

Adjusting 1st year students' teaching practice to the online environment

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Abstract

Keywords:

teaching practice; mentor; self-reflection; effective communication; primary school.

The current study aimed to collect relevant feedback on teaching practice effectiveness in relation to the tutors, students' engagement in teaching practice, as well as self-reflection regarding necessary competences for a primary school teacher. Pedagogical activities within the teaching practice have considered: students' online attendance to the classes held by the primary teacher, filling in an observation form regarding the lessons taught, mentorship session for analyzing the lessons along with the teachers, drafting a psycho-pedagogical record for a pupil, filling a form on reviewing the student's performance and implication in the teaching practice. Having concluded the study's results, we can now state that the teaching practice's way of planning in the second school semester has proven efficient. The mentor-student / inter-student interaction has contributed to developing competences that a primary school teacher does require, through the feedback provided by the observation forms, as well as by involving students directly in the didactic activities, encouraging initiative and self-reflection. Objective analysis of results, suggestions, proposals, as well as difficulties encountered has made it possible to build a solid reference for future teaching practice – both online and in the classroom – and working towards improving it and all its partakers.

Zusammenfassung

Schlüsselworte:

Unterrichtspraxis; Mentor; Selbstreflexion; effektive Kommunikation; Grundschule.

Ziel der aktuellen Studie war es, relevante Rückmeldungen zur unterrichtspraktischen Effektivität in Bezug auf die Tutoren, das Engagement der Studierenden in der Unterrichtspraxis sowie die Selbstreflexion hinsichtlich der notwendigen Kompetenzen einer Grundschullehrerin bzw. eines Grundschullehrers zu sammeln. Zu den pädagogischen Aktivitäten im Rahmen der Unterrichtspraxis gehörten: Online-Besuch der Studenten zu den Klassen der Primarstufe, Ausfüllen eines Beobachtungsbogens zum Unterricht, Mentoring-Sitzung zur Analyse des Unterrichts gemeinsam mit den Lehrern, Erstellung eines psychopädagogischen Protokolls für einen Schüler, Ausfüllen eines Formulars zur Überprüfung der Leistung der Studenten und ihrer Beteiligungen auf die Unterrichtspraxis. Abschließend können wir sagen, dass sich die Planung der pädagogischen Praxis im zweiten Semester bewährt hat. Die Mentor-Student/ Student-Interaktion hat dazu beigetragen, durch das Feedback der Beobachtungsbögen sowie durch die direkte Einbindung der Student in die didaktischen Aktivitäten, die Initiative und Selbstreflexion zu fördern, Kompetenzen zu entwickeln, die ein Grundschullehrer benötigt. Objektive Analyse der Ergebnisse, Anregungen, Vorschläge, sowie Schwierigkeiten hat es ermöglicht, eine solide Referenz für zukünftige Unterrichtspraxis zu bauen - sowohl online als auch im Klassenzimmer - und an deren Verbesserung und allen Beteiligten zu arbeiten.

1. Introduction

The current conditions for the development of pedagogical practice have required the adaptation of all resources involved, being a challenge for all learning schools (Senge, 2016). The students' motivation was "an essential problem" (Pânișoară & Manolescu, 2019, p.43), the strategies approached requiring their stimulation for learning, in a context in which there were two different environments (physical and virtual) working together at the same time. Thus, technology becomes a "facilitator of content delivery" (Ceobanu, Cucuș, Istrate & Pânișoară, 2020, p. 24), in

our case, of the lessons developed within the pedagogical practice.

The first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year has been a challenge for students of the Pedagogy of the Primary and Pre-school Education from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. That is because teaching practice had to be held exclusively online, with no actual interaction with the children and school teachers, inside a classroom. The pandemic situation during the second semester allowed students

to virtually attend classes in real time, through an online platform, as these were held with both primary teachers and students, present at school. Having taken into consideration the two different manners in which teaching practice has been organized in both semesters, we found it necessary that we analyze students' perception regarding both ways of conducting courses.

2. Theoretical foundation

The teacher for primary education must have some general and specific competencies with the help of which to “ensure the quality and efficiency of the educational process” (Șerbănescu, Bocoș & Ioja, 2020, p. 20). “The paradigm of competence is value by contemporaneity” (Șerbănescu et al., 2020, p. 20), regardless of whether we are talking about initial and continuous training. The urge for online attendance of students in teaching practice has been determined by the need for adaptation, for finding new alternatives to the pedagogical context, as this field has taken a radical shift towards a new direction. Participants have been urged to reflect upon these questions, in order to optimize the teaching & learning process.

- To what extent will the teaching practice mentor manage to provide authentic experiences to the students?
- To what extent will the students manage to successfully identify theoretical aspects approached in the course?
- To what extent will the communication between the mentor and the students be clear and efficient?
- How will the students get involved in the teaching practice?
- To what extent do the students master self-reflective abilities regarding their own competences, as related to those particular to the primary teacher?
- To what extent will technical difficulties affect the quality and accuracy of teaching practice?

These questions arise from the previous experience of the first semester, during which we have concluded how necessary the “use of self-evaluation materials, reflexive behavior and highlighting engaging activities in teaching” among the students is (Chiș & Truța, art. 07, p. 63, 2021). Mentor-student communication regards the comprehension of all elements particular to organizing and conducting didactic activities, both during the classes and during weekly meetings, as well as practicing self-reflective abilities, knowing the fact that teaching practice ought

to be accompanied by constructive criticism, „the art of personal mastery [...] achieved through self-reflection” (Senge, 2016, p. 87).

Thus, activities carried out during teaching practice have taken into account: students' online attendance to classes held by the primary teacher, filling up observation forms, analyzing attended lessons, together with the teacher, filling up a psycho-pedagogical record for one of the children, filling up an evaluation form of the student, by the teacher, in which one highlights the level of implication and engagement during the practice season.

3. Research methodology

The study has been carried out from 23rd of February 2021 until the 6th of June 2021, and had 1st year students studying Pedagogy of the Primary and Pre-school Education from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Science, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, as target group.

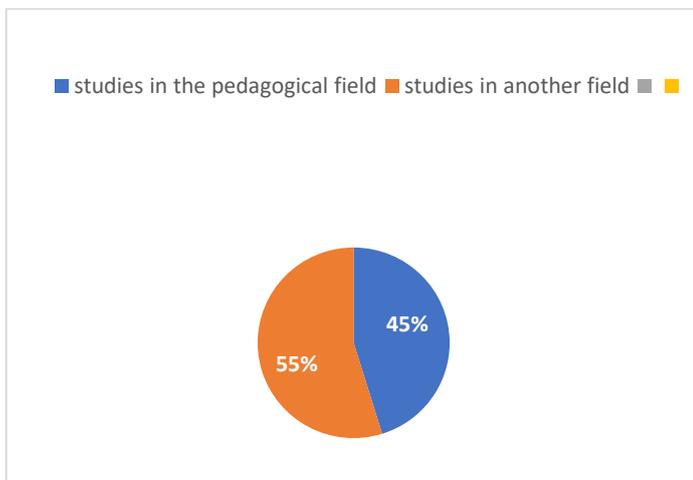
The purpose of the study has been that of collecting feedback on the efficiency of teaching practice, regarding mentorship interaction, students' implication and self-reflection on competences needed/required from the primary school teacher.

Objectives pursued throughout the research paper:

- Identifying efficient ways for organizing and planning teaching practice;
- The degree of applicability of theoretical resources / course materials in planning lesson stages;
- Finding efficient means of communicating between students and mentors;
- Identifying difficulties and obstacles that come up during online practice;
- Identifying critical abilities regarding self-reflection among students, about their own competences, as related to the ones particular to a primary school educator.

The present research paper has involved 93 participants studying Pedagogy of the Primary and Pre-school Education at university. Out of them, 42 (45%) are former pedagogy students and 51 (55%) have degrees in other fields, as illustrated in Figure 1. This aspect is particularly important for illustrating various perspectives of subjects involved, together with their experience regarding teaching practice held online.

Figure 1. Study subjects' previous academic experience



The 93 participants have answered the 14-question-survey online, on the following aspects:

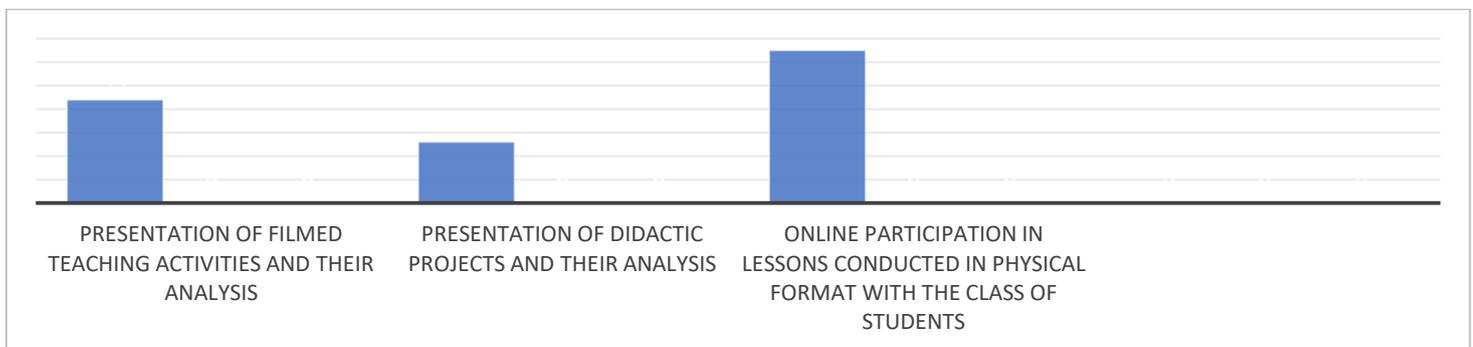
- student's position (question 1);
- efficient methods for organizing teaching practice (question 2);
 - the degree of applicability of theoretical resources / course materials in planning lesson stages (question 3);
- students – guiding teacher communication (questions 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13);

- identifying difficulties and obstacles that come up during online practice (question 5);
- identifying critical abilities regarding self-reflection among students, about their own competences, as related to the ones particular to a primary school educator (questions 7, 8, 9, 14).

4. Results

One of the preferred ways of organizing teaching practice is that of students attending, through an online platform, to classes held at school, with the teachers and pupils, as seen in Figure 2. If we look at the answers, we see that 70% (65) of students that already have degrees in the pedagogical field (67%) and those who have degrees in other fields (72,5%) have opted for this option. 47% of students (45% of those with pedagogical studies, 47% of those with other studies) have opted for presenting and analyzing filmed didactic activities from the classroom. The third alternative, that of holding presentations of didactical projects and analyzing these, has been the option of choice for 28% of students (31% of those with pedagogical studies and 25% of those with other studies).

Figure 2. Efficient ways of organizing teaching practice



Thus, the most important thing, from the students' perspective, is to experience the real situations in the classroom, even if through technology. It is important to observe the behaviors of those involved (students, teacher), class management in real time, having the opportunity to reflect on what is observed. Cerghit (apud Bocoș, 2013, p. 161) said that "without reflection there is no knowledge, elaboration, creation". As a result, the student will go through the personal filter of what is observed in the classroom, aiming to identify how it correlates the theoretical aspects with those found in practice.

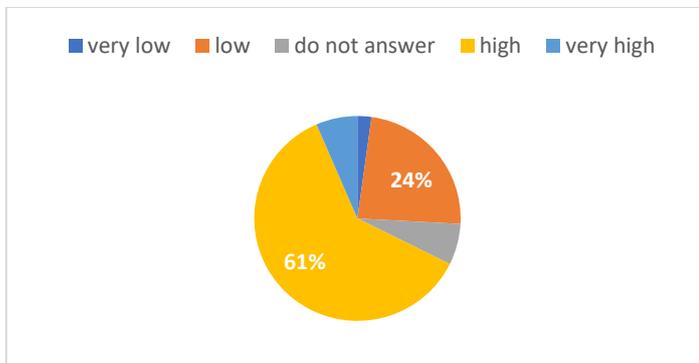
Come to the degree of applicability of theoretical resources and course materials in planning lesson stages, we have concluded that the extent to which students have managed to correlate theoretical aspects to practical aspect has been, as seen in Picture 3:

- Very low: 2% - 2 students (2 with degrees in Pedagogy);
- Low: 24% - 22 students (11 with Pedagogy degrees, 11 with other degrees);
- Refrain: 7% - 7 students (3 with Pedagogy degrees, 4 with other degrees);

- High: 66% - 56 (21 with degrees in Pedagogy, 35 with other degrees);
- Very high: 6% - 6 (5 with Pedagogy degrees, 1 with other degrees).

Even though a large number of students has successfully identified lesson planning stages during classes (over 70%), there is also a significant percent of them that has delimited lesson stages poorly or very poorly. We can notice the fact that, in order to improve the way teaching practice is conducted, students proposed (question 13) that, at the beginning their practice session, the mentor goes over the concepts they ought to operate with and thoroughly clarify all stages in lesson planning and classes for the day.

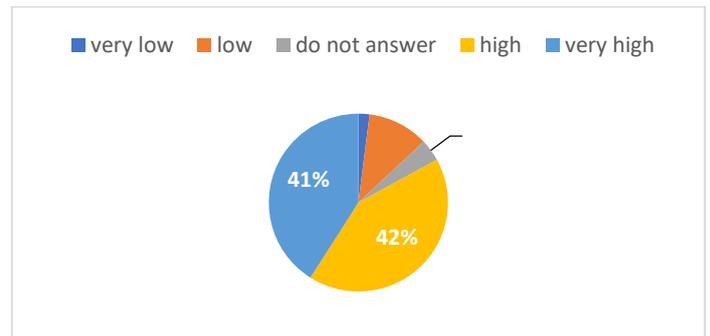
Figure 3. Identifying the stages in lesson planning



Student-mentor communication has been analyzed from a few perspectives, one of which vises the degree to which the primary school teacher (mentor) has successfully met the student's needs for knowledge, as shown in Figure 4:

- Very low: 2% - 2 students (with studies in other fields);
- Low: 11% - 10 students (6 who cu had previously studied Pedagogy and 4 who had studied something else);
- Restrain from answering: 4% - 4 students (1 with a Pedagogy degree, 3 with other degrees);
- High: 42% - 39 (21 who had a Pedagogy degree, 18 with other degrees);
- Very high: 41% - 38 (14 with degrees in Pedagogy, 24 with degrees in other fields).

Figure 4. Degree of satisfaction for students' need for knowledge by their mentors



The percentage of 83% of students who positively appreciate the way that the mentor responded to the knowledge needs is gratifying and denotes a very good communication between them. There is an interest of students with previous studies in another field who are aware of their own progress, so they show personal reflection on the level of knowledge specific to the pedagogic field.

Depending on the degree to which the mentor has managed to satisfy their student's need for knowledge, the latter have come up with recommendations, that were sorted depending on their former education:

- 17 % of those who had pedagogical studies: better communication / student interaction; in-depth analysis of taught lessons, after classes; setting up a day dedicated to observations and mentor-student dialogue; project models / lesson drafts for students;
- 31% of those who had degrees other than in Pedagogy: more openness towards the pupils' needs; providing lesson plan models that students can follow; explanations be given more often and in detail; better student-mentor communication; operational objectives be presented clearly.

Despite that, 70% of respondents had no recommendations for their mentors and stated they were satisfied with the professional connection they were able to build.

Among relevant points that were highlighted during the weekly student-mentor meeting, we find:

- students who had pedagogical studies: clarifying new terminology & notions; filling up observation forms for analyzing lessons taught; discussing aspects regarding class planning; up-to-date teaching methods; different lesson types;
- students who had degrees in a different field: clarifying different concepts used in class teaching;

settling organizational aspects; filling up observation forms regarding lessons taught, as well as communication and relation between the primary school teacher and pupils; discussing a lesson plan's structure.

In order to further improve the weekly teaching practice, students have come up with the following suggestions, as follows:

- students who had previous pedagogical studies: at the beginning of the class, the teacher should clarify the technical concepts they will operate with; debating each particular lesson type, along with giving clear examples; organizing weekly student-mentor meetings; observing filmed lessons and analyzing them into detail;
- students who had degrees in another field: regular student-mentor meetings; collecting

documents and resources that the students need and use, and uploading these on an online platform that they can have access to (such as Google Drive Cloud); presenting and discussing mock-up observation forms; presenting and discussing filmed lessons.

In order to showcase the students' involvement in the teaching practice activities, we see that 68% of students (29 (70%) with previous Pedagogy degrees, 34 (65%) with other degrees) attended the lessons, took part in the meetings with their mentor, filled up the observation forms, addressed relevant questions, discussed with their teaching practice mentor, as shown in Figure 5. 28% of students did take part in the meetings, although they did not address any further questions, while 4% did not participate in the lesson analysis meetings.

Figure 5. Students' involvement in teaching practice



During teaching practice, 43% of students had various initiatives, as follows:

- 11 students with Pedagogy degrees: participating in remedial activities; requesting teacher's assistance outside the course's hours; preparing and holding pedagogical activities during the "Different Learning" national school program.

- 19 with other degrees: requesting assistance in proofing and evaluating children's papers; discussing with children during recess; assisting other teacher's classes (e.g. English classes); carrying out games and alternative activities for the "Different Learning" week.

The initiative of students to get involved in activities other than those within the pedagogical practice, reflects their ability to address the status of teachers from the perspective of combining formal and non-formal education. Students' participation in these activities, under the guidance of pedagogical practice

mentors, supports the development of professional skills and, implicitly, it provides a real overview of the entire educational approach specific to a teacher. At the same time, in the current context, lacking predictability, the teacher faces "diversification of challenges" (Șerbănescu et al., 2020, p. 32), thus, the students assumes roles that will later allow him to adapt to new, complex situations, facilitating the training of independent and autonomous learners in learning (2020).

Among difficulties encountered by students during teaching practice, 82% of them have named: having technical difficulties, connection problems, lack of children interaction, poor visibility over the classroom, pupils or blackboard, difficulties in clearly determining lesson stages, observing the children's behavior, troubles accessing the online platform used, connecting to the audio system or having poor sound quality in general, poor student-mentor

communication. 28% of them have not met any problems during teaching practice, whatsoever.

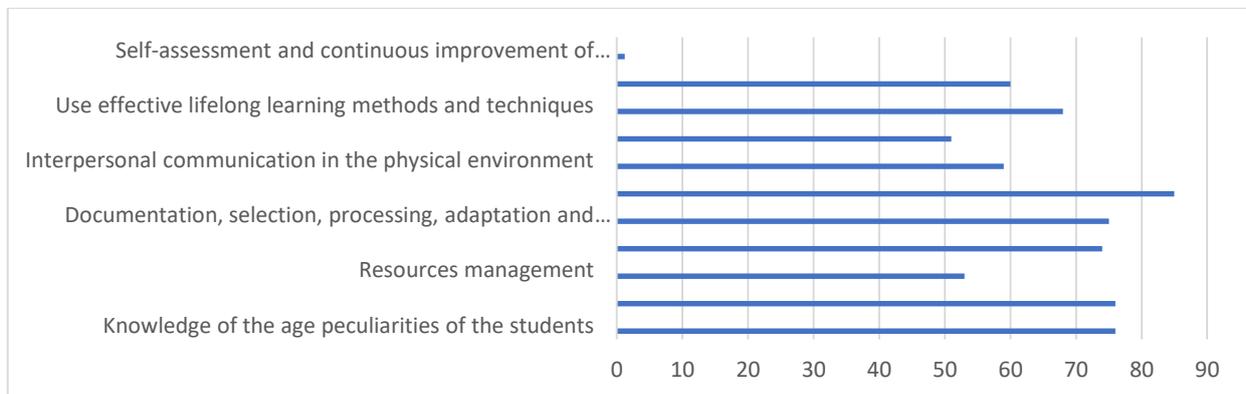
Practicing students, for the most part, are part of Generation Z, whose members, according to some authors, “live in a virtually connected world” (Ceobanu et al., 2020, p. 40). Cilliers (according to Ceobanu et al., 2020, p. 40) concluded from a study on some students of Generation Z that: they consider that “they have better digital skills than their teachers” and they “prefer face-to-face meetings”. So, the development of the pedagogical practice with the Generation Z students in the online environment and the students in the classroom, explain, to a certain extent, the difficulties highlighted by the students within the pedagogical practice.

The following aspect covered is that of students’ reflection on the competences that a primary teacher would need and they arranged these in order of importance, as seen in Figure 6:

- Adaptation and use of child-centered teaching and assessment strategies (personalized teaching methods, means of learning, organizational plans): 91% (85 students);
- Knowing of the age peculiarities of children: 82% (76 students);

- Design and implementation of teaching-learning-assessment lessons: 82% (76 students);
- Documenting, sorting, processing, adapting and providing learning content and resources: 81% (75 students);
- Student class management: 80% (74 students);
- Use of effective lifelong learning methods and techniques: 73% (68 students);
- Self-assessment and continuous improvement of professional practices and career evolution: 72% (67 students);
- Capitalization in formal circumstances, of abilities acquired in nonformal or informal contexts: 65% (60 students);
- Interpersonal communication in the physical environment: 64% (59 students);
- Resource management: 57% (53 students);
- Interpersonal communication in the virtual environment: 55% (51 students).

Figure 6. Primary teacher’s required competences



Each of the listed competencies contributes to the achievement of an effective educational act, but the students, through the hierarchy made, highlighted some ideas that support the profile of today’s teacher, according to European values and practices: student focus, appropriate strategies, lifelong learning, adaptability, in-depth knowledge of students, self-reflection.

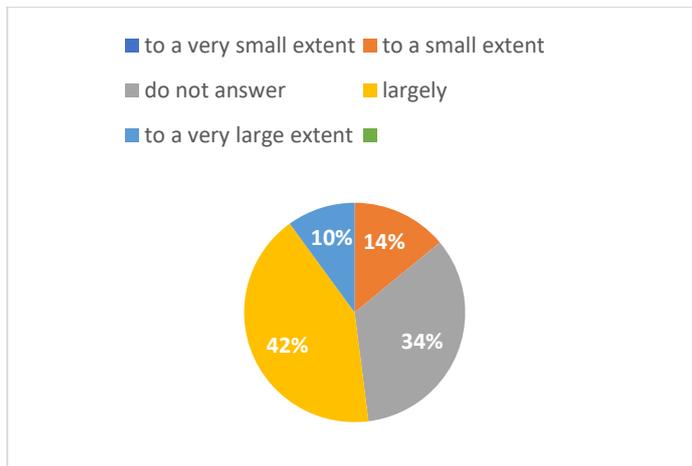
Regarding the students’ ability to self-assess and self-reflect on their personal competences, as related

to those required by the primary school teacher, we conclude the following, as shown in Figure 7:

- To a very small extent: -
- To a small extent 14% - 13 students (2 students with previous pedagogical studies, 11 students with studies in other fields);
- Refrain to answer: 34% - 32 students (12 students with previous pedagogical studies, 20 students with studies in other fields);

- To a large extent: 42% - 39 students (20 students with previous pedagogical studies, 19 students with studies in other fields);
- To a very large extent: 10% - 9 students (8 students with previous pedagogical studies, 1 student with studies in other fields).

Figure 7. Students' self-assessment regarding their pedagogical abilities, as related to those demanded by the primary school teachers



Even if 70% of students were able to self-evaluate their didactical competences, relative to the primary teacher's demands, a large percentage of them could not estimate objectively where exactly they situate in relation to this. Students considered this requested a more detailed introspection of what these abilities were, that the teacher vocation called for, and how to further exercise them. It is noted that there have even been students who had former studies in the pedagogical and yet were unable to successfully self-assess their competences.

On the other side, however, if we are to further look at what said competences imply, that the primary teacher should possess, students have named the following:

- Students who had previously studied Pedagogy: the ability to correlate curricular information to relevant situations in one's life, integrity, understanding pupils' age peculiarities, reflexive approach, ability to adapt to children's needs and demands, using efficient didactic methods and techniques, openness towards innovation, flexibility, empathy, professionalism, organizational skills, efficient communication, thorough lesson and course planning, ability to efficiently manage the student class, use of a child-centered pedagogical approach;
- Students who had previously studied in another field: use of efficient didactical strategies,

openness towards innovation, flexibility, empathy, professionalism, good organizational skills, efficient communication, thorough lesson and course planning, ability to efficiently manage the student class, use of a child-centered pedagogical approach.

By observing the students' answers, we can conclude that those who had previously studied Pedagogy have identified some additional traits that the primary teacher should possess. This further highlights the need for personal introspection on students' competences, in relation to those taught in university for future teachers. All students who were not aware whether they meet the competences demanded from a primary teacher have, instead, mentioned their expectations, as if they were pupils themselves, so we can consider that they have an image of the skills needed by a teacher, in the current context in which "the individual intrinsic quality of students becomes very important" (Șerbănescu et al., 2020, p. 35) in order to professionalize the teaching career.

Conducting this semester's teaching practice has brought along some improvements, as found in 96% of the students' answers:

- Use of didactical strategies for making pupils more attentive during classes;
- Clearly delimiting lesson stages and steps;
- Filling up observation & analysis forms correctly;
- Primary school lesson types;
- School curricula's form and content be especially customized for primary level;
- The need to adapt and correlate curricula to the children's age peculiarities;
- Student class management;
- Activation of pupils' potential;
- Importance of children's socio-emotional state during the entire didactical process
- Organizing courses for different disciplines;
- Up-to-date teaching techniques and methods;
- Planning out operational goals;
- Efficient time management;
- Assessment methods;

- Ways to further improve and develop critical thinking.

The answers provided by the students clarify the initial question regarding the identification in practice of theoretical elements in the course support. Thus, the practice mentor managed to guide the students in the didactic approach, they managed to correlate the theoretical aspects with the practical ones, more than 70% as is turned out to the specific question. 4% of students claim to have not learned anything new, during the teaching practice stage, 3 of them having had previously studied in fields different than Pedagogy. Previously, 2 of them stated they do have primary teacher competences to a small extent, and one of them restrained from answering. One single student who had previously studied Pedagogy claims to have not learned anything new during teaching practice, and stating he does possess qualities required from a primary teacher to a large extent.

5. Discussions

Having analyzed the survey's results, we seize remarkable progress regarding the degree of applicability of pedagogical resources: if, during the first semester, only 46% of students considered this degree as being high and very high, after the second semester, more than 70% of them are able to correlate theoretical aspects taught to in-person practice. This is attested by the fact that online attendance to in-person classes held with the children and teacher together was the preferred option by 70% of participants.

The questions that vised student-mentor communication highlight the fact that the educators did satisfy the students' needs regarding knowledge, as confirmed by 83% of the aforementioned. Students' recommendations to their mentors, the aspects highlighted as a result of the weekly meetings, their suggestions for improving the way teaching practice is done were complementary and even overlapped – this signifying mutual understanding of demands for knowledge and even use of particular terminology.

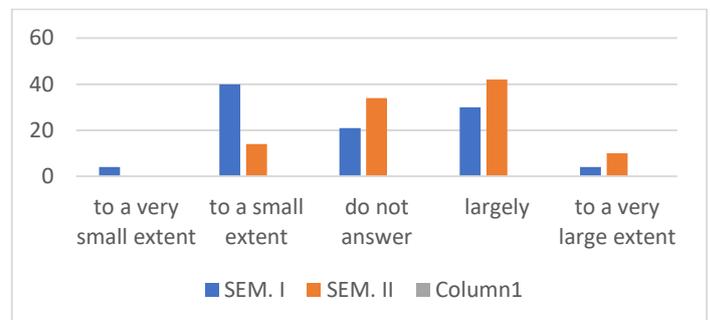
Another important aspect has to do with student's involvement in teaching practice – 68% of them attended classes, attended the weekly meetings with their mentor, filled up the observation forms, addressed relevant questions and discussed with their assigned teacher, outside classes. 43% of them had their own initiatives for engagement in their practice stage. Their devotion and strong implication in teaching practice is also reflected in the number of

participant students that did increase from one semester to another: 47 in the first one and 93 in the second one.

The ability to self-reflect on one's professional competences highlights yet another aspect: if, during the first semester, student class management was considered important by only 49% of respondents, after the second semester, 80% of them now agree to this. On comprehending children's age peculiarities, 60% of the first semester participants found this relevant, and 82% did, in the second semester.

Personal assessment on one's abilities and skills, as related to those demanded from a primary school teacher show significant progress, as shown in Figure 8:

Figure 8. Comparative results regarding personal reflection on one's professional competences, related to those demanded from a preschool/primary school teacher



The differences in percentage of the two semesters could have different causes:

- Teaching practice has been carried out differently for the two semesters (for the first one, the stage was held entirely online, with no direct contact to the preschool class);
- Students correlated their own competences to those of the primary teacher, rather to those of the preschool teacher's.

This way of holding teaching practice does come with difficulties and impediments, starting from the technical aspects – faced by 82% of participant students, that lead, inevitably, to interrupting or lowering transmission quality of the courses. A good part of inconveniences associated with a problematic experience in attending teaching practice are strongly related to technical difficulties.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can attest that the way in which teaching practice has been carried out throughout the second school semester has proven efficient, student-

mentor interaction has contributed to developing strong competences in preparing one for the teacher vocation, with the help of assessment forms altogether and by actively involving students in activities, encouraging their contributions, but also advising self-reflection. Objective analysis of results, suggestions, proposals and difficulties encountered now constitute important reference that one can come back to, in order to further improve the teaching practice experience – both online and in-person, with all partakers being present.

Authors note:

The authors have equal contributions to this article.

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