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**VALUE SYSTEM, IMPLICIT PEDAGOGY, AND COMPETENCIES  
OF A CONTEMPORARY PRESCHOOL TEACHER**

**Abstract**

Quality in early education is based on understanding a child's perspective, knowledge about a child's development, and thinking about own actions. To find out more about the desirable characteristics of a contemporary preschool teacher, students of preschool education offered their perspective on this issue. Through work in focus groups, students have identified moral values, competencies and integral elements of implicit pedagogy, which is considered to be a foundation for the quality of education. High on scale of desirable moral and personal characteristics are empathy, tolerance, understanding and patience. As far as competencies are concerned, students underline cooperation with diverse partners, knowledge on a child's development and appropriate strategies for gratifying a child's needs. These results could be used as a starting point for teaching self-reflection and for support of students' autonomous thinking, which are considered to be the key factors in contemporary early education.

**Keywords:** value system, implicit pedagogy, competencies, students, preschool teachers, quality

## **1. Introduction**

Contemporary research of quality in early education is mainly focused on a child's perspective. This perspective, named a child's perspective, emphasizes the quality of children's experience as the main indicator of overall quality of early education (Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). However, solely focusing on a child's experience is insufficient because the organization of an institution is the responsibility of the adults. It is presumable that the quality of a child's experience is influenced by adult's behavior. Thus, preschool teachers should behave according to the principles of developmental appropriateness, which Wolery and Bredekamp (1994) describe as preschool teachers' responsiveness to a child's needs within broader classroom context. The main problem in this concept is the maintenance of balance between the needs of a particular child and the needs of other children, and the needs of a preschool teacher as well. It is obvious that a preschool teacher should possess a broad spectrum of competencies to achieve and maintain a balance in the classroom. In reality, as Colker (2008) claims, preschool teachers conduct professional tasks according to their own knowledge, skills and personality. Since knowledge and skills are influenced by formal education, and personality is a student's "problem" to be dealt with, the question is: can we define competencies at all? And can competencies be specifically specified, as it is a current trend in education? These questions presuppose a philosophical debate on the purpose of education, which is not the main aim of this paper. We will rather stay focused on the pragmatic aspects of formal education and open up a dialogue about desirable characteristics of a preschool teacher, perceived by the students.

There are several definitions of competencies, yet they can be interpreted as a set of attitudes, values, abilities, skills and knowledge which are applicable in a particular context (OECD, 2005). The main purpose of a concept of competencies is to define desirable outcomes, depending on professional tasks. Competencies should help individuals to efficiently answer the professional demands. In other words, competencies are the tools for successful professional functioning. Although competencies are a widely accepted concept, which is closely connected to education, they are, at the same time, quite vague. The main problem concerning competencies is that they seem to be "learnable" i.e. they are, by default, the canons of knowledge that are offered to the learner. This kind of competence acquisition is achievable through the transmission of teaching the content by a more competent individual (teacher, peer, etc.). The foundation of transmission is a traditional learning paradigm, which is considered to be outdated and inappropriate. So the question that rises is: can we learn attitudes and values?

If competencies are a set of separate elements, as proposed in agendas, can learning process influence personal beliefs? And if so, what is the right way to reach one's personal value system? These are just few of the questions imposed after dwelling on the definition of competencies. There is no scholarly justified way of interfering one's inner conception of the world. We should rather discuss a presence of normativeness in defining competencies. The major reason for why we emphasize normativeness is the taxative nature of competencies: they are lists of (mainly) skills and knowledge about a particular phenomenon, they are (or at least should be) measurable and they are highly externally regulated. In other words, a convergent way of teaching desirable competencies is always present. To support these claims, we will just briefly remind our readers that competencies are targeted in many agendas (policies, strategies etc.) and they are inseparable parts of curriculums at all levels of education, from preschools to universities. Also, they are mostly consisted of social values and social expectations, and not of one's perception of working tasks. Thus, the influence, or to be more accurate, the power of education is at stake. Can the process of education reach one's personal belief system, including the implicit pedagogy? And what's more important, if competencies are applicable in contexts, can teachers always anticipate social factors that student will face later in life? It looks like the quality in early education is always a question of balance. Social expectations and professionalism of a preschool teacher are supposed to be congruent, yet Gallagher (1997) says that preschool teachers are always oriented towards children and their needs, i.e. preschool teachers are balancing social demands and individual approach towards a particular child. Since the dominant activity in the classroom is answering a child's needs, preschool teachers are facing a significant level of stress because they are expected to fulfill the child's needs regardless of the conditions they work in (Cavallaro, Haney and Cabello, 1993). For that reason, they are suggesting that the preschool teachers strengthen their competencies in the field of scrutinizing characteristics of immediate surroundings, and maintaining an adequate distance between themselves and the children (ibid.), as a prerequisite for designing appropriate actions. The least is very important because social perception of preschool teachers' authority is mainly focused on child's autonomy, and adults' one is rarely discussed as a starting point for quality in early education. In other words, social expectations are emphasizing neutrality during performing tasks, as one of the main indicators of professionalism. However, neutrality during professional engagement is not possible. As Zembylas and Chubbuck (2009) claim, education is a highly emotional context because the teachers are emotionally involved in relations within classrooms. If we project this idea to reality, we would find it quite true: preschool teachers are expecting positive feedback from children, which

they explicitly value more than a paycheck. Thus, we suggest that competencies are a dynamic concept, changeable over time and conducted according to the contexts, and not just a list of socially expected knowledge, skills and values.

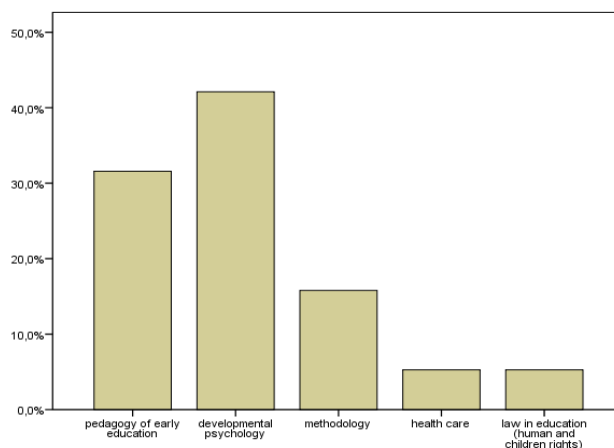
## 2. Methods

Since the contemporary early education is saturated with taxative nature of competencies, we wanted to find out how students perceived their future profession, i.e. what was the nature of value system, implicit pedagogy and competencies of the contemporary preschool teachers?

For that purpose, focus groups were organized. An overall of 65 students of preschool education participated. Students discussed the examples from their practice, and then derived the key competencies. After discussion, students sorted the emerged terms, in accordance with OECD's (2005) approach to competencies, as a set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and value systems. Students also ranged desirable characteristics of preschool teachers, from the most desirable to the least desirable. Data analysis in this survey was descriptive and dealt with results ranged on 1<sup>st</sup> position.

## 3. Results

Displayed here is the students' first range on knowledge, skills, abilities, and value system.



*Figure 1 Students' views of desirable preschool teachers' knowledge*

As far as **knowledge** is concerned, students emphasize the importance of several courses. The most valued is developmental psychology, followed

by pedagogy of early education, methodology, and health care. Interesting, students equalize the courses with knowledge. It seems that the students perceive courses as a source of knowledge, without any other purpose. Yet, knowledge can also be interpreted as subject area or subject knowledge, where a canon of particular discipline is being taught. It encompasses knowledge about specific characteristics or population, in this case preschool children. Also, knowledge about children development is a foundation for further lessons, for instance methodology. The applicable nature of knowledge on child's development and methodology makes early education practice possible. Thus, we suggest for the educational courses (or at least some themes) to be written in the form of a curriculum, with so called in-between contents, where several educational topics are interweaving in one meaningful unit, supplemented with meta-level of competencies.

Another interesting fact is that developmental psychology, pedagogy of early education, methodology, and health care are the inherent parts of regular program of formal education for preschool teachers. However, the law in education emerged as important knowledge, but there is no specific course for this issue. Rather, the law in education is integrated in several courses (sociology of education, inclusive education etc.), which means that students are well informed on contemporary problems in early education, and thus recognize the need for knowledge on this topic. Since the educational program for preschool teacher is strictly defined and highly structured, we think that cooperation between different institutions could resolve this problem. For instance, cooperation with Faculty of law could be beneficial for future preschool teachers.

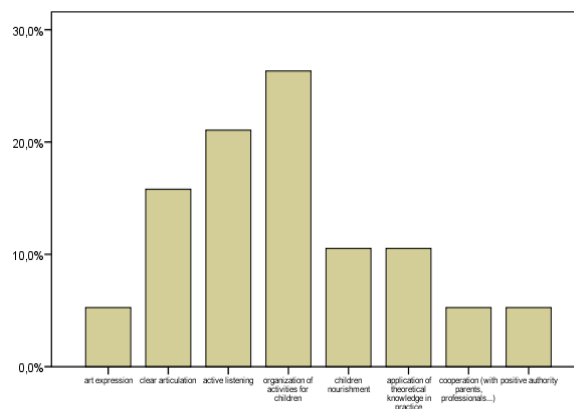
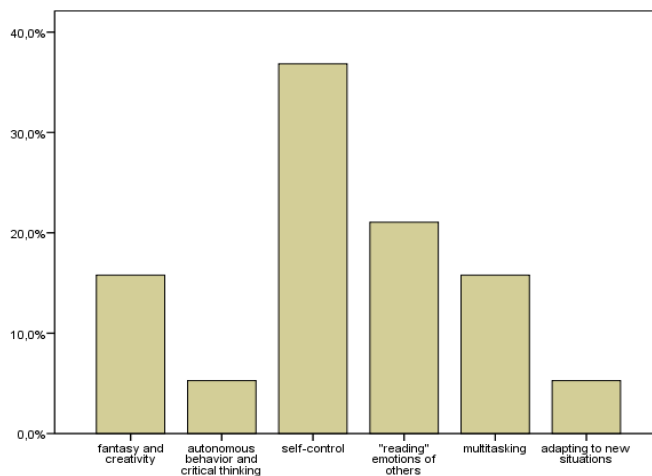


Figure 2 Students' views of desirable preschool teachers' skills

Secondly, students identified the desirable *skills* of a preschool teacher. The most desirable one is the organization of activities for children

followed by active listening, clear articulation etc. If we look at the previous results, we can assume that there is a link between desirable knowledge and desirable skills: developmental psychology and methodology match with organization of activities for children. This could mean that students are focused on children, which represents a solid foundation for developmentally appropriate practice as conceived in formal education. Students' focus on activities is also expected due to the nature of preschool institutions: they are less formal than schools, children have more opportunities to interact with peers and to organize their own activities according to personal preferences. Thus, possession of skills needed for organizing activities adequate for preschoolers is something that students highly value.

Also, active listening is nowadays seen as a prerequisite for quality in adult-child interaction, and cooperation with associates, kindergarten staff and parents. Students' focus on development and maintenance of proximal relationships revealed their orientation towards others, as it would be expected from the beginners. Interesting, positive authority is seen as a skill, not as a personal characteristic. Although we didn't explore the deeper meaning of positive authority, we assume (according to this finding) that it's a skill which can be mastered during formal education. Positive authority should allow a preschool teacher to cope with various problems in practice, and thus we welcome an idea that students should be offered different ways of dealing with professional challenges, according to their own point of view. During this process, students will need support from their teachers, so the university teachers should also be able to scrutinize pedagogical reality from different point of views.



*Figure 3 Students' views of desirable preschool teachers' abilities*

Thirdly, students argued about preschool teachers' desirable *abilities*. The most common is self-control, followed by recognizing emotions of others, multitasking, fantasy and creativity, adapting to new situations, and autonomous behavior and critical thinking. Although the statistics in this survey were descriptive by nature, some abilities are sort of a common sense when it comes to upbringing young children. For instance, fantasy and creativity, as the ability to approach young children in the least restrictive manner, are something that students are good at. Therefore, fantasy and creativity became a tool for quality in early education, as one of the most important abilities of a preschool teacher.

Interesting, multitasking is a term that is rarely used in early education. Basically, it means conducting several actions (tasks) at the same time, which represents a routine for a preschool teacher. Surely, preschool teachers multitask in their classrooms, but are they aware of this and what are the consequences of long-term multitasking? Our concern is that every day multitasking actions could result with a preschool teacher's fatigue and saturation, if they don't take care of their own capacity for such behavior.

As it can be seen in figure 3, self-control is valued the most. Almost every other student valued self-control with rank 1. We haven't found out whether self-control means restraining from some sort of behaviors or was it a meta-level of practice? Maybe self-control has emerged from social perception of preschool teachers' profession and as a result of child-centered pedagogy at university level, or self-control has some other meaning for the students. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to find out more about this desirable ability.

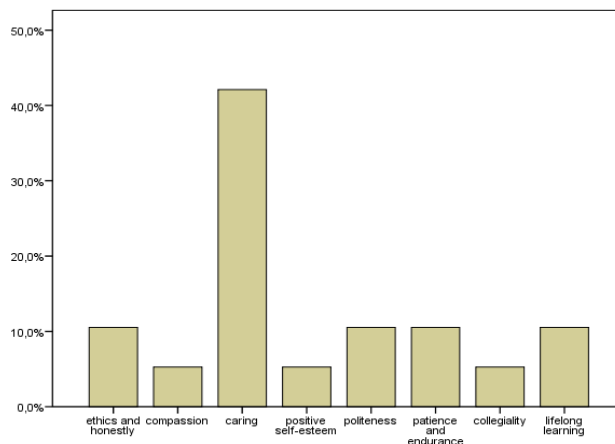


Figure 4 Students' views of desirable preschool teachers' value system

At last, students defined the desirable preschool teachers' *value system*, or to be more specific, the elements of the value system. The highest rank belongs to caring, followed by ethics and honesty, politeness, patience and endurance, lifelong learning, compassion, positive self-esteem, and collegiality. Some of these elements are not surprising. For instance, caring, patience and endurance are expected due to previous findings, i.e. students' orientation towards others. Yet, positive self-esteem is ranked quite low. This is disturbing since preschool teachers are the models of behavior for children, and if they don't work on their own self-esteem, how will they support children in such a process? Maybe this looks like an irrelevant issue, but this is an important finding, since preschool teachers are explicitly oriented towards others. This conflict at continuum me <--> others could later become a source of discontentment, and potentially a burn-out. However, the presence of value of lifelong learning is encouraging: we anticipate that students will continuously work on strengthening their own capacity for conducting professional tasks.

#### **4. Discussion**

Contemporary preschool teacher education is faced with some sort of scientific fashion, where a child-centered perspective without any discussion on reciprocity in adult - child relations dominates. The dominant orientation towards children is concealed under concepts of children rights, children well-being, etc., so we assume that preschool teachers feel a certain level of social pressure to conduct their professional tasks. Respecting the children's perspective means constructing the common field of actions, building mutuality and sharing experiences, positive as well as negative ones and not just mechanically serving children as it is expected. In that context, students should be offered an alternative way of scrutinizing a profession for which they are currently being educated. This could be a good start for the quality in education. As an alternative, we propose strengthening skills for critical thinking based on philosophy and scientific research, rather than criticism based on own impressions. Articulating *pros and cons* based on scientific theories is a prerequisite for practicing choices, and quality in lifelong learning, which showed to be important value for future preschool teachers. Another positive effect of applying scientific findings in practice is enabling participatory actions of children in the classrooms, which is important for children's social engagement later in life. In this way, true citizenship education and education for democracy is supported. Also, quality presupposes discussing emerged problems, and finding a way to deal with diversity in proximal environment. For that, students will need competencies of self-advocacy. In life, it is important to speak for oneself, yet with higher



education, this issue is taken for granted. Expressing own opinions and experiences, as well as proposing solutions for problems emerged in working environment is inherent for successful self-management.

## **5. Conclusion**

Although this research is based on interpretative research paradigm, and results can't be generalized, they could be used as a starting point for further research of this issue. Yet, we have noticed that students who prefer active listening and organizing activities for children (skills), highly ranked self-control and multitasking (abilities) and caring, compassion and patience (values). Also, students who prefer active listening (skills), highly ranked recognizing other's emotions (abilities), and sincerity and openness (values). These preliminary results showed students' orientation towards children, and the dominance of emotion in early education context. Students' orientation towards children is a good starting point for early education quality. However, an absolute focus on children in the classroom is not possible, due to the complex nature of the environment. If students became aware of this after employment, it could be devastating for them, and for children as well. A preschool teacher who is unprepared for the reality of education could face a lot of stress, and intensive emotions in later professional life could lead to the burnout syndrome. For that reason we are proposing more active involvement of students during their formal education, with support of professors and mentors in kindergartens.

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## **Sažetak**

### **SUSTAV VRIJEDNOSTI, IMPLICITNA PEDAGOGIJA I KOMPETENCIJE SUVREMENOG ODGOJITELJA**

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Kvalitetan pedagoški rad je temeljen na razumijevanju dječje perspektive, znanju o razvoju djece i promišljanju o vlastitom djelovanju. Kako bi se saznalo više o poželjnim karakteristikama suvremenog odgojitelja, studenti predškolskoga odgoja su kroz rad u fokus grupama identificirali moralne vrijednosti, kompetencije i sastavnice implicitne pedagogije za koje se može reći da su temelj kvalitetne pedagoške djelatnosti. Visoko na ljestvici poželjnih moralnih i karakternih osobina našle su se empatija, tolerancija, razumijevanje i strpljenje. Iznimno važnim kompetencijama studenti drže vještine suradnje s različitim ljudima, znanja o razvoju djece i primjerenim načinima zadovoljavanja dječjih potreba. Pragmatičnost dobivenih rezultata očituje se u jačanju vještina samorefleksije i autonomnog mišljenja koje se u suvremenom odgojno-obrazovnom procesu smatraju ključnim čimbenicima kvalitete.

**Ključne riječi:** sustav vrijednosti, implicitna pedagogija, kompetencije, studenti, odgojitelji, kvaliteta