Readiness of preschool educators for professional development and training

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Aim: To investigate early childhood teachers' readiness for professional development.

Methods: We surveyed 150 early childhood educators from Croatia through an online two-part questionnaire. The first part collected general information about the respondents, while the second focused on the self-assessment of readiness for professional development. We analyzed the data with descriptive statistics.

Results: Overall, respondents had a high level of readiness for professional development (mean = 4.21 [range = 1–5], standard deviation = 0.54). There were no statistically significant age or work experience-based differences in educators' readiness for professional development. Educators who were in permanent employment and had completed a graduate degree appeared readier for professional development.

Conclusion: Early childhood teachers showed readiness for professional development and training regardless of age, employment status, work experience, or educational attainment.

Keywords: educational needs; pre-school educators; professional education; professional training; school environment; self-assessment

Introduction

Professional development involves learning, practicing, and giving or receiving feedback in a permanent context. In their analysis of the Croatian Primary and Secondary Education Act (2008–2013), Purgar and Bek (2014) defined professional training as structured, individualized training in the relevant field and other related scientific areas that may contribute to the quality of teaching. It is encompassed within the broader term of professional development and, when delivered continuously, contributes to it mainly by strengthening competencies and maximizing the use of human potential (Tot & Klapan, 2008). Various

authors have looked at the professional role of early childhood educators. For example, Kramer (1994) described them as people who continuously learn and seek to discover and examine different models of professional behavior and action without pretending to have the answers to every question in advance. For early childhood educators, professional development entails continuous learning and a marked desire for self-improvement. Mendeš (2018) identified three stages of professional development: initial education, traineeship, and continuous professional development. Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin, and Knoche (2009), meanwhile, recognized five forms: formal education; "credentialing" (agency or organizational qualifications); specialized, on-the-job training; coaching and consultative interaction; and communities of practice (focused on the goals of collaborative problem solving, building ideas, etc.). They also highlighted two primary early childhood professional development objectives. The first involves advancing early childhood teachers' knowledge, skills, and practices, while the second focuses on promoting a culture of ongoing professional development. This includes maintaining high-quality practices, focusing on systemic improvement, personal growth, and the personal responsibility to grow. Blanuša Trošelj (2018) developed a research-based, six-stage early childhood professional development model in Croatia. The six-stage model is rooted in Vygotsky's social constructivist theory and Kolb's theory of experiential learning. For Blanuša Trošelj (2018), each stage is closely tied with the length of service: novice practitioner (0–3 years); reflective practitioner (4–7 years); advanced practitioner (8–15 years); habitual practitioner (16–23 years); professional practitioner (24–30 years), and veteran practitioner (>30 years).

Professional ethics also play a significant role in professional development. Professional ethics is a set of standards and values that guide acceptable and desirable professional behaviours. In the context of the early childhood profession, professional ethics shape the quality of the educational process (Blanuša Trošelj, 2014; NAEYC, 2011). The Pedagogical Standard of the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) defined seven areas that require high-quality work effort (ISSA, 2011). These are: interactions; family and community; inclusion, diversity, and democratic values; assessment and planning; teaching strategies; learning environment; and professional development (ISSA, 2011). Work quality assessment is carried out by self-evaluation and external evaluation of indicators within each focus area. In their handbook, Steps Towards High-quality Teaching Practice, Tankersley, Brajković, and Handžar (2012) outlined four levels of practice for each quality indicator to facilitate early childhood practitioners' self-evaluation of their practices. Višnjić Jevtić (2018) provided a summary of educational standards in Croatia as part of The Standards of Qualifications and Improvement of Study Program Quality for Early Childhood and Primary School Teachers by Krstović, Vujičić, and Pejić Papak (2016). According to Višnjić Jevtić (2018, p. 83), "Croatian standards are defined through learning outcomes and the achievement of competencies in six areas (play and learning; learning environment; curriculum design; reflection and self-reflection; partnerships with families and communities; and professional development)". There are various approaches to re-searching standards of practice, but all focus on general areas that contribute to acquiring qualifications, whose primary function is to enable evaluation or self-evaluation of early childhood educators' job performance. Relatively high results of work performance assessments contribute to the social standing and professional identities of early childhood educators. Meanwhile, professional identity

building interdepends on the context within which it is developed, on relationships with others, and on periodical upgrading and reconstruction (Rodgers & Scott, 2008), yet these efforts require readiness for lifelong professional training and development.

Although professional development is integral to job descriptions in the early childhood profession, it mainly depends on teachers' motivation, which in turn relies heavily on their readiness. More specifically, early childhood educators should know that professional development and training are long-term processes that require much work, effort, and time.

We aimed to examine early childhood educators' self-assessment of their readiness for professional development and training, and to investigate its potential relationship with age, work status, work experience, or education attainment.

Methods

Respondents

We conducted the survey via an online questionnaire created in Google Forms (https://forms.gle/DRxdRFtmY2PLdeVE8), which the participants accessed exclusively through digital platforms and social networks, either Facebook groups for workers in the field of education or WhatsApp. We only included adult respondents who were employed as early childhood teachers. Participation was anonymous and voluntary; the survey respondents did not leave their names in the questionnaire, and data was only analyzed on a group level. Prior to filling out the survey, we explained our study aim to the participants and instructed them on how to fill out the questionnaire, informing them that they could opt out at any time. The study lasted three months, from April 8, 2020, to July 22, 2020.

Research instrument

We used a two-part questionnaire in our study. The first part collected general information about participants' gender, age, educational attainment, work experience, employment status, type of early childhood program, size of their city of employment, frequency of professional training, and reasons for attending professional training programs.

The second part was a self-assessment scale measuring readiness for professional development and consisting of 24 items adapted from questionnaires by Beara and Okanović (2010) and Uzunboylu and Hursen (2011). Each item consisted of a statement followed by a five-point Likert scale: 1 – completely disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – agree, 5 – completely agree.

Statistical analysis

We presented the survey question responses as absolute and relative frequencies, and numerical variables are presented as average values with standard deviations (SD), medians, and interquartile ranges. Medians and interquartile ranges were used when distributions deviated from normality, and the normality of distributions (P>0.20) was previously test-

ed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and used Cronbach's alpha (with 95% confidence interval, CI) as a measure of scale reliability.

We compared two groups with the Mann-Whitney U and three or more groups with the Kruskal-Wallis test, and applied the *post hoc* Bonferroni correction. Since only one respondent had a secondary (high) school diploma as his/her highest attainment, we excluded this variable from the analysis of educational attainment-based differences. We set the level of statistical significance at α=0.05 (*P*<0.05). The analysis was done using the SPSS, version 25 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA) statistical software. Raw data were recorded in Microsoft Excel spreadsheet (**Appendix 1**).

Results

Overall, 150 early childhood practitioners from Croatia responded to the survey, three of whom were male. Most participants belonged to the 20–35-year-old age group (n=68), followed by the 36–45 (n=54), 46–55 (n=20), and the >56 (n=8) groups. The sample included 86 full-time employees, 51 fixed-term employees, and 13 trainees, with most having up to five (n=53), followed by 11–20 (n=42), and ≥21 years of work experience (n=29). The fewest participants belonged to the 6–10 years of experience group (n=26). One participant had a high school diploma, 122 had bachelor's degrees, and 27 completed their master's programs.

In response to a multiple-choice question regarding reasons for participating in professional training, most participants responded with "It is important to me and for my personal development and advancement" (n=121, 80.7%), which suggests early childhood educators are intrinsically motivated to pursue professional training and are aware of the importance of professional development (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Respondent distribution based on reasons for participating in professional training

Reasons	n (%)
It's important for my job.	14 (9.3)
It's important for the institution where I work.	2 (1.3)
It's important to me, as well as for my personal development and advancement.	121 (80.7)
Others sent me to participate in professional training.	71 (4.7)
Other	6 (4)

Besides the four pre-defined reasons, respondents had the option to add other reasons for (not) participating in professional training, with six replying:

- "I have never participated."
- "We didn't get permission to participate in professional development – more precisely, we didn't have a director and the acting director wasn't interested in that sort of thing."
- "It's important for the institution I work for as well as for my personal development."
- "All of the above."
- "Unfortunately, the (private) kindergarten I work for doesn't endorse professional training so I wouldn't ask for a raise."
- "Because I want to, because I'm interested!"

Early childhood educators' readiness for professional development based on age, work status, work experience, and educational attainment

As measured with the self-assessment scale, early childhood practitioners had high readiness for professional development (mean 4.21 [range = 1–5], SD=0.54) (**Table 2**). The Cronbach's alpha indicator of scale reliability was 0.931 (95% CI=0.915–0.946), suggesting that internal consistency was achieved and that the use of the 24 statements to examine early childhood educators' self-assessment of their readiness for professional development was justified (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Respondents according to self-assessed readiness for professional development (n=150)

Statement	Mean (standard deviation)*
1. The expectations of my institution's director are not my only motive for professional development.	4.39 (1.03)
2. I'm also interested in optional seminars/training programs.	4.59 (0.72)
3. The number of credits is not my only reason for participating in seminars/training programs.	4.42 (1.08)
4. Professional development is not a waste of my time.	3.47 (1.29)
5. The early childhood profession requires constant professional development and training.	4.81 (0.52)
6. Early childhood educators should consistently pursue professional training regardless of their institutions' requirements.	4.67 (0.70)
7. I try to participate in a professional training program at least once a year.	4.57 (0.75)
8. I don't think I'd be a successful early childhood educator without professional training.	3.89 (1.05)
9. Early childhood educators can't do their jobs well without professional training.	3.89 (1.02)
10. I need professional training.	4.49 (0.76)
11. I follow the latest research and advancements in the field of education.	4.09 (0.94)
12. I read the latest literature in the field of education.	4.18 (0.81)
13. I adapt my work to the latest approaches.	4.23 (0.69)
14. I discuss what I have learned from literature with my colleagues.	4.05 (0.90)
15. I follow all programs and activities related to my profession.	3.86 (0.87)
16. I adapt easily to new developments in my profession.	4.05 (0.82)
17. I'm readily interested in any topic in my field.	3.98 (0.93)
18. I set goals and create a personal professional development plan.	3.95 (0.97)
19. I'm always motivated to learn new things.	4.17 (0.87)
20. I'm able to recognize shortcomings in my professional development process.	4.13 (0.74)
21. I'm able to make new decisions concerning career development.	4.25 (0.69)
22. I'm able to apply acquired knowledge in my day-to-day life.	4.39 (0.64)
23. I'm able to independently choose specialized literature to further my career development.	4.31 (0.75)
24. I'm able to recognize available opportunities for career advancement.	4.29 (0.72)
Total score for early childhood educators' self-assessment of readiness for professional development.	4.21 (0.54)

* Score range: 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).

Mean values of self-assessment of readiness based on age of early childhood educators ranged from 4.14 to 4.41 (**Table 3**). However, we found no statistically significant difference among the indicators (F=1.28, *P*=0.285).

Table 3. Self-assessment of readiness based on age of early childhood educators

Age in years	n	Mean (standard deviation)	F	*P**
20−35	68	4.14 (0.48)		
36−45	54	4.23 (0.63)		
46−55	20	4.41 (0.47)	1.28	0.285
>56	8	4.23 (0.47)		

* Analysis of variance.

We found a statistically significant difference in the readiness of early childhood educators for professional development with respect to their employment status (**Table 4**), with permanently employed participants having greater readiness than those employed on a fixed-term basis (*P*=0.034). There was no statistically significant difference between teachers in permanent employment and trainees. The mean values of early childhood educators' self-assessment of readiness for professional development based on work experience ranged from 4.17 to 4.42 (range = 1–5), but without a statistically significant difference (Kruskal Wallis test, H=5.25, *P*=0.154). The median value of early childhood teacher readiness for professional development for respondents was 4.19 (IQR=3.87–4.58) for respondents with a bachelor's degree and 4.50 (IQR=4.17–4.83) for those with a master's degree. The latter group displayed a greater readiness for further professional development when compared to the former (Mann Whitney test, U=1190.50; Z=2.25; *P*=0.024).

Table 4. Early childhood educators' self-assessment of readiness for professional development based on work status*

Work status	n	Median (interquartile range)	H	*P*†
Fixed-term	51	4.17 (3.83−4.46)		
Trainee	13	4.17 (4.00−4.54)	6.58	0.037
Permanent employment	86	4.38 (3.94−4.75)		

* Score range: 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree).
† Kruskal-Wallis test, Bonferroni *post hoc* test *P*<0.05.

Discussion

In our study, early childhood educators showed a high level of readiness for professional development and training. We measured the former concept using statements about the importance of professional development and early childhood educators' readiness to explore the latest scientific research and include it within their educational work. As the awareness of the importance of professional development is seen as a predictor of readiness for professional development (Fatović, 2016), which in turn is the basis for developing

professional competencies (Šagud, 2011), we may also conclude that early childhood educators were motivated to develop future professional competencies. However, they were not homogenous in their self-assessed level of readiness for professional development.

Meanwhile, we found no age- or work experience-based differences in early childhood educators' self-assessment of readiness for professional development, but did observe statistically significant differences based on employment status and educational attainment. Permanently employed early childhood educators with master's degrees reported a higher degree of readiness for professional development than those in temporary employment and those with bachelor's degrees. The employment status-based discrepancy in early childhood educators' readiness self-assessment may be explained by the employers' tendency to underinvest in teachers on fixed-term contracts (Matković, Ostojić, Lucić, Jaklin, & Ivšić, 2020) and their lack of career continuity. More specifically, fixed-term teachers often switch between pre-schools and tailor their approach to the institution's needs rather than the children. Lack of familiarity with the dynamics of an educational group and uncertainty about the characteristics of the next group assigned to the teacher is not conducive to the development of early childhood expertise; however, this is one of the cornerstones of working with children, in addition to a developed personality, creativity, and educational attainment (Lučić, 2007). Moreover, the discontinuity of early childhood teachers undermines the possibility of fostering any real child-teacher attachments and establishing a consistent learning model within the educational group, which is a crucial factor of development and learning in early childhood (ISSA, 2011). As no studies have looked into the length of early childhood educators' careers have looked into the length of early childhood educators' careers spent in fixed-term arrangements or how it affects their work roles, future research should focus on the type of employment and its effect on the quality of education in pre-school establishments. Furthermore, we observed that educators with a higher level of educational attainment were readier for professional development than their peers with lower attainment. This finding may be explained by the reinforcing effect of acquiring new competencies on a more dedicated approach to professional development. According to Vujičić (2012), a master's degree provides early childhood educators with competencies to operate in more complex areas of early childhood and pre-school education. Likewise, teachers with master's degrees in early childhood and pre-school education are trained to use integrative reflection on their profession and pursue continuous professional development. Therefore, we may conclude that acquiring these competencies is interlinked with greater readiness for professional development. The noticeably high level of readiness for professional development is heartening, as it hints at early childhood educators' willingness to improve the professional image of early childhood practitioners in society and raise awareness about the importance of education, especially as our modern society continues to disregard education as an important life value (Vujičić, Boneta, & Ivković, 2015).

This research has several limitations. The first is our small sample size; future studies should involve a more representative number of early childhood practitioners with master's degrees, especially as our results suggest a need for exploring the contribution of master's level education to the professional development of early childhood educators. We may assume that participants who are more open to professional training will also be

more motivated to pursue further initial education. However, if further education fails to translate into better working conditions or career opportunities for early childhood practitioners, educators' motivation to pursue it may be uncertain. The Croatian labor market received its first batch of early and pre-school education graduates in 2012 (Mendeš, 2018). In 2021, only 1,642 of 13,694 early childhood practitioners across all pre-school establishments had master's degrees (Državni statistički zavod, 2021), highlighting a need to identify other factors that affect the motivation for professional development and lifelong education. Some early childhood educators are sufficiently intrinsically motivated for professional training without any additional support or stimuli from professional services or employers. However, others are only driven by external factors (Blanuša Trošelj, 2018) directly correlated with their working conditions, such as salary, pedagogical standards, cooperation with parents, or good relationships with colleagues. Pedagogical standards ultimately involve not only the necessary minimum conditions for safe and healthy child development, but also working conditions that promote the quality of educational activities and further professional training of educators.

Our findings show that, although encouraging early childhood educators' professional development is important, their willingness to assume personal responsibility for their own professional development may be just as relevant. This suggests that educators aspire both to improve the quality of their work and to change the social status of their profession.

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