offered to students is in line with their expectations regarding the content of teaching and the quality of communication with subject teachers. The professional practice, despite the difficult circumstances, enabled the students to strengthen their competencies for the application of information technologies and the cooperation of the kindergarten with the family.

**Keywords:** master applied studies, preschool teachers, professional practice, epidemic, Covid 19 virus.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The completely changed context of education, work, movement, gathering, behavior and spending free time due to the global pandemic of the COVID 19 virus has certainly affected almost the entire student population both in the world and in Serbia. Thus, at the very beginning of the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia, a decision was made to suspend live teaching in the higher education institutions, secondary and primary schools as well as the regular operation of preschool education institutions.

The disruption of work in educational institutions around the world, as a consequence of the COVID 19 virus pandemic, has led to increased application of new technologies in the learning and teaching process. Although the distance education program, as an alternative solution, was supposed to mitigate the negative consequences, it had an impact on various social and economic problems including disproportion in the level of development of education systems, availability of computers and the Internet, lack of informatics skills of parents who were supposed to help younger children in the learning process as well as capabilities of teachers to adapt to changes in the teaching process. The use of new technologies has also influenced teachers to exchange experiences with each other to a greater extent and contributed to increasing self-confidence in work. However, evaluations of the success of the application of new technologies indicate that it did not enhance strengthening the connection between teachers and students since direct contact is essential, especially during work with preschool children (Stepanović, 2020).

The *Rulebook on the special program of education and upbringing* regulates the organization and implementation of teaching, the duration of classes and recommendations for the teaching process during extraordinary circumstances emerged due to the Corona virus pandemic. Thus, the Committee for Economic and Social Rights in its statement on the COVID-19 pandemic especially points out that in countries where schools, vocational schools and higher education institutions are temporarily closed, efforts are being made to continue teaching and learning via the Internet having in mind the existing capacities in higher education i.e. access to technology, developed skills and autonomy of students, use of external tools for video conferencing such as Zoom, Skype, and most often Google Classroom. However, it is not possible to organize classes that require practical experience, laboratory exercises or other ways of direct work.

In the modern system of university education, the demand for improving the quality of studies is emphasized, whereby university professors have the task not only to introduce students with current teaching contents, but also to instruct them to develop adequate ways of thinking and communication in a certain field (Peko, Mlinarević, & Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2008). According to the same authors, it is necessary to deal more seriously with the issues of students' quality experiential learning, which implies a well-organized pedagogical practice, as a purposeful activity within the study system. We can assume that the professional practice of future preschool teachers during the COVID 19 pandemic in the forthcoming period will represent the key issue in the reorganization of their education and activities of professors in higher education institutions.

Having in mind the realization of the right to education during 2020, through the prism of the COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis caused by it, two topics can be singled out as crucial: exercising the right to education of students in the context of online teaching, including young people from vulnerable groups, and state measures in the field of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis and distance learning, countries must envisage special measures to ensure continuity in education.

The main task of our research was to determine how employed preschool teachers who at the same time attend master vocational studies at the Department of Studies for Preschool and Nursery Teachers in Sabac perceive the conditions of distance learning, pedagogical work of their professors during live teaching and combined model of online learning and live teaching as well as ways of cooperation between kindergarten and preschool children's families during the state of emergency when the work of preschool institutions was suspended. Throughout the research - quantitative and qualitative, the focus was on evaluations of pedagogical work of professors with emphasis on the subject of the study programme named *Professional practice* both during live teaching and combined model of online and live teaching as well as the description of activities and observations of students about their engagement during professional practice and quality assessments of online cooperation with parents during activities conducted with children.

Starting from the theoretical context, it is certain that students at the study program *master vocational preschool teacher* acquire basic general and professional knowledge during their studies which represent the starting point for their experiential learning and engagement, with emphasis on the professional practice conducted in preschool institutions.

The analysis of online education programs in the world (in 99 countries), based on the data from March 2020, shows that out of 72 programs, only 11 were intended for preschool age and out of 21 professional development programs for teachers, only 5 were for those working with children at early ages (Reimers, Schleicher, Saavedra, & Tuominen, 2020).

However, a series of seven video trainings has been prepared for the professional development of preschool teachers in Serbia within the project "Support to the development of the preschool online learning community" which has been implemented by the Center for Interactive Pedagogy with the support of UNICEF and the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

## METHOD

The first part of the research was conducted in two phases: during the 2019/20 academic year on a sample of 37 students who then attended the first year of master vocational studies and at the end of the academic year of 2020/21, on the same sample i.e. when they attended the second year of master vocational studies of the Department of Studies for Preschool and Nursery Teachers in Sabac. Namely, the survey was conducted among the students by using a questionnaire relating to the students' attitudes on the quality of the teaching process which took place under the Covid 19 epidemic circumstances during the above-mentioned academic years. The obtained data are analyzed by a descriptive statistical method, with the results expressed both quantitatively and qualitatively and followed with discussion.

The other part of the research relates to the quality of online cooperation between kindergartens and families. In the period from March 16 to May 11, 2020, when the work of preschool institutions was suspended due to the state of emergency, the cooperation took place only with the use of new information technologies. When the kindergartens reopened, the number of children attending them was reduced, while with the parents of children who were unable to come, an online connection was maintained and teaching contents for learning in a family environment were suggested.

As a source of data on the ways of the online cooperation between preschool teachers and parents, professional practice diaries were used. *Professional practice 1* and *2* are compulsory subjects at Master vocational studies level, in the II and III semesters and took place for 10 days during May and December 2020. The sample for this segment of analysis consisted of diaries of 30 students, out of the above-mentioned overall sample of 37, since those 30 are at the same time employed as preschool teachers in preschool institutions in several places in Serbia (*Table 1*), which fact is significant for the interpretation of the survey results.

Students recorded the description of activities and their observations for each day and then provided answers to the questions that form the basis for evaluation of their engagement during professional practice. Students' answers to the questions about which activity they assess as the most successful and how they assess the quality of cooperation achieved with parents, were used as a source for analysis in this research.

Table 1. Sample structure.

Place (city or municipality)	f
Beograd	18
Bogatić	1
Krupanj	2
Lajkovac	1
Loznica	2
Nova Varoš	2
Užice	1
Šabac	3
Σ	30

## DISCUSSION

The research aimed at examining the perceptions and experiences of employed preschool teachers - students of master vocational studies, concerning live teaching, on the one hand, and combined model of online learning and live teaching, on the other, with special reference to professional practice carried out during the COVID 19 pandemic. This chapter discusses the results in relation to the research task.

**Average grades of pedagogical work of professors in total during live teaching and the combined model of online learning and live teaching.**

One of the key indicators of the quality of the teaching process is the pedagogical work of professors. During the observed period, the pedagogical work of professors in the final year of master vocational studies during live teaching is ranked with highest grades: 4.72, 4.65 and 4.60. The degree of student participation in teaching activities was assessed as 4.51; giving useful information about students' work - 4.48, answering students' questions was rated 4.45, while the pace of presentation - 4.32, clarity and highlighting of the most important segments of the teaching material - 4.29. Students evaluated the clarity and comprehensibility of the teacher's presentation with 4.17.

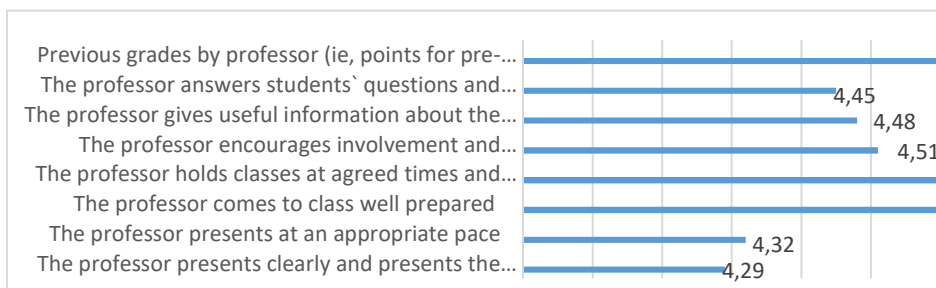


Figure 1. Average grades of pedagogical work of professors in total during live teaching.

The analysis of the obtained results leads to the conclusion that the second year students of master vocational studies during live classes, on average, are generally satisfied with the work of professors. It should be noted that the comparative analysis of the results during the observed period when teaching was realized live - *Figure 1* and the results shown in *Figure 2*, the average evaluations of professors' work during the combined model of learning and teaching, show a tendency of increase. Namely, during the evaluation, the students rated the professors' feedback on the work with 5, the teacher's readiness for teaching with average grade of 4.97, and the way of presenting the material with 4.9. With a grade of 4.81, students rated answering students' questions and appreciating students' comments. The tempo of the presentation of the material - 4.83, the clarity of the presentation and the highlighting of the most important parts of the material were assessed by the students with a grade 4.91. The grade for the accuracy and regularity of teachers in online teaching was also similar - 4.83 in accordance with the realization of the combined model of online learning and live teaching. Slightly lower grades were given by students for encouragement of their involvement by professors in the teaching process - 4.75.

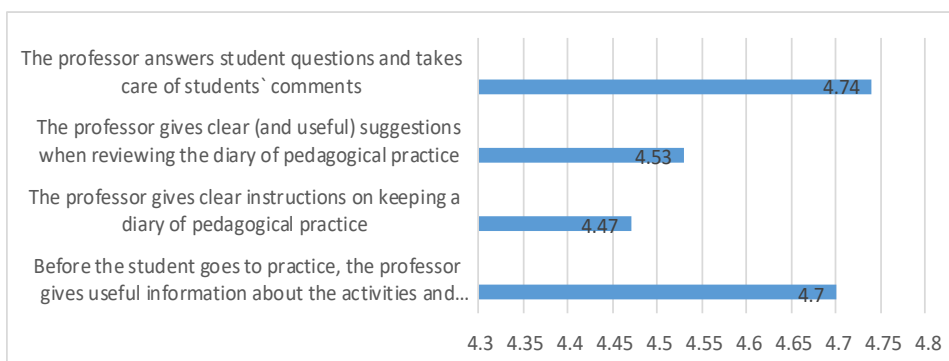


Figure 2. Average grades of pedagogical work of professors in total during the combined model of online learning and live teaching.

**Average grades of pedagogical work of professors for the subject Professional Practice 2 during live teaching and the combined model of online learning and live teaching.**

A survey with a questionnaire for the evaluation of professors' pedagogical work was conducted among the first and second year master students who attended classes during the COVID 19 pandemic. The subject of the analysis was the evaluation by the first year students related to professors' pedagogical work collectively for the subject *Professional Practice 2*.

After the end of the June exam period 2020/21, a survey among second year students of master vocational studies was conducted, and the subject of analysis was related to the pedagogical work of professors collectively for the subject *Professional Practice 2* during the combined model of online learning and live teaching.

Table 1. Comparative presentation of average grades of pedagogical work of professors collectively for the subject Professional Practice 2 during live teaching and the combined model of online learning and live teaching.

No	Statement	Average grade	
		Live teaching	Combined Model
1.	Before the student goes to practice, the teacher gives useful information about the activities and behaviour of the student during the internship	4.70	4.94
2.	The teacher gives clear instructions on keeping a diary of pedagogical practice	4.47	4.91
3.	The teacher gives clear (and useful) suggestions when reviewing the diary of pedagogical practice	4.53	4.89
4.	The teacher answers student questions and takes care about students' comments	4.74	5
Σ		4.61	4.94

Based on the obtained results shown in *Table 1*, it can be concluded that in most cases there was an increase in the average grades for the combined model of learning and live teaching. During the evaluation, communication with professors and their answers to students' questions and appreciation of comments were rated with the grade 5. Such high average grades are the basis for providing quality teaching and education services, as well as further improvement of the organization of professional practice and efficiency of studying at the level of master vocational studies. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Department has the capacity and necessary resources for the implementation of teaching during emergencies arised due to the Corona virus epidemic.

The establishing of quality cooperation between the preschool institution and parents represents a prerequisite for a successful educational process. The new circumstances have brought challenges in supporting families with preschool children. By designing suggestions for play and activities with children in a family environment, continuity in educational work has been maintained. Preschool teachers are motivated to connect through *Viber* groups, *Facebook* pages and the institution's websites. Thus, they used to forward parents the teaching materials from different teaching and learning areas as well as information about platforms and links, with suggestions for ideas for joint learning in a family environment (most often *Youtube* and *Pinterst*). Games and activities that were proposed for realization in family surroundings, were in compliance with the program of work in the kindergarten. Also, the children were sent recordings from the kindergarten, so that they were able to maintain contact with their friends who attended it. During the month of May 2020, communication usually took place on a daily basis. In December 2020, the frequency of notifying parents depended on the number of children staying at home. Somewhere, communication continued on a daily basis, but where a small number of children were absent from

kindergarten, suggestions were sent once a week. Also, information about the events in the kindergarten was available to parents on the websites of preschool institutions. Parents had the opportunity to get acquainted with the ways of working and learning which took place in kindergartens, and preschool teachers were given the opportunity to monitor children in the family environment, which contributed to the formation of a clearer image of each child's progress.

The results of the answers to the question posed in the diary of professional practice, about which activity was the most successful, based on the reactions of the children, are shown in the following tables:

Table 2. The most successful activity from the perspective of preschool teachers (May 2020).

Kindergarten activities	f	Online cooperation - Program "Kindergarten in the family"	f
Physical activity	4	Physical activity (Little basketball players)	1
Physical activities integrated into other areas	7	Talk about the virus - simultaneous participation of children in kindergarten and at home	1
Getting to know the environment	3	Art education	4
Art education	2	Getting to know the environment	1
Speech development, drama	2	Speech development, drama	1
Developing mathematical concepts	1	The rest - the response of children in online cooperation	1
Music education	2		
		Σ	30

Table 3. The most successful activity from the perspective of preschool teachers (December 2020).

Kindergarten activities	f	Online cooperation - Program "Kindergarten in the family"	f
Physical activity	6	Physical activity	4
Physical activities integrated into other areas	8	Art education	1
Getting to know the environment	3	The rest - the response of children in online cooperation	1
Art education	2		
Speech development, drama	2		
Developing mathematical concepts	2		
Music education	1		
		Σ	30

A number of preschool teachers (*Tables 2 and 3*) singled out the activities realized in the family. The answers from the category "Other" show that, from the perspective of preschool teachers, each realized activity had its significance and was considered a joint success. However, most preschool teachers, despite noticing many advantages of modern means of communication, express the opinion that at early age a live word and direct contact is irreplaceable, primarily as a support for the development of children's socio-emotional competencies and also as an opportunity to continuously monitor children's progress.

Parents documented the achievements of their children with photographs and videos, which the preschool teachers watched, sometimes together with the children in the kindergarten. Not only preschool children participated in these activities, but also older sisters and brothers, parents, and extended family members. At the same time, children and parents got involved from their homes and sent suggestions for games to children in kindergarten. Apart from program activities, some important events in children's lives, such as birthday celebrations, were an opportunity to make on

line connection between preschool teachers and children in kindergarten and children at home (children in kindergarten made greeting cards for their peers and videos and then videos were sent to the *Viber* group).

The willingness of parents to cooperate and inform preschool teachers about the implementation of the proposed content was conditioned by a number of factors such as professional engagement, health status, fulfillment of family obligations (providing learning assistance to their school age children), opportunities for obtaining information and available resources of communication technology.

Table 4. Quality of cooperation with parents from the perspective of preschool teachers (May 2020).

Answer categories	f
Successful and quality communication, daily response, parents accepted the content and gave suggestions	16
Satisfactory cooperation in the given conditions, preschool teachers and parents supported each other in overcoming challenges in new circumstances	9
Insufficient response from parents, irregular sending of information to preschool teachers	5
$\Sigma$	30

Table 5. Quality of cooperation with parents from the perspective of preschool teachers (December 2020).

Answer categories	f
Better communication in relation to previous professional practice, harmonization of educational influences, joint decision-making, built relationships of mutual trust, harmonized joint action in the interest of children	15
Successful communication, continued cooperation as in the previous period, parents are active collaborators and support to preschool teachers	13
Insufficient response of parents, reduction of parents' interest in cooperation (health reasons are given as an explanation)	2
$\Sigma$	30

The analysis of the diary of professional practice indicates that online cooperation with parents had its disadvantages and advantages:

Disadvantages of online cooperation between kindergarten and family.

In relation to children:

- The desire to be present in the kindergarten, with their friends, was expressed;
- Although the children carried out activities at their homes, the conditions were not the same as in kindergarten.

In relation to parents:

- Depending on their professional and family obligations, they were not always able to implement all the contents suggested to them by preschool teachers;
- Ability to apply new technologies has influenced the frequency of participation in the *Viber* group.

In relation to preschool teachers:

- They lacked direct contact with children;
- Monitoring children's progress is indirect, conditioned by the quality of information they receive from parents.

Advantages of online cooperation between kindergarten and family. In relation to children:

- News from the kindergarten encouraged the children to carry out activities likewise their friends;
- The children informed their friends and preschool teachers about their achievements and all significant events in the family.

In relation to parents:

- They got better acquainted with the organization and contents of the work in the kindergarten;
- Cooperation with preschool teachers and other parents was developed, based on the mutual support.

In relation to preschool teachers:

- They got better acquainted with the conditions in which children live;
- Adaptation to new ways of working required more frequent communication with other preschool teachers and professional associates, referring to professional literature and application of new technologies, which contributed to the development of professional competencies.

## CONCLUSIONS

The education of future master vocational preschool teachers implies the realization, by the curriculum, of the goals and tasks determined for the purpose of their preparation for quality work with preschool children. Contemporary professional practice during the pandemic caused by COVID 19 also imposes its requirements on preschool teachers, in terms of the need to monitor and apply the latest achievements of ICT in preschool education as a purposeful activity within the study system. In order to develop the mentioned competencies of future preschool teachers, it is necessary to deal with the assumptions of the needs in education of a successful preschool teacher for a modern preschool institution and the child in it. It is necessary to ensure the greatest possible connection between theory and practice, i.e. application of acquired theoretical knowledge in the immediate educational practice. Practical and pedagogical training of students for future action in functioning of a preschool institution during the Covid 19 pandemic, is one of the key issues when thinking about the quality of the educational system.

The combined model of teaching - live and online, which is offered to students, is in compliance with their expectations in terms of teaching content and communication with subject professors. The professional practice enabled the students to strengthen their competencies for the application of information technologies and to develop the cooperation of the kindergarten with the family. Online communication between preschool teachers and parents of children who could not attend kindergarten is very important for providing support to the family. Offered as an alternative solution, it somewhat alleviated the lack of direct contact with children as well as monitoring their progress. Consequently, the study system should enable continuous strengthening of the competencies of preschool teachers to recognize the potential of the environment, improve the quality of educational work, develop a partnership with the family and acquire skills of using new information technologies in their work.

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