

INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COMPETENCE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS - THE CONDITIONS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The initial education of preschool educators, their general and professional competencies, needed for their continuing professional developments are very important and actual matters. These matters have always attracted the professional and scientific community, especially today, with efforts to create a unique and modern system of education of teachers in accordance with the Bologna process (ECTS).

In this the paper we present the results of a descriptive analysis of curricula for preschool teacher education, which present the results of the analysis of multiple parameters, that are fundamental in building a base concept for preschool teacher education; we also analysed competencies that educators acquire during initial education in different faculties of the same country?, but different geographical areas in which specific kind of differences were observed.

We present the results of a survey conducted with 42 student teachers regarding the perceived advantages and disadvantages during their initial education and their capacity for a successful start in their career as preschool teachers. We also present results based on interviews with fifteen preschool teachers about their professional development like an employer – working conditions, needs and opportunities.

This paper is an attempt to elucidate some aspects of the problem with preschool teacher education and to create opportunities for creating a consistent overall structure of their initial education and continuing professional development.

Keywords: preschool teacher education, competencies, professional development

“High quality teacher – always prepared for learning – sine qua non, is facing with dynamic complexity, as a key to creating citizens which can govern their own lives and be connected with the others around in a constantly changing world. There is no

replacement for good teachers... We can't have society who learns, without teachers – a profession that learns.”

Fullan, 1993

Setting high standards in the education, emphasizing the creativity, innovation, nurturing of multiethnicity, multiculturalism, application of contemporary educational technology, are just some of the commitments for achieving higher quality in the educational sphere in our country. Tendencies for quality education, education that will be characterized with dynamic and flexible structure, education that will enable mobility of the teacher staff, students, education that will be moving alongside contemporary science, technical, and technological achievements, education for all, is obligation for all affected parties – the government, the ministry of education, BRO, universities, faculties, schools, teachers, students, pupils.

There is a well-known saying of Socrates: “If Athens would have had shoemakers, Athenians would walk barefoot, but if Athens would have had teachers, there would be no Athens.” Thus, it is necessary to work on improvement of the quality of educational system, perceived as prerequisite to increasing productivity and quality of production.

But the implementation of the concept of contemporary quality education, implies quality, educated teaching staff, staff that will work constantly on its own professional development, staff directed towards permanent education, lifelong learning.

In that direction we asked ourselves the question what we mean under the term quality education, quality educated teaching staff?

Under the term quality in education we will mean quality teaching (knowledge, clear aims and tasks, appropriate teaching methods, constant feedback, positive relations), quality teaching, quality learning – the pupils are progressing well, perseverance, reaction to the given task, giving value of the own self work, the pupils are helping each other; we will mean a term that is not static, but it is changing during the social and scientific development.

Quality education is considered education that leads towards satisfying the educational (developmental) needs of its users, education that is measured according the users. There are number of factors that have influence on it: environment, tradition, conditions in which the process takes place, expert competence of the teachers.

Tendencies for realization of quality education can be exercised in dependence of the quality of the work of one of the main agents in the educational process – the teacher.

The quality of the work, the quality of the teachers teaching will greatly depend on:

- the degree and quality of his/hers theoretical and practical training on the faculties that produce teaching staff, above all Pedagogical faculties, Faculty for educational sciences, which educate staff specially for preschool education and both cycles of primary nine-year education, and upgrades throughout whole working age;
- the representation of the pedagogical-psychological and teaching methods disciplines, especially the performance of the pedagogical, didactic-methodical practice in preschool institutions, primary schools; in the last few years the number of classes

predicted for realization of the pedagogical practice (clinical, pedagogical, methodical) is growing;

- the assured control of quality in education (in the preschool institutions, primary and secondary schools, a so called administrative control is emphasized, especially the respect of the legislation regulation and financial and material working of the schools, the expert-pedagogical aspect is given very little attention);
- the presence of programs for constant professional development and improvement of the teaching staff.

The expert, pedagogical and teaching methods competence of the teachers is mostly done at faculties, and later upgraded in the existing centers in Universities, special centers for training and professional development.

Taking into account that on the Pedagogical faculties mainly is educated teaching staff that goes into preschool and primary education, more precisely in the first and second cycle of basic nine-year education, and surely according with the recommendations of the European Parliament and Council (2006) we decided to conduct small, micro research in order to determine if there are identical or different programs for initial training of the teaching staff in the region of former Yugoslavia, that would later engage in the education of the youngest, in preschool institutions, their similarities and differences; what are the key competences identified at different faculties which the teaching staff for preschool education should possess, whether at faculties exist special centers that take care of the professional development of the teachers, for their career development? Also, we asked ourselves the questions if there are differences in opinions and attitudes of students, future educators, about positive and negative sides considering their training for successful start in employment, in the direction of what should we do as Faculties in aspect of our teaching plans and programs, where should we direct our interventions?; what are the attitude and opinions of the employed teachers about the possibilities of their professional development, where and in what way it is realized, suggestions and improvement directions etc.

Answers of asked questions were acquired through analysis of the teaching plans and programs in some of the faculties of education for staff for preschool education, questioning the students – future teachers, by interviewing employed teaching staff in the children institutions. Descriptive design was used.

More specifically, analyzed were the teaching programs for preschool education at the teaching faculties in Skopje, Bitola, teaching program in preschool education at the Faculty for Educational Sciences in Shtip, teaching programs for preschool education at the Pedagogical Faculty in Ljubljana and the Teaching faculty in Vranje. The example was convenient. The technique content analysis was used and the instrument was records document.

Also, it was realized questioning of the students – future teachers from the Faculty of Educational Sciences in Shtip, students from third, fourth year, whose number was 42, with the application of the instrument questionnaire, as were interviewed teachers from four preschool institutions from the municipality of Shtip, Sv. Nikole, more precisely nine teachers about the possibilities for their continuous professional development, with the application of the instrument tied interview protocol. The example for interviewing and questioning was convenient.

Research results

Results from analysis of the study programs

Study programs for education of teaching staff for preschool education were analyzed through few parameters. Analysis showed the following:

1. **Analyzed study programs for preschool education** are innovated according to Bologna Declaration, National programs for development of education in a certain period, Programs for work with children from preschool age, National programs for primary school education, and the needs of the service users for the children of preschool age.
2. **Timespan of the studies** is four years, with exception of the study program at the Pedagogical Faculty in Ljubljana where it is three years, the students gain 240, (180) ECTS.
3. **Program structure** – the existence of mandatory and elective subjects.
There are differences in the different programs in aspect of the ratio of mandatory and elective subjects.
 - **Faculty of Educational Sciences** – 39 subjects – 60% mandatory, 30% faculty elective subjects, 10% university elective subjects;
 - **Teaching Faculty in Vranje** – academic general education 17.08%, theoretical methodological 19.17%, scientific-expert, arts-expert 30% and expert applicative 33.75%;
 - **Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje** – 2835 classes in the mandatory subjects (including practical classes) and 720 classes elective subjects;
 - **Pedagogical Faculty in Bitola** – 40 subjects out of which 28 mandatory and 12 elective subjects;
 - **Pedagogical Faculty in Ljubljana** consists of four groups of subjects: mandatory, expert mandatory, elective, expert elective.
4. **Pedagogical praxis** – pedagogical praxis is mandatory and in some study programs (Ljubljana, Skopje) exists as a mandatory subject, and in others is incorporated in the mandatory subjects. In all programs as a mandatory subject exists pedagogical internship.
5. **Outcomes from learning.** In most of the study programs the term competences is used as something that the teachers should gain after the end of the studies, with the exception of the Faculty for Educational Sciences where they are identified as descriptors that are prepared according Blum's taxonomy (knowledge and understanding, capability for evaluation, application of knowledge and understanding, communication skills, learning skills).

In all other study programs there are common-educational competences, subject specific competences which the future teacher should possess. Most common identified are: general competences, determined as *cognitive-academic* (can think analytical-syntactical and solve problem creatively); *social* (can cooperate, do teamwork and exchange experiences); *personal* (possess skill for (self-)organizing, planning, valuing, initiative); application (possess information literacy, can use knowledge in praxis

flexible); *general* (possess attitude that every child has a right to education; possess attitude that every child is different than the others and learns according to its individual abilities and capabilities); *subject specific competences* (can critically choose and apply contemporary pedagogical ideas and theories according the educational needs; is familiar with different preschool educational program models and can choose them and use them according the environmental and cultural value systems;)

We can conclude that in the analyzed study programs there are no big differences in aspect of structural components of study programs, as prominent differences in aspect of competences that the future teacher should possess, and which arise from the intentions for education of European contemporary teacher.

Questioning results

The purpose of the questioning was to test the opinions and attitudes of the students about the strong and weak sides of their initial training, as identify recommendations for improvement of their initial education. It was tested the opinion of 42 students from third and fourth year at the Faculty for Educational Sciences in Shtip. We present the results:

- the desire to be a teacher, to work with children is the basic reason for the enrollment at the study program for preschool education;
- during the initial training they have opportunities to expand their general knowledge from various areas;
- they are satisfied from the relation of the teaching staff towards them;
- opportunities for inclusion in certain project activities, especially projects that refer to strengthening of their capabilities for work in multiethnic classrooms, gives them opportunity for change in their attitude and stereotypes towards members of certain ethic communities;
- praxis (pedagogical, clinical, methodical) offers them a possibility to get directly familiar with the work in the preschool institution;
- in aspect of their competences for work in preschool institution, the status of employed teachers, almost all of the students stated that they can involve without any problems and work with the children from preschool age. Still, they hope for the help and support of the elderly, experienced colleagues.

What the students are missing throughout the initial training refers to:

- more practice in the preschool institution, their involvement in all the activities in the kindergarten, especially the way the pedagogical documentation is prepared;
- more cross-curriculum activities related to their future job;
- more elective subjects in the study programs at their faculties which will allow the future teachers to get to know and to study more interactive strategies;
- organizing additional training related to the novelty, innovation in the preschool educational system;
- sharing practices with students/teachers from other countries;

Interview results

In the research teachers were interviewed from four preschool institutions in the municipality of Shtip. The purpose of the interview was to test opinions of the teachers from preschool institutions about the possibilities for their professional development, their improvement. Almost all teachers agreed on the following:

- everything is left to individual initiative;
- there is insufficient material support in the preschool institution for professional development of the teacher;
- there is no defined system for training, often the initiative is left to just a few persons in the school;
- insufficient dissemination of information after completing certain trainings, seminars, among the teacher colleagues;
- According with this attitudes are their proposals to:
- organizing more trainings, debates on different topics, above all innovations that refer to the improvement in the area of preschool education;
- more complete coverage of all teachers with trainings;
- exchange experiences with colleagues from other countries;
- bigger cooperation with the faculties, especially with the special centers for training, career centers with which they will cooperate on the plan of their professional development;

Of course to achieve this success it is necessary an engagement of educators from teaching faculties, members of social community, in the change of the style of teaching, applications of various strategies, training the younger staff for following the contemporary streams of profession, training for their lifelong learning.

Conclusion

The theoretical analysis of the problem with the initial training of the teaching staff, as the realized research lead us to following conclusions:

- Changes in the teaching programs and programs at faculties in the sense of their enrichment with greater number of elective subjects;
- increasing of the number of classes intended for the pedagogical practice in the preschool institutions;
- greater engagement of the centers for career development – implementation and realization of greater higher number of trainings directed towards improvement of the professional development of the teachers;
- greater involvement of the teaching staff from the faculties for education of teachers in the activities, education of the employees in the children institutions;
- Working on the plan for preparation of legislative framework and strategy for professional development of the preschool teacher in our country.

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Brief bio

Snezana Jovanova-Mitkovska was born in Shtip. She works at Faculty of educational sciences at University Goce Delchev in Shtip. Her research interest is focused on Methodology of pedagogical research; Statistics; Teaching methods of educational work in nature and society environment; Teaching methods in math; New contemporary strategies and models of educational work; Lifelong education/professional development.

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