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INTERNALIZING PROBLEMS IN THE BEHAVIOUR OF CHILDREN OF EARLY AND PRESCHOOL AGE – SELF-ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATORS’ COMPETENCIES WITH REGARD TO WORK EXPERIENCE

***Abstract:** The goal of this research was to explore educators’ self-assessments of their competencies to work with children with internalizing problems, considering the length of their work experience, because modern approaches to competence research are holistic and focused on the combination of formal education and training. As many as 111 educators participated in the research, and the data were, among other things, processed with the χ^2 -test, multivariate analysis of variance and discriminant analysis. The results of the research show that educators with the greatest amount of work experience self-assess their competencies and frequency of training better than do educators with less work experience. Differences were also found in the self-assessments of specific knowledge about internalizing problems in such a way that educators who had 31 or more years of work experience achieved the highest results in the area of knowledge about individual characteristics of children, while educators with up to 10 years of work experience predominantly recognized phenomenological forms of internalizing problems. The value of this research is that the results identify difficulties related to the competence of educators and can be guidelines for further training.*

***Keywords:** early and preschool education institutions, knowledge, lifelong education, passive behavioural problems, work experience*

INTRODUCTION

Today's knowledge about the early development of a child understands the child as a complete being that needs to be approached holistically in order to influence their overall growth and development, that is, so that their development is orderly. In the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (State Institute for Family, Maternity and Youth Protection, 2001), with regard to the vulnerability of the child population, their psychological and physical immaturity at an early age, the need to protect the special rights of each child, as well as the obligation of adults and the society in which they grow up to protect them and meet their needs are especially emphasized. *The National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education* (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, 2015) is based on the scientific study of the *New Paradigm of Childhood* (2012), which included various aspects of the institutional upbringing of children. The study included several basic components related to the fact that children are social subjects in the educational process with all their characteristics, and as such, they should be seriously approached and respected (Maleš, 2012). In this context, contemporary views on professional pedagogical competencies (Cheetham and Chivers, 1996; Kostović-Vranješ and Ljubetić, 2008) focus, in addition to the need for a holistic approach in competence research, on the combination of formal education and training after formal education. For these reasons, it is necessary to approach aspects of competence in a multidisciplinary manner, while professional development programmes, which will optimally meet the needs of educators, taking into account the fact that the specific needs of each child change, must be built on scientifically based indicators.

Educators should know how to evaluate children's behaviour in their direct educational work and in different situations every day, so that they can treat children correctly and meet their needs. Therefore, it is important that they know how to recognize the beginning of a deviation from the expected and usual behaviour. This enables the educator to help the child with proper procedures and direct the behaviour of the parents, thus preventing the further development of the problem. With children of early and preschool age, it is very difficult to determine to what extent certain behaviour is acceptable or what it should be. Educators most often consider behavioural problems to be children's behaviours that interfere with daily work, while experts rely on the widely accepted statistical understanding of the term "normal", which refers to the behaviour that appears in the majority of children of a certain chronological age (Čturić, 1995).

Behavioural problems are those behaviours that deviate from the generally accepted norms of behaviour in the specific environment in which the child grows up and as such, negatively affect the overall psychophysical growth and development of the child. These behaviours can have a negative impact on the

child's functioning in society, so they can be potentially harmful to the child's environment as well as to the child himself, and therefore require professional and social help (Krampač-Grljušić and Marinić, 2007; Uzelac, 1995). Also, such behaviours deviate from the appropriate and usual behaviour for a child of a certain age, and are conditioned by the child's personality, educational, social, cultural, or other factors (Bouillet, 2019). At the same time, the term behavioural problems, according to the *Standards for terminology, definition, criteria and methods of monitoring the occurrence of behavioural disorders in children and young people* (Koller-Trbović et al., 2011), includes all forms of this phenomenon, such as risky behaviours, and behavioural difficulties and disorders.

Campbell (1995, as cited in Živčić-Bečirević et al., 2003, p. 64) concludes that "at an early age it is difficult to distinguish problematic behaviours from different forms of behaviour that can be challenging for the environment, and which are still age appropriate". It is often unclear whether a particular behavioural problem is a sign of a disorder or just a symptom of a difficult but transitory developmental phase. Even behavioural problems that are temporary can have serious consequences for the child because they interfere with the child's optimal development and learning. However, children of early and preschool age face a variety of behavioural problems. They can be a challenge for educators due to a number of specifics of educational work. When it comes to children with difficulties or behavioural problems, there are a number of competencies that the educator should possess in order to be able to adequately care for this population of children. The above includes (Bouillet, 2010, p. 324) understanding the social and emotional development of children; understanding individual differences in the children's learning process; knowledge of the techniques of quality management of the educational group; communication skills (in relation with children, parents, other experts and colleagues); knowledge of effective teaching techniques (including individualized instruction and experiential learning); knowledge of the specifics of certain difficulties in the development and other difficulties of social integration of children; knowledge of the didactic-methodical approach and planning of adapted curriculum; knowledge of available didactic methodical methods, tools and aids (including information technology); knowledge of advisory work techniques; practical experience in the education of children with particular difficulties, and readiness for teamwork, cooperation and lifelong education. On the other hand, as Jurčević-Lozančić (2018) states, the competencies of educators are conditioned by the theoretical knowledge they acquire during schooling, by the professional knowledge they acquire in practice, but also by constant learning and improvement based on social competencies.

Internalized behaviours can easily go unnoticed because verbal skills are still poorly developed in early childhood, which makes children less competent

in expressing their inner feelings (Tandon et al., 2009). Moreover, in most cases it is more challenging for educators to identify a child with internalizing problems in the group because most interventions are directed towards children with externalizing problems (Batsoupoulou, 2017). According to research conducted by Panić and Bouillet (2021), educators assessed internalized behavioural problems in 3% of early and preschool children, more often than parents did (1%).

The manifestation of internalizing problems can lead to later disorders in a child's life. Specifically, internalizing problems that are not prevented or recognized on time are associated with a series of harmful outcomes, i.e., consequences in the individual's adulthood, such as dropping out of school, depressive and anxiety disorders, and somatic complaints. Also, children with internalized emotional disorders, diagnosed or not, show established patterns of behaviour that interfere with their daily functioning and involvement in social activities. While externalized behaviours are distressing to the social environment, internalized behaviours are distressing to individuals themselves (Algozzine, 1980, as cited in Batsoupoulou, 2017). Regarding the problem of excessively controlled behaviour, Živčić-Bečirević et al. (2003) state that these are behaviours that create more problems for the child than for the people around them.

Behavioural problems in very young children who exhibit "inward" behaviours and emotional states such as withdrawal, inhibition, anxiety, and depression are usually classified as internalizing problems. Such problems are relatively common in young children, and the onset of their occurrence is already noticed in early and preschool age. For children with internalizing problems in early and preschool education institutions, the most difficulties arise when entering into social contacts with their peers due to low self-esteem, fear of rejection and feelings of humiliation. Such behaviours prevent them from active involvement and participation in most activities in the group (Batsoupoulou, 2017).

In the literature, we can find different classifications of internalizing (passive) behaviour problems, and the most recognizable is Achenbach's classification (1993), which includes the following behaviours under internalizing behaviour problems: timidity, withdrawal, depression, tearfulness, shame, depression, low self-confidence, laziness, boredom, spoiledness and neurotic disorders. McClellan and Katz (2001) presented a list of attributes of children's social competence based on the results of research on children's social competence and research that compared children who are socially accepted with children who are not. The focus is on certain individual characteristics of the child, the child's social skills or their absence, and the child's relationship with peers.

The inclusion of children with developmental difficulties and problems, in general, is a process that has intensified in recent years. The curricula of

university studies of early and preschool education today are richer in content related to specific knowledge in this sense (Radetić-Paić, 2018). Moreover, new generations of educators are more exposed to working with children with internalizing behaviour problems, while older generations have encountered them less, among other things, due to terminological inconsistencies and difficulties in diagnosis. It can therefore be concluded that younger generations of experts in educational practice have greater responsibility and challenges (Radetić-Paić, 2018; Westwood and Graham, 2003). Kiš-Glavaš (2000) also came across data that younger experts and experts with less than twenty years of work experience in education show more positive attitudes toward inclusion than their older colleagues.

On the other hand, individual studies (Blewitt et al., 2021; Vukadin, 2021) have shown that research participants with longer work experience rate responsible decision-making higher than younger colleagues, and it is concluded that longer work experience in a certain profession provides greater security and self-confidence when making certain decisions. Also, less work experience in the profession is an obstacle to the development of one's own competencies. Research participants were aware of the importance, on the one hand, of children's social-emotional competencies, but also of their own, and emphasized the importance of "training" their own skills and the help of the wider community in developing them (Blewitt et al., 2021). In their research, Emam and Mohamed (2011) examined the connection between self-efficacy and attitudes toward the inclusion of children with disabilities, which included work experience, and reported that educators with more work experience have more positive attitudes in this regard.

As a result of the above, the assumption was that educators with different work experience would show specific differences in the self-assessments of their own competencies to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems.

The general goal of the research was to explore the educators' self-assessments of their own competencies when it comes to internalizing problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children, considering the length of work experience.

The specific objectives of the research were as follows:

1. To explore the self-assessments of educators' competencies for working with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems, considering the length of work experience.
2. To explore the self-assessments of educators' knowledge about internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age, considering the length of work experience.

3. To explore the self-assessments of the frequency of teacher training on internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age concerning the length of work experience.

4. To explore educators' self-assessments of specific knowledge about phenomenological forms, individual characteristics, characteristics of social skills absences, and relationships with peers of early and preschool children with internalizing behavioural problems, considering the length of work experience.

The following four hypotheses were put forward in the research:

H1: Educators with a greater amount of work experience self-assess their competencies to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behaviour problems better than educators with less work experience;

H2: Educators with a greater amount of work experience self-assess their knowledge about internalizing problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children better than educators with less work experience;

H3: Educators with a greater amount of work experience self-assess a higher frequency of training on internalizing problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children than educators with less work experience;

H4: There are differences in educators' self-assessments of specific knowledge about phenomenological forms, individual characteristics, characteristics of lack of social skills, and relationships with peers of early and preschool children among educators with different amounts of work experience.

METHODOLOGY

Sample of participants

111 educators participated in the research. The research included educators from two local and thirteen regional kindergartens of the Istrian County from sixty-two educational groups. Teachers from eleven nursery groups and fifty-one kindergarten groups participated in the research. The age of the children within the mentioned groups ranged from 12 months to 7 years.

Most research participants were female – 107 of them, which is 96.4%. There were 4 male participants, which is 3.6%. Men have started to be employed as educators in early and preschool education institutions, but there are not a lot of them compared with female educators.

The age group of educators from 20 to 29 years included 21.6% or 24 educators. The age group from 30 to 39 years included 28.8% or 32 educators. A total of 24.3% or 27 educators were between 40 to 49 years, while 16.3% or 18 educators were from 50 to 59 years of age. The fewest educators belonged to the age group of 60 and over, namely 9% of the research participants, i.e., 10 educators.

The largest percentage of educators, 71.2% of them, were bachelor's degree holders, 25.2% of educators had completed graduate university studies, and

0.9% had completed the former two-year Study of preschool education. The remaining 2.7% of participants were non-professional substitutes (highly educated professors and people with a high school diploma).

According to years of work experience, the study participants were divided into three groups: those with up to 10 years of work experience, those with 11 to 30 years of work experience, and those with more than 31 years of work experience (Table 1).

Table 1

Research participants according to years of work experience in early and preschool education institutions

years of work experience	f	%
up to 10	46	41.4
11–30	45	40.5
31 and more	20	18.1
	111	100

Items

The instrument created for the purposes of this research consisted of 17 closed-ended and combined-type questions related to the competencies of educators in working with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems. The reliability of the measuring instrument is relatively acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha=.620$). Internal consistency is relatively low, but the variables are positively correlated. For the purposes of this research, the following items were analysed:

1. I consider myself competent to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems.

2. How do you assess your knowledge about internalizing behavioural problems of early and preschool children?

3. How often do you study literature or improve yourself in any way, and is it related to internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age?

4. I can recognize the following phenomenological forms, individual characteristics, characteristics of lack of social skills, and relationships with peers characterizing children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems.

Assessments for the first three questions were made on a Likert-type scale. The last question asked consisted of four subscales: phenomenological forms (11), individual characteristics (13), characteristics of lack of social skills (13), and relationships with peers (3). Possible answers were yes/no.

Research and data processing methods

The research was conducted via an anonymous online questionnaire in the period from February to April 2024. Completing the questionnaire was voluntary, and educators could withdraw from it at any time. At the same time, ethical principles were respected in this research. Educators were introduced to the topic and the reasons for conducting the research. Data collection using this method was chosen in order to make the research results as credible as possible and to speed up and make it easier for the participants to complete the questionnaire.

Data were processed based on basic statistical parameters, χ^2 -test, multivariate analysis of variance, and discriminant analysis, which are an integral part of the licensed SPSS program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the first hypothesis, which assumes that educators with more work experience self-assess their competencies to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems better than do educators with less work experience do, the results showed (Table 2) that the observed fraction of deviations of the observed frequencies from the theoretical or expected frequencies can be considered significant at the $p = .01$ level, given that its χ^2 -test values were higher than the threshold values at the corresponding degree of freedom ($df = 8$). Educators with more than 31 years of work experience, according to the absolute frequency, were the most likely to agree that they had the competence to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems (70%), while educators with the least work experience were the least likely to agree with this assertion. This allowed the hypothesis to be accepted. Similar results, for slightly older children, were reported by the author Idol (2006), who showed that more work experience in inclusive groups led to better acceptance of a child with disabilities and a more competent approach in educational practice. Also, educators should meet the daily needs of children and encourage the development of each child according to their abilities. For this reason, it is possible to view the competences of breeders as “a complex mosaic of different areas of knowledge and skills that are necessarily included in the practical area of every professional” (Slunjski et al., 2006, p. 46). The educator should possess professional and personal competencies and have a positive attitude towards the inclusion of children with behavioural problems in regular educational systems for inclusion to be successful, which also includes creating an environment in which every child has enough opportunities to learn and meet their needs (Bukvić, 2014).

Table 2

Relative and absolute frequencies and χ^2 -test values – Competences for working with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems

item/year of work experience		up to 10	11–30	31 and more	χ^2	p
1) I consider myself competent to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems	I don't agree at all	2 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	21.538	.006*
	I mostly disagree	12 (26.1%)	3 (6.7%)	3 (15%)		
	I neither agree nor disagree	20 (43.5%)	22 (48.9%)	3 (15%)		
	I mostly agree	9 (19.6%)	19 (42.2%)	13 (65%)		
	I completely agree	3 (6.5%)	1 (2.2%)	1 (5%)		

The results of the answer to the question *How do you evaluate your knowledge about internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age* (Table 3) showed that the deviations of the observed frequencies from the theoretical or expected frequencies can be considered significant ($p = .025$), given that the values of the χ^2 -test were higher than the threshold values on the corresponding degree of freedom ($df = 8$). Educators with the most years of work experience assessed their knowledge about internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age as excellent and very good, whereas educators with the least work experience considered their knowledge largely insufficient (23%) and sufficient (26.1%). Thus, it was possible to accept the hypothesis that educators with more work experience self-assess their knowledge about internalized problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children better than do educators with less work experience.

In general, the inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool institutions requires knowledge and skills from at least two scientific fields: early and preschool education and educational-rehabilitation scientific branches (Skočić Mihić, 2011). Specific challenges include the high qualifications of educators, an appropriate learning environment, an inclusive curriculum, didactic activities, and continuous assessment and improvement of developmental activities (Bouillet, 2011). Earlier research in this sense showed that the self-assessments of experts who are satisfied with their knowledge have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with problems in regular settings (Kiš-Glavaš, 2000). The advantages for educators whose groups include children with

disabilities (Mikas and Roudi, 2012) are the enrichment of experiences and the ability to find new strategies, approaches and methods that lead to high-quality and effective solutions, as well as the need for additional professional learning.

Table 3

Relative and absolute frequencies and χ^2 -test values – knowledge about internalizing problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children

item/year of work experience		up to 10	11–30	31 and more	χ^2	p
2) How do you assess your knowledge about internalizing behavioural problems of early and preschool children?	insufficiently	11 (23.9%)	7 (15.6%)	2 (10%)	18.959	.015*
	enough	12 (26.1%)	8 (17.8%)	0 (0%)		
	good	18 (39.1%)	19 (42.2%)	8 (40%)		
	very good	5 (10.9%)	11 (24.4%)	9 (45%)		
	excellent	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (5%)		

The answers to the question *How often do you study literature or improve yourself in any way, and that it is related to internalized problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children* (Table 4) were distributed in such a way that educators with the most work experience most frequently improved themselves in different ways. Over 50% of the educators with less than 10 years of work experience self-assessed that they rarely or never improved. Deviations of the observed frequencies from the theoretical or expected frequencies can be considered significant at the $p=.025$ level, given that the χ^2 -test values were higher than the corresponding threshold values at the corresponding degree of freedom ($df=8$). Considering the results, it was possible to accept the hypothesis that educators with more work experience self-assess a higher frequency of training on internalized problems in the behaviour of early and preschool children than do educators with less work experience. It can be assumed that educators with more work experience improve more often due to the fact that they recognize the need and necessity of lifelong learning to increase the quality of educational practice and have greater responsibility in this sense (Blewitt et al., 2021). On the other hand, educators, especially female educators who make up the largest part of the population of this profession, with less experience in the years after completing their studies, can be assumed to be mostly busy starting a family and are less oriented towards regular training of any kind.

Kyriacou (2001) also concludes that stress among educators is increased at the beginning of their professional career.

The importance of the need to improve for everyday educational practice in different ways during a professional career is evident from the results of research (Zrilić et al., 2022), in which the results showed that 46% of educators estimated that they acquired knowledge during formal education, 51% of educators acquired knowledge about working with children with disabilities during professional training, and 46.7% of educators acquired the same through informal education. In addition, educators who have received additional professional training for working with children with disabilities feel more competent (Skočić Mihić, 2011).

Table 4

Relative and absolute frequencies and values of the χ^2 -test – Frequency of learning about internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age

item/year of work experience		up to10	11–30	31 and more	χ^2	p
3) How often do you study literature or improve yourself in any way, and is it related to internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age?	once a year	7 (15.2%)	7 (15.6%)	2 (10%)	18.310	.019*
	once in 6 months	12 (26.1%)	15 (33.3%)	8 (40%)		
	once a month	2 (4.3%)	5 (11.1%)	6 (30%)		
	rarely	20 (43.5%)	18 (40%)	4 (20%)		
	never	5 (10.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)		

For the fourth hypothesis related to the self-assessments of educators with different lengths of work experience in specific knowledge on four subscales, arithmetic means (Table 5), with respect to the direction of the answers, show that educators believe that they are best able to recognize the following phenomenological forms and characteristics of children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems:

- spoiledness
- does not appropriately express anger and frustration
- seclusion
- tearfulness
- low self-confidence.

Some authors (Shaw and Wood, 2009) link spoiledness with children's anger and frustration, i.e., they refer to spoiledness as a kind of epidemic of modern

times in which parents believe that their life should be without frustration. They believe that the reason for this is that parents often spend little time with their children, so out of a guilty conscience, they do not set boundaries for the child in the short time they spend together. Avoiding the experience of frustration in a child does not develop empathy, nor does it develop social competence. Fulfilling all the child's wishes and rewarding directly supports inappropriate behaviour and thus reduces the possibility of the child understanding what is positive and what is negative in some behaviour (Raundalen, 1998).

On the other hand, explanations of the causes of children's social withdrawal are reduced to a lack of social skills. However, the following question has also been raised (Lebedina Manzoni, 2010): Does anxiety interfere with social interactions and thereby condition their avoidance, or do socially withdrawn children possess social skills that would enable them to interact with peers? Crying can be associated with symptoms of depression, which have different manifestations in children than in adults. By looking at all factors, depression in children is considered a clinically significant problem when a behaviour that lasts for a long time, for example crying, occurs together with other symptoms, and represents unusual, deviant behaviour in a certain child interfering with his/her daily functioning (Vulić -Prtorić, 2004). Ljubetić (2009) also believes that one should be careful when talking about crying and withdrawal in children of early and preschool age in order to avoid labelling, because these problems can be solved in a relatively easy way by applying appropriate, adapted, and individualized educational procedures.

Table 5

Basic statistical parameters

Items	N	Min	Max	M	St. Dev
timidity	111	1.00	2.00	1.2793	.45068
reticence	111	1.00	2.00	1.5495*	.49980
dispirited	111	1.00	2.00	1.1351	.34342
tearfulness	111	1.00	2.00	1.5405*	.50061
shame	111	1.00	2.00	1.2342	.42544
depression	111	1.00	2.00	1.0541	.22715
low self-confidence	111	1.00	2.00	1.5405*	.50061
laziness	111	1.00	2.00	1.1892	.39344
boredom	111	1.00	2.00	1.1802	.38608
pampering	111	1.00	2.00	1.5766*	.49634
neurotic disorders	111	1.00	2.00	1.1081	.31193
he/she is usually in a bad mood	111	1.00	2.00	1.2793	.45068

Table 5 (continued)

Items	N	Min	Max	M	St. Dev
he/she is overly dependent on adults	111	1.00	2.00	1.4505	.49980
as a rule, he/she does not like coming to kindergarten	111	1.00	2.00	1.1892	.39344
he/she does not cope well with social rejection by peers	111	1.00	2.00	1.3423	.47665
he/she fails to achieve friendship with one or two children	111	1.00	2.00	1.3063	.46305
he/she shows no capacity for empathy	111	1.00	2.00	1.2613	.44131
he/she shows no sense of humor	111	1.00	2.00	1.0631	.24418
he/she controls the expression of feelings	111	1.00	2.00	1.1712	.37837
he/she is sad for no apparent reason	111	1.00	2.00	1.2793	.45068
he/she is very critical of him/herself	111	1.00	2.00	1.2162	.41353
he/she seems worried	111	1.00	2.00	1.2072	.40714
he/she seems confused	111	1.00	2.00	1.1982	.40045
he/she worries about making a mistake	111	1.00	2.00	1.3784	.48718
he/she does not approach other children independently	111	1.00	2.00	1.3514	.47956
he/she does not clearly express his wishes and preferences	111	1.00	2.00	1.2432	.43099
he/she does not adequately seek the satisfaction of needs	111	1.00	2.00	1.2613	.44131
he/she can easily be intimidated or disturbed by the behavior of other children	111	1.00	2.00	1.2252	.41963
he/she does not express anger and frustration in an appropriate way	111	1.00	2.00	1.5586*	.49881
he/she cannot join a group of children playing or working	111	1.00	2.00	1.3604	.48228
he/she does not participate in joint discussions	112	1.00	2.00	1.1161	.32175
he/she has difficulty sharing toys or incentives with other children	111	1.00	2.00	1.2252	.41963
he/she shows little interest in others	111	1.00	2.00	1.1712	.37837
he/she attracts attention in inadequate ways	111	1.00	2.00	1.2793	.45068

Table 5 (continued)

Items	N	Min	Max	M	St. Dev
he/she is dormant in most social contacts	111	1.00	2.00	1.0631	.24418
he/she feels uncomfortable when he has to say something out loud in front of a group of children or adults	111	1.00	2.00	1.3333	.47354
he/she shows discomfort around other children or adults	111	1.00	2.00	1.0811	.27420
other children, as a rule, do not accept him/her, reject and ignore him/her	111	1.00	2.00	1.1532	.36177
other children do not invite him/her to join them in play or work	111	1.00	2.00	1.4865	.50208
other children do not choose him/her as a friend or show that they like to play with him/her	111	1.00	2.00	1.2523	.43627

A multivariate analysis of variance was used to test the differences between the groups of educators regarding the length of work experience in relation to the combination of variables on specific knowledge within the four subscales (of phenomenological forms, individual characteristics, characteristics of the absence of social skills, and relationships with peers). The analysis showed that there are statistically significant differences in the self-assessment of the specified specific knowledge among the three groups of educators with different amounts of work experience, $\Lambda=.636$, $F = 1.56$, $p=.006$.

The discriminant analysis was conducted with the purpose of determining the latent structure of differences between groups of educators with different lengths of work experience, measured in a set of 40 items that self-assess specific knowledge, which include four subscales. In this way, an effort was made to determine how much the groups of participants differ from each other and how much individual items contribute to that difference.

Given that a discriminant analysis was conducted on three groups of participants according to years of work experience (up to 10 years of work experience, from 11 to 30 years of work experience, and more than 31 years of work experience), two discriminant functions were obtained. The calculated values for the discriminant functions showed that the set of observed items significantly differentiates the groups of participants regarding the length of their work experience at the level of significance, $p=.01$ (Table 6) only for the first discriminant function. The canonical correlation for that discriminant function shows a good discriminant power of that function in a practical sense.

This made it possible to accept the last hypothesis, which assumed that there are differences in the educators' self-assessments of specific knowledge about phenomenological forms, individual characteristics, characteristics of the absence of social skills, and relationships with peers of early and preschool children in educators with different amounts of work experience.

Table 6*Statistical significance of discriminant functions*

function	% Var.	R	Λ	χ^2	df	p
1	66.3	.714	.321	100.674	80	.006
2	33.7	.588	.654	37.545	39	.536

Table 7*Structure of significant discriminant function*

Items	C	S
timidity	-.330	-.339*
shame	-.907	-.323*
as a rule, he/she doesn't like coming to kindergarten	.393	.266*
he/she seems worried	-1.347	-.250*
he/she is very critical of himself/herself	.735	.244*
other children, as a rule, do not accept him/her, reject and ignore him/her	.753	.236*
he/she seems confused	.389	-.233*
he/she controls the expression of feelings	.999	.227*
dispirited	-.177	-.219*
tearfulness	-.462	-.218*
he/she is overly dependent on adults	.364	
he/she worries about making a mistake	.193	.217*
laziness	-.176	-.216*
he/she is sad for no apparent reason	.193	-.215*

By looking at the structure of the significant discriminant function (Table 7), we can learn that the items that participate in the creation of the first discriminant function on which the groups of educators differ statistically significantly about the amount of work experience are as follows:

- timidity
- shame

- as a rule, he/she does not like coming to kindergarten
- he/she seems worried
- he/she is very critical of himself/herself
- other children, as a rule, do not accept him/her, reject him/her and ignore him/her
- he/she seems confused
- he/she controls the expression of feelings
- dispirited
- tearfulness
- he/she is overly dependent on adults
- he/she worries about making a mistake
- laziness and
- he/she is sad for no apparent reason.

Table 8

Centroids of groups

f	1	2
Up to 10	-.901	-.561
11-30	.061	.867
31 and over	1.935	-.662

Considering the signs of the groups' centroids and their values for each group (Table 8), it was concluded that the group of participants with more than 31 years of work experience achieves the highest results in the area of knowledge on the scale about the individual characteristics of early and preschool children with internalizing behavioural disorders. Unlike them, educators with less work experience, up to 10 years, predominantly recognize the phenomenological forms of internalizing behavioural disorders.

Educators are expected to have good knowledge of the child's developmental stages and influence on the child's behaviour, and recognition of deviations from the usual psychosocial functioning and behaviour of a child of a certain age enables systematic monitoring of the child and its overall development, for which the system of early and preschool education is particularly suitable (Panić and Bouillet, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The results of the research showed that educators with the longest amount of work experience, 31 and more years of work experience, self-assess their competencies to work with children of early and preschool age with internalizing behavioural problems better than do educators with less work experience,

and the same is true for their knowledge about internalizing problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age and a higher frequency of training in this area. It was also concluded that there are differences in the self-assessments of educators with different lengths of work experience regarding specific knowledge about phenomenological forms of internalizing behavioural problems, individual characteristics of such children, characteristics of the absence of social skills and relationships with peers in such a way that the group of participants who have more than 31 years of work experience achieves the highest results in the field of knowledge about the individual characteristics of early and preschool children with internalizing behavioural disorders. Educators with up to 10 years of work experience predominantly recognize more significantly the phenomenological forms of internalized behavioural disorders.

The limitations of the research, and consequently of the interpretation of the results, refer to the convenience sample of participants, which included, among other things, 2.7% of participants who were non-professional substitutes, as well as to the questionnaire that was created for the purposes of this research, with relatively acceptable reliability. Additionally, the questionnaire did not examine the skills and attitudes, or values of the participants, which are integral competencies.

The value of this research is that the obtained results are scientific indicators of self-assessment of competencies by educators themselves, which can be objective and important guidelines for the identification of specific difficulties related to competencies in the context of internalized problems in the behaviour of children of early and preschool age in immediate educational practice, as well as for further teacher training, especially for educators with less work experience. Moreover, educators in their daily direct work with children of early and preschool age have favourable conditions in which they can easily prevent and detect internalizing behavioural problems; however, for this purpose, they need continuous lifelong training and support.

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