

A Croatian Study of Practitioners' and Kindergarten Teacher Students' Opinions of their Role in Children's Lives

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☞ In the project *Methods and Models in the Education of Preschool Children in Kindergartens* conducted at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, we were interested in practitioners' and kindergarten teacher students' opinions, motivation, satisfaction, expectations and attitudes with regard to their work. Two open-ended questions regarding the role of the kindergarten teacher in children's lives, were set as a separate mini-questionnaire. For the purposes of this particular study, practitioners (N=69) and first-year university kindergarten teacher students (N=65) had to complete two sentences: "Children are like...because..." and "Kindergarten teachers are like... because...". Their responses were content analysed and then compared. Analysis shows that both students and kindergarten teachers perceive children in a very positive way and evaluate their job as highly valuable. They also highly value their role in children's lives (as another parent, teacher, helper, model, safe haven, etc.). The most significant difference between practising teachers and students is their perception of working conditions, where students show a more idealistic approach.

Keywords: Kindergarten teachers; Kindergarten teacher students; Perception of children; Perception of the kindergarten teacher's role

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Hrvaška raziskava mnenj vzgojiteljev in študentov predšolske vzgoje o njihovi vlogi v življenju otrok

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∞ V okviru projekta Metode in modeli v vzgoji predšolskih otrok v vrtcih, ki smo ga izvajali na fakulteti za izobraževanje učiteljev v Zagrebu, so nas zanimali mnenja, motivacija, zadovoljstvo, pričakovanja in odnos do dela vzgojiteljev ter študentov predšolske vzgoje. V prispevku predstavljamo odgovore na dve odprti vprašanji, ki se nanašata na dojetje vloge in pomena vzgojitelja v življenju otroka v obdobju predšolske vzgoje. V raziskavo je bilo vključenih 69 vzgojiteljev in 65 študentov prvega letnika predšolske vzgoje. Odgovarjali so na naslednji vprašanji: "Otroci so kot ..., ker ..." in "Vzgojitelji so kot ..., ker ...". Odgovore smo vsebinsko analizirali in primerjali med skupinama. Analiza je pokazala, da študentje in vzgojitelji otroke dojemajo zelo pozitivno ter da hkrati izjemno cenijo svoje delo. Izjemno cenijo tudi svojo vlogo v življenju otrok (kot »drug starš«, učitelj, pomočnik, vzornik, varno zavetje itn.). Med študenti in vzgojitelji se najočitneje razlikuje njihovo mnenje o delovnih pogojih, ker študentje izkazujejo bolj idealiziran pristop.

Ključne besede: vzgojitelji; študentje predšolske vzgoje; dojetje otrok; dojetje vloge vzgojitelja

Introduction

In Croatia, there have only been a small number of studies to date in the field of the profession of preschool teacher. According to the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports (Ministarstvo znanosti obrazovanja i sporta Republike Hrvatske, 2013), in 2012 there were 742 public and private preschool institutions in Croatia, attended by 141,608 children. Most of these institutions are responsible for the education of children from the age of one to six or seven years, while some of them deal only with the education of children from the age of three to the age of six or seven. The number of children in the age group from one to three was 24,337, while there were 102,338 children from three to five, and 14,933 from six to seven. No preschool programme is compulsory, but it is recommended that all children be involved in one year of preschool education immediately prior to starting school. As many as 99.60% of children attend such a programme, either in a kindergarten or in the nearest school (Ministarstvo znanosti obrazovanja i sporta Republike Hrvatske, 2010). Most of these children spend 7-10 hours per day at kindergarten. Kindergarten teachers work 40 hours per week, of which 30 hours are spent in close contact with children. Although preschool teachers are required to hold a master's degree in preschool education, which provides a relatively high degree of certainty regarding their qualification for the job, it is clear that they face many different challenges that, in addition to adequate knowledge, require a great deal of commitment and motivation.

Following the romantic conception of an idealised early childhood, the curriculum of early childhood education/kindergarten should be thought of in terms of child activity and experience through interaction with the environment (Anning, 1997), rather than the acquisition of knowledge and the assimilation of facts. An effective teacher should provide a social context in which there are opportunities to learn and where children can exercise some control over their construction of meaning and understanding. The next important requirement is high quality teaching and assistance in learning, including effective communication, empathy, assessment and the provision of appropriate and well-informed support and instruction (Pollard & Filer, 1996).

Such thinking emerged in the middle of the previous century, when Piaget conceptualised the child as an independent knowledge constructor, a person who is able to learn from experience (Piaget & Inhelder, 1986). Piaget's concept was complemented by Vygotsky's and Bruner's emphasis on the social dimension of learning, which implies that a large part of the child's learning is done through interaction with others (Daniels, 1996). In these new

relationships between the content of learning, the educator and the child, the latter is no longer viewed as a passive recipient of information. By adjusting the physical and social environment, adults seek to ensure the conditions for “building, constructing, acquiring and developing a child’s knowledge through the active participation of the child” (Miljak, 1999, p. 310). According to Bruner (2000), in social interaction with others, children build, complement and change their knowledge in their own way according to their natural rhythm. This means that learning is a cooperative and communicative activity that enables the child to create knowledge and construct meaning in the world together with other children and adults. This notion, which is supported by findings from the field of developmental psychology, brain research and research into language acquisition, strengthens the idea of the child as a subject of his or her own development, as well as a person who participates in determining his or her own educational process and social relations (Bašić, 2011). Petrović-Sočo (2007) claimed that the role of educators in promoting child development and education lies in creating a network of reciprocal relationships that support a variety of individual and group processes, in order to encourage and direct the child’s education and development. Manning and Payne (2010) point out that the educator’s perception of his or her own personality is also an important factor in determining the nature of the relationship with the child in early education. Research on teachers’ thinking assumes that teachers’ beliefs influence their practices (Isenberg, 1990). Clark and Peterson (1986) state that teachers’ thought processes are reciprocated by their actions, reinforcing the idea that there is a very close relationship between beliefs and practices.

Modern educators are supposed to continually adjust their work based on knowledge and on the understanding of children in general. They have to understand the principles of children’s learning and contribute to the creation of an institutional context that supports children’s culture. According to Šagud (2006), the central role of educators is to help children in finding topics of interest. Furthermore, they should provide an environment in which children are able to explore issues of interest in order to reach deeper understanding and knowledge. In this sense, kindergarten teachers have to assume different roles: the role of evaluator, organiser, motivator and collaborator with the children. On the other hand, Finnish educators, according to Puriola (2002), distinguish five different aspects to their role: educational, caring, managing, practical and personal aspects. The *educational* aspect is oriented towards the children’s learning and development. The *caring* aspect relates to children’s health and growth, as well as to emotional security and social factors. *Caring* implies not only the natural caring and nurturing that does not require specific knowledge,

but also the caregivers' drive to enhance his or her own vision of him or herself as a moral person. *Managing* refers to activities such as leadership, decision making, discipline and control. The *practical* aspect refers to the organisation of daily activities. The *personal* aspect highlights the complexity of the educator's role: underneath his or her professional role, each educator is also an individual with his or her own emotions, personality traits and personal life.

However, there are also certain problems related to the kindergarten teacher's profession. Wallace (2005) believes that educators have problems with the comprehension, translation and interpretation of theory, resulting in difficulties arising in practice due to a limited understanding of strategies.

In fact, mere theoretical knowledge is not sufficient in addressing the daily demands of pedagogical practice, because there are no two identical children and no two identical situations. Therefore, educators need to develop their own strategies built from the experience of exploring their own practice (Babić, 2010), which makes the role of the early-age educator extremely challenging (Einarsdottir, 2010). Furthermore, there is evidence of a kind of *reality shock* for teachers-beginners in Croatia. Specifically, while studying, teacher students have a rather idealistic conception of their future job, which is not quite compatible with the experience in practice (Rijavec, Miljević-Ridički, & Vizek Vidović, 2006). This may also occur in the case of kindergarten teachers.

Considering the different roles of kindergarten teachers, we were especially interested in the way practitioners and preschool student teachers see children, as well as the way they see their own role in children's lives.

Problems

- (1) To explore kindergarten teachers' and kindergarten teacher students' perception of children and kindergarten teachers.
- (2) To explore whether kindergarten teachers' and kindergarten teacher students' perceptions differ in some respects.

Methodology

The present study is part of an ongoing research project *Methods and Models in the Education of Preschool Children in Kindergartens*, which is designed to gather information on practitioners' and student teachers' opinions, motivation, satisfaction, expectations and attitudes with regard to their work. For the purposes of this particular study, two sentences completed by respondents, set as a separate mini-questionnaire, were subjected to content analysis. The incomplete sentences were: "*Children are like... because ...*" and "*Kindergarten teachers are like... because...*".

Sample

The original study sample consisted of two sub-samples: 90 kindergarten teachers from 10 different public kindergartens in Zagreb and North-Western Croatia, and 108 first-year students enrolled in the study programme for preschool teachers at the Faculty of Teacher Education, Zagreb. The number of participants in the present study varies from 50 to 69, depending on the number of participants who completed the incomplete sentences. The kindergartens at which the research was conducted provide for children from nursery age to school age. The children's education is organised mainly according to age groups (nursery age, 2 to 3 years, 3 to 4 years, 4 to 5 years, 5 to 7 years).

Procedure

The analytical tools employed were workplace metaphors. The teachers and students were asked to complete two incomplete sentences "*Children are like... because ...*" and "*Kindergarten teachers are like... because...*". Consenting teachers from ten different kindergartens were given the sentences to complete individually at home, while students who agreed to participate in the survey completed the sentences during a lesson.

Metaphors occur in every sphere of life, including the professional sphere, and provide tools with which we can explain things to others and to ourselves. Using metaphors, researchers gain a better insight into problems. The use of an open-ended elicitation procedure enables an understanding of the participants' metaphorical conception, and of the relationship between their thoughts and the subject. It also reveals individuals' attitudes, prejudices and inclinations with regard to certain aspects of their profession. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) see a metaphor as a way of conceiving one thing in terms of another in order to reach a better understanding. They also believe that people define their reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of these metaphors. Metaphors can carry a lot of meaning and paint a vivid picture (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, analysis of kindergarten teacher practitioners' and students' metaphors is a good way to ascertain their attitudes toward their profession.

Findings and Discussion

Content analysis reveals the themes that emerge from the kindergarten teachers' and students' associations with the incomplete sentences "*Children are like... because...*" (Tables 1 and 2) and "*Kindergarten teachers are like... because...*" (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 1. Kindergarten teachers' associations with: "Children are like... because...." presented according to themes that appear in the analysis

Children are like ...	(f)	... because ...
Abstract concepts		
Happiness	1	They give us joy
Soul	1	They are full of goodness
Fairy tale	1	They always have positive thoughts
Natural phenomena		
Rainbow	1	They are unique; to shine in all of their glory they need to experience both raindrops and the sun
Flame	2	They illuminate us, but we must create a spark
River	1	They are unpredictable, sometimes fast, sometimes quiet, variable
Beings and people		
Beings from a fairy tale	1	They just want to enjoy the world of imagination
Little princes and princesses	1	They learn and work by playing, they are great in their benevolence and purity of spirit
Beings	2	They are interesting, creative, original, give love in return, unique
People	4	They have needs, rights, characteristics, they are original, unique, priceless treasures, unformed, curious, worthy of love and attention
Explorers	5	They are curious, learn with all of the senses, explore, solve problems, develop, interested in the new and unfamiliar, develop skills, acquire knowledge through play
Travellers	1	They choose, search for the straight path, develop
Plants		
Plants	4	They are fragile, delicate, magnificent, vulnerable, they give us power, radiate with sincerity and joy, they should be nurtured, loved, taken care of, they grow, develop, blossom
Buds	1	They are unique, they open up slowly in front of our eyes and we admire the richness and diversity of the flowers
Flowers	4	They are wonderful, precious, they should be pampered, nurtured, educated and guided; the more attention we give them the better they grow
Inanimate objects		
Clay	2	In the hand of an artist they become a work of art; they can be modelled and modified
Paper with invisible letters	1	Every day they reveal the same letters and add a new one
Ships	2	They are sailing across the sea, we are sailing with them
Whirligigs	1	They are on the move all the time
Sponges	14	They absorb everything, learn from the environment, observe, think, feel, perceive, put everything together, they have not been squeezed yet
Total N	50	

Table 2. Kindergarten teacher students' associations with: "Children are like... because..." presented according to themes that appear in the analysis

Children are like ...	(f)	... because ...
Abstract concepts		
Miracles	1	They are full of surprises and they conquer all
Future	1	They are our projections
The best gift	1	They are priceless
Natural phenomena		
Sun	1	They warm us with love and sincerity
Beings and people		
Beings	6	They are unprotected, small, restless, unpredictable, dependent, honest, simple, challenging, insatiable for knowledge, not aware of danger, they need love and a stimulating environment
People	4	They are curious, full of expectation, sweet, they love the world and people around them, they are those who should learn how to live and how to be independent
Pupils	1	They learn from us and improve themselves that way
Explorers	4	They are interested in new ideas and insights, they want to know more about the world, they give love
Little philosophers	1	They have opportunities to learn, they have a pioneering spirit and the power of wonder
Team players	1	Teachers and children make a team
Animals		
Little lambs	1	They need security and support
Little teddy bears	1	They are full of love and tenderness, they are willing to share love with everyone
Plants		
Plants	1	We should shape them and help them grow
Flowers	6	They are soft, they need to be nurtured and guided, we have to provide a shield for them, they require a lot of hard work and would die without love
Inanimate objects		
Uncut diamonds	5	They shine if we take good care of them, we must shape them to become perfect
Clay	2	They are suitable for shaping
Unread book	1	They always invent something new
Blank plate	1	They must be taught everything
Picture	1	We are creating them
Glass vase	1	They are fragile and vulnerable, one wrong move is enough to destroy them for good
Sponge	20	They are curious and absorb everything around them, they follow, imitate and learn from adults
Total N	61	

Teachers and students describe children in similar ways through abstract concepts and through the characteristics of natural phenomena, beings and people, plants or inanimate objects. It is very clear that the concepts that both groups of respondents use to describe children are positive and glorifying, indicating their extremely positive attitudes towards children, attitudes that are required in their work. Further analysis of their explanations reveals two basic approaches: 1) the traditional approach, where the child is seen as an object in the educational process; and 2) an alternative approach, where the child is viewed as an active being. Although quite different, both approaches are present in education; one follows the *educational* image of the child, which views the child as an *object*, while the other favours a *romantic* approach, where the child is seen as the *subject* of his or her own development (Bašić, 2011).

It is evident that some teachers and students see the child as a helpless, dependent, protected and passive creature that has yet to be shaped and educated by adults: “*Children are like a soul for receiving good*”; “*Children are like clay because in the hands of an artist they become a work of art*”; “*Children are like little lambs because they need security and support*”. Others see the child as an independent, loving, curious, unique, unpredictable, giving, creative and active being: “*Children are like miracles because they surprise and conquer all*”; “*Children are creative, original, unique, interesting beings*”; “*Children are like explorers because they explore and solve problems*”. Consequently, teachers and students see the kindergarten teacher’s role as that of teacher, substitute parent and role model: “*Kindergarten teachers are like parents because they are full of love for children*”; “*Kindergarten teachers are role models because they spend a lot of time with children and influence them*”. Alternatively, they see the teacher’s role as a mediator in the child’s development, and as being responsible for providing optimal conditions for the child’s development, as suggested by Miljak (1999): “*Kindergarten teachers are reflective practitioners because they support their own development as well as the development of the child*”; “*Kindergarten teachers are observers who listen to the needs of children and act accordingly*”; “*...people who are involved in the child’s gaining knowledge but do not want to take authorship of the child’s activities*”.

From the descriptions in Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that kindergarten teachers see children as more active and able to contribute than students do. We assume that such differences occur due to the kindergarten teachers’ professional knowledge and experience, which first-year students are still lacking. Analysis also shows that both the students and the teachers are, as suggested by Šagud (2006) and Puriola (2002), aware of the different roles they have in their profession: the role of organiser, motivator, collaborator, educator, nurturer, practitioner, etc. However, we presume that each respondent emphasises the role they personally

find the most important in their work with children. In this way, unlike students, teachers in general see themselves as multitasking people (Table 3).

Table 3. Kindergarten teachers' associations with: "Kindergarten teachers are like... because..." presented according to themes that appear in the analysis

Kindergarten teachers are like ...	(f)	... because ...
Natural phenomena		
River	1	They flow easily and children follow them
Rain and sunshine	1	They shine like a rainbow
Tree on the moor	2	They are in the crosswinds - unprotected while they are bearing fruit and providing shade, protection and support, they have to be durable
Things		
Never-ending story	2	They make the story never ending, they are faced with many obstacles, ups and downs
Open book	1	They open up new horizons
Way mark	1	They direct, lead, help
Windmill, bridge, earth	1	They tame the wind, they connect and support
Mirror	2	Children learn using imitation
Lighthouse	1	They illuminate
Sponge	1	They absorb all of the bad things, and are squeezed by everyone
Squeezed mop	1	Everyone uses them
Strong brace	1	They take care of children's needs
Strongest link	1	They are the first in the education system, very important people in establishing positive interaction and modelling
Animals		
Squirrels	1	They search for acorns all the time together with children
Giraffes	1	They have the biggest heart
People		
Weavers	1	They weave together with the child
Gardeners	1	They create optimal conditions for the child's growth
Role models	7	They spend a lot of time with children and influence them
Children	3	They are constantly looking for new games and play together with children
Mothers	6	They care for, nurture and love the child as their own, they are full of love for children, they provide love, warmth and understanding
Friends	4	They lead children in the way they should go, give children pleasure and fun, they love and accept them as they are, play and learn with them, enable mutual giving with love

Teachers	4	They have knowledge and skills, provide understanding, the basis for life, sometimes they invest more effort than the parents do
Observers	5	They listen to the needs of children and act accordingly, they are involved in the acquisition of knowledge but do not want to take the authorship of the child's activities, they are continually adapting their work with children, they investigate, lead, encourage, but do not make suggestions
Helpers	1	Children learn best when exploring alone
Important people in the child's life	1	They provide security and protection for children
People who know and can do a lot	1	They learn something new and interesting every day
People full of love	1	They give their love selflessly
Reflective practitioners	3	They support their own development as well as the development of children, they must have a lot of knowledge, they discover and act
Professional coordinators	1	They coordinate the child's learning
Multitalented person: a router, initiator, the eternal player, safe haven, a supplement to the family, friend, confidant, entertainer, teammate, partner of the child and the parent, psychologist, speech therapist, nurse, teacher, angel, monster, clown, police officer	11	They spend a lot of time with children, invest a lot of love in their work, provide safety, pleasure, fun, they play and learn with children, give love, comfort and affection, ensure the children's happiness
Humiliated people	1	Constant changes drive them crazy, their salaries are low, their working hours are long, there is no improvement in their working conditions
Total	69	

Table 4. Kindergarten teacher students' associations with: "Kindergarten teachers are like... because..." presented according to themes that appear in the analysis

Kindergarten teachers are like ...	(f)	... because ...
Natural phenomena		
Sun	1	They spread the rays of knowledge towards children
Water	3	Water is essential for living just as kindergarten teachers are, they lead to the right path
People		
Explorers	1	They help, love and guide
Observers	1	They listen to the needs of children
Helpers	3	They direct and encourage children
Shepherds	1	They feed their flock, they guide, care for and teach
Sculptors	3	They shape the children as they would shape a sculpture, they encourage them, guide, provide for them, make them ready to encounter cruel reality

Painters	1	They shape and complement
Gardeners	3	They shape, plant and nourish
Friends	6	They provide understanding and love, they are people of confidence, they are honest, always willing to help and care, they give themselves unconditionally
Another parent	19	They spend more time with the child than parents, they teach children, talk to them, meet their needs, educate, take care of the child's development, they are responsible for the lives of other people's children, they encourage children to play and have fun, make them ready for school, and have the toughest job in the world
Another (additional) educator	2	Parents are (the) first (educators), they educate children when parents are unable to
Models	3	Children watch adults and learn from them
Teachers	4	They develop the child's skills in their preparation for life, they model proper behaviour and socialisation, teach children new things
Necessary people	2	Children need love and affection
People who are always there for the child	1	Being a kindergarten teacher is a vocation and mission
People who guide the child	2	They guide and stimulate children
People who care for children	2	They care for them as well as the parents
People who raise other people's children	1	It is their vocation
People who know their job	1	Their job makes them satisfied since they work with children
Companion in child's development	1	They help them grow
Leaders	4	They direct, provide a framework, help children to develop a self-image, and walk with children through a phase of their life
Total N	65	

We can recognise all five aspects distinguished by Finnish educators (Puriola, 2002) both in the description of children and kindergarten teachers:

(1) Educational: *Children are like explorers or sponges – they learn with all of the senses, solve problems, develop skills, learn and work by playing. Kindergarten teachers are like teachers, observers, helpers, models – they provide the basis for life and have knowledge and skills.*

(2) Caring: *Children are like plants, buds or flowers – fragile, delicate, the more attention we give them the better they grow. Kindergarten teachers are like gardeners, mothers (parents) – they care for, nurture and love the child as their own.*

(3) Managing: *Children are like clay – they can be modelled and modified. They are travellers – they search for the right way. Kindergarten teachers are like role models, observers, friends, signposts – they lead the child, direct, and help.*

(4) Practical: *Children are like people – they have needs and rights. Kindergarten*

teachers are like protectors – they take care of children’s needs. Kindergarten teachers are like observers – they listen to the needs of children and act accordingly.

(5) Personal: *Children are like happiness – they give us joy. Kindergarten teachers are important individuals in the child’s life; people full of love; giraffes (have the biggest heart). Kindergarten teachers are like a tree on the moor – they stand in the crosswinds unprotected while they bear fruit and provide shade, protection and support. They have to be strong and durable and at the same time they are like a sponge – they absorb all of the bad and are squeezed by everyone.*

Furthermore, it is clear that both students and kindergarten teachers perceive their job as highly valuable. Therefore, some kindergarten teacher students see themselves as “*necessary people in children’s lives*”, or the essentials of life, like “*the sun or water*”, and believe that their noble work is both a profession and mission at the same time. Likewise, preschool teachers largely see themselves as “*multitalented people*” who are ready to cope with different challenges in children’s daily activities and developmental requirements.

Both students and teachers highly value their role in children’s lives (“*another parent*”, “*teacher*”, “*helper*”, “*model*”, “*safe haven*”, etc.). Nevertheless, we have some concerns on account of some of the kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of children and their role in children’s lives. Firstly, some teachers see children as working material that should be shaped by adults (Table 1). Secondly, some of them see their role exclusively as parental, while others seem to criticise parents (“*...kindergarten teachers sometimes invest more effort than the parents do*”) (Table 3). Thirdly, some of them are more focused on the negative aspects of their profession: “*Kindergarten teachers are undermined because they are exposed to constant changes, which drive them crazy, the salary is low and they have long working hours*”; “*Kindergarten teachers absorb all of the bad and they are squeezed by everyone*”; “*Kindergarten teachers are like a squeezed mop*”; “*Kindergarten teachers are like a tree on the moor – they stand in the crosswinds, all of the winds are against them, and they are unprotected while they bear fruit, provide shade and protect*” (Table 3).

The first and second issues are mainly related to kindergarten teachers’ theoretical framework, which reflects their attitudes and directs their approach towards children. It seems that some kindergarten teachers see children solely as beings to be shaped by adults, with no regard for their active contribution to their own development. As stated earlier, such attitudes do not encourage children to take the initiative in activities. Instead of placing children in the active, strong and independent role of constructors, they are placed in the passive role of reproducers of knowledge, identity and culture. As suggested by Dahlberg

et al. (1999), seeing a child simply as a reproducer (“*Children watch adults to learn*”) or as an innocent being (“*Children are fragile, delicate, vulnerable*”) has the potential of producing a weak, passive and dependent child, which is certainly not the goal of contemporary education. Given that the basic vocational education of some older kindergarten teachers may have been more traditionally focused, continuing education is necessary in order to help them build a new educational framework for their actions. Furthermore, our analysis shows that some students in our research sample also share the view of children as material “*suitable for shaping*” (Table 2). However, the students in our sample are still at the beginning of their studies, and we strongly believe that their attitudes reflect the traditional family approach, and that these attitudes will change as a result of the students’ vocational education.

The second problem is related to the teachers’ image of their role as parents or as a parental substitute. We agree that the parental role is almost certainly one of the most important and demanding roles; however, as Dahlberg et al. (1999) suggest, the role of the kindergarten teacher in a childhood institution is supposed to offer the child something quite different but complementary to that which parents provide, so that the child can get the best of two environments. It is a fact that not all parents approach parenting equally responsibly and conscientiously. The teacher’s task, as a professional, is to try to influence parents through education and reference to the child’s needs, without jeopardising their relationship with the parents or the child. These competences, if not acquired in basic vocational education, should be acquired in continued life-long education formally provided for by the system in which they are employed and by the relevant ministry.

The third issue that emerged was the negative aspect of the kindergarten teachers’ profession. While students’ perceptions of the professional role of the kindergarten teacher are clearly idealistic, tending to encompass only the positive aspects of the profession, it is clear that practitioners face various obstacles in their work and often feel that they remain undervalued. Although the number of children and educators per educational kindergarten group is determined by the State Educational Standard of Preschool Education (Državni pedagoški standard predškolskog odgoja i naobrazbe, 2008), ranging from 10 children per group for infants to a maximum of 25 children in a group of seven-year-olds, these norms are often not respected in Croatian kindergartens (Petrović-Sočo, 2007).

As Chartier and Geneix (2006) report, children’s groups in Italian, Belgian and French nurseries are also large: a class may number 25 children or even more. According to their report, children attending nursery schools have

recently become younger and more numerous, which has revealed the weaknesses and segmentation of the early-year childcare networks in these countries. Large kindergarten groups can also be found in Croatia's neighbouring country, the Republic of Serbia (IT za inkluzivno društvo, 2010), while the number of children per kindergarten group in Slovenia is somewhat lower, ranging from 14 per group of children aged from one to three years, and 22 per group of children over three years of age (Sindikát vzgoje, izobraževanja, znanosti i kulture Slovenije, 2009). This implies that there are better working conditions in Slovenia than in the other countries mentioned. Palmerus (1995, according to Chartier & Geneix, 2006) pointed out that educational interactions, such as the time spent playing or talking with children, increase when the number of children in a group decreases. Consequently, too many children in a group may negatively affect the educator's interaction with children (Chung et al., 2005). In addition to kindergarten teachers' opinions regarding their long working hours, low salaries and lack of autonomy in work ("*Kindergarten teachers are exposed to constant changes, which drive them crazy*"), too many children in a group contributes to a feeling of dissatisfaction, ineffectiveness and helplessness among teachers.

In addition to the above, Fumoto (2011) emphasises that a further problem may be the lack of autonomy of teachers at work. He stresses the importance of supporting preschool teachers' professional autonomy, because this directly influences their behaviour and attitude towards children. Due to the significant influence of the institutional climate on the teacher-child relationship, particular attention should be devoted to our data showing the dissatisfaction of kindergarten teachers in practice ("*squeezed by everyone*", "*responsible to everyone*"). Specifically, a negative, uncooperative and hostile climate can significantly aggravate tension and discipline problems, while a positive and friendly climate can encourage teachers to engage in effective and creative teaching. In order to reduce educators' sense of helplessness and to empower them to control the situation, there is a need to publicly advocate the increased autonomy of educators in their work, thus enhancing their participation in decision-making. It is also necessary to make the relevant institutions aware of any violation of pedagogical standards. On the other hand, despite less than ideal working conditions, highly qualified and motivated staff constitute a strength of Croatian preschool institutions.

As can be observed from Tables 3 and 4, kindergarten teacher students and teachers in Croatia rarely have a vision of themselves solely as a teacher figure. The teaching practice of public kindergartens reflects standards set by state educational policies; for instance, the Croatian preschool educational standard

resembles the Italian standard in many ways. In accordance with official Italian documents, nurseries are not schools (Chartier & Geneix, 2006); children in Italian nurseries play freely, speak, sing, recite, paint, draw and listen to stories, as well as starting to learn to count, read and write. Although nearly all children attend nurseries, attendance is not compulsory and the “teaching” programme does not have to provide results. The aims and teaching practices in Italian nurseries are very similar to those in Belgium and France. In Germany and Sweden, on the other hand, there is a shift towards making preschool institutions part of the primary school system, with an emphasis on learning. In this regard, it would be interesting to investigate how kindergarten teachers from other countries see their role in children’s lives, because we assume that kindergarten teachers’ perceptions of their roles in children’s lives differ depending on the educational goals.

Conclusion and Implications

Content analysis reveals that both kindergarten teachers and trainees postulate the multiplicity of their professional roles. These roles can be classified into five aspects: educational, caring, managing, practical and personal. Given their awareness of the substantial and varied contribution of kindergarten teachers to the educational process, it is not surprising that both groups highly value their role in children’s lives. One salient finding, however, is the perception of some kindergarten teachers who see their professional role as a parental role. Such attitudes indicate the need for the ongoing professional development of kindergarten teachers, as they should be constantly reminded that their professional role is complementary to, but quite different from, the parental role. Furthermore, kindergarten teachers’ perception of the child – more so than that of students – is derived from a romantic approach, according to which the child is seen as a creative and active being. Differences in perception can be attributed to the influence of experience and vocational education. However, even some practitioners perceive the child as a passive being, further emphasising the need for lifelong education and professional development. We believe that students’ perceptions change during their vocational education, which is based on a contemporary view of the child as the subject of its own development. Finally, the dissatisfaction of some kindergarten teachers is also striking, with long working hours, low salaries and a lack of autonomy in work, as well as too many children per group, contributing to a feeling of dissatisfaction. Kindergarten teacher students have yet to face the difficulties that arise in real working situations, and therefore have a more idealistic image of

their profession. We note the importance of supporting the professional autonomy of kindergarten teachers because it directly influences their attitude towards children. The standards of preschool education in Croatia are often not respected, which is evident in the large groups in kindergartens. We therefore also highlight the need to make relevant institutions aware of any violation of pedagogical standards.

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