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## **TEACHER COMPETENCES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRIMARY EDUCATION**

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This paper starts by identifying multiple understandings of the notion ‘competence’, discusses three approaches to competence (behavioural, holistic and constructivist) and provides a review of contemporary theoretical considerations about early childhood and primary teacher competence. The paper then focuses on contemporary understandings of childhood and children and discusses teacher competences in light of these understandings, based on results from a research conducted about children’s perspective of their reality in a preschool institution. Research results, indicating that children have very little opportunity for decision-making in preschool suggest that it is necessary to consider which teacher competences allow for both teachers and children to exercise their autonomy and actively participate in preschool and primary school. It is suggested that teachers’ development of reflexive and research competences could provide a way towards bridging the gap between teachers’ and children’s perspectives of preschool/primary school reality.

**Keywords:** competence, teachers, contemporary understandings of childhood and children

## **ПЕДАГОГІЧНІ КОМПЕТЕНЦІЇ ФАХІВЦІВ У РОБОТІ З ДІТЬМИ РАННЬОГО ВІКУ ТА ВЧИТЕЛІВ ПОЧАТКОВОЇ ШКОЛИ**

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У роботі обговорення починається з визначення багатозначного поняття «компетенція», розглядаються три підходи до компетенції: біхевіористський, холистичний та конструктивістський. Дається огляд сучасних теоретичних поглядів, що стосуються компетенції як дітей дошкільного й молодшого шкільного віку, так і вихователів дошкільних закладів, а також учителів молодших класів. Дослідження також робить акцент на сучасному розумінні дитинства й дітей та розглядає

компетенції вчителя у світлі цих значень, засновуючись на результатах дослідження, що з'ясувало погляди дітей на їх перебування в дошкільному закладі. Результати досліджень, які показують, що в дітей у дошкільному віці мало можливостей для прийняття рішень, передбачають, що необхідно виважено обирати компетенцію вчителя, яка дозволяє як учителю, так і дітям проявляти/використовувати свою незалежність і активно брати участь у житті як дошкільного закладу, так і початкової школи. Передбачається, що розвиток рефлексивної й дослідницької компетенції вчителів може налагодити розуміння між дитячими й учительськими поглядами на перебування в дошкільних закладах і молодшій школі.

**Ключові слова:** компетенція, учителі, сучасне розуміння дитинства й дітей.

## **ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКИЕ КОМПЕТЕНЦИИ СПЕЦИАЛИСТОВ ПО РАБОТЕ С ДЕТЬМИ РАННЕГО ВОЗРАСТА И УЧИТЕЛЕЙ НАЧАЛЬНОЙ ШКОЛЫ**

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В данной работе обсуждение начинается с определения многозначного понятия «компетенция», рассматриваются три подхода к компетенции: бихевиористский, холистический и конструктивистский. Дается обзор современных теоретических взглядов, касающихся компетенции как детей дошкольного и младшего школьного возраста, так и воспитателей дошкольных учреждений, а также учителей младших классов. Данное исследование также делает акцент на современном понимании детства и детей и рассматривает компетенции учителя в свете этих значений, основываясь на результатах исследования, выясняющего взгляды детей на их пребывание в дошкольном заведении. Результаты исследования, показывающие, что у детей в дошкольном возрасте мало возможностей для принятия решений, предполагают, что необходимо обдуманно выбирать компетенцию учителя, позволяющую как учителю, так и детям проявлять/использовать свою независимость и активно участвовать в жизни как дошкольного заведения, так и начальной школы. Предполагается, что развитие рефлексивной и исследовательской компетенции учителей может наладить понимание между детскими и учительскими взглядами на пребывание в дошкольных заведениях и младшей школе.

**Ключевые слова:** компетенция, учителя, современное понимание детства и детей.

### **Introduction**

The twenty first century, marked by globalization and fast societal changes, contemporary notions of education within institutionalized context and contemporary understandings of childhood and children call for a reconceptualization of teacher

roles within the educational process, or, more specifically, call for a reconceptualization of competences of the contemporary teacher. Teacher competence is considered a prerequisite of early childhood education quality, often considered in the sense of visible outcomes and school-readiness. However, if we consider early childhood education quality in the sense of quality as an attribute of the educational process, i.e. interaction between adults and children, then teacher competences need to be reconsidered in light of this *processual* dimension of quality.

This paper starts by identifying multiple understandings of the notion *competence*, discusses three approaches to competence and provides a review of contemporary theoretical considerations about early childhood and primary teacher competence. It further provides a short introduction into contemporary understandings of childhood and children in social sciences and then discusses teacher competence in light of those understandings. This is exemplified by a research about children's reality in early childhood education institutions.

### **Defining competence<sup>1</sup>**

Recently, numerous authors dealing with competence claim that the changing society requires more of professionals than just factual knowledge. It is required of them to be able to operate in complex environments, characterized by “ill-defined problems, contradictory information, informal collaboration, and abstract, dynamic and highly integrated processes” [30, p. 75]. Mastering complex situations is associated with the concept of competence because it is assumed that it surpasses knowledge and skills and explains how they are effectively applied in a specific context [30]. However, this is just one of numerous understandings of the notion *competence* [1; 11; 14; 15; 18; 22]. For example, Westera [30] claims that the concept of competence is used in different ways and its current meaning is based on common sense and ordinary language use rather than an agreed definition. “The competence concept is quite troublesome, and it is argued that the term has no significance beyond that which is associated with the term 'skills'” [30, p. 75].

On the other hand, Weinert [29, p. 34], after reviewing various theoretical considerations of the notion *competence*, provides a definition of competence as “cognitive fitness for a particular class of tasks” or as “a roughly specialized system of abilities, proficiencies, or individual dispositions to learn something successfully, to do something successfully, or to reach a specific goal”. Jurčić [14] made a similar review of definitions of teacher competence and concluded that teacher competence

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<sup>1</sup> Review of literature indicated that the terms competence and competency were used interchangeably, although there have been attempts to make a distinction between them (cf. Teodorescu, 2006).

is the expertise recognized by those who work together, based on knowledge, abilities and skills.

### **Approaches to competence**

The competency approach to human capital influenced how competences are considered in the field of education. Babić [1] identifies three approaches to competence: behavioural, holistic and constructivist.

The behavioural approach is characterized by the usage of visible criteria for determining competences, for example, teacher behaviour in relation to student achievement. However, this approach has been much criticised, because teachers need more than just an ability to use a particular teaching technique; they need knowledge and comprehension of the specific historical, political, and economic context of the educational process, which might “not necessarily manifest itself in an observable, immediately assessable way” [18, p. 66; 9; 10].

The holistic approach to competence is defined as a unity of interrelated knowledge, attitudes, skills and values in the context of performing a certain task [1; 9; 28]. It surpasses a “mere listing of tasks (what is done in the job), by adding the two holistic dimensions: the practitioner’s attributes (what is brought to the doing of the job) and the characteristics of the context, or ‘situatedness’ (where the job is done)” [9, p. 6]. Within this approach, competences represent a potential for behaviour and not behaviour itself.

The third, constructivist approach to competence implies a construction of competence in reciprocal relations with “meaningful others”. Choo Goh et al. [5] emphasize that within this approach, the perspectives of all stakeholders of the educational process should be taken into consideration. This approach opposes the “decontextualized quest for certainty through the detached and objective application of universal and timeless criteria” [8, p. 104] and better suits contemporary deliberations about competence, as part of an emancipatory practice in which knowledge is produced, rather than reflected. Advocators of this approach claim that competence should be researched within the qualitative approach to research, especially using phenomenographic methods.

### **Teacher competences — contemporary considerations**

Competences have become a frequent topic in early childhood and primary education literature. Authors assert that change, as one of the characteristics of postmodernity calls for a reconceptualization of the competences needed for the complex educational field. This is especially emphasized in literature concerning early childhood education and primary education as these levels are increasingly burdened with the pressure of achieving visible and measurable outcomes, in the

sense of early attainment, perhaps at the expense of children's socio-emotional development and at the expense of acknowledging each child's individuality.

Different authors provide different categorizations of teacher competencies. Jurčić [14] differentiates between personal, cognitive, subject-related, communicational, reflexive, social, emotional, intercultural and developmental competencies. Selvi [23] extracts nine dimensions within the general frame of teacher competences: field competences, research competences, curriculum competences, lifelong learning competences, social-cultural competences, emotional competences, communication competences, information and communication technologies competences (ICT) and environmental competences. She emphasizes the importance of considering teacher competences because they affect teacher values, behaviour, goals and practice, but also support their professional development. Similarly, Huntly [10] and Sandberg et al. [22] indicate that examining teacher performance is not enough in competence research. It is also important to capture their beliefs and conceptualizations of competence. Stričević [26] confirms this and states that when it comes to competences, teacher's knowledge and skills are as equally important as his/her implicit theories about children, themselves as teachers, and their roles as teachers. Teacher's self-confidence is based on knowledge, abilities, skills, but also on his/her implicit theories. Teacher's implicit theory can be defined as "a pivotal value orientation which refers to all forms of social behaviour (individual — individual, individual — group and individual — society), including raising and educating children and youth" [2, p. 556]. More specifically, in relation to children, childhood and education, they define implicit theory as a value system about the needs, abilities and factors of child development, educational goals and methods. Similarly, Bennett et al. [3] talk about implicit frames, through which teachers perceive and process information, based on the assumption that teacher's cognitive and pedagogical behaviours are guided by their personal belief, value and principle system. Slunjski [25] claims that teachers need to employ their research and reflexive competences to become aware of their implicit theory. This is even more important when we consider research findings that suggest that a teacher's implicit theory is a predictor of his/her practice [2; 31]. Teacher's reflexivity and research of his/her own practice and competences can lead to his/her confidence concerning personal expert knowledge, ability and skills, which is emphasized by an increasing number of authors [4; 7; 17]. They further claim that by being continuously involved in changing their own practice through reflection, teachers are more motivated, encouraged for everyday challenges, and relieved of everyday routine pressures. Therefore, the competence the importance of which is recently emphasized by many authors — reflexive competence, which enables teachers to interpret and better

understand their own experiences — might be a prerequisite of quality early childhood and primary education.

Teachers can assess their competence by asking themselves whether the following determinants, among others, are present in their practice: children's participation, symmetrical communication between children and adults, activities characterized by supporting children in their discovering, exploring and developing of skills and knowledge [14].

### **Teacher competences from the perspective of contemporary understandings of childhood and children**

#### *Contemporary understandings of childhood and children*

In contemporary literature within social sciences, the dominant “traditional” view of childhood and children as inferior to adulthood and adults is being abandoned, and the view of childhood and children as a conceptual category and social position is advocated.

Contemporary understandings — “new paradigms” of childhood and children emphasize social construction and structuring of childhood. An interdisciplinary approach (sociology, psychology, pedagogy, cultural anthropology...) to contemporary children and childhood study in theory and practice is advocated.

Social construction of childhood as a theoretical approach, according to its proponents [13] implies viewing childhood conceptualizations and experiences as variable. Along with variability, authors also emphasize continuity of childhood. Social structuring of childhood, according to Qvortrup [20] means that childhood is a socially structured space, permanently present in the structure of all societies, whose construction changes in accordance with historical and cultural characteristics of society. This understanding of childhood as a permanent social category opposes “traditional” understandings, in which childhood is considered a phase on the way to adulthood.

The “new” understanding of childhood led to questions about the nature of children — how are they conceptualized? Within the “traditional” understanding, children were considered as those who are to become adults, and whose current needs, desires and ways of living are not important. In this view, the child is passive, and will become “someone” only after s/he obtains adults' knowledge, skills and understandings [6]. On the other hand, Prout and James [19, p. 57] state that children are active participants in the “construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live”. In other words, children are seen as active and autonomous constructors of their own social lives, and not passive objects, who are only affected by social structures and processes. In elaboration of this understanding of children, authors often use the term

agency, in the sense of a child's personal activity and ability to act independently. Although research of social structuring emphasize the common characteristics of childhood and social life, agency emphasizes the diversity of individual childhoods — recognizing children as social participants, their competency etc. [12].

Corsaro [6] supplements contemporary understandings of childhood and children with the notion “interpretative reproduction”, in the sense of the children's contribution to society, as active interpreters and participants in the social world, who adjust information from the adult world and use it in a creative and interpretative process. If our starting point is social construction of childhood and if children are considered as capable of making independent decisions, then it is necessary to think of them as “beings and becomings” [16, p. 5].

In sum, in contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, children are social actors with the ability to control the direction of their own lives. These conceptualizations differ from “traditional” conceptualizations of childhood and children, in which childhood is a phase on the way to adulthood and children are immature, vulnerable, incapable beings, who need guidance. Childhood and children are considered in accordance with broader historical-cultural-social changes.

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All these considerations lead to a question: Do competences of early childhood and primary teachers deliberated in the literature correspond with contemporary understandings of childhood and children? What do research results indicate? If we take the constructivist approach to competence as “unfinished and imperfect”, as a concept that is co-constructed in educational practice by all the stakeholders, then research of contemporary reality of childhood and children in institutional conditions might be a reliable source in consideration of teacher competence. Moreover, if we state that we do research in the function of quality of children's lives, then it might be important to gain insight into children's view of their teachers' competences. In the next section, I present selected results from a research study conducted last year that could provide some answers to these issues [21].

*Research: Children's decision-making in preschool*

The aim of the research was to gain insight into children's view of decision-making in preschool. Decision-making was taken as an example of children exercising their agency, ability to act independently in an institutional context. The research was conducted on an intentional sample of 20 children who attend preschool on two occasions — when they were 5 to 6 years old, and when they were 6 to 7

years old<sup>2</sup>. To gather data, a semi-structured interview protocol was used. The protocol was constructed based on the protocol Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson's [24] used in their research on children's conceptions of decision-making. Children were interviewed in pairs, without the presence of their teacher. All the interviews were audio-taped, and then transcribed to paper. Two independent researchers initially and axially coded the gathered data, using "grounded theory" methodology. The unit of analysis was a meaningful unit, i.e. a child's answer of at least one sentence or more sentences. We analysed these sentences and determined dominant meanings of the answers.

Answers about children's view of their own decision-making in preschool were categorized into three groups. The first group contains answers in which children determine their decision-making functionally, in the sense of choice and participation, with or without examples (*"Here I can decide to play by myself."*; *"Games! I can decide games; I can decide what we are going to play... I can decide what kinds of sports we are going to play..."*). The second group is made up of answers containing only examples (*"I can, I can decide when someone is smaller than me, then I can decide for him"*), and the third group consists of incomplete answers (*"I don't know."*)

Most answers point to children's decision-making being related to play, in the sense of selecting play as an activity, and choosing what to play, with whom, with what and when. Despite children's decision-making in preschool being related only to play, children's answers indicate that the final decision about will they play, what, with whom, with what and when is made by the teacher.

Children's answers to the question *Who is a teacher in preschool?* can be categorized in the following three groups: definition in the sense of the teacher's professional activity (*"it's a person who baby-sits"*, or *"she works, writes, and then we eat"*). In the second group of answers, children defined a teacher in preschool in the sense of his/her social position (*"She keeps us in order (...) we have to listen to her because she is the biggest of all of us"*). The third group of answers comprises of definitions in which the focus is on the specific actions of the teacher, like regulation (*"surveillance"*, punishing) or support (*"She looks after us, and if someone does something to someone else, hits him, then he has to tell the teacher and she punishes him."*; *"Teachers are very nice to us, when we want to drink water, they let us."*). When we asked children who is in charge in the preschool, all the interviewed children stated that the teacher was in charge. Children claim that they will be in charge when they *"grow up"*, which indicated a problem concerning generational

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<sup>2</sup> Children were interviewed on two occasions, as part of a larger study that deals with methodological possibilities of research with young children. No significant differences in children's answers were found.

social structuring of relations in the preschool. This is also confirmed by children's answers to a question concerning what they do when they decide something, and their teacher interrupts them. They all answered that they stop whatever they were doing and "obey their teacher". When asked where they can decide more, at home or in the preschool, all the participants said they can decide more at home.

When asked what they would change about their preschool, half of them suggest structural, material changes (e.g. colour of walls), but the other half suggest processual changes: they want to be able to decide and choose; change the quality of interpersonal relations in the preschool and do more activities, like singing, playing and having fun (*"My preschool would... from the outside it would stay the same, but from the inside the walls would be colourful, and I would like it if we could eat what we want every day for lunch, play what we want and do what we want."*).

Research results indicate that in preschool children decide solely about play (will they play, what, with whom, with what, when). They are aware that most of the time they cannot decide in preschool. The results indicate that children are also aware of the asymmetrical relations between them and teachers in institutional contexts, i.e. their inferior position in relation to teachers. These findings suggest that children's reality in the researched preschool is in contradiction with contemporary understandings of children as active in the creation of their own lives and as those who should have the possibility to influence and take responsibility for their environment and learning process.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper discussed multiple understandings of the notion *competence*, the three approaches to competence (behavioural, holistic and constructivist) and provided a review of contemporary theoretical reflections about early childhood and primary teacher competence. Reflexive and research competence are gaining more and more prominence in contemporary theoretical discussions about teacher competences. The second part of the paper focused on contemporary understandings of childhood and children in social sciences and then presented results from a research about children's reality in early childhood education institutions.

Research results, indicating that children have very little opportunity for decision-making in preschool suggest that it is necessary to consider which teacher competences allow for both teachers and children to exercise their autonomy and actively participate in preschool and primary school. In other words, it is necessary to consider which competences enable both teachers and children to be active social actors in their environment. The importance of teacher competences is visible here, because the teacher is the one who creates the environment (social and material) in which actors can or cannot exercise their agency. Therefore, the emphasis that is put

on reflexive and research competences of early childhood and primary teachers is acceptable if it includes teachers' becoming aware of their views of childhood, children, the institutional context, and relations between children and teachers. Aside from teachers being reflexive and researching their own implicit theory and competences, it would also be valuable if teachers could gain insight into children's perspectives of their preschool/primary school reality and teacher competences. This would enable the creation of an environment in which children and teachers learn mutually and live together — not side by side. This calls for teachers' further development of their research competence — specifically, competence for conducting research *with* children.

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