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The competences of preschool teachers for working with gifted children

Extended summary

The thesis on “spontaneous development” of gifted children has long been rejected in favour of the understanding that early identification and support to gifted children are indispensable for their potential to reach the optimal level of development. Although the legal regulations in the Republic of Serbia include various forms of additional support in the work with children who achieve outstanding results in the field of education, far above the general and special standards, the results of the research indicate that in our preschool institutions little attention is paid to the gifted children. The competences of preschool teachers to work with gifted children are one of the basic preconditions for recognizing the gifted and providing additional support through the individualization of educational work and the development of an individual educational plan. Therefore, in this research, we defined the goals, which would define: 1) how preschool teachers evaluate their competences for recognizing giftedness in different areas and competences that are important for realizing additional support to gifted children in preschool institutions; 2) which are the preferred ways to improve these competences. The sample included twelve female preschool teachers in the region of Srem, with an average length of working period ($AS = 15.19$, $SD = 8.863$), 44.3% preschool teachers graduated from Pre-

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school Teacher Training College, 35.8% graduated from Higher education school of vocational studies for preschool teachers and 19.18% preschool teachers obtained their specialist degree in the field of early inclusion. The research was carried out in two stages, with the application of quantitative and qualitative methodology. In the first stage of the study, preschool teachers filled in the questionnaire made for the purposes of the research. The questionnaire consisted of three subscales: the first subscale contained statements on the basis of which preschool teachers evaluated the competences for recognizing giftedness in certain domains by the theory of Howard Gardner; the second subscale of the Likert type consisted of seven statements, and preschool teachers estimated the degree of competence development to provide additional support to the gifted children by circling one of the answers on a scale from "I disagree" to "I fully agree"; The third subscale consisted of five statements, and preschool teachers assessed whether a particular method is important for enhancing competences for working with gifted children in kindergarten.

The second stage of research was organized through a focus group interview with members of the team for cognitive and creative development encouragement, which was formed in the Preschool Institution "Pcelica" in Sremska Mitrovica. The purpose of conducting the interview is to collect additional information on the competences of preschool teachers for working with gifted children and the ways in which they can be improved. The quantitative data collected by the questionnaire were processed by the methods of descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), and the differences in self-assessment of competences among the examinees with different degrees of qualification were tested by ANOVA and χ^2 test. The processing of data collected by focus group interviews was done based on the analysis of transcripts and notes. The census and ranking method were used. The obtained results show that the largest number of examinees (79.2%) estimates that they can recognize spatial and artistic giftedness, then musical giftedness (69.8%) and natural giftedness (65.1%), and the smallest number (only 15.1%) can recognize intrapersonal and interpersonal giftedness. About half of the examinees estimate that they can recognize logical-mathematical, linguistic and kinaesthetic giftedness. Significantly, larger number of preschool teachers who have completed the specialization of inclusive orientation can recognize logical-mathematical, interpersonal and intrapersonal giftedness. There was no correlation between the degree of professional qualification and competences for recognizing giftedness in other domains. Preschool teachers estimate that they are competent to create techniques and instruments for observing and monitoring the gifted, to create learning environment for development of a gifted child and to apply adequate methods of working with gifted children. They believe that learning environment for gifted children has been enriched in practice, but, in their opinion, special activities for gifted children are not implemented nor are the observation techniques and instruments applied in recognizing giftedness and planning additional support. Preschool teachers estimate that they are insufficiently trained to develop a pedagogical profile for a gifted child and an individual educational plan. The self-assessment of these competences is not related to the degree of professional qualification. The highest number of examinees (69.8%) believes that further education and better cooperation with professional associates (pedagogues and psychologists) as well as associates/experts in the field of giftedness are needed to improve professional competences for work with gifted children. Focus group interview participants recognize the importance of continuous

improvement of the competences of preschool teachers to work with gifted children and propose a joint project of Preschool Training College in Sremska Mitrovica, with the involvement of associates in the field of giftedness, and a team for cognitive and creative development encouragement from the Preschool Institution "Pcelica". The results indicate the importance of cooperation and team approach in the development of competences of preschool teachers to encourage early giftedness, and the joint project may have the character of an action research with the aim of re-examining and improving immediate practice in working with gifted children of preschool age.

Key words: pre-school giftedness, teacher's competences, teamwork, project, action research

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