

Social Competences of Kindergarten Teachers – Are We Applying Contemporary Knowledge?

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Abstract

Professional development of kindergarten teachers is a complex and continuous process that implies developing the competences of kindergarten teachers. It aims to improve work performance and foster the development and achievements of children. For this reason, the importance of a holistic approach in their professional development and lifelong learning is emphasized, as only a comprehensive model of different competences of kindergarten teachers can precede changes and improvements in educational practice. The professional competences of kindergarten teachers require a high level of various abilities and practical actions based on these abilities, which assume mutual synergy of all those involved in or responsible for the quality of the educational practice. The aim of this qualitative research is, therefore, to gain insight into the personal attitudes of kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals, and to question group meanings and norms on the possibilities of enhancing professional competences of kindergarten teachers while contemplating existing barriers that can be seen and exist in this area. For the purpose of this research, three focus groups were formed. Thirty-nine participants coming from twenty kindergartens in the area of Zagreb took part in the focus groups.

Key words: kindergarten teacher; professional development; social competences.

Introduction

Numerous analyses (of contemporary authors and practitioners) concerning the initial education of kindergarten teachers as well as their professional development show that the existing initial education cannot provide all the necessary knowledge and skills required for a kindergarten teacher in his/her work. Jurčević Lozančić

(2015), Keeley (2007), Taguchi (2010) and many others emphasize that the knowledge gained within initial education of kindergarten teachers is only the first step in starting professional work where a practitioner encounters new discoveries, interpretations, and understandings of the educational practice. Professional development of kindergarten teachers needs to be seen as an open path of maturation and growth, which implies a continuous need for learning and the promotion of professional activity. Today, kindergarten teachers are faced with many demands generated by the overall social context, and in each segment of their work, they are expected to show scientific and professional competences (Jurčević Lozančić, 2016; Slunjski, Šagud, & Brajša-Žganec, 2006; Šagud & Jurčević Lozančić, 2012). For this reason in particular, as emphasized often by Fullan (1993), good professionals should always be ready to learn; this is the key or way of creating citizens who can and know how to manage their lives and be connected with others around them in a permanently changing world. Here we are talking about an emancipated individual who constantly uses his/her knowledge and judgments to achieve the best in a complex and interdependent world (Delors, 1998; Keeley, 2007; Moyles, 2007; Peeters, 2008; Senge, 2003). The experience that an individual brings into the learning process has an important impact on the ultimate outcome of learning; in other words, the social environment becomes a facilitator in learning and further advancement. Therefore, the need to build a competence system based on the co-constructivist paradigm exists in pre-service kindergarten teacher education as well (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2003; Elmore, 2007; Glenn, 2005; Krstović, 2009). In this paradigm, the importance of social constructivism of Lev Vygotsky is emphasized. According to him, social and communicative dimensions of learning take place in a dialogue dominated by free and creative research of complex and subtle pedagogical issues, listening to each other, and interpersonal exchanges marked by partnerships. In accordance with the aforementioned, the competences of teamwork are considered an important part of the education of the academic profile of kindergarten teachers; teams, and not individuals, are fundamental units of learning and advancement. This confirms Bruner's (2000) stance, according to which learning is most effective when done in collaboration, and when it is directed towards a common construction of meaning. Today, there is almost no modern author who does not base his/her work on the essential views of social constructivism, regardless of the specific professional field in which they can be applied. The competences of kindergarten teachers are conditioned by their theoretical knowledge that is generated during their initial education, and then by their vocational knowledge, i.e. practical and professional knowledge, as well as by the biography of teacher's learning that is made up of social and personal competences (Šagud & Jurčević Lozančić, 2012).

Research Aim

The aim of this research was to gain insight into the views of kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals about the possibilities of enhancing and

developing the professional competences of kindergarten teachers, and to look at potential obstacles that are encountered and exist in this area.

Methods

Qualitative methodology was used to collect and analyze the data. The essential principles of the constructivist paradigm were taken into account, and the focus group method was applied, which aimed to look at professional development in total, from the perspective of immediate participants in early and preschool education.

Research Participants

This research was conducted following ethical standards, taking into consideration the protection of participants in accordance with the Ethics Code of the Ethics Committee in Science and Higher Education (2006). Thirty-six participants, kindergarten teachers, professional associates and principals from a total of twenty kindergartens from the city of Zagreb participated in the research. There were twelve professional associates from the kindergartens: *Botinec, Iskrice, Krijesnice, Maksimir, Potočnica, Tratinčica, Trnsko, Različak, Vjeverica* and *Siget*, as well as twelve principals and twelve kindergarten teachers from: *Bukovac, Zapruđe, Budućnost, Matija Gubec, Petar Pan, Travno, Zvončić, Ivane Brlić Mažuranić, Mali princ* and *Medveščak*. Three focus groups were held in 2017 during the month of May at the kindergarten *Sopot* in Zagreb, separately for the principals, professional associates and kindergarten teachers. A total of three moderators of focus groups were previously prepared and educated by an external expert to set up open questions and conduct discussions on the basis of which the values and attitudes of the respondents were explored. Two of the moderators of the focus group interviews had a master's degree in early and preschool education, with a rich experience in the area of early and preschool education, while the third moderator was a professor at the Faculty of Teacher Education. In the introductory part of the focus groups, the moderator thanked the participants for their voluntary participation, explained the purpose and the research goal, the course of the group discussion, the use of the footage for the protection and anonymity of the participants' data. The role of the notary for each focus group was to record key statements of each participant and to spot their non-verbal communication. This was a convenience sample of kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals, whose knowledge and views were assumed to be useful in illuminating and understanding the subject of this research.

The qualitative analysis of the processed data was done by reading the existing transcripts, coding each group individually, summarizing, naming categories with corresponding subcategories, and analyzing and interpreting the defined categories (Milas, 2005). In this research, four thematic areas were predefined, based on the research goal and research questions, which are: the professional development of kindergarten teachers and consideration of possible obstacles encountered in this

area; challenges in working with children with disabilities and the importance of modelling the material context; communication and partnership with parents; the initial education of kindergarten teachers and the needs of the contemporary practice. For each of the four thematic areas, specific topics were created that occur in each of the thematic areas. They were interpreted with the help of the mentioned categories for each specific topic.

Research Results and Discussion

In the introductory part of the focus groups, kindergarten teachers mentioned interest in working with children, interest and the challenges in the work, love towards children and the possibility of further learning and advancement, as important reasons for choosing their profession. The most important motivation for professional associates and principals, was the desire to give their contribution to early education and child well-being. Professional associates especially emphasize that an important characteristic of early and preschool education is in their opinion “...*field of work...*” or in other words, all that encompasses early and preschool education, which is characterized by “... *the openness to applying new knowledge...*” and “...*flexibility and creativity much more than in primary education...*” The participants were asked to respond to the question: “*If you needed to estimate your level of satisfaction with your work, on a scale from 1 to 5, how would you estimate it?*” Despite the high demands and responsibilities of their work, kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals showed a high level of satisfaction with their work in preschool institutions (on the assessment scale, categories 4 and 5 were selected). Further in the text we give an analysis of individual questions, or topics.

Professional development of kindergarten teachers. The first thematic area included specific thematic units and their categories. In the subcategory, the answer to the following question was requested: “*Has the job of a kindergarten teacher changed in the past few years?*” All participants unanimously stated that the everyday work has become much more complex and demanding. Nowadays, expectations of kindergartens have become higher, which on the one hand makes educational work more dynamic and creative, and on the other, requires the acquisition of new knowledge and taking on new forms of responsibility (Slunjski et al., 2006). Kindergarten teachers, pointing out numerous examples from practice, warn of “...*insecurity in finding an adequate approach...*” but “*the children are a source of positive energy*”, “... *a reward for invested effort and engagement...*”, “...*they make all obstacles easier to master...*” In the subcategory that refers to *the tasks of the kindergarten teachers, as well as the observation of possible disruptive factors*, the professional associates emphasize that modern times are characterized by numerous changes, for example, “...*new times new people...*”, “...*we should always be up to date with what is new...*”, which in their opinion implies the development of many abilities, as well as the application of contemporary knowledge of psychology, pedagogy, modern methodologies, information technology, and other

related disciplines. The aforementioned and many other changes (which have been elaborated in contemporary literature in detail) have resulted in demands for changing the existing competences and developing new ones that have not yet been considered important in the teaching profession.

Kindergarten teachers warn of the apparent difference between teachers who were educated ten or more years ago, who are critical and reluctant to adopt the new competences that a modern information society provides. The following examples illustrate the recognized limitations “... *it is not necessary, we are just complicating things*”, “... *going public means abuse...*”, “...*we should protect the privacy of the child and parents...*” Contrary to the above-mentioned, modern generations of kindergarten teachers use technology with a vision and knowledge because this is “...*simpler and easier...*” at the same time emphasizing “...*examples of good practice...*” and an increase in “...*the quality of work and life in family and kindergarten...*”

The second thematic area, *challenges in working with children with developmental disabilities*, implied seeking answers to the question: “*Do you feel competent enough to work with children with disabilities?*” as well as considering the importance of the spatial and material context. From the participants’ answers, it is obvious that kindergarten teachers most commonly express their insecurity in dealing with children with disabilities. They put forward the argument that they did not acquire enough relevant knowledge in their initial education that would prepare them for work with children with disabilities and this is illustrated with the following example “...*I do not know how to react, so I just have to look for help in everything...*”, “...*a large number of enrolled and incoming children reduces the possibility of individual approach...*”, “...*every child needs an individual approach...*”, “...*every child is a story for him/herself...*”. This insufficient understanding of the specific needs of children with disabilities is considered to be the primary reason why kindergarten teachers feel incompetent, and this is claimed by researchers, for example Jurčević Lozančić & Kudek Mirošević (2015), and many others. If we summarize the views of kindergarten teachers, we can see their positive attitude towards children with disabilities, for example in the statement “...*no child can be excluded from the regular kindergarten because of his/her difficulties...*”, which points to the teachers’ altruistic motives and determines the quality of the overall atmosphere and the direct work with children with disabilities. Furthermore, as far as teaching assistants’ work is concerned, kindergarten teachers emphasize that their presence in the kindergarten groups positively affects the achievement of the goals and tasks of educational work, and say they are a “...*big relief...*” and “...*help...*”

Considering the present views on the role of professional associates in working with children with disabilities, it is possible to notice a sort of polarization of teaching attitudes. On the one hand, kindergarten teachers warn that they do not have sufficient nor systematic support from the expert team, as confirmed by the statement “...*often, we are not sure what to do and how...*” and on the other hand, they emphasize the need for guidance and support in working with children

with disabilities. By analyzing the opinions of kindergarten teachers, it is obvious that they recognize the overload of professional associates, because the number of children with disabilities is always growing. Professional associates declare they do not want to be perceived as “...*controllers*...” in kindergarten groups, but want to do quality work and develop relationships based on synergy and trust. Kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals unanimously support the request for introducing more courses during the initial education of kindergarten teachers, for example, methodology of working with children with disabilities with an emphasis on each individual disability. They believe that this would help strengthen the teacher in working with children with disabilities and in acquiring the necessary knowledge. Only an educated kindergarten teacher who knows how to work with a child, having in mind his/her needs, makes sense and is justifiable.

During the discussion in their focus group, kindergarten teachers made frequent complaints in regard to managing child portfolios “...*it is a problem*...”, “*I do not understand all of the developmental domains and I have no professional education in this regard*...” The aim of a child portfolio is to document progress and changes in a child’s development. For this purpose, various notes, photographs, anecdotal records, and logs are collected..., however, as mentioned, teachers point out a number of issues, such as “...*managing a child portfolio requires significant engagement, and in practice, this is mostly just a formality*...” Contrary to this, professional associates notice positive changes in the management and creation of various forms of pedagogical documentation by the teachers. They say that the teachers competently explain all that is collected in the pedagogical documentation, which helps them in the joint monitoring of a child’s progress.

Kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals emphasize that the subcategory *questioning the importance of a quality material and social context that encourages children to play, socialize, and learn*, is of great importance and they consider it a fundamental prerequisite of educational work. They also emphasize the importance of joint, team involvement of children and adults in its modelling. What is interesting is that the principals (far more than teachers and professional associates) mentioned positive examples from their kindergartens. If we summarize the answers of all participants, we can conclude that the pedagogical design of a kindergarten environment strongly determines the quality of a child’s life in the kindergarten. Today, science confirms that the quality of education for children of early and preschool age corresponds significantly to the quality of space in which they spend their time.

Communication and collaboration is the third thematic area, which implies *partnership with parents*. Kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals, based on their personal experience, warn of the weakening of the educational and socializational role of the modern family. Today, parents’ working hours have changed and have become longer ... “*parents work all day ... spend little time with their children*...”, “...*children are alone*...”, ... “*children watch television or play computer*”

games at home ...”, “...parents compensate their absence with buying and spending...” Furthermore, kindergarten teachers point out that parents do not know how to cope with their parental roles and that they transfer tasks of raising their children onto the kindergarten teachers and the kindergarten, and claim that “...it is harder to collaborate with parents than with children...” Kindergarten teachers also mention difficulties in communicating with parents because not all parents have the same expectations, suggesting more lectures for parents and meetings with members of the expert team through various educational workshops and lectures. Professional associates are convinced that although tensions can occasionally occur, they can be controlled. According to their opinion, the most important thing is “...to act professionally, openly, empathically...”

The analysis of the responses found kindergarten teachers to be the most common source of counseling support for parents, persons in kindergarten whom parents trust and from whom they expect support and guidance in their role as parents. The principals point out the usual practice in their kindergartens, according to which counseling is mainly linked to professional associates, although counseling should also be a part of the professional role of kindergarten teachers. However, kindergarten teachers emphasize they do not feel competent enough to work with parents. During their initial education they did not acquire necessary competences for working with parents in general, and therefore for parental counseling and the implementation of some other forms of communication... “everyone thinks that the kindergarten teacher needs to know everything; that is mission impossible...”. As a possible solution that leads to the realization of partnership with parents, teachers, beside their expertise, emphasize the developed social competences that they place in the center of the professional identity: “...social competence...is important for children, but also in adult communication...”

We wanted to know how a socially competent person can be recognized. The teachers listed the following characteristics: “...developed empathy...”, “...sensitivity to other people’s feelings...”, “...getting along well with others...” During the discussion, a common view emerged about how partnership between parents and kindergarten teachers has an important role in the building of social competences. This is in line with the views of contemporary researchers who also emphasize that social competence opens a way to building a quality partnership in which parents become happier and safer regarding their parenting, and kindergarten teachers become more open to new relationships and knowledge about the child’s needs and interests (Ljubetić, 2014).

The coordination of initial education and the needs of contemporary practice, is the fourth thematic area that questions the importance of professional development of kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals. In seeking answers to the question: “*Is today’s initial education of a kindergarten teacher (professional associate) in line with the needs of contemporary practice?*” all focus group participants agree that the existing initial education for the kindergarten teachers is not in line

with the needs of contemporary practice: “...a lot of theory, a little bit of practice...” Generations of kindergarten teachers who are to come do not have sufficiently developed contemporary knowledge of teaching methodology; they are lacking in skills and knowledge in the field of collaboration with parents, children with developmental difficulties, research implementation, which is confirmed by the statements of several participants who pointed out “...contemporary theory, traditional practice...” as one of the main issues. The *initial education* subcategory implies there is a breach between theory and practice; kindergarten teachers have mentioned various examples opposing their views, and as a solution they propose “...more practice, but not just any practice... practice with quality experts as mentors...” as well as more frequent visits to the kindergarten and kindergarten groups while studying, and mentorship which is more organized. Contemporary authors also emphasize that present-day education does not meet the needs of the modern age, mentioning numerous reasons for this, for example the breach between the theory and practice, or the dominance of theory over practice (Krstović, 2009; Saracho & Spodek, 2013; Taguchi, 2010), discontinuity of initial education and further professional development, and lifelong learning (Fullan, 1993; Miljak, 2009; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2007).

Kindergarten teachers and professional associates are burdened with various administrative responsibilities they are constantly exposed to, as well as various additional tasks that follow their daily work, such as, “*organization of work in kindergarten groups, collaboration with parents, work and tasks in the social environment...*” They believe that, due to insufficiently defined determinants of the kindergarten teacher profession, their recognizability in society is still extremely low, especially when compared to some other professions. Although the conditions, duration, and ways of studying today are somewhat different, which is the results of the introduction of the Bologna system, kindergarten teachers warn that the society still generally views the kindergarten teacher as a “...*babysitter...*” who replaces parents while they are at their jobs. In summarizing the collected answers, the importance of better initial education of kindergarten teachers is evident, and this implies “...*fewer students enrolled in the studies...*”, “...*more lectures on contemporary methodology...*”, “...*practicing the learned theory in kindergarten...*”, and that the entrance exam should include “...*testing of intellectual and psychological abilities*”.

As for the subcategories: “*Are we as kindergarten teachers (professional associates, principals) promoters of change or do we, for any reason, keep the status quo? Do you think that professional development is your right and obligation?*” the principals believe that, in order for work in the preschool institutions to be realized in accordance with contemporary knowledge and respond to the demands of present-day, it is necessary to continually improve one’s professional skills “...*the worst you can do is be stagnant and do nothing about it...*” In addition to this explanation, kindergarten teachers have also highlighted some other problems with professional development, for example, “...*available positions are quickly taken...*”, “...*problems with applications...*” They also

warn that various institutions frequently repeat the same topics: “...*the same story that is constantly being repeated...*” These are the reasons why they propose a more frequent collaboration with institutions and individuals, in order to present examples of good practice and their wider implementation. The analysis of the collected data shows that kindergarten teachers, professional associates and principals feel the energy (personal and professional) that makes them want to become initiators of change, and learn and develop in all areas of educational work. Moreover, they are ready to invest in their professional and personal development, and point out that teamwork, knowledge, self-improvement and appreciation of diversity, as well as mutual support and trust are a sure way to acknowledging the kindergarten as a community that learns and develops for the benefit of the child and parents.

Conclusion

In this research, we decided to establish focus groups as a method of data collection, as the aim of this research was to gain insight into the views of kindergarten teachers, professional associates, and principals about the possibilities of enhancing the professional competences of kindergarten teachers. Three focus groups were held with thirty-nine participants in the study. All participants in the research gave comprehensive assessments in which they emphasized that significant changes have taken place in the tasks of kindergarten teachers, and that it is necessary to discuss the development of new competences, necessary for better work of kindergarten teachers (and all other professionals) in the complex field of practice (especially research and reflexive practice). There is a positive attitude towards children with disabilities, but from the analysis of the responses it is evident that kindergarten teachers feel incompetent in dealing with children with disabilities, and they emphasize the importance of initial education and acquisition of necessary competences, both in the material and methodological sense.

In the part with questions that referred to communication and collaboration with parents, there was less consistency in the participants' responses, which is why, in order to deepen particular topics and gain a deeper insight into current misconceptions and myths about parenting and partnership with parents, participants were asked to answer additional questions. The participants emphasize that social competences, which along with the generic competences represent an important precondition for successful work in educational practice, are key to developing collaborative relationships. By means of focus groups, a contribution was made to raising awareness of the importance of social competences of kindergarten teachers, whose elements imply the ability to communicate openly, creating a positive atmosphere, optimism, and empathy, as well as flexibility, and the assessment of leadership styles in order to achieve quality education. These are, in a nutshell, competences that need to be acquired, advanced, and improved for the purpose of achieving autonomy and taking responsibility for one's own work.

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Socijalne kompetencije odgojitelja – primjenjujemo li suvremene spoznaje?

Sažetak

Profesionalni razvoj odgojitelja složen je i kontinuiran proces koji podrazumijeva razvijanje kompetencija odgojitelja s ciljem kvalitetnijeg obavljanja posla i unapređivanja razvoja i postignuća djece. Zbog toga se naglašava važnost holističkog pristupa u njihovu profesionalnom razvoju i cjeloživotnom obrazovanju, jer samo cjelovit model različitih kompetencija odgojitelja može prethoditi mijenjanju i unapređivanju odgojno-obrazovne prakse. Profesionalne kompetencije odgojitelja zahtijevaju visoku razinu raznovrsnih sposobnosti i na njima utemeljene praktične akcije, što pretpostavlja sinergiju svih onih koji su uključeni u kvalitetu odgojno-obrazovne prakse ili za nju odgovorni. Stoga je cilj ovog kvalitativnog istraživanja dobiti uvid u osobna stajališta odgojitelja, stručnih suradnika i ravnatelja te propitati grupna značenja i norme o mogućnostima unapređenja profesionalnih kompetencija odgojitelja uz istodobno sagledavanje postojećih barijera koje na tom području opažaju i na koje nailaze. Za potrebe ovoga istraživanja održane su tri fokus grupe u kojima je sudjelovalo trideset devet sudionika iz ukupno dvadeset dječjih vrtića s područja grada Zagreba.

Ključne riječi: *odgajatelj; profesionalni razvoj; socijalne kompetencije.*