

Chapter V

**DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES
OF PRESCHOOL STUDENT TEACHERS: METHODOLOGY
COMPETENCIES**

Ljiljana P. Stankov*

Preschool Teacher Training College Šabac, Serbia

Sanja D. Vuletić

Preschool Teacher Training College Šabac, Serbia

Mira Ž. Jovanović

Preschool Teacher Training College Šabac, Serbia

Abstract: The paper deals with the issue of the development and improvement of professional competencies of future preschool teachers with special emphasis on methodical competencies. The aim of this research was to determine how students in the final year of vocational studies evaluated and which level of importance they attached to the competencies considered necessary in pedagogical activities in order to perform the work of a preschool teacher. The research issue is reflected in the question: Are students of the final year of vocational studies empowered with important professional competencies? The research tasks were carried out by analysing the assessment of competencies that the respondents provided using a survey and scaling techniques, as well as instruments such as a questionnaire and a scale of attitudes. The research sample included 73 respondents, students in the third year of undergraduate studies. Students' assessments point to the importance of developing professional competencies through the implementation of professional practice. The current competence of students is the most important within specific competencies, knowledge, skills and abilities – visual, musical, speech, and drama. Based on the obtained results, in the opinion of students it is essential to focus on: greater representation of professional practice during the course of studies, relation of methods in professional practice with work in other course subjects, professionalism of mentors – preschool teachers and supervising professors, and the pedagogical climate in which activities are carried out. The obtained results show the importance of students' assessments and opinions on the role of professional practice in improving competencies directed at their quality training for the future vocation of competent preschool teachers.

Keywords: *professional competence of preschool teachers, professional competence, development.*

Introduction

In a time of accelerated social and technical development, preschool institutions are expected to monitor this development and solve current problems that accompany the education system in contemporary society. A preschool teacher in a modern preschool institution has become one of the key factors for the improvement of the education system. The new roles of preschool teachers nowadays require the development of professional competencies, affirmation of the profession, and the building of a strong and recognizable professional identity. The status and role of the profession of preschool teachers in contemporary preschool institutions are conditioned by numerous changes in the social system which cause this vocation to be complex and responsible.

Examining professional competencies of students – future preschool teachers, leads to understanding of their behaviour, which forms the basis of planning their professional development. Hence originates the significance of examining the impact of initial [undergraduate] education on the development of their methodical competencies as well as the way they think about their qualifications to perform the job of preschool teacher. Pedagogical competencies of preschool teachers are complex and represent an elaborate set of different areas of knowledge and skills that are necessarily included in the practical area of each professional. Since methodological competencies are very important in professional development and improvement, only a comprehensive model of diverse competencies of students – future preschool teachers can lead to the modernization of educational institutions.

Over the last few decades, the vocation of preschool teachers has gained increasing significance and attention in public and political life, as well as in the creation of modern educational policies, so that many European countries have become committed to stimulating its further improvement and development. Almost all modern states and inter-state bodies (*European Commission for Education and Culture*), have resorted to the standardization of competences in order to raise the quality of educational work in pre-school institutions and included the list of standardized competences which teachers need to fulfil their role in their educational documents.¹

According to facts deriving from the professional role of preschool teachers, the expected outcomes or goals in the field of preschool education, world trends, and our policies in the sphere of education and the role of the segment of institutional preschool education in the wholeness of our education system,

¹ European Commission Documents (Children in Europe, Policy paper 2007; OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008; ("Education & Training 2010" the Success of the Lisbon Strategy Hinges on Urgent Reforms); (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework, The European Parliament and the Council of The European Union, 2006).

the most important professional competencies of teachers nowadays are predominantly related to the performance of certain tasks and work assignments, which can only be realistically accomplished on the basis of the following:

- Knowledge of the theory and practice of upbringing (especially knowledge related to the development and upbringing of children);
- Capacity for one's own lifelong education and professional development (especially in the form of innovations known today as "action research"), that is, solving problems in practice as a special type of professional development in partnership with children, colleagues and parents (Pešić, 1998).

Thus according to Kamenov, the approach to education oriented to competencies is based on the awareness that in a globalized and individualized society of knowledge, competencies are becoming more important than narrowly specialized knowledge which is rapidly changing. Nowadays young people are facing the challenge of continuous advancement and adoption of new knowledge. Therefore, communication ability, lifelong learning ability, and competent interaction with the changes are becoming increasingly important (Kamenov, 2006). Due to the complexity and diversity of the methodology of educational work, the issue constantly present in current preschool education is the search for ways of changing educational practice as well as for innovations in educational work. These innovations to a great extent depend on the professional capacity of the staff working in preschool institutions – the professional competencies of preschool teachers – because they represent the basis for successful methodical work. The question of competence is also related to the roles which expect teachers in contemporary conditions of educational work, which are also being significantly innovated (Maleš, 2011).

Unlike the general approach to the notion of competence, which originates from the goals of education and universal values, "professional competence" is especially related to the knowledge, skills and personality characteristics needed for the successful performance of a professional role in one occupation and the work assignments or tasks arising from this role (Havelka, 2000).

The Law on the Foundations of the Education System prescribes measures for improving the quality of work of the educational institution, with the focus on all participants in the process of learning and teaching, especially preschool teachers. The *Rulebook on standards of competence for the vocation of preschool teachers and their professional development* is of particular importance. This document presents guidelines to employees and supports educational institutions in self-assessment and personal orientation of teachers in the context of planning and creation of professional development, monitoring and evaluation of work, and defining national priorities. Each area of competence is concretised through several competencies described in the dimensions of knowledge,

skills and values. Using the term “skill” (knowledge to do something) instead of the term “ability”, the difference between technical understanding of educational work, as the application of individual skills and ethical nature of the practice of a preschool teacher, which is essentially based on values and reflexive examination of knowledge, is highlighted. Every competence should be comprehensively envisaged, through knowledge, skills and values, and related to other competencies.²

Preschool teachers are expected to demonstrate their competencies in areas defined by the necessary corpus of knowledge and skills as well as the set goals and expected outcomes of the program. These demands are established from the outside – independently from a preschool teacher and the context in which he/she operates (Krnjaja & Pavlović Breneselović, 2013).

Pavlović Breneselović (2014) points out the fundamental differences between two approaches to the professionalism of preschool teachers – *discourse of competence* versus *discourse of competencies*. The technocratic one (*discourse of competencies*) is based on the understanding of professionalism as the application of certain knowledge and skills in one’s own professional practice. The technical emphasis in the approach is reflected in the idea that a precise list of individual knowledge and skills can be made in order to be mastered by a preschool teacher, and the role of a practitioner is reduced to the one of an “implementer”. Such competencies are perceived as a fixed and sustained capacity that an individual possesses or does not possess, regardless of the context; they are the separate responsibility of the individual who needs to possess certain competencies in accordance with the set requirements, and if he/she does not have them, to take measures to acquire them, most often through professional development.

Systemic (*discourse of competence*) is based on the recognition of different types of knowledge: in addition to theoretical – knowledge for practice, there are both knowledge in practice and knowledge of practice (Cochran Smith & Fries, 2005 according to Pavlović Breneselović, 2014: 6). This discourse recognizes the profession of a preschool teacher as the ethical practice of responsible behaviour based on values, multiperspectivity, democracy, and a critical approach.

The competence of preschool teachers is the result of a continuous learning process, a process through which one’s own practice and beliefs are constantly being re-examined in relation to the changing social and educational context. Developing competence is a process that requires a systemic approach in order to support it, and it is not just the individual responsibility of preschool teachers (Ibid: 9).

² Rulebook on standards of competence for the profession of educators and its professional development, *Official Gazette of RS*, no. 88/17 and 27/18 – and other acts

The author points out that, although the goals and principles of preschool education set in the *Law on Preschool Upbringing and Education of Serbia* imply a value basis that is appropriate to the discourse of competence, many educational policy measures and educational practices are in discrepancy with this discourse. Consequently, comprehensive transformations are necessary and involve changes in the initial [undergraduate] education of preschool teachers – redefining the role of a preschool teacher from program implementer into researcher of one’s own practice, opening scientific and university centres towards practice and networking with practice, as well as transforming the kindergarten into a learning community that supports the development of the competence of a preschool teacher. When it comes to initial [undergraduate] education, the changes would take place “towards an educational program that is integrated and based on research as a process of building knowledge and understanding through consideration, examination, and review of theory and practice” (Ibid: 15).

The way preschool teachers comprehend their role as researchers of their own practice, is shown in the results of a study according to which a small number of preschool teachers used their own research to review their own practice; and the highest benefit is regarded to be the benefit for children. Preschool teachers do not see the significance of the review due to the belief that the evaluation of the practice belongs to experts and external evaluators (Krnjaja & Pavlović Breneselović, 2011).

The results of the research on the perspectives of teachers on professional development point to three controversies: equalizing professional training with training seminars, the question of the effectiveness of seminars, and the discrepancy between the assessment of the importance and the need for giving credit to certain forms of professional development (Pavlović Breneselović & Krnjaja, 2012).

By examining the quality of the practice in kindergartens from the perspective of practitioners, on a sample of 105 preschool teachers from preschool institutions in Serbia, the most important dimensions of quality are: the number of children in the group and equipment with aids and material available to children, and then the adequate size and arrangement of the room. Professional training, among 28 identified quality criteria, was ranked as eighteenth i.e. 2.8% of the respondents opted for it (Krnjaja, 2016: 24).

“The professionalism of preschool teachers is reflected in continuous learning through the problematization of one’s own practice and practice of others and in permanent upgrading of the answer to the questions like what it means to be a good preschool teacher and what a good program is” (Pavlović Breneselović & Krnjaja, 2017: 65).

It is significant that the education of students – future preschool teachers is in line with contemporary scientific knowledge and trends on which the humanistic approach to the educational process, as well as the constructivist interaction concept of learning, is based. In order to be trained for this, trainee teachers must, besides general knowledge, be well versed in the general and special methods of educational work. They need to be trained to apply modern, interactive, cooperative and other methods, workshops and organizational forms and ways of working in accordance with children's needs, opportunities, rights, and interests. Thus formed experts will understand the advantage of indirect guidance and orientation, which allow a child to develop his/her personality only in line with his/her capabilities, to find his/her own rhythm, to decide, to solve conflicts through communication, and become more independent. C. Peklaj and M. Puklek Levpušček, 2008, in the findings of their research, point out that greater emphasis should be placed on developing the skills of students in practice, which can only be achieved by larger and more consistent involvement of well-conducted pedagogical practices at all levels of the study – perhaps even at the beginning of the studies, together with demonstration classes (observation practice), and above all, with the practice of general and special didactics (methodology). It is particularly important to note that modification of the program is not sufficient for better training in practice itself.

Method

In the conducted empirical research, a descriptive method was applied. The assessment of students – future preschool teachers relating to the influence of initial [undergraduate] education on the development of their competences and their ability to perform the vocational education in a quality manner was studied. The sample consisted of 73 students of the final, third year of undergraduate studies of the Preschool Teacher Training College in Šabac, in the 2017/18 school year. The data was collected by interviewing. The survey questionnaire, compiled for the purpose of this research, contained five questions of closed and combined type and one of open type. The obtained data were processed using descriptive statistics and is represented in frequencies and percentages.

Results

The researchers were interested in the way students of the third year of vocational studies evaluated the subject-professional competences for quality performance of the vocational training, based on the data obtained from the survey on satisfaction with the acquired competences at the end of the school year of 2017/18.

Table 1: Evaluation of subject-professional competencies for quality education

No	Evaluation of professional competences	Average rating
1.	Self-assessment of subject-professional competence of teachers	4.73
2.	Self-assessment of the ability of vocational preschool teachers to solve practical problems	4.61
3.	Self-assessment of the abilities of preschool teachers to acquire more specific knowledge and skills in methodology, which correspond to contemporary living conditions	4.89
4.	Self-assessment of the ability of professional preschool teachers to think analytically and critically	4.66
5.	Self-assessment of the development of work habits among professional preschool teachers	4.73
6.	Self-assessment of the abilities of professional preschool teachers for team work	4.82
	Overall average rating	4.70

The ratings ranged from 4.61 (the ability of professional preschool teachers to solve practical problems, the ability of professional preschool teachers to think analytically and critically, the development of work habits) to 4.89 (the ability of professional preschool teachers to acquire more specific knowledge and skills from methodologies that meet modern living conditions). Students rated with the highest average grades the competencies that are of great importance for the profession of preschool teachers – the ability to acquire more specific knowledge and skills in methodologies, which correspond to contemporary living conditions and ability for team work. Based on this, it can be recommended that in future work on developing study programs and improving the pedagogical work of preschool teachers, greater attention should be paid to developing the aforementioned competencies. With somewhat lower, but still very high grades, the students evaluated: the ability of professional preschool teachers to solve practical problems, and the ability to acquire more specific knowledge and skills that meet contemporary living conditions.

When asked a question of an open type about capabilities of special competencies, several different answers were obtained, which indicate that the ability to articulate a text, acting out a play, and the like, on the stage, the artistic ability to create a scene, the ability to perform drama, presenting small dramatic forms, were found with the students to a much greater degree, as well as digital competences (82.17%), while for musical competence – playing on an instrument, was opted for by 16.43% of the respondents.

Table 2: Types of skills within students' special competences

What skills within special competencies have you acquired during your studies?	f	%
Skills to articulate the text, actor's performance on the stage, artistic ability to create a scene, etc.	20	27.39
Skills for drama play, presentation of small dramatic forms, processing of stories, games and songs into drama forms, activity games, creation of dramatic texts from uttered statements, dramatization, creation of simple forms of selected theatre pieces, puppet theatre, table theatre, theatre of shadows and others	26	35.61
Skills to use information and communication technology in upbringing and education	14	19.17
Musical competence: playing on the instrument	12	16.43
Σ	73	100

As a part of the third question, five statements relating to the professional competence of preschool teachers for specific areas were offered, and the respondents were asked to express a degree of agreement on a five-level scale.

Table 3: Attitudes of preschool teachers about the vocational training for specific areas, topics

Statement	Totally disagree	Disagree	Indecisive	Agree	Totally agree
Preschool teacher should possess appropriate knowledge and know the contents of the field of learning and teaching			2	25	46
	0	0	2.73	34.24	63.01
Preschool teacher should have the developed capacity for interdisciplinary linking of learning and teaching content; an integrated approach to learning			4	36	33
	0	0	5.47	49.31	45.20
Preschool teacher needs to know and understand the curriculum, as well as the goals that the preschool teacher should reach in a particular field		4	6	31	32
	0	5.47	8.21	42.46	43.83
Preschool teachers are expected to have knowledge of didactic materials and tools for learning and teaching certain areas of development and topics			8	42	23
	0	0	10.95	57.53	31.50
Preschool teacher needs to know the novelties in the content that are offered to children in teaching procedures			7	31	35
	0	0	9.58	42.46	47.94

The attitude of students regarding the vocational training of preschool teachers in certain areas, is represented by the fact that 97.25% of them agreed with the statement. The preschool teacher should have adequate knowledge and know the contents from the field of learning and teaching. Also, most of them (94.51) believed that a future preschool teacher needs to possess a developed capacity for interdisciplinary linking of learning and teaching content – an integrated approach to learning. When it comes to the knowledge and understanding of the curriculum by preschool teachers, as well as the goals that the students need to reach in a particular field, the answers were divided: 5.47% did not agree, 42.46% agreed and 8.21% were indecisive. The distribution of answers regarding the statement that preschool teachers are expected to have knowledge of didactic materials and tools for learning and teaching certain areas is as follows: 89.03% agrees and 10.95% is indecisive.

The next question in the survey referred to the self-assessment of students' knowledge in the area of competence – *Developing professional practice* as shown in Table 4. The ratings ranged from 4.42 (understanding of social and economic trends affecting the work of preschool institutions and requirements that are placed before the profession of preschool teachers, knowledge of the place of preschool upbringing and education in the local, national and international context, knowledge of the goals and principles of preschool upbringing and education as well as functions of preschool institutions and programs, knowledge of different procedures and techniques of planning, monitoring, documentation and evaluation in program development, knowledge for work in the context of diversity) up to 4.92 (knowledge on the use of digital technologies).

Table 4: Self-assessment of students' knowledge in the field of competence – Developing professional practice

No	Evaluation of knowledge – Developing professional practice	Average rating
1.	Knowledge about the goals and principles of preschool upbringing and education and the functions of preschool institutions and programs	4.53
2.	Knowledge about different procedures and techniques of planning, monitoring, documenting and evaluating in program development	4.71
3.	Knowledge for work in the context of diversity	4.88
4.	Knowledge of the place of preschool upbringing and education in the local, national and international context	4.60
5.	Understanding the social and economic trends affecting the work of preschool institutions and the demands placed on the profession of preschool teachers	4.42
6.	Knowledge about the use of digital technologies	4.92
	Overall average rating	4.67

The last question in the survey related to getting information from students about proposed measures to improve professional practice that would contribute to acquiring professional competencies

Table 5: Proposed measures for improvement of professional practice

No	STATEMENTS	Percentage distribution
1.	More theoretical lessons are needed	1.77%
2.	More practical lessons are needed	19.42%
3.	More professional practice is needed	16.67%
4.	It is necessary to pay more attention to training students for team work	7.20%
5.	Teachers' pedagogical skills need to be improved	5.67%
6.	It is necessary to increase the amount of teaching materials	3.43%
7.	It is necessary to reduce the amount of teaching materials	4.67%
8.	It is necessary to increase the volume of literature	2.77%
9.	It is necessary to reduce the volume of literature	4.67%
10.	It is necessary to improve the quality of literature	4.17%
11.	It is necessary to increase the engagement of teachers and associates in working with students	3.23%
12.	It is necessary to reduce the number of students	4.50%
13.	It is necessary to pay more attention to the professionalism of preschool teachers – mentors and teachers in charge of professional practice	11.50%
14.	It is necessary to improve the students' abilities to create a positive pedagogical climate in the realization of activities in professional practice	9.33%
	Total number of proposed improvement measures:	140

As noted, the priority proposed measures are: more practical teaching (19.42%), more professional practice (16.67%), paying more attention to professionalism of preschool teachers – mentors and teachers in charge of professional practice (11.50%), and necessity to improve students' abilities creating a positive pedagogical climate in the realization of activities during professional practice (9.33%).

Discussion

The results of the research showed that, on a sample of 73 students of the third year of undergraduate vocational studies, evaluated with the highest average grades competencies that are highly significant for the profession of preschool teachers – the abilities to acquire more specific knowledge and skills from the methodologies that meet modern living conditions, and an ability for team work.

A positive attitude about the importance of possessing knowledge, knowledge of content in the field of learning and teaching scored a high percentage among students (97.52%). Also, most of them (94.51) believed that a future preschool teacher needs to have a developed capacity for the interdisciplinary linking of learning content and teaching, and an integrated approach to learning.

If we analyse the obtained research findings regarding the ability of special competencies of students acquired during the course of the study, it can be noted that the abilities of artistic narration of a text, the acting of a play and the like, on the stage, the artistic ability to create a stage, ability to perform drama, presenting small dramatic forms, were favoured by students in much greater scale, as well as digital competences (84%), while for musical competence – playing an instrument, was opted for by 16% of respondents.

Conclusion

In accordance with the analysis of the self-assessment of professional competencies of students in this paper, we can conclude that the need for quality organization and the realization of professional practices is not only required from the perspective of vocational colleges for training of preschool teachers, which need to educate and prepare them for work in a preschool institution. This need is also reflected among the students themselves, who recognized the importance of professional practice for improving professional competencies and their future professional development. Further improvement of students' training for work in preschool institutions is also necessary. Based on the obtained results, according to the opinion of students, it is recommendable to focus on: greater representation of professional practice during the course of studies, connection of methods in professional practice with work in other course subjects, professionalism of preschool teachers – mentors and teachers, and pedagogical climate in which activities are realized. The obtained results show the significance of students' assessments and opinions on the role of professional practice in improving competencies in the sense of their quality training for the future profession of competent preschool teachers.

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