

# Preschool Teacher's Role in the Art Activities of Early and Preschool Age Children

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## Abstract

*Visual arts capacitate the realisation of children's creative potential from the early age. This potential is visible through research activities of play with the use of different materials and techniques; it develops children's visual-spatial intelligence, imagination, aesthetic perception and specific artistic- expressive abilities. Great importance for the development of children's creativity and artistic abilities lies in the influence of a preschool teacher, who enables the wealth of motivational stimuli, allows children's freedom and appreciates their interests and possibilities. This research examined preschool teachers' attitudes about their role in the art activities and the frequency of some didactic approaches to art activities implementation. It was conducted on a sample of 207 preschool teachers from 17 kindergartens in Croatia. Research results show that preschool teachers rate their knowledge of the art areas as good, and that there is no statistically significant difference in preschool teachers' attitudes about their personal knowledge of visual art, considering the education degree and professional title. The results also show no statistically significant difference in the preschool teachers' attitudes about their own role in the art activities, with regards to the education degree. Using the Spearman's correlation coefficient, the correlation between the frequency of including works of art in the art activities with children and the preschool teachers' attitudes about personal knowledge of art history basics was found.*

**Key words:** *art in the kindergarten; preschool teacher's role in the art activities; work of art in art activities with children.*

## Introduction

Child's experiences in the area of art have an important role in the encouragement of his/her integral and healthy development. Children communicate and express

themselves through art and, in doing so, they develop their abilities to use symbols. One of the areas of art which has an important role in the young child's cognitive development is the area of art expression, through which a child explores, explains and conceives its inner world and the one that surrounds him/her. Child's drawing does not represent the imitation of reality, but is the exploration of an object's characteristics, role, function and manifestations in its physical environment. Art work provides children with an opportunity to explore their own ideas individually or in a group, and also to discuss those ideas with other children and adults. In the art activities, children develop their creative potentials by using different materials and techniques; they develop visual-spatial intelligence, visual sensitivity, imagination, aesthetic perception and specific art-expressive possibilities (Butina, 1997; Efland, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Karlavaris, 1991; Kindler, 2010; Kroflič, 2007; Vecchi, 2010; Vrlič, 2001).

Children develop the aforementioned abilities by experiential learning. They do so through play in which they shape their attitudes, suggest solutions to problems and so expresses their interests and desires (Pitri, 2001; Tomšič Čerkez & Zupančič, 2011). Children are active constructors of their own knowledge, which they fill up through interaction with peers and adults (Kindler, 1994; Matthews, 2003). In the developmentally directed approach to art activities, it means that preschool teachers become the organisers, motivators and children's associates. Such preschool teacher's role implies his/her expertise in the art area, the one which includes knowledge of art theory and art, art-creative process, understanding of children's art development and methodologically adequate planning of art activities.

### ***Preschool Teacher's Role in the Stimulation and Observation of Children's Art Development***

The primary role of a preschool teacher is to prepare and ensure the stimulating environment in order to give children the possibility for learning through touch, movement, sight and hearing. In doing so, it is necessary to include manipulation and exploration with different materials and objects, which will enable a child to perceive, experience, and conceive in an integral way. Planning of art activities, in which children's perception is directed, stimulates their curiosity and develops sensory perception. Incentives have to be multilayered, problematically structured, and in accordance with children's interests and psycho-physical development, in which great importance lies on the child's active participation in all the phases of the creative process – from planning the activities, shaping ideas, creation, to talking about their work, experience and the process itself. On these foundations, preschool teachers develop some new educational procedures, on the grounds of conceiving the natural modalities of children's communication and the complex dynamics of their activities, all of which is necessary for realising quality and reciprocal communication between the participants of the educational process.

Observing children in activities, discovering their interests and possibilities, help the preschool teacher with designing new activities. His/her intervention must not be in

the form of instructions about how to work, but in the form of challenges which will stimulate children's attention and interest in further exploration. Help in the shape of giving instructions on what and how to draw, paint or shape by using schemes, puts children in a position where they finish someone else's idea (in this case the teacher's), which very often tires them or discourages them from further independent work, and stifles their creative development.

Since a child enjoys the creative process itself, it is important for the preschool teacher to respect its need for doing art work and give a child enough time for the development of his/her own ideas. The preschool teacher's role is also to familiarise the children with various art areas and techniques, and to enable a child to comprehend the expressive possibilities of individual techniques, to independently explore and experiment, to find new procedures, use new materials and means. The integral conception of the environment, with the goal of its understanding, implies enabling children to respond to different incentives in different ways, according to their individual inclinations and interests, which is the basis for the integration of art with other educational areas. At the same time, it stimulates natural and holistic learning with early and preschool age children. Modern approach to art education in the early age also includes introducing children to the world of art by direct encounters with works of art in museums and galleries, or by using quality reproductions in preschools (Zupančič & Duh, 2009a). Acquiring more specific, expert competencies in the art area enables preschool teachers to qualitatively shape the developmentally directed art-creative process. In doing so, they also shape the development of children's art abilities and influence their complete development.

## **Methodology**

### *Goal and Hypotheses*

The goal of this research was to examine the preschool teachers' attitudes about their personal knowledge of visual art, their personal role in the art activities, and about the frequency of some methodological approaches to the implementation of art activities.

The following hypotheses have been set:

H1: There is a statistically significant difference in preschool teachers' attitudes about personal knowledge of the art area, with regards to the degree of education and professional title.

H2: There is a statistically significant difference in preschool teachers' attitudes about their personal role in art activities, with regards to the degree of education.

H3: There is a statistically significant correlation between the frequency of including art works in art activities with children and the preschool teachers' attitudes about personal knowledge of art history basics.

### *Sample*

Research participants were 207 preschool teachers from 17 kindergartens in Croatia. Age range of 40.1% of the preschool teachers is from 26 to 35 years of age, 33.3% are

between 46 and 55, 17.9% are from 36 to 45, and the smallest number is of those over 55 years (4.8%), and those younger than 25 (3.9%). The greatest percentage of the preschool teachers have between 21 and 30 years of work experience (26.1%), followed by those with 6 to 10 years of work experience (24.6%), and 18.8% have up to 5 years of work experience. Somewhat equal number of the preschool teachers has 11 to 20 years of work experience (15.5%) and over 30 years of experience (15%). More than one half of the preschool teachers has graduated from two-year vocational studies of preschool teacher education (63.8 %). Furthermore, 17.4% of the preschool teachers has graduated from three-year Bologna graduate studies, 9.7% of the preschool teachers have graduated from college, and 9.2% finished secondary school for preschool teachers. Out of the 207 preschool teachers, 17 acquired a professional title, 14 preschool teachers (6.8%) gained the mentor title, and 3 preschool teachers (1.4%) obtained the counsellor title. Just over one half of the interviewed preschool teachers work in kindergartens in bigger towns (1.4%), while 43.5% work in smaller-town kindergartens.

### ***Instrument***

Data collection procedure included the questionnaire constructed on the basis of studying expert and scientific literature from which we extracted the most relevant areas and themes (Devjak et al., 2010), as well as experiences from practice. The questionnaire consists of open and closed questions of survey type, ordinal scale, and five-point attitudes scale of the Likert type. The content validity was verified in view of the content, questions' intelligibility, economy, questionnaire form, and the clarity of instructions (Cencič, 2009, p. 47). Questionnaire reliability was confirmed by method of internal consistency, so that Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated ( $\alpha=0.794$ ), measured for the sets of questions with multiple answers. The questionnaire objectivity was ensured mostly by closed type questions and by simple instructions.

### ***Data Processing and the Applied Statistical Methods***

The acquired data were entered into the computer programme for statistical data processing (SPSS 19.0). Descriptive statistics was used for the basic data analysis. For nominal and ordinal variables, the descriptive indexes were calculated and expressed in frequencies ( $f$ ), percentages (%), arithmetic means ( $M$ ), standard deviations ( $SD$ ), and distribution normality measures (skeweness, flatness and Kolmogorov-Smirnov test). The hypotheses were verified with the use of statistical tests. Because the variables do not have normal distribution, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test and Spearman's correlation coefficient were used.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Preschool Teachers' Ratings about the Knowledge of Visual Art***

Task of every preschool teacher is to encourage and stimulate children's complete development, their abilities, aspirations and interests. It is a well known fact that

professionally trained workers influence the realisation of quality in early and preschool education (Vonta, 2009). For the quality art-pedagogic work, alongside their psychological and pedagogical competencies, preschool teachers need the knowledge of the art profession. Visual literacy, knowledge of art theory and visual art are the basis for understanding children's artistic growth, art-creative process, and appropriate methodological planning of art activities. In this research, the preschool teachers have rated their knowledge of art language basics, art areas and techniques, and also of the art history basics. The greatest number of the preschool teachers rated their knowledge of art language as very good, 12.6% as excellent, 35.7% as good, and the smallest number is of those who considered their knowledge of art language as poor (5.8%). Preschool teachers' ratings for the knowledge of the art areas and techniques were somewhat better: 55.6% rated it as very good, 21.7% as excellent, 19.3% as good, while 3.4% considered their knowledge of the art areas and techniques as poor. Approximately equal percentage of preschool teachers rated their knowledge of art history basics as none or poor (28%), and very good or excellent (25.1%), while the greatest was the number of those who rated it as good (46.9%). The results show that preschool teachers rated their knowledge of the art areas and techniques the best ( $M=3.96$ ), followed by the art language basics ( $M=3.65$ ), and the knowledge about the art history basics ( $M=3.00$ ) was considered to be the lowest. The research determined statistically significant difference in the preschool teachers' attitudes about their personal knowledge of the art area, in view of the education degree and professional title. Considering the distribution normality, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was applied, which is on the level of statistical significance for all items, implying the absence of distribution normality. So, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used for the verification of the first hypothesis. The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test indicate no difference between preschool teachers' degree of education and their self-assessment of the knowledge about visual art basics (knowledge of the art language basics -  $X_2=4.363$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.225$ ; knowledge of basic art areas and techniques -  $X_2=2.366$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.500$ ;

Table 1  
*Differences in the preschool teachers' attitudes about knowledge of the art area, considering their professional title*

	Professional title	N	Mean Rank	$\chi^2$	df	p
Knowledge about art language basics...	mentor	14	125.43	4.144	2	.126
	counsellor	3	146.17			
	preschool teacher	190	101.76			
Knowledge about basic art areas and techniques	mentor	14	128.04	6.274	2	<b>.043</b>
	counsellor	3	158.33			
	preschool teacher	190	101.37			
Knowledge about art history basics	mentor	14	116.21	1.974	2	.373
	counsellor	3	139.00			
	preschool teacher	190	102.55			

\*  $p \leq 0.05$

knowledge of art history basics -  $X_2=5.045$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=0.169$ ). Somewhat different are the results with regards to the differences in preschool teachers' attitudes about knowledge of the art area, considering their professional title (Table 1).

Test results show no statistically significant difference between the assessment of personal knowledge about the art language and art history basics between preschool teacher mentors, preschool teacher counsellors, and preschool teachers, but there is a statistically significant difference between the interviewed preschool teachers who gained the mentioned professional titles and their assessment of the personal knowledge about the basic art areas and techniques ( $X_2=6.274$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=0.043$ ). On the grounds of the given results, the first hypothesis is partly dismissed.

### ***Preschool Teacher's Role in Art Activities***

The third set of questions in the questionnaire was about the statements which aimed at examining the preschool teachers' attitudes about their role in the art activities. The values of the arithmetic means of the stated items were in range from 3.79 to 4.83, which shows that most subjects have great positive perception towards the object of measurement. Preschool teachers recognise the importance of shaping a motivating environment and the offerings of necessary materials and tools in accordance with children's interests and needs. Almost two thirds of preschool teachers consider that, for imaginative and inherent art interpretation, significance lies in diverse experiences which activate multiple children's perceptions and to which they respond according to their individual inclinations and possibilities. Satisfactory is the information that preschool teachers know of the importance which stimulating children's attention has for the precise and sensitive perception in developing art abilities, learning various art techniques and areas, and for the integration of art activities with other areas. Although almost all preschool teachers consider that individual research, experimenting, thinking, and problem solving through one's own experiences in play, is a way children develop different abilities, 65.7% of the preschool teachers think that their role in art activities is to teach a child how to draw, paint and shape in space. Only 15.4% of the preschool teachers disagree with that statement, while 15.8% is indecisive. These percentages point to still present traditional concept of preschool teacher's role in the art activities of preschool children, and that the greatest number of preschool teachers does not understand that children learn on the basis of their own experience. Not appreciating children's explanation of the created art work on the part of the preschool teacher, and imposing inappropriate samples, pose underestimation of children's art abilities and negatively influence the child's creative expression development. In further research we examined the statistical significance of the difference in preschool teachers' attitudes about the assessment of their personal role in art activities, with regards to education degree. Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is on the level of statistical significance ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) for all items, which implies the absence of distribution normality. So, nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis test was used for the verification of the second hypothesis.

Table 2

*Differences in preschool teachers' attitudes about their personal role in the art activities with regards to education degree*

	Education degree	N	Mean Rank	$\chi^2$	df	p
Preschool teacher's role in the art activities is to teach a child how to draw, paint and shape in space	Secondary school	19	82.95	3.918	3	.271
	Two-year vocational studies	132	104.79			
	Three-year Bologna graduate studies	36	103.94			
	College	20	118.90			

\*  $p \leq 0.05$ 

The test results show no statistically significant difference between education degree and the preschool teachers' attitudes about their role in art activities ( $X_2 = 3.918$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p = 0.271$ ), which means that the second hypothesis has not been confirmed.

### *Works of Art in Children's Art Activities*

The fifth set of questions examined the frequency of some methodological approaches in implementing art activities. Here, those results about the presence of works of art in art activities are analysed. In preschool art education, besides stimulating children's creativity and art expression, the important role lies in the direct encounter of children with works of art. Numerous contemporary research studies have found that, from the early age, children show sensitivity for many aspects of the work of art and its creation (Cox, 2005; Gardner, 1990; Zupančič & Duh, 2009b), and that the aesthetic experience which a child gets through encountering art is a complete process which connects reception to emotions and to the thinking process (Dewey, 2005; Cox, 2005). Galleries and museums are venues which give children the opportunity for a direct encounter with the works of art, and with people who possess knowledge and abilities to familiarise children with the knowledge of art in different ways (Eckhoff, 2008). To the question about how often they do art activities in a gallery or a museum, 61.8% of the preschool teachers answered very rarely; 25.1% sometimes use this kind of work, while 13% of preschool teachers implement art activities in a museum or gallery often or very often. Related with the aforementioned question, the frequency of art works' inclusion (originals or reproductions) in the art activity in the kindergarten by preschool teachers was examined. The percentage of those who do it very rarely and those who do it sometimes is similar, 45.4% and 40.6%, respectively; while only 14% of the preschool teachers include works of art in art activities often or very often. Although preschool teachers have rated their knowledge of art history basics as good, they still do not use works of art in the work itself. Possible reason for not using works of art in art activities is preschool teachers' insufficient education in the field of art, as well as the unawareness about the importance of a child's direct encounter with the work of art for his/her art abilities development (Podobnik & Bračun Sova, 2011).

Due to the fact that the variables do not distribute normally ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), Spearman's correlation coefficient was used to test the correlation between the frequency of art works' inclusion in the art activities with children and the preschool teachers' attitudes about personal knowledge of art history basics. Test results show that the knowledge of art history basics is positively linked (statistically significant, but weaker link) to the frequency of art works' inclusion in the art activities with children, which confirms the third hypothesis ( $\rho = 0.219$ ,  $P = 0.001$ ). Preschool teachers who have better knowledge of art history use art works in the art activities with children more often.

## Conclusion

This research examined the attitudes of preschool teachers in service about their knowledge of the art area, personal role in the art activities, and the frequency of some methodological approaches in implementing art activities, which gained basic insight into the present art-pedagogic practice in Croatian kindergartens.

The research results show that the practice still incorporates the elements of traditional conception of preschool teacher's role as the one who teaches children, as well as the insufficient knowledge of the art area and its role in the child's complete development. Some other studies have shown similar results (Garvis & Pendergast, 2011; Jontes & Lesar 2003; Paragvaj & Ujčić, 1999; Podobnik & Bračun Sova, 2010). In the art area, preschool teachers are not yet ready to give children their art autonomy or accept the learning approach based on child's independent research, experimenting and problem solving. In accordance with the traditional concept, preschool teachers consider their role is to teach children what and how to draw. In doing so, they show the inclination towards the preset results ('nice pictures') and surrounding's expectations, and less so towards the art process itself, although equal importance should be given to the final product and the process. In order not to make the covert curriculum from ingrained ways of work, preschool teachers' continuous professional training and betterment in the art area are necessary. It would gradually lead to restructuring of the art area's evaluation and its role in children's development.

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# Uloga odgojitelja u likovnim aktivnostima djece rane i predškolske dobi

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## **Sažetak**

Likovne umjetnosti od rane dobi omogućuju ostvarivanje dječjeg kreativnog potencijala vidljivog kroz istraživačke aktivnosti igre s upotrebom različitih materijala i tehnika; razvijaju dječju vizualno-prostornu inteligenciju, maštu, estetsko percipiranje i specifične likovno-izražajne sposobnosti. Za razvoj dječje kreativnosti i likovnih sposobnosti vrlo je važan utjecaj odgojitelja koji omogućuje bogatstvo motivacijskih poticaja i djeci dopušta slobodu, i uvažava njihove interese i mogućnosti. Ovim istraživanjem ispitana su stajališta odgojitelja o poznavanju likovne umjetnosti, stajališta odgojitelja o njihovoj ulozi u likovnim aktivnostima i učestalosti nekih didaktičkih pristupa izvođenja likovnih aktivnosti. Istraživanje je bilo provedeno na uzorku od 207 odgojitelja iz 17 vrtića u Hrvatskoj. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da odgojitelji svoje poznavanje likovne umjetnosti ocjenjuju dobrim i da ne postoji statistički značajna razlika u stajalištima odgojitelja o osobnom poznavanju likovne umjetnosti s obzirom na stupanj obrazovanja i stručni naziv, kao i da ne postoji statistički značajna razlika u stajalištima odgojitelja o osobnoj ulozi u likovnim aktivnostima s obzirom na stupanj obrazovanja. Spearmanovim koeficijentom korelacije utvrđeno je kako postoji povezanost između učestalosti uključivanja umjetničkih djela u likovne aktivnosti s djecom i stajališta odgojitelja o osobnom poznavanju osnova povijesti umjetnosti.

**Ključne riječi:** likovni odgoj u vrtiću; uloga odgojitelja u likovnim aktivnostima; umjetničko djelo u likovnim aktivnostima s djecom.