

The Road to Quality in the Theory and Practice of Early Learning: Identity of the Preschool Teacher Profession

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Abstract

The profession of preschool teachers is extremely complex, requiring high professional awareness, continuous research of educational practice, responsibility, ethics, creativity, continuous reflective judgement, and it is almost impossible to achieve professional advancement without lifelong learning and professional development. The study, the results of which are presented in this paper, was conducted in order to determine the attitudes of preschool teachers towards the need and importance of their further professional development in relation to some socio-demographic factors (the current initial training of preschool teachers, age, years of work experience, the number and size of the preschool institutions located in a town or a village). This study included 573 preschool teachers from Zagreb, Karlovac, Medimurje, Bjelovar-Bilogora, and Virovitica-Podravina counties. The results of this study show that with respect to age, the existing level of initial education and years of work experience of preschool teachers, a statistically significant difference was obtained only regarding the first of the five items in total (Knowledge acquired during my study has significantly improved my theoretical expertise). The values of descriptive statistics indicate that the existing initial education has more or less met their theoretical and practical expectations in terms of the acquisition of overall knowledge.

Key words: attitudes of preschool teachers; early childhood education; lifelong learning; quality of theory and practice.

Introduction

Today, substantiated with strong arguments, we can speak of the importance of contemporary paradigms of education of preschool teachers, which are not recognized

in the traditional didactic and methodological training. Rather, their importance lies in empowering the creative potential of preschool teachers, encouraging critical and reflective thought, training for team reflection and evaluation of the educational process (Ray, 1996; Keeley, 2007; Moyles, 2007; Krstović, 2009). Therefore, the preparation of preschool educators for profession in the field of education is an open and an on-going process during which professional knowledge is examined, revised and gradually built through continuous research of pedagogical practices. In other words, quality education is the cornerstone on which lifelong learning is founded and which, as emphasized by Delors (1998), directs and encourages lifelong learning. New paradigms in lifelong learning and education of preschool teachers emphasize that a reflective approach to practice presupposes access to reflection of one's own procedures with the aim of further professional development and advancement, which contributes to the continuous improvement of the quality of work because it paves the way not only for the strengthening of professional knowledge and attitudes, but also for changing personal values and beliefs (Elliott, 1998; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2003; Liessmann, 2008). Therefore, the preparation of preschool teachers for their future profession is an open and an on-going process in which professional knowledge is examined, revised and gradually upgraded through continuous research of pedagogical practices. In other words, quality initial teacher training contributes to the creation of knowledge and competencies necessary to manage complex and unpredictable situations within pedagogical practices. In this context, it is necessary to enable the students of preschool education studies to develop their professional and generic competencies that can be instrumental (cognitive, methodological, technological and linguistic), interpersonal (social skills) and systematic (the ability to apply knowledge in practice, the ability to adapt to new situations, the ability to work independently, etc.) (Delors, 1998; Keeley, 2007; Slunjski, 2011). Of course, significant skills and abilities that are included in the body of the required competencies of preschool teachers are related to their willingness to learn continuously, not only through formal education, but also during informal and non-formal education. An intrinsically motivated professional tends to achieve self-actualization through personal and professional development, works on professional integrity, develops and strengthens those competencies that generate the optimum conditions for learning, teaching and quality life of a child of early childhood and preschool age (Šagud & Jurčević-Lozančić, 2012; Saracho & Spodek, 2013).

Therefore, it is reasonable to ask the question: "Does the current university education of preschool teachers in Croatia develop these competencies?" Without going into a deeper analysis of the existing early childhood and preschool education studies, it is our opinion that the development of professional and generic competencies of the future preschool teachers should be based on work with toddlers and preschool children, the organization and structure of the institution of early childhood education, the techniques of observation and documentation of children's activities,

the research and development of educational practice, the research and development of the curriculum, and so on. This means that even in the very name of some university courses it should be visible that their practice focuses on early childhood and preschool education and its essence, i.e. toddlers and preschool children. Every child is a humane, reasonable and active being, so it is necessary to focus on all aspects of his/her development and education, to respect their rights, personal integrity and individual pace of development and to create the optimum conditions for their education and development of their full potential (Barth, 2004; Curtis & Carter, 2008; Slunjski, 2011). This implies that the educational work performed in institutions of early childhood and preschool education is designed in such a way that the child is viewed as a complete and open individual, always taking into consideration their individual peculiarities, abilities and interests. It is, therefore, necessary that the various areas of education should be integrated in the process of formal education of educators. In order to see and really understand the way a child explores and learns, it is necessary to build a theory based on everyday practice. This implies that the theory and practice form a dialectical unity (Elliott, 1998; Senge, 2001; Morin, 2002; Cadwell, 2003) or, as outlined in literature, interdependence and cohesion.

Research

The aim of the research is to determine whether there are differences in the preschool teachers' attitudes towards the theoretical and practical knowledge, with special attention paid to their age, initial training and years of work experience.

In accordance with this research objective and based on the analysis of literature, the following hypotheses have been formed:

H1. The preschool teachers' attitudes towards the acquired theoretical and practical knowledge do not differ with respect to their age.

H2. The preschool teachers' attitudes towards the acquired theoretical and practical knowledge do not differ with respect to the current level of initial education.

H3. The preschool teachers' attitudes towards the acquired theoretical and practical knowledge do not differ with respect to their years of work experience.

For the purpose of this research a questionnaire on preschool teachers' attitudes towards lifelong learning (Jurčević Lozančić, 2014) was designed. It is a modification of the measuring instrument (according to Ljubetić, 2009) adapted for the purposes of this research. At the beginning of the questionnaire there were standardized instructions on its completion in which the preschool teachers were instructed to respond honestly to the questions. They were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, and were told that the test is anonymous and the results would be used for scientific purposes only.

In addition to the variables of socio-demographic characteristics, the questionnaire consisted of 15 variables, and the task of the preschool teachers was to assess, on the Likert scale from 1 to 5 points, the degree of their agreement: 1 - strongly disagree,

2 - disagree, 3 - I cannot decide, 4 - agree and 5 - strongly agree. In the first part of the study the results obtained from the processing of the first five items of the questionnaire, which tested the preschool teachers' attitudes to initial education, will be presented. In addition to descriptive indicators, within the framework of inferential statistics for testing the differences between the subsamples we used ANOVA (and a robust Welch test when the precondition of homogeneity of variance was not met). The collected data was analysed using SPSS, ver.19.00.

Qualitative research was carried out and described in the second part of the study in which the subjects responded to two open-ended questions and cited the reasons why they decided to attend Preschool Education Studies.

The survey included 573 preschool teachers employed in 35 public and private kindergartens in Zagreb, Karlovac, Međimurje, Bjelovar-Bilogora and Virovitica-Podravina counties. The study was conducted during the year 2014.

The basic descriptive scale values are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Basic descriptive values

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Mode	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis		
							Std. Error	Std. Error	Std. Error	Std. Error	
a1	573	1	5	3.81	.037	4	.896	-.972	.102	.773	.204
a2	573	1	5	2.52	.046	2	1.107	.644	.102	-.563	.204
a3	573	1	5	3.13	.047	4	1.134	-.089	.102	-.945	.204
a4	572	1	5	3.02	.049	4	1.175	-.038	.102	-1.204	.204
a5	573	1	5	2.51	.048	2	1.151	.559	.102	-.708	.204
Valid N (listwise)	572										

Table legend: A1: Knowledge gained during my studies has significantly improved my theoretical expertise. A2: The knowledge acquired during my studies prepared me for the unpredictability of the teaching practice. A3: The contents of each subject were connected, which resulted in better understanding, and thus their usefulness and application. A4: During my studies I was not encouraged to memorise and formally reproduce various unnecessary facts. A5: During my studies I had enough concrete opportunity to express personal opinions, suggestions and views.

From the values of descriptive statistics presented in Table 1 it can be concluded that the measures of central tendency are relatively high (especially positional mode value as the measure of central tendency), which implies that the existing initial training for educators has met their theoretical and practical expectations in terms of the total acquisition of knowledge. However, as is evident from the data in Table 1, item A1 (Knowledge gained during my studies has significantly improved my theoretical expertise) has the highest mean value, while item A5 (During college I had enough concrete opportunities to present personal opinions and suggestions, and attitudes) has the lowest mean value. Following the results obtained in this research it is reasonable to ask the question: "Is the person adequately prepared for the future world if during his/her education they are taught only what has been prescribed in

advance, without any possibility to choose, think or reason?" Does this mean that current formal (initial) education does not provide enough concrete opportunities, as demonstrated by the results of our research, for organization, reviewing of different strategies of action and participation in the joint reflections with others? This is the very issue detected in scientific research (Elliott, 1998; Senge, 2001; Liessmann, 2008; Saracho & Spodek, 2013), which also indicates that the acquired theoretical knowledge often lacks synthesis, practicality and usability. Specifically, it is expected that the teachers entering the educational practices would continue developing their technical and professional competences and for this reason it is necessary to involve the students at the level of initial professional education in various activities through which they will actively participate in the deliberation, but also in the process of changing the educational practice, and based on that foundation build their own personal professional identity.

Results further indicate (Table 1) that due to the asymmetry of distribution there is a moderate left distribution: A1, A3, A4 (negative) and right: A2, A5 (positive) asymmetrical distributions, which is in line with the mean value. In fact, these are moderately platykurtic distributions (except the particle A1 which is moderately leptokurtic). The results listed in Table 1 show that the range of the responses is at its maximum at all levels (1-5).

In the first hypothesis it was assumed that the preschool teachers' attitudes towards the acquired theoretical and practical knowledge do not differ with respect to their age. The participants in the study were mostly female educators 99.3% (N=569), whereas only 7% (N=4) were males. The age range of the respondents was 22 to 63 years, or the average age ($M=41.63$ years, $SD=10.58$).

In order to test H1 ANOVA was used, and the results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
ANOVA (*preschool teachers' attitudes with respect to their age*)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
a1	Between Groups	47.410	41	1.156	1.492	.028*
	Within Groups	411.609	531	.775		
	Total	459.019	572			
a2	Between Groups	54.265	41	1.324	1.087	.333
	Within Groups	646.755	531	1.218		
	Total	701.019	572			
a3	Between Groups	66.451	41	1.621	1.287	.114
	Within Groups	668.502	531	1.259		
	Total	734.953	572			
a4	Between Groups	66.175	41	1.614	1.184	.206
	Within Groups	722.529	530	1.363		
	Total	788.705	571			
a5	Between Groups	71.930	41	1.754	1.360	.072
	Within Groups	685.222	531	1.290		
	Total	757.152	572			

*p<0.05

Given the precondition of homogeneity of variance, caution is needed in drawing conclusions because, as can be seen from Table 2, homogeneity has not been met (Levene's test, $p \leq 0.05$) in variables A1, A2 and A5. After examining the results presented in Table 2 with a one-way analysis of variance, a statistically significant difference was confirmed only for the first variable A1 (Knowledge gained during my studies has significantly improved my theoretical expertise). This means that, with respect to their age, the subjects differ only in the first variable, thus partly confirming H1.

The study also checked hypothesis H2, which assumed that the preschool teachers' attitudes towards the acquired theoretical and practical knowledge do not differ with respect to the current level of initial education. The largest number of preschool teachers, that is 62.7% ($N=358$), completed a two-year study of preschool education, 21% ($N=120$) completed a three-year study of preschool education, 3.3% ($N=19$) of preschool teachers completed a four-year study of preschool education, while only 9.1% ($N=52$) completed secondary school. The remaining 3.9% ($N=22$) of preschool teachers completed various studies, for example, pedagogy, theology, primary school teacher studies and are employed as substitutes.

For the purpose of testing H2 ANOVA was used, and the results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
ANOVA (preschool teachers' views considering initial education)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
a1	Between Groups	14.713	4	3.678	4.701	.001*
	Within Groups	442.860	566	.782		
	Total	457.573	570			
a2	Between Groups	2.227	4	.557	.453	.771
	Within Groups	696.330	566	1.230		
	Total	698.557	570			
a3	Between Groups	2.243	4	.561	.434	.784
	Within Groups	731.176	566	1.292		
	Total	733.419	570			
a4	Between Groups	4.572	4	1.143	.826	.509
	Within Groups	782.215	565	1.384		
	Total	786.788	569			
a5	Between Groups	1.289	4	.322	.243	.914
	Within Groups	751.425	566	1.328		
	Total	752.715	570			

* $p < 0.05$

With respect to the first variable, homogeneity was not met (Levene's test, $p \leq 0.05$), so for that variable (A1) a robust Welch test was applied ($F=5.772$; $df_2=66.966$, $sig.=0.000$) and is consistent with the results of the ANOVA.

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 3, a one-way analysis of variance confirmed a statistically significant difference only for the first variable (A1 Knowledge gained during my studies significantly improved my theoretical

expertise). Furthermore, given the value of the arithmetic mean of the first variable A1 (M (high school)=3.67; M (studies 2 years)=3.74; M (studies 3 years)=4.10; M (studies 4 years)=3.86), it is evident that educators who have completed higher levels of education have higher initial assessment of the relevant variables. Based on the results obtained in this study, the set H2 has been partially confirmed.

Furthermore, to test the hypothesis H3, according to which the preschool teachers' views on the acquired theoretical and practical knowledge do not differ with respect to years of work experience, ANOVA was used. Given the overall years of employment, most educators have up to 5 years of service - 17.5% (N=100), there were 17.3% (N=99) of those with 6-10 years of work experience, then those with 11 to 15 years - 17.3% (N=90), 16 to 20 years - 11.0% (N=63), 21 to 25 years - 11.3% (N=65), 26 to 30 years - 12.6% (N=72) and those with 31 years and more - 14.4% (N=82).

ANOVA results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

ANOVA (preschool teachers' views with regard to years of employment)

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
a1	Between Groups	10.452	6	1.742	2.233	.039*
	Within Groups	439.968	564	.780		
	Total	450.420	570			
a2	Between Groups	2.889	6	.482	.393	.884
	Within Groups	691.703	564	1.226		
	Total	694.592	570			
a3	Between Groups	5.743	6	.957	.745	.613
	Within Groups	724.428	564	1.284		
	Total	730.172	570			
a4	Between Groups	2.146	6	.358	.258	.956
	Within Groups	781.602	563	1.388		
	Total	783.747	569			
a5	Between Groups	6.873	6	1.146	.864	.521
	Within Groups	747.803	564	1.326		
	Total	754.676	570			

*p<0.05

Since homogeneity was not met only for the first variable (Levene's test, $p \leq 0.05$), for that variable (A1) a robust Welch test ($F=2.573$; $df_2=237.684$, $sig.=0.020$) was applied, which coincides with the results of ANOVA.

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 4, pertaining to the years of work experience, a statistically significant difference was confirmed with one-way analysis of variance only for the first item (A1 Knowledge gained during my studies has significantly improved my theoretical expertise) and this has partially confirmed H3.

In the second part of the study a qualitative approach was applied, with the participants providing their responses to the open-ended statement: "Identify one or two reasons why you decided to attend Preschool Education Studies". The responses were summarised and then grouped into the following categories:

Love of children; desire to work with children; interest in the future profession as preschool teachers: 68% (N=389) of subjects. Gaining knowledge and ability for lifelong learning and continuing professional development: 28% (N=156) of subjects. The contribution to child education and upbringing: 14% (N=78) of subjects. Work and Leisure: 11% (N=56) subjects. I would not recommend Preschool Education Studies: 6% (N=31) of subjects.

The analysis of the obtained responses has shown that preschool teachers usually opt for intrinsic and altruistic motives and for these reasons emphasize their love for children and personal desire to work with children, as well as interest in the future profession as preschool teachers. The following category of selected responses is represented by their perception of themselves and the possibility of lifelong learning and continuing professional development, but also a personal contribution to socially useful values of education. The results of this study are in accordance with the results of previous studies which emphasize that lifelong learning at a professional as well as at university level is imperative in the field of early childhood and preschool education (Peeters, 2008). It is obvious (as the results of our research have shown) that the perception of the profession in the field of education as a simple, intellectually and emotionally engaging profession is changing into an extremely complex task, based on the principles of autonomy, humanity, development and integrity.

Concluding Remarks

The starting point of this paper is the premise that emerges from practice and scientific research, which highlights that professional development and further training is an essential requirement, as well as the condition, for work in the profession that fundamentally requires higher education. Of course, this is not just a long-term, but also continuous, never-ending process of learning and advancement, both with respect to personal and to professional development. Therefore, this study focused on examining attitudes of the employed preschool teachers (N=573) towards their initial education and further professional advancement. The results of the study have important implications for further professionalization of the profession in the field of education. The comparison of some of the preschool teachers' attitudes showed that preschool teachers express indecision in matters of initial education and further advancement. Professional development of preschool teachers is a continuous process which implies that the professional development is not viewed as a static process of unchanging quality achieved once and for all, but as an ongoing process of deepening personal vision and progress towards a new quality in the theory and practice of early childhood education (Elliott, 1998; Cadwell, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Šagud, Jurčević-Lozančić, 2012). There are many reasons that affect the unpredictability of the development path of preschool teachers; for example, various social changes (not always positive) and instability in all areas of social life, not just in education, are the evident realities of modern life. The identity of the profession of preschool

teachers consists of their personal, expert and professional competencies that include the willingness and openness to a redefinition and transformation of traditional approaches to teaching and learning. For these reasons, we believe that it is necessary to look deeper into theoretical approaches and perspectives of expert and professional preparation of preschool teachers and reconceptualise and transform, and then re-actualize the question of professional status of educators who, during lifelong learning and education, consistently upgrade and improve their knowledge.

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Put prema kvaliteti u teoriji i praksi ranog odgoja: identitet profesije odgojitelja

Sažetak

Odgojiteljska profesija iznimno je složena, zahtijeva visoku profesionalnu svijest, kontinuirano istraživanje odgojno-obrazovne prakse, odgovornost, etičnost, kreativnost, sposobnost stalne refleksivne prosudbe i gotovo je nemoguće zamisliti napredovanje unutar profesije bez cjeloživotnoga učenja i profesionalnoga usavršavanja. Istraživanje čiji rezultati slijede u ovom radu provedeno je s ciljem utvrđivanja stajališta odgojitelja o potrebi i važnosti njihova cjeloživotnog učenja i daljnog profesionalnog razvoja u odnosu na postojeće inicijalno obrazovanje odgojitelja, njihovu životnu dob i godine radnog iskustva. U ovom istraživanju sudjelovala su 573 odgojitelja Zagrebačke, Karlovačke, Međimurske, Bjelovarsko-bilogorske i Virovitičko-podravske županije. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da je s obzirom na životnu dob, postojeću razinu inicijalnog obrazovanja i godine radnog iskustva odgojitelja od ukupno pet čestica dobivena statistički značajna razlika samo na prvoj čestici (Znanja stečena tijekom mojega studiranja značajno su unaprijedila moju teorijsku stručnost). Iz vrijednosti deskriptivne statistike vidljivo je da postojeće inicijalno obrazovanje relativno zadovoljava njihova teorijska i praktična očekivanja u smislu stjecanja ukupnog znanja.

Ključne riječi: cjeloživotno učenje; kvaliteta teorije i prakse; rani odgoj i obrazovanje; stajališta odgojitelja.