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## **THE COMPARISON OF PROFESSIONAL SELF-PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN PRESCHOOL AND PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN CROATIA**

### **Abstract**

Starting from the point of view of how the articulation and examination of personal values, beliefs and attitudes can stimulate the process of better understanding and the development of professionalism as well as the development of professional identity of preschool and primary school teachers, the main aim of this study was to explore the self-perceptions of primary school and preschool teachers about three characteristics that characterize the most quality teacher. The study included 140 teachers and 67 preschool teachers from the Istria and Primorsko-goranska County and 73 primary school teachers from the Primorsko-goranska County. Preschool teachers emphasize creativity, empathy and flexibility as the three most important characteristics of quality teachers, while primary school teachers mention knowledge and competencies for working with children, creativity and fairness. The study showed the most significant self-perceived desirable professional and personal characteristics of these two samples, and can serve as a solid ground for creating new university study programs or lifelong learning programs.

*Keywords:* teacher characteristics, self-perceptions, professional identity, professional competences, preschool teacher, primary school teacher

### **Introduction**

Lately there has been a qualitative turn in the study of necessary knowledge and competencies that preschool and primary school teachers<sup>2</sup> are required to have in order to successfully act in a professional manner now and in the future in the educational practice. Efforts which lead to redefining of the traditional educational perspectives on the roles of professional preschool and primary school teachers are apparent (Mulc, 2013).

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<sup>2</sup> Although in the scientific literature, the term “teacher” is used for all persons responsible for the education of students by the end of secondary education, regardless if it refers to preschool, primary or secondary education, the Croatian tradition deviates from this definition. The term “preschool teacher” serves as a guideline for those who work in the early and preschool education (ISCED, level 0). The term teacher usually serves as a guideline for those who work in the first four grades of primary school (primary school teacher) (ISCED, level 1), and in the legislative regulations for those who work in primary school (ISCED, levels 1 and 2).

In many papers dealing with the development of their competencies, challenges and requirements to which they must respond today, the starting point is the notion that in order to successfully pursue the professional activity merely the acquired competences are not sufficient, but also the reflection of their professional mission and identity, self-examination of their own experiences, beliefs, values and practices (Tatalović Vorkapić, Vujičić & Čepić, 2014). The professional identity of teachers (slightly less of preschool teachers) has in the last decade been the subject of many studies (Dalli, 2008; Urban, 2008; Miller & Cable, 2008; Thomas & Beauchamp, 2011).

With the Croatian accession to the EU, new possibilities for the modernization of the system of the continuing professional training of educational personnel are opening up in accordance with the recommendations of key documents and initiatives of the EU. Some of the changes in the Croatian educational system are the *National Curriculum Framework for pre-school education, general compulsory and secondary education* (2010), amendments to the Primary and secondary school education Act (2012), and the adoption of the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act (2013). Agency for Education, responsible for the professional development of educational workers at all levels of general education, outlined the long-term development of their development with the Strategy for Professional Education of the Agency for Education 2014-2020. With the Strategy guidelines for the development and establish a framework of activities have been established aimed at improving the quality of the vocational training in order to develop competence of the educational staff and improve the learning outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

The preschool teacher studies have experienced a transformation from three-year vocational studies into university undergraduate studies followed by a possible continuation of the initial education at the graduate university studies of early and pre-school education (EPE). The first generation of students was enrolled at the Faculty of Teacher Education in the university graduate studies of the Early and Pre-school Education. In this way, the University of Rijeka was the first university in Croatia to enable university education for preschool teachers (3 +2), according to the projection of the development of educational programs for preschool teachers distributed in all three cycles of higher education so as to ensure their place in the European higher education, and to increase opportunities for advancement and mobility within the profession.

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<sup>3</sup> The Strategy is a developing document which was created on the basis of the *Strategy for professional training of the educational staff (2009-2013)* and the *Analysis of the existing system for the professional training of the educational AE staff and the assessment of the need for professional development of educational workers* within the framework of the project "Improving the quality of professional development of educational workers", which is performed within the framework of the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance (IPA) component IV - Human Resources Development, and funded by the European Union from 2012 to 2014, as part of the broader efforts to strengthen and develop the educational system in Croatia.

## **Aim, Problems and Hypothesis of the Study**

The main aim of this study was to explore self-perceptions of preschool teachers and primary school teachers about three characteristics that present the most quality teacher. Within this aim, three basic problems were defined: a) to determine three most important characteristics that make a good primary school teacher and preschool teachers in Croatia; b) to analyse their relationship with subjects' age and work experience; and c) to compare self-perception between primary school teachers and preschool teachers. Based on previous research studies, it was expected to find rather similar self-perceptions between those two samples with the exception considering the evaluations tasks.

## **Methods**

### **Subjects**

Overall, one hundred and forty teachers participated in this study, all females, average age  $M=37.41$  ( $SD=10.57$ , ranged from 21-64 years) with average work experience  $M=12.91$  years ( $SD=11.23$ , ranged from six months to 42 years). Sixty-seven of them were preschool teachers, all females, with average age  $M=30.82$  ( $SD=6.71$ ) within the range from 21 to 49 years. They reported about their average work experience  $M=6.57$  ( $SD=7.09$ ) within the range from six months to thirty years of working with preschool children. They were all employed and working in various kindergartens from Istarska and Primorsko-goranska county. Besides, this sample included seventy-three teachers. They were all females, working in different primary schools in Primorsko-goranska County. Their average age was  $M=43.46$  years ( $SD=9.85$ ) within the range from 26 to 64 years. In addition, they reported about their average work experience  $M=18.73$  ( $SD=11.21$ ) ranged from six months to forty-two years of working with schoolchildren.

### **Measuring instrument**

To determine three main characteristics of the most quality preschool teacher, a measuring instrument that was created for the purposes of this study was applied. It consisted of general questions about their age and work experience, and one specific question: *"Please, could you be so kind and write down three most important characteristics of the most quality primary school/preschool teacher, in your own opinion. Also, range these three characteristics by their importance level with 1 as the most important characteristic."*

### **Procedure**

The subsample of preschool teachers was asked to participate in this study during their engagement within the Life-long course at the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Rijeka. They all agreed to participate voluntarily in this study. In addition, their participation in this study was completely anonymous and collected data privacy was guaranteed. The subsample of primary school teachers consisted of teachers who have been working in randomly selected primary schools in the Primorsko-goranska County. Same as preschool teachers, they voluntarily and anonymously participated in this research. In each case, administering the questionnaire took approximately five minutes and after that, all participants were

promised they would be informed about the results. SPSS 18.0 was used to perform necessary statistical analysis.

## Results and discussion

According to the first problem of this research, three most significant professional properties of preschool and primary school teachers have been determined. Preschool teachers pointed out that the three most important characteristics of a good and quality preschool teacher are:

- creativity (M=1.46, SD=1.31);
- empathy (M=1.16, SD=1.20);
- and flexibility (M=1.01, SD=0.96).

These three characteristics are followed by:

- a) openness to novel and different situations (M=0.52, SD=0.98);
- b) ability of being a partner with preschoolers (M=0.51, SD=0.96);
- c) having a special sensibility to work with preschool children (M=0.42, SD=0.86);
- d) reflectiveness (M=0.34, SD=0.86);
- e) consequent (M=0.33, SD=0.91);
- f) communicative (M=0.31, SD=0.84); and
- g) cheerful (M=0.31, SD=0.86).

Very small number of them also emphasized characteristics such as: being observer (M=0.12, SD=0.48), to have knowledge and competencies for working with preschool children (M=0.12, SD=0.51), being an preschool teacher to children means being a learner too (M=0.10, SD=0.39), to be a role model for children (M=0.09, SD=0.51), being a patient person (M=0.09, SD=0.45), being curious (M=0.06, SD=0.38), being motivated and being able to motivate children (M=0.03, SD=0.17) and being reliable (M=0.03, SD=0.24). As for the second research problem, nonparametric correlation analysis showed a significant relationship between empathy and age ( $r_{ho}=-.42$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and working experience ( $r_{ho}=-.43$ ,  $p=.001$ ), same as between flexibility and age ( $r_{ho}=-.32$ ,  $p=.01$ ) and working experience ( $r_{ho}=-.27$ ,  $p=.03$ ). In other words, the importance of empathy and flexibility as professional characteristics were evaluated as the more important professional characteristic significantly decreases with preschool teachers' age and working experience. Younger and less experienced preschool teachers find empathy and flexibility more important than older and more experienced colleagues. No significant correlation has been determined between age and working experience and the importance of creativity. The results implied that it is crucial to create subjects and workshops within existing university study programs that develop and promote empathy in preschool teachers, not only because of the results in this study. Latest study on significant empathy decline, especially fantasy dimension among future preschool teachers showed that existing study programs failed not only in increasing the fantasy abilities in students, but in maintaining their baselines, what should be modified (Tatalović Vorkapić & Ružić, 2013).

In difference to preschool teachers, teachers reported that the three most important characteristics of quality teacher are: to have knowledge and competencies for working with preschool children (M=0.74, SD=0.97), creativity (M=0.68, SD=1.08) and fairness (M=0.51, SD=0.97). Furthermore, teachers

emphasized the importance of some other properties such as: empathy ( $M=0.33$ ,  $SD=0.80$ ), consequent ( $M=0.26$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ), being a patient person ( $M=0.26$ ,  $SD=0.78$ ), communicative ( $M=0.21$ ,  $SD=0.64$ ), love toward children ( $M=0.16$ ,  $SD=0.47$ ), skilful ( $M=0.15$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ), love toward a job ( $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ), planning classroom activities and tasks ( $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=0.61$ ), headiness ( $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=0.59$ ), flexibility ( $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=0.56$ ), being a teacher to children means being a learner too ( $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=0.59$ ), eloquent ( $M=0.12$ ,  $SD=0.60$ ), openness to novel and different situations ( $M=0.11$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ), to have warmth ( $M=0.11$ ,  $SD=0.39$ ), and humour ( $M=0.11$ ,  $SD=0.54$ ). Very small number of teachers mentioned that following characteristics are important as well: objectivity ( $M=0.10$ ,  $SD=0.48$ ), diligence ( $M=0.10$ ,  $SD=0.50$ ), organizer ( $M=0.08$ ,  $SD=0.43$ ), sincerity ( $M=0.08$ ,  $SD=0.43$ ), being motivated and being able to motivate children ( $M=0.07$ ,  $SD=0.42$ ), optimism ( $M=0.07$ ,  $SD=0.42$ ), cheerful ( $M=0.05$ ,  $SD=0.33$ ), exactness ( $M=0.05$ ,  $SD=0.37$ ), to be able to centralize ( $M=0.04$ ,  $SD=0.35$ ), having a special sensibility to work with primary school children ( $M=0.04$ ,  $SD=0.35$ ), to have authority ( $M=0.04$ ,  $SD=0.35$ ), agreeableness ( $M=0.04$ ,  $SD=0.35$ ), sociability ( $M=0.04$ ,  $SD=0.26$ ), curiosity ( $M=0.03$ ,  $SD=0.23$ ). The ability of being a partner with children, reflectiveness, to be a role model for children, being observer and being reliable are not reported by teachers as the important characteristics, what was not the case with preschool teachers. This is very interesting, since being reflective presents a characteristic that is very important during the work analysis. In addition, no teachers perceived their individuality as an important role model for primary school children during their work with them. On the other hand, characteristics such as ability for planning, headiness, skilfulness, diligence and other, were not present within self-perception of preschool teachers, which is interesting too. Finally, no significant correlations were determined between age, working experience and the three most important characteristics evaluated by teachers.

Considering the main similarities of determined findings, both samples emphasized the creativity as one of the three most important characteristics among preschool teachers. Nevertheless, with the aim of answering the third study problem about possible significant differences between the frequencies of three the most chosen characteristics by preschool and primary school teachers, the Chi-square test was used. Preschool teachers pointed out significantly higher importance of creativity ( $\chi^2=19.47$ ,  $p=.001$ ), empathy ( $\chi^2=24.65$ ,  $df=1,3$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and flexibility ( $\chi^2=51.78$ ,  $df=1,3$ ,  $p=.001$ ) than teachers. Furthermore, these two samples showed significantly different perception of the other two main characteristics: to be fair ( $\chi^2=26.51$ ,  $p=.001$ ) and to have knowledge ( $\chi^2=18.96$ ,  $p=.001$ ). In other words, teachers emphasized significantly higher importance of being fair and having knowledge than preschool teachers, as it was expected.

The main contribution of this study is pointing out the fact that self-perception of the existing and professionally expected and needed personal characteristics are very important, and could be dominant within the quality of preschool and primary school teachers' work. Therefore, they should be examined, so the determined findings could serve as a solid ground for creating programs (within university study programs or lifelong learning programs) that could help preschool teachers develop exactly those characteristics that are crucial in their work. Study limitation

considering the small number of participants and short measuring instrument are do not permit the drawing of some more general conclusions.

## Conclusion

Given the main focus of this study, both in primary school teachers and preschool teachers creativity was established as being one of three most important characteristics. This finding can be explained by the fact that creativity in the preschool environment is important due to the creation of space and encouragement of the overall development of the child, while in the school environment creativity is important because of innovations in the didactic-methodological approaches to the educational process (Čepić, Tatalović Vorkapić & Svetić, 2014). Preschool teachers emphasize creativity, empathy and flexibility as the three most important characteristics of quality teachers, while primary school teachers mention knowledge and competencies for working with children, creativity and fairness. Openness to novel and different situations and ability of being a partner with preschoolers are immediately in the fourth and fifth place among preschool teachers, and empathy, consequent being a patient person are in fourth and fifth place among primary school teachers. Furthermore, a statistically significant correlation between age and working experience has been detected among preschool teachers and with empathy and flexibility. Younger and less experienced preschool teachers find empathy and flexibility more important than older and more experienced colleagues. It is possible that younger preschool teachers due to less working experience feel more uncertain and pressured, and therefore attach greater importance to empathy and flexibility than the older and more experienced colleagues.

Comparing self-perception between preschool teachers and primary school teachers about possible significant differences between the frequencies of the three most chosen characteristics, it was found that preschool teachers attach significantly more importance to creativity, empathy and flexibility than primary school teachers. Furthermore, these two samples showed significantly different perception of the two other main characteristics: to be fair and to have knowledge. Primary school teachers emphasized significantly more the importance of being fair and having knowledge than preschool teachers. It could be said that the results of this study support the assumption that among teachers there still exists the belief that their fundamental role is in the transmission of knowledge rather than encouraging learning. These very beliefs are in the base of the two approaches to teaching - that aimed at the teachers and content as opposed to the modern approach aimed at the students. In the contemporary educational culture it is expected of the teachers to change the roles, from the role of an authority that transmits information and knowledge to the facilitator who allows learners to discover and construct knowledge, but it is not an easy process. It can also be assumed that teachers emphasize fairness as an important characteristic of a quality teacher because fairness is often associated with evaluating and assessing students as an integral and important part of the teacher's work.

All these issues require further research of the professional identity of preschool and primary school teachers. The conducted research is a good starting point for thinking about a more comprehensive approach to these issues perhaps in combination with qualitative research methods. Answers to these questions have

significant practical implications because the quality of education, as pointed out by Hoyle (2008), is fundamentally in the hands of teachers and therefore the professionalization and professional development of teachers is central to improving education. Focusing on reflective capabilities of ourselves, the environment and the outcomes of educational processes, the process of better understanding and development of professionalism as well as the development of the professional identity can be stimulated. It is therefore of utmost importance to create conditions for raising awareness and challenging the perception of preschool and primary school teachers on how they see themselves professionally, on competencies that they believe should be improved, and all the factors that assist them, i.e. that do not assist them.

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