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Preschool teachers' competencies and professional development – a way to a better-quality education of the preschool children²

Extended summary

Preschool teachers' competencies are among the most relevant factors influencing the quality of the preschool children's education. The aim of this research was to investigate preschool teachers' self-evaluation regarding their work with the preschool children, look at their experience with professional development, and to analyse the challenges and difficulties that teachers encounter in their everyday work with children. The exploratory research presented in the paper was conducted by using the method of systematic non-experimental observation and the technique of surveying. The data were collected using a specially designed questionnaire on a sample of 91 preschool teachers working in kindergartens.

The results showed that preschool teachers' evaluation of their own competencies in promoting early development was high. They believe that they possess, on a scale of 1 to 5, a high level of knowledge (4.16), skills (3.95), values (4.65) and competencies (3.91). Self-evaluation is above the theoretical average, which indicates their confidence in their own abilities, knowledge, and skills in the field of early development. The results also show that 61.5% of preschool teachers have so far received professional development in the field of early development. The results indicate that these teachers most often improve their skills by exchanging experiences

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and skills with colleagues (horizontal exchange) – 76.8% of the respondents. The average number of trainings in the field of early childhood development attended by the preschool teachers was 5.03, with a range from 1 to 30. When it comes to assessing the usefulness of individual forms of professional development, the results show that 92.6% of teachers consider accredited professional development programs to be partially or very useful, while 96.3% consider horizontal exchange to be partially or very useful for their educational work in the field of early childhood development and its promotion. The results also show that 64.8% of the preschool teachers had the support of an institution for professional development in the field of early childhood development, and 66% of them stated that their needs and interests were taken into account when selecting topics and professional development programs. The results of the analysis of variance show that the teachers who stated that their needs and interests were taken into account when selecting the topics and professional development programs concluded that professional development programs were more useful for their work. According to the results, 70.3% of the preschool teachers encountered difficulties and obstacles in encouraging the early development of children in direct educational work; the most common difficulty was the lack of support in the immediate educational environment (12.4%), followed by the lack of support from parents (11.2%).

In the research the results of which we present in this paper, the preschool teachers demonstrated a high level of self-evaluation regarding their competence. The self-evaluations are above the theoretical average. This is an encouraging sign, showing that these teachers are actively involved in their professional development. According to the self-assessments, the highest score was given for value attitudes, which indicates the preschool teachers' awareness of the importance of child development and ethics in educational practice. It has been recognized that horizontal exchange between practitioners is one of the most effective forms of professional development. A large percentage of the teachers believe that this form of development has significantly helped them in their professional development. This is an important indicator that points to the need for greater team cooperation, exchange of ideas, and empowerment of the preschool teachers to apply this type of exchange as much as possible. According to the results, the teachers encountered difficulties, such as a lack of support, mostly in the immediate educational environment (colleagues) and from parents. These obstacles indicate the need for improving the partnership between teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in education. It is important to emphasize that the preschool teachers consider professional training to be useful and important for improving their competencies. Although there are differences in the evaluation of the usefulness of training depending on the professional background, the majority of the preschool teachers also expressed a positive attitude towards accredited professional development programs.

In line with the above results and conclusions, we highlight the following recommendations that can lead to the improvement of the preschool educational practice: it is necessary to work on providing a greater number of resources and support in preschool educational institutions, as well as on strengthening cooperation with parents in order to reduce external constraints that affect the work of the preschool teachers; it is necessary to ensure constant access to professional development programs in accordance with the needs and interests of practi-

tioners, as well as to encourage teamwork and exchange of experiences in order to ensure the continuous professional development; it is necessary to develop self-reflection and critical review of the practice in order to improve the teachers' expertise and competence. The recommendations include the engagement and cooperation of all actors in the preschool educational process - teachers, parents, preschool institutions, the wider social community, as well as educational policy makers.

Keywords: preschool teachers' competencies, encouraging early development, professional development

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