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ASSESSMENT OF IMPORTANCE OF COMPETENCES FOR STUDENTS – FUTURE PRESCHOOL TEACHERS IN SERBIA AND ROMANIA

ABSTRACT: Education plays special role in fostering development of human potentials for acquiring competence as general ability of an individual. New educational and psychological paradigms consider competence as a set of potentials, development capacity of an individual to successfully achieve its objectives, needs and roles in various areas of social and professional life and for mutual communication with others. Modern approaches emphasize the obsolete nature of the concept of one-dimensional competences of education, which has been primarily based only on knowledge, stressing the importance of practical activities, active teaching, creative work, ability of working in team and understanding others. This paper presents the results of an empirical-explorative study aimed at identifying competences that preschool teachers believe to be important for their vocation. The overall sample consisted of 306 respondents, future preschool teachers who study in Serbia and Romania. The research is based on a questionnaire that was developed for students with the goal to examine the extent of differences regarding the assessment of importance of competences for the vocation of preschool teacher depending on the year of study and place of residence (Serbia / Romania). The research revealed that there are statistically significant differences in the assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences and the place of residence. Students from Romania attribute higher importance to the knowledge of standards required for the vocation of preschool teachers, achieving objectives in accordance with the program, using information technologies, evaluating the own work and awareness of the importance of lifelong learning, than do students from Serbia. Results obtained in this research may find their application through incorporation in teaching programs of higher education institutions of content related to the importance of competence of future preschool teachers.

Keywords: preschool teacher training, assessment of importance, competences.

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INTRODUCTION

Preschool teacher competences affect the overall development of preschool children through the psychomotor, cognitive, social and emotional aspects of development. Accordingly, the preschool teacher should be able: to consider problems from the child's perspective taking into account its age and origin; perceive and accept similarities and differences between children; individualize in work; respect children's rights and be sensitive to their concerns and interests; confess mistakes and be willing to learn from them. Also, the preschool teacher should be realistic in self-perception and perception of children, problem-solving oriented, confident and sober in crisis situations, active listener, avoid conflict resolving strategies in which one party gains, the other loses (Nedimović, 2010).

The very notion of competence is not uniquely defined, since its use varies from field to field. The new integrative models understand competences as set of potentials, the individual's education development capacity for the successful achievement of the own goals, needs and roles in various areas of social and professional life, but also for the mutually acceptable communication with others (Gojkov, 2008). There is a very broad definition of competence in German literature (Klaassen, in 1994, after Prišl, 2010) which covers four areas: vocation - subject matter, pedagogical, organizational and communication-reflexive. A comprehensive definition of competence which is generally accepted by countries involved in the Bologna process is provided in Tuning Project brochure (Tuning, 2006, after Vizek-Vidović, 2009). This brochure defines the concept of competence based on the integrative approach, which sees individual abilities as a dynamic combination of features that enable competent realization or are parts of the final product of the educational process. Competences include the following elements: knowledge and understanding (theoretical knowledge of the academic area, capacity for perceiving and understanding), knowledge about how to act (knowledge practically applicable in certain situations), knowledge on how to be (values as integral elements of ways of perceiving and living with others in a social context). Competences are a mixture of these features (taking into account knowledge and its application, attitudes, skills and responsibilities) and describe the level or degree to which an individual is able to use them.

When we talk about the competences of future preschool teachers, they can be defined as the ability to successfully meet the complex demands of a particular area based on mobilization of both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of work (Peklaj, 2008). Successful work within the educational process clearly requires cognitive skills, such as problem solving, analytical and critical thinking, decision making, divergent thinking, proficiency in decision-making, as well as a sufficient amount of knowledge in a particular field. However, although the importance of these competences is beyond any doubt, they are still insufficient, because, in addition to cognitive aspects, the concept of competence includes also motivational and emotional aspects necessary for educational work. It is also important to note that if the individual developed a specific competence, it means that he has appropriate abilities, which include cognitive, motivational and emotional abilities, as well as that he is able to activate, harmonize and use these in an adequate manner. Thus, competences are not just about possessing potentials, but they need to be used in

different situations (Nedimović, Maran, Činč, 2013). Preschool teacher competences are unlikely static but developmental traits, so that preschool teachers always remember that their vocation requires continuous learning and vocational advancement, given the new circumstances in which children grow, new scientific insights about early childhood, in particular, in order to access children individually, and this requires versatility (Slunjski, 2006).

One should not ignore the fact that in the educational work adults are experienced guides who have travelled their way of activities and learning. Development is neither based only on experience, nor on a set of isolated skills, but on constructing structures, and it involves connecting and incorporating new information into already shaped structures, or forming new structures (Piaget, 1995). Consequently, the ability of responding to changes and modifying personal pedagogical practice (and "lifestyle" to some extent) is one of the basic vocational competences of preschool teachers. The basic premise of the cognitive-constructivist paradigm is that actions of the individual are driven and based on his beliefs, value structure, principles and experience. Some authors believe that the preschool teacher's lifestyle is the most important factor of teaching and upbringing, and that the "hidden curriculum" is not only ideological content, but it certainly provides support to the educational process (Bahovec and Kodolja 1996; Špoljar, 1993). In the educational work, when it comes to the implementation of certain programs and activities, preschool teachers are often guided based on their own preferences. The work is assumed to be of higher quality if applying contents that preschool teachers feel more interesting and appealing (Sturza-Milić, 2011, 2012; Zajec and Cemič, 2010). When working with children of younger ages the preschool teacher should invest his entire personality; based on his lifestyle he can be a role model and the object of respect, so that the general opinion is that the person who is capable of generating new knowledge based on reflecting his own activities is a competent practitioner – professional. Thus, instead of developing specific competences, they should be developed as flexible as possible, since the time in which we live requires preschool teachers prepared for a variety of uncertain situations and able to adapt to changes.

Unlike innate abilities, competences can be learned. This fact leaves a large room for designing such plans and programs in the training of future preschool teachers and teachers that are largely based on the development of their competences for future educational work.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the previous section, an attempt was made to define competences in general and competences of preschool teachers as a subordinate concept. In addition, the emphasis was on competences preschool teachers are required to have in their work from the standpoint of contemporary understandings of this domain, i.e. competences important for their vocation. However, it immediately raises the next question, and this is the question by which we were predominantly driven in this research: *are there differences between the assessment of importance of competences required for the vocation of future preschool teachers between Serbia and Romania* as a result of the wider social and educational context of teaching and upbringing preschool children and the importance

attributed by society to the vocation of preschool teachers? We consider this question important as it makes sense to assume that opinions of preschool teachers on the importance of competence in the field of their vocation affect primarily their motivation to develop these competences, and it can be assumed that the preschool teacher will be working more on the development competences that he considers to be important. The existence of these differences necessitates the identification of reasons for their existence, factors leading to the formation of perceptions on the importance of competences for future preschool teachers trained in Serbia and Romania. Moreover, nowadays a great importance has been attributed to cultural determinants of development. Therefore, it is important to determine whether perceptions of future preschool teachers on the importance of their competence are related to their culture of origin.

In order to answer the above questions, empirical research has been conducted, the subject of which were perceptions of future preschool teachers regarding the importance of competences in the field of their vocation.

H1: There are statistically significant differences between respondents – future preschool teachers from Serbia and Romania in the assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences;

H2: There are statistically significant differences between students by the year of study (first, second, third) in their assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences. As matures and learns, the preschool teacher understands what it means to be a preschool teacher. Being enabled for his profession he becomes more aware and creates a qualitatively different value system than the one he had at the beginning of his study.

Research Sample and procedure

The survey was conducted on the sample consisting of 306 respondents. Thus, 39.9 % were students of the Preschool Teacher Training College in Vršac, while the remaining 60.1% were undergraduate students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Psychology and Social Sciences of the Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad (Romania), as the only higher education institution in the western part of Romania, which trains preschool teachers at academic level. The majority of students are from the second year of the study (42.7 %), slightly fewer of them from the third year (39.3 %) and the least of them from the first year (18 %). The survey was conducted between February and March 2013 and it was anonymous. After reading the instructions and providing the general data (the respondents' country, high school institution, year of study, and success), respondents approached to completing the questionnaire.

Research instruments

In accordance with the draft of Standards on knowledge, skills and attitudes (competences) for the vocation of preschool teachers, a questionnaire has been developed for students aiming to examine the differences in assessing the importance of preschool teacher competences in function of the year of study, success and place of

residence (Serbia - Romania) and their extent. The questionnaire was translated into Romanian, so that students from Romania could be also included. The research was based on the questionnaire consisting of 5 sub-scales with a total of 44 items. Each subscale measures the importance attributed to a certain group of preschool teacher competences. Respondents were assessing the importance of competence on individual items on a five-point Likert scale.

The questionnaire included five groups of competences, namely:

- Competence 1: The preschool teacher knows and understands the general principles and objectives of the teaching/upbringing system; he is able to achieve them and contribute to their development – (he is acquainted with the system of teaching and upbringing, understands his role and contributes to its improvement in a critical way; knows and understands the standards of vocation and performs his professional work in the institution accordingly; knows the regulations in the field of teaching and upbringing; understands the relations between objectives, tasks, outcomes, content, methods and forms of work; understands and applies the principles of equality, social justice and fights against discrimination; understands the importance of applying information technology for the sake of innovating, enriching and improving his work);
- Competence 2: The preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities to analyze the existing resources, plans activities and creates conditions for realization of teaching/upbringing activities – (based on his value standards and overall commitment he participates in planning activities that contributes to the improvement of the quality of work in the preschool institution; improves and advances the cooperation between nursery school and other institutions; communicates with families, informs and offers ideas for creating a stimulating environment that encourages child's development and healthy lifestyle; plans and organizes educational work; creates equal opportunities for all children; creates an active, safe and healthy environment; encourages consistency, fairness, honesty, reliability based on personal example);
- Competence 3: The preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and the ability to realize the teaching/upbringing process – (understands and applies appropriate methodology; understands and applies information technology in planning, implementing, evaluating and innovating his work; adapts methods and forms of work, takes responsibility for the progress of each child; develops democratic values, tolerance, understanding, acceptance and respects differences; he is acquainted with psychological, physical as well as developmental characteristics of children and coordinates his work and demands accordingly);
- Competence 4: The preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities to monitor, measure, evaluate and analyze the achievements of children and take measures to improve their performance and the overall teaching/upbringing process – (reflects on, evaluates, analyzes and evaluates his own practice; exchanges experiences relevant for monitoring the development and progress of children with colleagues, professional services,

director, institutions, and all participants in the teaching/upbringing process; helps parents to gain information, resources or services they need to enhance the child's development and learning; develops tools for monitoring children's development and learning activity);

- Competency 5: The preschool teacher continually develops and promotes his knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities – (he is aware of the importance of lifelong learning, and improves and promotes his work continuously; follows the current developments and innovations in teaching and upbringing; develops adequate and coherent personal strategies of lifelong learning and advancement in vocation, education and information technology, inclusion, etc.; shares experiences with colleagues in order to extend his knowledge, and improves and innovates his work).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of results is primarily focused on competences that students consider to be very important. In the process of training future teachers this could eventually facilitate the recognition of various strategies aimed at improving the teaching/upbringing work in preschool institutions. Analyses were conducted regarding individual items of the questionnaire. As indicated by the results obtained for individual items, following individual competences received fairly high rating from students (on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the lowest score): applying grammar and spelling rules (4.57), creating safe and healthy environment (4.49), supporting the development of children's self-esteem (4.54), taking into account the characteristics of children's age (4.48), developing tolerance in children (4.50).

The next section presents the results of analyzes in which the assessment of importance of individual competences is related to the place of residence (Serbia / Romania) and year of study.

1. Assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences and place of residence (Serbia / Romania)

The significance of differences between students from Serbia and Romania in terms of importance they attribute to individual competences is investigated by a series of t-tests for independent samples. In Table 1.1, we notice that the series of ratings regarding the importance of five ratings competences have statistically significant differences between respondents from Serbia and Romania. One of them belongs to the first group, one to the third group, two to the fourth group, and one to the fifth group of competences. Also, note that none of the competences of the second group (analyzing resources and creating conditions for realization of teaching/upbringing activities) is highlighted as the one in respect of which there are statistically significant differences between students from Serbia and Romania.

Table 1.1: T - test for independent samples

	t	df	p	Average differences	Standard deviation of differences
Importance of competences					
Knows and applies standards required for vocation	-2.895	295	.004	-.287	.099
Achieves objectives in accordance with the program	-1.986	293	.048	-.193	.097
Uses information technologies in his work	-1.994	292	.047	-.205	.103
Evaluates and modifies his work	4.479	293	.000	-.430	.096
Aware of importance of lifelong learning	2.089	294	.038	-.212	.101

As indicated by Table 1.2, these competences, on average, are rated somewhat higher by students from Romania. In other words, students from Romania attribute higher importance to being acquainted with the educational standards, achieving objectives in accordance with the program, using information technologies, self-evaluation and being aware of importance of lifelong learning, than students from Serbia.

Table 1.2: Number of respondents (N), standard deviation (SD) and average ratings (M) of importance of preschool teacher competences to respondents from Serbia and Romania

Importance of competences	Place of residence	N	M	SD
Knows and applies standards required for the vocation	Serbia	113	4.19	.892
	Romania	184	4.47	.789
Achieves objectives in accordance with the program	Serbia	111	4.25	.858
	Romania	184	4.45	.780
Uses information technologies in his work	Serbia	110	4.02	.888
	Romania	184	4.22	.829
Evaluates and modifies his work	Serbia	111	3.77	.660
	Romania	184	4.20	.871
Aware of importance of lifelong learning	Serbia	112	4.25	.885
	Romania	184	4.46	.822

Results indicate that students – future preschool teachers – who study in Romania attribute higher importance to specific competences required for the vocation of preschool teacher than students from Serbia; it may be the consequence of differences in the social and cultural systems between the two countries. Any differences in these wider social systems may also imply differences in school systems, even in systems of training future preschool teachers, as well as differences in the importance and role of this vocation in society. The nature and explanation of these differences should be the subject of future research.

2. Assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences and the year of study

The significance of differences between students from the first, second and third year of study in the importance they attribute to specific competences is investigated by a series of one-way variance analyses. In Table 2.1, we notice that the series of ratings regarding the importance of six ratings competences have statistically significant differences between respondents from the first, second and third year of study. Thus, three belong to the third group and three to the fourth group of competences. Differences regarding the importance of competences from the other groups (first, second and fifth) were statistically insignificant.

Table 2.1: Results of the one-way variance analysis

Importance of competences		Sum of squares	df	Average square	F	p
Uses information technologies in his work	Among groups	5.326	2	2.663	3.710	.026
	Within groups	205.998	287	.718		
	Total	211.324	289			
Relates activities with previous knowledge	Among groups	3.321	2	1.660	3.040	.049
	Within groups	157.284	288	.546		
	Total	160.605	290			
Develops democratic values in children	Among groups	12.052	2	6.026	6.523	.002
	Within groups	265.151	287	.924		
	Total	277.203	289			
Evaluates and modifies his work	Among groups	8.503	2	4.252	6.459	.002
	Within groups	190.219	289	.658		
	Total	198.723	291			
Uses information technologies when evaluating	Among groups	10.846	2	5.423	7.330	.001
	Within groups	213.078	288	.740		
	Total	223.924	290			
Develops tools for monitoring the work	Among groups	8.024	2	4.012	5.562	.004
	Within groups	207.729	288	.721		
	Total	215.753	290			

As indicated by Table 2.2, second year students attribute higher importance to using information technology in work and evaluation, developing democratic values and tools for monitoring the work than students of other years. Furthermore, first year students attribute higher importance on relating activities to prior knowledge than students of

other years. Finally, third year students attribute higher importance to self-evaluation and modification of the own work than students of other years.

Table 2.2: Number of respondents (N), standard deviation (SD) and averages scores (M) regarding the importance of preschool teacher competences for first, second and third year students

Importance of competences	Year of study	N	M	SD
Uses information technologies in his work	1	49	3.86	.890
	2	125	4.24	.807
	3	116	4.18	.871
	Total	290	4.15	.855
Relates activities with previous knowledge	1	49	4.71	.577
	2	126	4.42	.752
	3	116	4.44	.783
	Total	291	4.48	.744
Develops democratic values in children	1	48	3.85	1.130
	2	126	4.37	.826
	3	116	4.02	1.021
	Total	290	4.14	.979
Evaluates and modifies his work	1	50	3.66	.688
	2	126	4.08	.765
	3	116	4.14	.903
	Total	292	4.03	.826
Uses information technologies when evaluating	1	49	3.84	1.067
	2	126	4.39	.748
	3	116	4.20	.877
	Total	291	4.22	.879
Develops tools for monitoring the work	1	50	4.14	1.069
	2	125	4.48	.703
	3	116	4.15	.887
	Total	291	4.29	.863

As indicated by the results, there are statistically significant differences in the assessment of importance of individual competences depending on the year of study. Third year students tend to attribute higher importance to competences related to self-evaluation and modification of the own work than first and second year students. These differences can be explained by the adoption of both theoretical knowledge and methodological skills acquired during the process of training, through regular teacher training classes and independent practice.

CONCLUSIONS

The survey revealed that there are statistically significant differences in the assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences and the place of residence (Serbia - Romania) at the level of individual items. Here are the following five items out of the total number of items included in the questionnaire (44):

- Recognizes and applies the standards of vocation and realizes his professional work in the institution accordingly (Competence 1);

- Realizes upbringing, teaching activity, aesthetic and functional objectives in accordance with the curriculum for the given age (Competence 3);
- Understands and uses information technology in planning, implementing, evaluating and innovating pedagogical work (Competence 3);
- Continuously reflects, evaluates, analyzes and self-evaluates, seeking feedback on his work and introduces changes (Competency 5);
- He is aware of the importance of lifelong learning, develops and promotes his work continuously (Competency 5).

The importance of the above competences is rated slightly higher on average by students from Romania than students from Serbia. Similar results were found by Sturza Milić (2009), while examining the difference in teachers and preschool teachers between our country and the neighbouring Republic of Romania on the importance of vocational advancement (this research has also found that preschool teachers and teachers from Romania attribute higher importance to vocational training and lifelong learning).

The obtained results indicate that there are statistically significant differences in the assessment of importance of preschool teacher competences and the year of study at the level of individual items. Here are the following six items out of the total number of items included in the questionnaire (44):

- Understands and uses information technology in planning, implementing, evaluating and innovating his work – Competence 3 (on average, somewhat higher importance is attributed to this item by the second year students as compared to the first and third year students);
- Relates activities to prior knowledge and experience – Competence 3 (on average, somewhat higher importance is attributed to this item by the first year students as compared to the second and third year students);
- Develops democratic values in children – Competence 3 (on average, somewhat higher importance is attributed to this item by the second year students as compared to the first and third year students);
- Continuously reflects, evaluates, analyzes and self-evaluates his own practice, seeking feedback on his work and introduces changes – Competence 4 (on average, somewhat higher importance is attributed to this item by the second year students as compared to the first and third year students));
- Uses information technology in evaluation – Competence 4 (on average, somewhat higher importance is attributed to this item by the second year students as compared to the first and third year students);
- Develops tools for monitoring his work – Competence 4 (on average, somewhat higher importance is attributed to this item by the second year students as compared to the first and third year students).

This research confirmed hypothesis H1 of the existence of statistically significant differences between respondents – future preschool teachers – from Serbia and Romania in assessing the importance of competences. Namely individual items from the first (the preschool teacher is acquainted with and understands general principles and objectives of the education system, he is able to achieve them and contribute to their development),

third (the preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities required to realize the educational process) and the fifth group of competences (the preschool teacher continually develops and promotes his knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities) are estimated by respondents from Romania as statistically significant along a total of five items. Based on the results, it can be concluded that the second hypothesis H2 is also confirmed. Namely, as indicated by the statistically significant differences obtained, second year students estimate individual items from the third (the preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities required to realize the educational process) and the fourth group of competences (the preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities to monitor, measure, evaluate and analyze children's achievements and take measures to improve their performance and the overall teaching/upbringing process) as statistically more important along a total of five items, while the first year students attribute statistically higher importance to one item from the third group of competences (the preschool teacher possesses the knowledge, skills, value standards and abilities required to realize the teaching/upbringing process).

Traditionally, planning in institutions of higher education was based on the content, i.e. the structure of the particular scientific discipline. Accordingly, teachers were specifying the content to be included in the curriculum, planning the ways it should be realized, and checking the extent to which students have mastered the planned contents. Thus, this approach can be considered input-oriented. Current trends in education indicate that there is a need for shifting from teacher-oriented teaching to student-oriented teaching activity. This model focuses on what student is expected to achieve by the end of the module or program and involves orientation towards the outcomes of learning (Dimović, 2009). Learning outcomes are nowadays often defined as competences, defined as combination of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes to act in specific area.

Nowadays, goals of modern higher education are expressed through demands for participatory training, which involves students' active participation, and changes in the role of their teachers in teaching process, thus facilitating their vocational competences to develop to higher levels. This requires significant changes in the work of our institutions of higher education stimulating a more intense interaction, research, mentoring, teamwork, cooperation among students, work on projects, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary exchange, etc. Modern teaching activity as a process of active acquisition of knowledge in partnership involves autonomous learning and applying active methods reasonably. This facilitates the development of basic competences in students – future preschool teachers – learning skills, communication skills, problem solving skills and knowledge.

Results obtained in this research may find their application in curricula of higher education institutions and contents related to the importance of future preschool teacher's competence.

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Biographical note

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Natasa Sturza Milic has graduated from the Faculty of Sports and Physical Education in Belgrade where she also obtained her master and doctoral degree. She is employed at the Preschool Teacher Training College “Mihailo Palov” in Vrsac as a Professor of professional studies for the subjects Teaching Methodology of Preschool Children Physical Education and Applied Physical Education which are held at both professional bachelor and professional studies. She is a member of the Council of the Preschool Teacher Training College and of the Editing Board of the college publishing activity. She has published 9 books and 40 papers either independently or as a co-author. She has participated in numerous professional and scientific conferences both in the country and abroad, as well as in various project of national and international importance. She is especially interested in the topic of motor giftedness in children.

Adrijan Božin born in 1977 in Šabac (Serbia) where he has completed elementary and high school. In 2004 he graduated in the Department of Psychology of Faculty of Philosophy (University of Belgrade) and since 2006 works as teaching fellow for psychology at Preschool Teacher Training College in Vršac. At present he is enrolled in doctoral studies of psychology at the same faculty and is preparing his doctoral dissertation on styles of parenting. He is the author or co-author of several scientific and professional papers.