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"Should we get support or just guidelines?" (self) assessment on mentoring of early childhood education students

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this research was to find out students' and mentors' attitudes toward the quality of mentoring support during teaching practicums. The research sought to determine whether there is any difference in (self) assessment between teacher mentors and early childhood education students.

Design/methodology/approach – Through the quantitative research methodology, the Crisp (2009) College Student Mentoring Scale (CSMS) instrument was used to assess the quality of mentoring support during teaching practicums. Assessments were made in relation to the following variables: support in the areas of psychological and emotional needs, support in professional development and the development of professional competencies and the role of mentors as models. Early childhood education students ($n1 = 105$) and mentors ($n2 = 54$) of teaching practicums at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, participated in the research.

Findings – The results of the research show that there is a statistically significant difference between student assessments and mentor self-assessment with regard to all researched areas of support. Mentors rated their mentoring skills higher than students did.

Originality/value – An approach in which mentoring is assessed in the context of support to students in different areas (e.g. psychological, emotional, professional) is rarely used in early childhood teacher education. Results indicate the need for a systematic evaluation of mentoring and the design of programs to strengthen mentoring competences.

Keywords Mentors, Practical training, Support, Students, Teacher education, Teaching practicum

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Initial early childhood teacher education varies across the world, but usually, future teachers gain their competencies through a combination of theoretical and practical experiences. Fekede and Gemechis (2009) justify this approach and highlight that teacher education must incorporate practicums so that future teachers can learn in a real-world context. Education of early childhood teachers in Croatia provides practical experiences through professional–pedagogical practice and teaching practicums (Jurčević Lozančić and Rogulj, 2018). Payler and Georgeson (2013) state that students need to be provided with support by mentors. Mentors should ensure an individual approach to practice and a safe environment for students. A mentor is often a more experienced professional who supports a less experienced person in acquiring professional competencies (Gasper, 2020). Despite the difference in experience, mentoring should not be a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor has more power. On the contrary, it is a relationship of mutual respect in which the mentor and the mentee are equal. It is precisely because of this equality that Starr (2014) avoids describing the mentor as a helper because it implies that the mentee is helpless.

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Gasper (2020) states that mentors must have certain skills, such as the skill of active listening, noticing the existence or lack of self-confidence, questioning and giving space (to another person) to think. Bleach (2020) sees mentoring as a constant relationship of support that leads to professional growth and development, and defines it as a relationship of trust, empathy, respect and confidentiality. The interrelationship is conditioned by different levels of mentor participation, which can range from non-engagement to initiative taking (Clarke *et al.*, 2014).

To circumvent the usual "pitfalls" in mentor education, Aderibigbe *et al.* (2018) conclude that "mentoring relationships cannot be separated from critically questioning the ways and values that support professional learning in initial education of all teacher profiles" (p. 54). The practical implications of their research are "focused on the preparation and resources for the development of mentoring as a learning tool, embedded in the professional culture of the school" (p. 54).

Hobson *et al.* (2012) focused on the importance of mentoring student teachers and concluded that mentors have opportunities to serve as a support system to future teachers. Goldhaber *et al.* (2020) found the importance of mentors in the fact that they can provide students with concrete examples of "school practices and processes" (p. 583). Examples of practices and processes can contribute to students' awareness of their future professional tasks. It could be assumed that the importance of mentoring is even greater in the changes of education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Ersin and Atay (2021) discussed online mentoring as a possible way of support for students during the pandemic. Consequently, mentors should develop new skills for this new approach to mentoring.

This paper presents the results of research on mentoring support in teaching practicums for students of early childhood education at the University of Zagreb.

Contextualization of mentoring in early childhood education in the Republic of Croatia

With the industrialization of society in the 19th century, there was a need for organized care for children of early age. Institutionalization of preschool education urged the need for pedagogically educated staff. Development of early childhood education caused changes in teachers' education. The education developed from short courses to master's degree education (Mendeš, 2018). Learning outcomes of early childhood teachers' studies in the Republic of Croatia describe the expected knowledge, understanding, acquisition of professional values and practical skills that students should be able to demonstrate upon completion of their studies. According to the early childhood teacher education program (Faculty of Teacher Education, 2020), the education of second- and third-year undergraduate-level students is organized in the form of lectures and teaching practicums that take place in institutions for early childhood education (practical training spots). In teaching practicums, students have opportunities to work with children under the supervision of professors and teacher mentors. Teaching practicums within the studies are Practicum in Environment Learning, Practicum in Music Culture, Practicum in Kinesiology, Practicum in Croatian Language and Literature and Practicum in Art.

"Practical training spots" are institutions certified by the Ministry of Science and Education (hereafter MZOS). The status of practical training spots is defined in the *Regulation on Practical Training Institutions and Experimental Programs in Kindergartens and on Kindergartens as Professional Development Centers* (hereinafter Regulation) (MZOS, 2004). At the request of the higher education institution and the kindergarten's management, a kindergarten is appointed as a practical training spot for a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 4 years. The Regulation regulates the mutual obligations of the practical training institution and the higher education institution. Obligations are clearly defined – for example, the work plan by methodical areas, the number of hours students should be present at practicums, the number of students in practicums, the tasks and responsibilities of the higher education institution and the tasks of the mentor during the practical training time.

The work of mentors can be performed by teachers with at least 5 years of work experience, appointed by the Kindergarten Professional Council for a period of 1 year (MZOS, 2004). After a "trial" period, the Ministry appoints a mentor for a period of 4 years, and the Regulation itself prescribes the tasks of the mentor. The mentor should plan, prepare and evaluate the work of students, cooperate with the professors responsible for different teaching practicums and other mentors, participate in the analysis of educational work of students, keep written documentation, and if necessary, participate in meetings at university. In addition to the above, the mentor should assist the student in preparing for practical work, keeping appropriate written documentation. After the practical work, the mentor, with the students, conducts a reflection on the implemented activity, with the participation of the methods teacher. There is no training or additional professional development for mentors in practical training spots in Croatia at the moment. However, some universities (i.e. University of Zagreb) are currently developing a program of continuous professional development for mentors in their practical training spots.

Teaching practicum units have defined learning outcomes that include theoretical and practical knowledge, as well as values and practical skills. The interaction between theory and practice influences the development of specific competencies that are focused on the needs of the profession (Eraut *et al.*, 2000). The importance of implementing theory into practice was confirmed by MacLeod (1996) who stated that theoretical knowledge embedded in a practical context becomes part of knowledge about practice. The framework of mentoring exceeds the obligations defined by the Regulations and learning outcomes, creating preconditions for the professionalization of the teaching profession – that is, the transformation of occupation into profession (Domović, 2011). A significant role in the process of professional development of both mentors and students is played by the establishment of their mutual relationship – that is, their interaction (Ambrosetti, 2014). Despite demands for reciprocity, research studies mainly focus on the role of mentors. The teacher mentor plays a significant role in providing the mentee with psychological and emotional support, helping to achieve professional development and serve as a professional model (Crisp, 2009). Lasater *et al.* (2021) stated that mentors can serve as an encouragement and a support, especially in a time of crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic.

Haring (1999) sees the biggest weakness of mentoring as the lack of a conceptual program without support in structured programs, while some authors cite insufficient testing of mentoring theory as the cause (Philip and Hendry, 2000). Previous studies have focused on assessing the impact of mentoring on learning outcomes (Crisp and Cruz, 2009). The presented research compares perspectives of mentors and mentees toward mentoring support in teaching practicums.

Method

The aim of this research, conducted during the winter period of the academic year 2020–2021, was to find out students' and mentors' attitudes toward quality in mentoring support during teaching practicums. This research sought to answer the following questions:

(1) Is there a difference in the perception of quality in mentoring support during teaching practicums between students and teacher mentors?

(2) Is there a difference in the perception of quality in mentoring support with respect to the location of the practical training institution?

Participants and procedure

The research was conducted on a sample of 159 ($N = 159$) participants (see Table 1). All participants were female, because currently there are no male students in neither early

Independent variables		Students ($n_1 = 105$)	Mentors ($n_2 = 54$)
Location of practical training institutions	Čakovec	32.4%	22.2%
	Petrinja	10.5%	25.9%
	Zagreb	57.1%	51.9%
Methodology of related assessments	Kinesiology	9.5%	16.7%
	Art	5.7%	22.2%
	Environment	14.3%	18.5%
	Music	1%	27.8%
	Croatian language and literature	6.7%	14.8%
	General	62.9%	
Education level	Bachelor degree		81.5%
	Master degree		13%
	Other		5.5%
Professional advancement	Teacher mentor		24.1%
	Teacher counselor		25.9%
	Neither		50%

Table 1.
Sample structure in relation to the location of practical training institutions and methodical exercises to which assessments and self-assessments refer

childhood education studies nor in the population of mentors. The sample ($N = 159$) consisted of students (66%, $n_1 = 105$), undergraduate and graduate studies, at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb. The average age of the participants in the students' sample was 22.3 years (SD = 1.38), with the youngest participant being 20 and the oldest 27 years old. Mentors of practical training institutions of the same faculty made up 34% ($n_2 = 54$) of the total sample ($N = 159$). The average age of the participants in the mentor sample was 50.2 years of age (SD = 8.25), with the youngest participant being 36 and the oldest 64 years old. Mentors had an average of 25.9 years of work experience (SD = 10.11), while those involved in mentoring had 12.2 years of experience (SD = 8.19) within the mentoring range of less than 1 year to 34 years of mentoring experience.

All students in the sample were chosen because of their active participation in teaching practicums during the previous academic year (2019–2020). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a small number of participants (6.7%, $f = 7$) did not participate in exercises in practical training spots but performed tasks in a virtual environment. Although students in the virtual environment had different tasks than those in the practical training spots (e.g. video analysis), they still performed tasks with the support of mentors. Therefore, it was justified to assess the quality of mentoring support equally, regardless of the environment in which it took place. Consequently, the authors chose not to single out students who virtually participated as a separate subsample.

A questionnaire was distributed to participants via email. In order to include all mentors, a link to the online questionnaire was sent to the addresses of all practical training spots with a note to be forwarded to the teacher mentors. A questionnaire to potential participants in the student subsample was sent to joint email addresses, a total of 120 questionnaires for mentors and 230 questionnaires for students. Responses were received from 45% of mentors and 46% of students. According to some authors (i.e. Hohwü *et al.*, 2013; Massey and Tourangeau, 2013), it is reasonable to expect 60%–70% return of survey questionnaires. Significantly fewer participants participated in the present research. Possible reasons could be an inconvenience due to the possible identification of participants through independent variables (place of practical spot, teaching practicum), or participants were reluctant to engage given the overall situation with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and were guaranteed anonymity. At the same time, they were aware of the possibility of withdrawing from

participation. The research was conducted in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the University of Zagreb and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education.

Instrument

For the purposes of this research, the questionnaire College Student Mentoring Scale (CSMS; Crisp, 2009) was used. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part dealt with the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants. The second part consisted of 4 scales: Psychological and Emotional Support to Students (eight items), Support to Professional Development of Students (six items), Support for the Acquisition of Professional Knowledge and Skills (eight items) and Professional Model (seven items). Participants rated the degree of agreement with the statements on a five-point Likert-type scale with 1 indicating complete disagreement with the statement and 5 indicating complete agreement. Point 3 indicated the neutral attitude of the research participants in relation to the claims made.

The reliability of the measuring instrument was determined using Cronbach's alpha and is 0.978 ($\alpha = 0.978$) for the whole instrument. The reliability of the individual scales is well above 0.70, which is considered sufficient reliability. Reliability for the Psychological and Emotional Support to Students Scale is 0.931, for the Student Professional Development Support scale 0.938, for the Support for the Acquisition of Professional Knowledge and Skills scale 0.945, and for Professional Model scale 0.939. The reliability of the scales in instrument validation (Crisp, 2009) ranged from 0.845 for the Professional Model scale to 0.913 for the Psychological and Emotional Support to Students scale. Although the reliability of the instrument was high ($\alpha = 0.978$), some authors (e.g. Tavakol and Dennick, 2011) do not consider that a high alpha coefficient necessarily means greater validity. Along with them, Johnson and Christensen (2019) state that the alpha coefficient is higher if a large number of items are in the questionnaire. As a possible solution that would contribute to the validity of the instrument, it is possible to reduce the number of items (Tavakol and Dennick, 2011; Johnson and Christensen, 2019). Since the original Crisp (2009) questionnaire was used, it was not justified to reduce the number of items.

The responses collected by the survey were analyzed using the statistical program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 22 (SPSS22). In addition to descriptive indicators, nonparametric tests (Mann–Whitney, Kruskal–Wallis H) were used.

Findings

(Self) assessment of participants in relation to the variable Psychological and Emotional Support to Students (Table 2) shows how participants (both mentors and students) agreed with almost all items of this variable, with the highest degree of agreement expressed in relation to the statement "Mentor openly/I openly talk/with students about their doubts about exercises" ($M = 4.33$, SD = 0.92). Participants (mentors and students) had neutral opinions in relation to the item "Mentor encourages me/I encourage students to discuss the problems they have in their social life, which are related to their professional life" ($M = 3.01$, SD = 1.36).

The Mann–Whitney test revealed a statistically significant difference ($U = 750.5$, $p = 0.00$) in the assessments of mentors and students in relation to the variable Psychological and Emotional Support to Students, where mentors expressed a higher degree of agreement than students did (Table 3).

In relation to the variable Professional Development Support, the participants (mentors and students) most often took a neutral position (Table 2). In (self) assessments, there was a slightly higher degree of agreement in items related to supporting students in understanding their professional development ($M = 3.51$, SD = 1.27) and questioning student assumptions ($M = 3.51$, SD = 1.20). A statistically significant difference was found in the assessments of

Mentoring Aspects of mentoring	Items	Students *M*	Students SD	Mentors *M*	Mentors SD
	Recognizing academic accomplishments	3.55	1.07	4.44	0.60
	Talking openly about doubts related to methodical exercises	4.07	0.98	4.83	0.50
	Encouraging to ask advice	3.74	1.19	4.83	0.61
Psychological and emotional support to students	Giving emotional support	3.45	1.22	4.82	0.62
	Talking openly about personal issues	3.04	1.23	4.39	0.90
	Feeling of belonging to the team	3.30	1.26	4.17	1.00
	Recognizing abilities to succeed as professionals	3.53	1.18	4.76	0.51
	Encouraging to talk about problems in social life	2.46	1.23	4.09	0.85
	Encouraging to consider education opportunities outside of current plans	2.88	1.37	4.20	0.86
	Assisting in understanding the possibilities of professional development	3.08	1.22	4.35	0.87
Support to professional development of students	Questioning assumptions guided by a realistic assessment of skills	3.12	1.18	4.26	0.81
	Assisting in researching professional development opportunities	2.91	1.26	4.14	0.84
	Discussing the implications of various choices on professional development	2.79	1.22	3.65	1.01
	Assisting in the perception of sacrifice required for professional development	2.84	1.26	3.76	1.10
	Continuous supporting during the methodical exercises	3.49	1.15	4.91	0.29
	Encouraging to work as well as possible	3.70	1.13	4.87	0.44
	Helping to achieve professional aspirations	3.26	1.18	4.50	0.80
	Counseling for the improvement of professional competencies	3.76	1.05	4.76	0.67
Support for the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills	Helping to connect theoretical knowledge with practical activities	3.52	1.08	4.80	0.49
	Encouraging to face professional dilemmas	3.10	1.14	4.65	0.62
	Assisting in planning activities that will be carried out independently in the exercises	3.67	1.20	4.82	0.44
	Conducting an evaluation after each exercise with the aim of improving the next activities	3.70	1.18	4.56	0.84
	Sharing personal examples of the difficulties the mentor had to overcome to achieve professional success	3.38	1.35	4.13	0.99
	Modeling how to be successful in work	3.30	1.23	4.43	0.66
Professional model	Providing example of how to treat other people	3.43	1.18	4.70	0.54
	Providing example of how to communicate with other people	3.60	1.13	4.70	0.54
	Providing example of how to give constructive criticism	3.53	1.25	4.46	0.88
	In professional activities, being like a mentor	3.09	1.29	4.22	0.84
	(Being) admiring to (as the) mentor	3.12	1.31	3.17	1.09

Table 2. Assessments of different aspects of mentoring

students and mentors ($U = 1{,}077.00$, $p = 0.00$) with respect to the variable Professional Development Support, with mentors estimating a higher degree of agreement with respect to the specified variable (Table 3).

Descriptive indicators for the variable Support for the Acquisition of Professional Knowledge and Skills show that participants from the subsample of mentors expressed a

higher degree of agreement with the items in this variable than did participants from the subsample of students (Table 2). For example, all mentors (100%, $f = 54$) agreed that they provided support to students during the exercises. In contrast, only half the students (50.5%, $f = 53$) agreed with that. The mentors' self-assessment in relation to this variable shows an extremely high degree of agreement ($M = 4.91$–4.50). Students were more likely to take a neutral position ($M = 3.70$–3.10). Using the Mann–Whitney test, it was found that the stated difference in the assessments of mentors and students in relation to the stated variable was statistically significant ($U = 663.00$, $p = 0.00$) (Table 3).

There was a statistically significant difference ($U = 1{,}404.00$, $p = 0.00$) in the assessments of mentors and students compared to the variable Professional Model (Table 3). Participants from the mentor subsample estimated a higher degree of agreement in relation to the stated variable in contrast to participants from the student subsample who were more likely to take a neutral stance (Table 2). Interestingly, neither mentors ($M = 3.17$, SD = 1.09) nor students ($M = 3.12$, SD = 1.31) were sure whether the mentor was a person that students should admire.

No statistically significant difference was found in the estimates of the variables that defined mentoring (Psychological and Emotional Support to Students, Support to Professional Development of Students, Support for the Acquisition of Professional Knowledge and Skills, Professional Model) regarding the location of the practical training spot (Table 4).

Starting from the assumption that there was a difference in the assessments of participants from the subsample of mentors with regard to their levels of education and professional status (professional advancement), the responses of research participants from

Table 3.
Differences in assessments of different aspects of mentoring regarding status of the participants (mentors, students)

Scale	Samples	M	Mann–Whitney U	Z	p
Psychological and emotional support to students	Mentors	118.60	750.50	−7.59	0.00
	Students	60.15			
Professional development support	Mentors	110.79	1077.00	−6.18	0.00
	Students	63.26			
Support for the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills	Mentors	120.22	663.00	−7.94	0.00
	Students	59.31			
Professional model	Mentors	106.50	1404.00	−5.21	0.00
	Students	66.37			

Table 4.
Assessments of different aspects of mentoring regarding the place of practical training spot

Scale	Place	M	χ^2	p
Psychological and emotional support to students	Čakovec	74.99	3.74	0.15
	Petrinja	96.02		
	Zagreb	78.07		
Professional development support	Čakovec	82.82	2.74	0.26
	Petrinja	89.79		
	Zagreb	74.01		
Support for the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills	Čakovec	75.57	1.39	0.50
	Petrinja	88.98		
	Zagreb	79.77		
Professional model	Čakovec	79.93	0.28	0.87
	Petrinja	84.32		
	Zagreb	78.81		

this sample were analyzed separately. No statistically significant difference was found in the self-assessments of the participants from the mentor subsample with respect to their professional status and levels of education, with the exception of self-perceptions regarding the variable Support to Professional Development of Students. Using the Kruskal–Wallis H test, a statistically significant difference was found in the self-assessments of the participants from the mentor subsample with respect to their professional status ($\chi^2 = 6.50$, $p = 0.04$). Participants who were promoted to mentors and counselors assessed a higher degree of agreement compared to the variable.

Discussion

Crisp (2009) defined four areas in which mentor support to students could be analyzed. Support refers to psychological and emotional support, support for professional development, the development of the acquisition of professional knowledge and skills, and the role of a mentor as a professional model. The results of this research show that research participants from the mentor subsample highly valued the support (emotional, social, competence development and professional development) they provided to students. It is support for mentees that defines the role of a mentor (McMahon *et al.*, 2016). Support is not only visible through enabling professional development but also in questioning and responding to the challenges faced by students and recognizing the success they achieve.

This research showed that students and mentors had different perceptions of mentoring support. For example, 99.1% ($f = 53$) of participants from the mentor subsample, contrary to 56.1% ($f = 59$) of participants from the student subsample, thought that they recognized a student's professional achievements during practical training. It is possible that there are different interpretations of what it means to recognize professional achievements – that is, the way in which they are expressed.

Gasper (2020) points out that mentoring in stressful professions, which can include teaching, presupposes providing a "safe place" (p. 9) so that students can face their professional dilemmas and gain space for a more objective view of the situation. The research presented in this paper showed that almost all mentors (92.6%, $f = 50$) thought they had helped students face their professional dilemmas. In contrast, one-third of students (35.2%, $f = 37$) took a neutral attitude toward the same statement, while more than one-quarter (27.6%, $f = 29$) of students disagreed, expressing their view that mentors would not help them face their professional dilemmas. It is the statistical significance in all assessments of mentors and students in the sample that shows a difference in mutual expectations. Višnjić Jevtić (2021) states that unspoken expectations can lead to obstacles in cooperative relations. Although this research did not focus on the mutual cooperation of mentors and students, the testimonies of both show that cooperation is a precondition for support. Students stated that they did not have the opportunity to try new approaches and activities during teaching practicums (e.g. "Most mentors impose their wishes and if we do not do the activity exactly as they wanted, then they are not satisfied"; "We are not encouraged to try something new"; "Is it possible to call someone a mentor if that person rejects 90% of new ideas at the first encounter?!") At the same time, mentors expected innovation ("I expect new activities and innovations from students; unfortunately, they use already seen innovations") which they did not recognize in students' practical work. It is possible that in situations that require assessment, students choose safe solutions to be confident in the success of the planned activities. If mentors serve as a support (Hobson *et al.*, 2012), they should help students in finding new, innovative solutions.

Snider and Holley (2020), on the other hand, conclude that the "tell me what to do" (p. 102) principle indicates a lack of ability to assess possible improvements in practice. Gasper (2020) states that mentors should guide mentees, so it can be concluded that the responsibility for

clarifying expectations and differences in the perception of (desirable) activities lies with the mentors.

Assessing the mentoring (professional) support, mentors largely agreed with the statements describing the support. The exception was the item "Students admire me", which can be taken personally, with mentors taking a neutral stance. Unlike mentors, students were generally more likely to take a neutral stance and, to a lesser extent, assess the adequacy of the support they received from mentors. Although it could be concluded that this was a critique of mentors, it may be seen as critical thinking on the process of mentoring itself. The importance of critical thinking is invoked by Gray *et al.* (2016) "Developing competence model is now important to define our profession, but if it lacks critical thinking and critique, we will be ill-served (p. 77)".

It should be noted there is no systematic evaluation of mentors in the practicums. Gray *et al.* (2016) point out that the evaluation of mentoring is necessary to improve the mentoring process, mentors and consequently the practice of the mentored. Given that there was a disparity in competencies and experience between mentors and mentees, evaluation and shared reflections could prevent differences in expectations and improve understanding of practice. It is possible that the absence of continuous reflections was the reason for the differences in the assessments of mentors and students. Keegan (2020) emphasizes the importance of the system in ensuring continuous supervision of mentors not only to learn and reflect, but also to experience the dynamics of the relationship. One of the student participants emphasized the importance of joint reflections for the relationship between mentor and mentee ("I believe that mentors are not easy because with the multitude of work they have should help us. I believe that the quality of relationships would increase if mentors were always present in activities").

Urban *et al.* (2012) state that the mentoring process contributes to the development of system competencies and professionalism in early childhood education. Participants from the mentor subsample in this research highly valued the support of mentors in strengthening the professional knowledge and skills of students, which may indicate a high level of professional competence of mentors. The diversity of the mentoring role is significant – they are models, leaders, teachers and counselors (Kent *et al.*, 2003). However, participants from the subsample of students did not agree that their mentors had all these characteristics as half of them did not experience support in encouraging the development of professional skills.

Although this research showed that both mentors and students emphasized the support as a significant task of mentors, it raises additional questions, such as expectations of interpersonal relationships. It is possible that students expect the transfer of knowledge, skills and experiences that would make it easier for them to cope in a new situation. One of the student doubts, "I am not sure do I need support or just the guidelines would make working with children easier". At the same time, they felt limited in working directly with children, possibly also afraid of the responsibility they would have to start taking on. On the other hand, mentors may think that students should show initiative and contribute to the development of practice with new approaches in the social and material environment. The mentors who participated in this research were selected by their institutions and the university without the possibility of checking their mentoring competencies. The selection was based on their professional expertise in a particular field. It is possible to question whether the results of the research would be different if mentors had the opportunity to be educated in the field of mentoring. Kupila *et al.* (2017) state that an increasing number of countries offer training to mentors to enhance their mentoring competencies. Teachers are educated to work with children of early and preschool age, so it can be assumed that there is room for strengthening their methodical competencies in working with adults. Research (Nolan and Molla, 2018) shows how mentor training contributes to increasing professional

dispositions, pedagogical knowledge and social capital. These are the areas where the biggest discrepancies between mentors and students have been shown.

The limitation of this research is the size of the sample. Only half the possible participants were involved, so it is possible to assume that they were highly motivated participants, and that the results could have been different if the entire population of mentors and students had been included. The research gives a limited insight into participants' understanding of mentoring because of the quantitative methodology used in the research. The next limitation is the period of the Covid-19 pandemic in which the research was conducted. It is possible that the communication between mentors and students was limited by the inability of students to be at the practical training spots and thus did not have the opportunity to develop a collaborative relationship. The Covid-19 pandemic itself may influence the results because of changes in the work organization, responsibilities and possible anxiety of participants.

Conclusion

The research showed that there is a difference in the (self) assessments of mentors and students. The difference in assessment was found in the assessment of mentoring support during teaching practicums between students and teacher mentors. No difference was found in the assessment in mentoring support with respect to the location of the practical training spot. The results showed that mentors themselves positively evaluated mentoring support to students. At the same time, students were more inclined to take a neutral stance in relation to mentoring support.

Further research should be conducted with a larger sample. It would be useful to include participants from those institutions that have developed mentoring support programs. Research could be repeated by use of different methodology. Qualitative methodology could contribute to a deeper understanding of participants' attitudes toward mentoring and relations of mentors and mentees.

The results of this research indicate the need for a systematic evaluation of mentoring and the design of programs to strengthen mentoring competencies through training or professional development. Formal teacher education is directed toward practical teaching through teaching practicums. Although mentors should be chosen amongst the most competent teachers, competency in their professional tasks does not automatically result in competence to lead, guide and support students. It is necessary to change the early childhood teachers' initial education to help them to be ready for mentoring challenges.

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