

Assessment of Early Childhood Teachers' Competencies for Care and Education of Toddlers

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POVZETEK – Sodobni trendi institucionalne vzgoje izkazuje potrebo po specifičnih kompetencah vzgojiteljev, ki delajo v oddelkih prvega starostnega obdobja (gre za oddelke, v katere so vključeni otroci med prvim in tretjim letom starosti). To potrjujejo tudi teoretična spoznanja in praktične izkušnje strokovnjakov, ki se ukvarjajo z vzgojo otrok prvega starostnega obdobja. Cilj te empirične kvalitativne študije z elementi primerjalnega pristopa je raziskati, osvetliti in razumeti perspektivo vzgojiteljev o lastnih kompetencah za delo z otroki tega obdobja v vrtcih v Bosni in Hercegovini in Republiki Sloveniji. Raziskavo smo izvedli v letu 2022. Za zbiranje podatkov smo uporabili na novo kreiran strukturiran spletni intervju v pisni obliki. V raziskavo je bilo vključenih 91 anketirancev. S tematsko analizo vsebine odgovorov anketirancev in teoretične postavitve koncepta kompetenc vzgojiteljev smo identificirali šest kategorij prednosti, povezanih z njihovimi kompetencami, in devet kategorij težav, s katerimi se srečujejo pri svojem delu. Ugotovitve raziskave kažejo, da vzgojitelji lastnih kompetenc ne prepoznajo kot optimalno razvitih.

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ABSTRACT – Contemporary trends in the education and care of toddlers shed light on the specific competencies of early childhood teachers. The aim of this empirical qualitative study with elements of a comparative approach is to investigate, look at and understand the perspective of early childhood teachers about their own competencies for working in toddler groups in kindergartens in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Republic of Slovenia. We collected the data needed for the research in 2022 from 91 respondents using a self-created structured online interview in written form. Through the thematic analysis of the content of respondents' answers and the theoretical setting of the concept of early childhood teachers' competencies, nine categories of difficulties and six categories of advantages related to their competencies were distinguished. The findings of this study point to the fact that early childhood teachers for toddlers do not assess their own competencies as optimally developed.

1 Introduction

Views on the care and education of a young child have gradually but radically changed in the last few generations (Perko et al., 2019). The formation of modern trends in the education and care of toddlers was also influenced by the positive experiences of the Montessori method and the theory of *the unconscious absorbing mind* of a young child (Kordeš Demšar, 2007; Mavrič, 2019; Montessori, 2003), by the theoretical and methodical approach of Pickler's care and education of a toddler (Balesko et al., 2019; Belza et al., 2019; Sagastui et al., 2020), and by Gerber's methodical approach in working with the youngest children (Hammond, 2021). A multidisciplinary approach to the

care and education of toddlers sheds light on the need for highly competent early childhood teachers for toddlers. Based on the established interpretation of early childhood teachers' competencies (Mohamed et al., 2017), a competent kindergarten early childhood teacher for toddlers should possess knowledge, pedagogical and organizational skills; build partner relations with parents, experts and the community; improve professionally; and respect professional ethics. Higher education helps the career development of students (Blažič, 2021), and undergraduate education should have particular importance for the development of early childhood teachers' competencies (Barenthien et al., 2020). The quantitative research results by Šindić et al. (2022) directly link theoretical knowledge and information with the successful implementation of educational work in kindergarten. Retar and Lepičnik Vodopivec (2017) indicate that professional development does not take place only within formal education but throughout life, within professional learning communities (Labak et al., 2022), while the results of research conducted by Barenthien et al. (2020), Partalo et al. (2022), Sucuoglu et al. (2014), Šindić and Pribišev Beleslin (2018) confirm the connection between practice and experience with early childhood teachers' competencies.

We approached the research based on the knowledge that the toddler period is specific and extremely important in human development, and that the competencies of early childhood teachers for toddlers are still an under-researched area. We were interested, from the point of view of early childhood teachers, to see and understand the preparation and training for the specifics of work in toddlers' groups. We set ourselves the following research questions: What competencies do early childhood teachers recognize as essential for working in a toddlers' group, and how do they assess them in themselves (representation and method of acquisition)?

2 Method

The aim of this empirical qualitative study with elements of a comparative approach (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) is to investigate, look at and understand the perspective of early childhood teachers about their own competencies for working in toddlers' groups in kindergartens in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the Republic of Slovenia. We collected the data needed for the research through an online survey (Hooley et al., 2012) using a structured online interview in written form. For data analysis, a thematic analysis of the content of respondents' answers was used (Viligi, 2016), taking into account the theoretical foundation of early childhood teachers' competencies (Mohamed et al., 2017) and the typology of five areas of key competencies of early childhood teachers (Erčulj et al., 2008).

Participants

Ninety-one respondents (90 women and one man) participated in the research. The participants were early childhood teachers and early childhood teachers' assistants employed in kindergartens in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republic of Srpska) (Nb = 51) and

in the Republic of Slovenia (Ns = 40). For the purposes of the research, it is important to emphasize that 83 early childhood teachers who have completed undergraduate education for early childhood teachers (from BiH Nb = 51, and from the Republic of Slovenia Ns = 32) and early childhood teachers' assistants (Nspv = 8) who have completed high school participated in the research. The average age of participants from BiH is 33 (M = 33.21; SD = 6.62; Min = 25; Max = 50), and from Slovenia 40.5 (M = 40.51; SD = 9.8; Min = 24; Max = 57). The average age of all participants is 36.42, with the youngest participant being 24 years old and the oldest 57. Participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina have worked in kindergarten for 6 years on average (M = 5.84; SD = 4.7; Min = 0.5; Max = 26), 3 years of which in nurseries (M = 2.71; SD = 3.57; Min = 0.5; Max = 17). Participants from Slovenia have an average of 14 years of work experience in kindergarten (M = 13.68; SD = 9.73; Min = 1; Max = 39), 4 years of which in nurseries (M = 4.49; SD = 3.21; Min = 0.5; Max = 12). Participants from both countries worked in nurseries for an average of 3.5 years (M = 3.49; Min = 0.5; Max = 17). Of the interviewees from BiH, 9 of them (17.65%) work in the younger toddler group (from 1 to 2 years old); 4 (7.84%) in the older toddler group (from 2 to 3 years old); 26 (50.98%) in the mixed toddler group; 12 (23.53%) do not currently work in the toddler group. Of the interviewed participants from Slovenia, 16 (40%) work in a group of children aged 1 to 2 years; 11 (27.5%) work in a group of children aged 2 to 3 years; 13 (32.5%) work in a mixed toddler group.

Data collection and analysis

We collected the data needed for the research in 2022 through a structured online interview that we had constructed ourselves. The instrument was made in two versions, in Serbian and Slovenian. It consists of two parts. In the first part, through 9 items, demographic and other basic data on the participants were collected. In the second part, through 6 open-type items, we tried to collect data on the experience of early childhood teachers working in the toddler group and a self-assessment of their own competencies. Although written interviewing lacks interaction between the researcher and the respondent, this research technique enables the participation of those participants who find face-to-face interviews uncomfortable and show resistance (Morris, 2015); it also reduces other problems encountered in live interviews (Hooley et al., 2012).

In order to check the validity and reliability of the instrument, we conducted a pilot study in Banja Luka, BiH, with 10 participants. Through the thematic analysis of the answers, we observed the potential of the instrument to inductively build theories of local character through insights and reflections, starting from micro data towards a broader conceptual understanding, which is one of the indicators of the validity and reliability of the research instrument (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015; Morse et al., 2002).

After the pilot study, the research was carried out with all participants in both countries. During the research, the code of ethics was respected. The participants were informed that the data they provide will be used exclusively for scientific purposes, and they entered the interview voluntarily with respect for anonymity.

Data analysis is inductive and comparative. The content analysis of participants' answers was carried out with the help of the QCAmap program (Mayring, 2022). It

contained qualitative steps in which categories were assigned to the original statements of participants and quantitative steps in which the frequency of categories was analyzed. Two authors alternately checked the consistency of the categories and the overall analysis process.

3 Findings and discussion

Starting from the definition of the competencies of early childhood teachers (Mohamed et al., 2017) and the distribution of key competencies of early childhood teachers (Erčulj et al., 2008), the categories we had formed on the basis of participants' answers to open-type questions were joined to the appropriate competencies, their frequencies were determined (Table 1), and compared between countries. Depending on the nature of the category, it is associated with one or possibly two competencies. Counting the answers belonging to different categories, it was determined that 161 statements refer to the assessment of difficulties in working with toddlers related to the underdevelopment of competencies, and 196 statements refer to advantages related to the development of competencies. Nine categories indicating difficulties (Table 3) and six categories indicating advantages in working with toddlers (Table 2) were singled out. These findings indicate that the examined early childhood teachers are not considered to be optimally competent. The results of the study by Lipscomb et al. (2022) with fifty early childhood teachers employed in nurseries indicate that the perception of the early childhood teachers' own abilities to work with small children is associated with increased stress; the need for professional support that would enable early childhood teachers to assess themselves as more competent has been observed.

Early childhood teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina pay special attention to the competence of effective teaching and working with children (Table 1). Namely, seven recognized categories correspond to this competence and the emphasized frequency of responses associated with these categories.

Five separate categories correspond to the competence of communication and relationships. Based on the representation of those five categories in the preschool teachers' answers, it can be seen that early childhood teachers pay slightly less attention to the competence of communication and relationships than to effective teaching and working with children.

Table 1

Competencies of Early Childhood Teachers with Associated Categories

	<i>Competencies</i>		<i>Associated categories</i>	<i>Category Representation</i>
1.	Effective teaching and working with children	1.	Easier work compared to that in kindergarten groups (easier adaptation, simpler organization of activities, smaller number of children in the group, easier influence/direction of children)	40 %
		2.	Quickly visible results due to susceptibility to the influence of age	32 %
		3.	Difficulties with health care and safety of children	31 %
		4.	The problem of choosing and adapting activities	29 %
		5.	Unpreparedness and lack of training for working with children at an early age	20 %
		6.	Adaptation as a difficulty	16 %
		7.	Problems during inclusion	8 %
2.	Communication and relationships	1.	Cooperation and help of other early childhood teachers	69 %
		2.	Relationship warmth and affection	36 %
		3.	Cooperation and assistance of the professional service	34 %
		4.	Cooperation with parents as a difficulty	25 %
		5.	Misunderstanding of children due to age	9 %
3.	Organization and management	1.	The diversity and size of the group as a difficulty	37 %
		2.	Insufficient equipment	8 %
4.	Professional development	1.	Quickly visible results due to susceptibility to the influence of age	32 %
		2.	Novelties and curiosities	4 %
5.	Cooperation with the working and social environment	1.	Cooperation and help of other early childhood teachers	69 %
		2.	Cooperation and assistance of the professional service	34 %
		3.	Cooperation with parents as a difficulty	25 %

The competence of cooperation with the working and social environment stands out as the third most represented, with three separate categories.

The other two recognized competencies are professional development, and organization and management.

Table 2*Advantages and Benefits of Working with Toddlers*

<i>Types of competencies</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>BiH</i>		<i>Slovenia</i>		<i>BiH and Slovenia together</i>	
		<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
Effective teaching and working with children	Easier work compared to work in kindergarten groups (easier adaptation, simpler organization of activities, smaller number of children in the group, easier influence/direction of children)	19	37.25	17	42.5	36	39.56
	Quickly visible results due to susceptibility to the influence of age	11	21.57	18	45	29	31.87
Professional development	Novelties and curiosities			4	10	4	4,4
Communication and relationships	Cooperation and help from other early childhood teachers	32	62	31	77.5	63	69
	The warmth of relationships and attachment to children/of children	24	47.05	9	22.5	33	36.26
	Cooperation and assistance of the professional service	12	23.53	19	47.5	31	34
Cooperation with the working environment	Cooperation and help from other early childhood teachers	32	62	31	77.5	63	69
	Cooperation and assistance of the professional service	12	23.53	19	47.5	31	34

The most represented categories that indicate ease in working with toddlers are the cooperation and help of other early childhood teachers (statements of 69 % of participants) and the cooperation and help of the professional service (statements of 34 % of participants), which fall under the competencies of *cooperation with the working environment*, and *communication and relationships*. These findings indicate the exceptional importance of professional learning communities for the development of competencies, as indicated by the findings of the research by Labak et al. (2022). Moreover, in another study, Mohamed, Valcke, and Ve Wever (2017) point to the importance of mutual cooperation among early childhood teachers through the exchange of knowledge and experience for the development of their competencies.

The advantages of working with toddlers are also recognized when it comes to *communication and building relationships with children*. More than a third of the participants (36.26%) single out as an advantage the emphasized warmth of the relationship and attachment to the toddlers/of toddlers (47.05 % of the interviewed early childhood

teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina and 22.05% of the early childhood teachers from Slovenia). Moreover, in the quantitative evaluation of care and education in the Republic of Slovenia (Erčulj et al., 2008), early childhood teachers highly rated their own competence *I express a positive attitude towards the child*. Contemporary research indicates that the relationship, attachment and cooperation with toddlers develop spontaneously through various contacts while changing clothes (Belasko et al., 2019), feeding (Belza et al., 2019), physical touch, putting them to sleep, responding to the toddler's cry.

Early childhood teachers associate the advantages of working with toddlers with the competence of *effective teaching and working with children*. More than a third of participants (39%) declare that it is easier for them to implement care, educational work and teaching in the toddler group than with children of kindergarten age. They notice that younger children adapt more easily, the organization of activities is simpler, and it is easier to influence and direct younger children. The results of working with children are quickly visible due to children's susceptibility to influence (the category based on the statements of 31.87% of participants). This contributes to more successful teaching and work with toddlers, and makes it easier for the teacher to assess their competencies and to further develop and improve them.

Novelties and interesting things are an integral part of professional training and *professional development*, and represent the competence recognized as an advantage for working with toddlers (the statements observed in the answers of 4.4% of participants). The development of science and positive practice contributes to the need for professional training through lifelong learning, which has a positive effect on the development of competencies, as indicated by the results of research on educational practice in Slovenia (Retar & Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2017).

Early childhood teachers have the most difficulties with the competence of *effective teaching and working with toddlers* (Table 3). Almost one-third of the participants (30.77%) point to inadequate health care and reduced safety of children, which is directly reflected in the work in nurseries. Early childhood teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina single out this problem in particular (41.18%). The results of the SWOT analysis carried out in 2019 in Bosnia and Herzegovina also support these findings. They indicate the same problems, and the need for personnel such as pediatric nurses, pediatricians, isolation rooms, etc. (Šindić, 2019). The problem of unpreparedness and lack of training for working with toddlers was recognized by a third of early childhood teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina (33.33%), which is in line with the findings of other categories presented in the rest of this research (Table 4 and Table 5). The Slovenian participants are somewhat better prepared for working in toddler groups, but they also cite numerous obstacles to effective teaching and working with children. They mostly point to the problem of adaptation (20%), selection and adjustment of activities, as well as the health care and safety of children (17.5%). In order for the early childhood teacher to be successful, it is necessary to choose and adjust activities in accordance with the developmental needs and capabilities of the children, ensure health care, and adequately respond to the children's needs, as indicated by the results of numerous studies on working with the youngest (Belasko et al., 2019; Belza et al., 2019; Sagastui et al., 2020). Less than 8% of all participants declare that they have a problem with the inclusion of children with difficulties in the toddler group. The results of quantitative

research conducted with early childhood teachers in Slovenia (Erčulj et al., 2008) indicate the need for additional improvement in the competence of *recognizing children with special needs and adapting work in accordance with their needs*. Drlić (2021) observes that the legislation in the Republic of Slovenia is changing with the aim of supporting the inclusion of preschool children, which certainly facilitates the integration of children with difficulties into the regular program of preschool institutions.

Table 3

Difficulties in Working with Toddlers (Need to Improve Competencies)

Type of competencies	Category	BiH		Slovenia		BiH and Slovenia together	
		F	%	f	%	f	%
Effective teaching and working with children	Difficulties with health care and safety of children	21	41.18	7	17.5	28	30.77
	Unpreparedness and lack of training for working with toddlers	17	33.33	1	2.5	18	19.78
	The problem of choosing and adapting activities	11	8	7	17.5	18	19.78
	Adaptation as a difficulty	7	5	8	20	15	16.48
	Problems during inclusion	5	9.8	2	5	7	7.69
Organization and management	The diversity and size of the group as a difficulty	27	52.94	7	17.5	34	37.36
	Insufficient equipment	3	5.88	4	10	7	7.69
Cooperation with the social environment/ Communication and relationships	Cooperation with parents as a difficulty	9	17.65	14	35	23	25.27
Communication and relationships	Misunderstanding of children due to age	6	11.76	2	5	8	8.79

Early childhood teachers find the biggest obstacle to the development of *organizational and management* competencies in the number of children in the groups and the mixed age group (37.36%), with early childhood teachers from BiH leading the way, namely 52.94% of them. Similar results were found in research conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where early childhood teachers cite the number of children in the group as one of the significant obstacles to optimal work in nurseries (Šindić, 2019). The problem of insufficient equipment was also observed (a category that was recognized in the answers of 7.69% of participants).

The lack of competence in cooperation with *the social environment, and in communication and relationships* is primarily recognized by participants in cooperation with parents, namely 25.27% of them (35% of participants from Slovenia, and 17.65% of participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina).

While for the competence of *relationships and communication with toddlers*, more than a third of participants see advantages in the warmth of relationships and attachment to children/of the children; a smaller number of participants (8.79%) identify a problem in communication due to the misunderstanding of children on account of the age specificity. The statements of participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina (11.76%) are more numerous than the statements of Slovenian participants (5%). Based on these insights, it could be said that early childhood teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina focus more attention on analyzing the competence of communication and relations with toddlers from both a positive and a negative angle. The results of the study by Lipscomb et al. (2022) indicate that difficulties in building relationships with small children are additionally influenced by stress related to this specific type of work.

Table 4

Self-Assessment of the Early Childhood Teacher's Readiness to Work in the Nursery (Adequately Developed Competencies)

Category	BiH		Slovenia		BiH and Slovenia together	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
The importance of previous experience for the development of competencies	5	9.8	6	15	11	12.09
Early childhood teachers have no difficulties working in the toddler group	5	9.8	8	20	13	14.29

Based on the early childhood teachers' self-assessment of their readiness to work in nurseries, 12.09% of them (9.8% of early childhood teachers from BiH and 15% of early childhood teachers from Slovenia) indicate the importance of previous professional experience (Table 4). The results of other research on kindergarten practice carried out in different countries (BiH, Germany and Turkey) link the professional experience of early childhood teachers and the development of competencies (Barenthien et al., 2020; Partalo et al., 2022; Sucuoglu et al., 2014; Šindić and Pribišev Beleslin, 2019).

From the answers of the early childhood teachers, a category was singled out from which it is evident that a smaller number of early childhood teachers (14% of all interviewed early childhood teachers; 9.8% of early childhood teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20% of early childhood teachers from Slovenia) estimate that their readiness and competencies for working in nurseries are at an optimal level and that they have no difficulties during care and educational work (Table 4).

We classified the data on the preparation of early childhood teachers for working with toddlers during undergraduate studies into four subcategories (Table 5). We had at our disposal the answers of 83 participants who had graduated from the university. While two-thirds of participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina (66.67%) stated that the faculty had prepared them little or not at all for work in nurseries, especially concerning baby care, slightly less than two-thirds of participants from Slovenia (62.5%) stated

that the faculty prepared them well or moderately for work in nurseries. The results of the SWOT analysis carried out in BiH in 2019 also indicate a weaker preparation of undergraduate students for working with children up to three years of age compared to the preparation for working with children from three to six years of age (Šindić, 2019).

Table 5

Preparation for Work in the Toddler Group during Undergraduate Studies

	Subcategory	BiH		Slovenia		BiH and Slovenia together	
		<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Preparation during undergraduate studies for work in nurseries	Good	11	21.57	10	31.25	21	25.30
	Moderate	6	11.76	10	31.25	16	19.28
	Little	26	50.98	9	28.13	35	42.17
	None at all	8	15.69	3	9.38	11	13.25

Research findings indicate the need to modernize undergraduate studies for early childhood teachers in BiH with new content and/or courses to prepare future early childhood teachers for care and educational work with children up to three years of age. Although the situation is somewhat better in Slovenia, these findings are still far from ideal because 37.51% of the participants stated that their undergraduate studies had prepared them little or not at all for working in nurseries. That is why these findings could be relevant to modernizing the undergraduate study program for early childhood teachers with content related to the care and education of children up to three years of age in Slovenia.

4 Conclusion

The findings of this study point to the fact that early childhood teachers for toddlers do not assess their own competencies as optimally developed, nor do they consider themselves sufficiently qualified for work. Nine categories of difficulties and six categories of advantages and benefits related to their competencies were singled out. It can be seen that early childhood teachers give priority to the competencies of *effective teaching and working with children, and communication and relationships*, while the most developed competency is cooperation with the working environment which indicates the importance of professional learning communities. There is a need to enrich and modernize the undergraduate study program for early childhood teachers with contents related primarily to care, but also to the education of children up to three years of age in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Slovenia, and a need for a greater emphasis on professional training. These are also topics that further research could open up. The limitation of the study is that it is based only on the self-assessment of early childhood teachers, which reduces its objectivity.

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Ocenjevanje kompetenc vzgojiteljev za vzgojo otrok prvega starostnega obdobja

Posebnost zgodnjega otroštva zahteva poseben pristop k vzgoji majhnih otrok. Na oblikovanje sodobnih trendov v vzgoji otrok prvega starostnega obdobja so vplivali teoretični in metodološki pristopi Montessori (Kordeš Demšar, 2007; Mavrič, 2019; Montessori, 2003), Piklerov pristop (Balesko idr., 2019; Belza idr., 2019; Sagastui idr., 2020) in Gerberov pristop (Hammond, 2021). Multidisciplinarni pogled na vzgojo otrok prvega starostnega obdobja kaže na potrebo po visoko razvitih kompetencah vzgojiteljev in vzgojiteljic. Pri opredelitvi kompetenc smo se naslonili na študijo Erčulj in drugi (2008). Izhajajoč iz teh spoznanj mora imeti kompetenten vzgojitelj razvite naslednje kompetence: komunikacija in odnosi, učinkovito poučevanje, organizacija in vodenje, sodelovanje z delovnim in družbenim okoljem in profesionalni razvoj. Ob tem pa se mora strokovno izpopolnjevati in spoštovati poklicno etiko (Erčulj idr., 2008; Mohamed, Valcke in Ve Wever, 2017). Želeli smo raziskati in razumeti dožemanje vzgojiteljev in vzgojiteljic o lastnih kompetencah, potrebnih pri delu z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja.

Zastavili smo si raziskovalno vprašanje: Katere kompetence vzgojiteljev prepoznajo kot bistvene za delo v skupini otrok prvega starostnega obdobja in kako jih ocenjujejo glede na razvitost in način pridobivanja?

Cilj te empirične kvalitativne študije z elementi primerjalnega pristopa (Merriam in Tisdell, 2015) je raziskati, pogledati in razumeti perspektivo vzgojiteljev o lastnih kompetencah za delo z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja v vrtcih v Bosni in Hercegovini in Republiki Sloveniji. V raziskavo je bilo vključenih 91 anketirancev, in sicer vzgojiteljev s končano dodiplomsko izobrazbo za vzgojitelja ($N_v = 83$) in pomočnika vzgojitelja s končano srednjo šolo ($N_{pv} = 8$). Večina anketiranih je žensk (90 žensk in en moški). Anketiranci so zaposleni v vrtcih v Bosni in Hercegovini (Republika Srbska) ($N_b = 51$) in Republiki Sloveniji ($N_s = 40$). Najmlajši anketiranec je star 24 let, najstarejši pa 57 let, povprečna starost anketirancev je 36,5 let. Anketiranci so z otroki v skupinah otrok prvega starostnega obdobja delali povprečno 3,5 leta (anketiranci iz Bosne in Hercegovine 3 leta, anketiranci iz Slovenije pa 4 leta). Za zbiranje podatkov o izkušnjah vzgojiteljev in njihovi samooceni lastnih kompetenc smo uporabili strukturiran spletni intervju v pisni različici s skupno 15 vprašanji. Prvi del intervjuja je vseboval devet vprašanj za zbiranje demografskih in drugih osnovnih podatkov o anketirancih. Drugi del s šestimi odprtimi vprašanji je bil namenjen zbiranju podatkov o izkušnjah vzgojiteljev pri delu z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja in samooceni lastnih kompetenc.

S pilotno raziskavo (predraziskavo) z 10 anketiranci v Bosni in Hercegovini smo pridobili podatke, ki so nam omogočili določitev nekaterih elementov veljavnosti in zanesljivosti raziskovalnega instrumenta (Merriam in Tisdell, 2015; Morse idr., 2002). Podatke, pomembne za raziskavo, smo zbrali leta 2022 s spoštovanjem etičnega kodeksa, prostovoljnosti in anonimnosti anketirancev.

Za analizo podatkov je bila uporabljena tematska analiza vsebine odgovorov anketirancev (Vilg, 2016) glede na teoretično postavko o kompetencah vzgojiteljev in njihovih tipologijah (Erčulj, idr., 2008; Mohamed, Valcke in Ve Wever, 2017).

Iz odgovorov vzgojiteljev pri delu z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja je razvidno, da imajo vzgojitelji bolj razvite kompetence učinkovitega poučevanja in dela z otroki ter komunikacije in odnosov, najbolj razvita kompetenca pa je sodelovanje z delovnim okoljem, kar kaže na pomen strokovnih učnih skupnosti.

Ugotovitve te raziskave kažejo, da vzgojitelji svojih kompetenc pri delu z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja ne ocenjujejo kot optimalno razvitih.

161 izjav anketiranih se nanaša na oceno težav pri delu z otroki v vrtcu, povezanih z nerazvitostjo kompetenc, 196 izjav pa na prednosti, povezane z razvitostjo kompetenc. Lipscomb idr. (2022) v svoji raziskavi z vzgojitelji, ki delajo v vrtcu, navajajo, da je zaznavanje lastnih sposobnosti vzgojiteljev za delo z majhnimi otroki povezano s povečanim stresom. Na podlagi ugotovitev avtorji (prav tam) izpostavljajo potrebo po strokovni podpori, ki bi vzgojiteljem omogočila, da se ocenijo kot bolj kompetentne.

Kategorije, ki kažejo na težave, so: težave z zdravstveno skrbjo in varnostjo otrok (trditve zastopa 30,77% anketiranih); nepripravljenost in neusposobljenost za delo z otroki v zgodnjem otroštvu (trditve zastopa 19,78% anketiranih); problem izbire in prilagajanja dejavnosti (trditve zastopa 19,78% anketiranih); težave med vključitvijo (trditve zastopa 7,69% anketiranih); prilagajanje kot težava (trditve zastopa 16,48% anketiranih); kombiniranost in številčnost skupine kot težava (trditve zastopa 37,36% anketiranih); nezadostna opremljenost (trditve zastopa 7,69% anketiranih); sodelovanje s starši kot težava (navedbe zastopa 25,27% anketiranih); nerazumevanje otrok zaradi njihove starosti (trditve zastopa 8,79% anketiranih).

Da bi bil vzgojitelj uspešen, je treba izbirati in prilagajati dejavnosti v skladu z razvojnimi potrebami in zmožnostmi otrok, skrbeti za zdravje in se ustrezno odzivati na potrebe otrok, na kar kažejo rezultati številnih raziskav na področju dela z najmlajšimi. Raziskovalni rezultati Belasko idr. (2019), Belza idr. (2019), Perko idr. (2018) in Sagastui idr. (2020) poudarjajo, da je za uspešnost vzgojitelja treba izbirati in prilagajati dejavnosti glede na razvojne potrebe in zmožnosti otrok, skrbeti za zdravje in se ustrezno odzivati na potrebe otrok, kar je 30,77% anketirancev v tej raziskavi označilo za težavo. Rezultati kvantitativne raziskave, opravljene z vzgojitelji predšolskih otrok v Sloveniji (Erčulj idr. 2008), kažejo na potrebo po dodatnem izboljšanju kompetence prepoznavanja otrok s posebnimi potrebami in prilagajanja dela njihovim potrebam, kar je v korelaciji z našimi ugotovitvami. Drljič (2021) ugotavlja, da se zakonodaja v Republiki Sloveniji spreminja z namenom podpore vključevanju predšolskih otrok, kar naj bi vzgojiteljem zagotovo olajšalo vključevanje otrok s težavami v redni program vrtcev. Nekateri avtorji opažajo potrebo po senzibilizaciji zaposlenih v vrtcih o povečani ranljivosti staršev otrok prvega starostnega obdobja, njihovih potrebah po poudarjeni socialni in zdravstveni oskrbi ter po pedagoški in svetovalni podpori pri navajanju na starševstvo, kar bi prispevalo h krepitvi kompetenc vzgojiteljev za sodelovanje s starši otrok prvega starostnega obdobja. Perko, Cugmas in Pšunder (2019) ugotavljajo, da je pomembno, da odrasli razumejo majhnega otroka in njegove razvojne potrebe, da prepoznajo in razumejo njegove težave in strahove ter se znajo nanje ustrezno odzvati, kar bi zagotovo prispevalo k boljši komunikaciji in odnosu odrasel–otrok. Rezultati študije Lipscomb idr. (2022) navajajo, da na težave pri vzpostavljanju odnosov z majhnimi otroki dodatno vpliva stres, povezan s to specifično vrsto dela.

Najbolj zastopane kategorije, ki kažejo na lahkotnost pri delu z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja, so: sodelovanje in pomoč drugih vzgojiteljev (trditve zastopa 69 % anketirancev) ter sodelovanje in pomoč strokovne službe (navedbe zastopa 34 % anketirancev). Te ugotovitve kažejo na pomen poklicnih učnih skupnosti za razvoj kompetenc, na kar kažejo ugotovitve raziskave Labak idr. (2022). Tudi v drugi študiji Mohamed, Valcke in Ve Wever (2017) poudarjajo pomen medsebojnega sodelovanja skozi izmenjavo znanja in izkušenj za razvoj njihovih kompetenc.

Kategorije, ki nakazujejo prednosti dela z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja, so: lažje delo v primerjavi z delom z otroki drugega starostnega obdobja (to je z otroki med tretjim in šestim letom starosti), (lažje prilagajanje, enostavnejša organizacija dejavnosti, manjše število otrok v skupini, lažje vplivanje/usmerjanje otrok) (navedbe 39 % anketirancev); hitro vidni rezultati zaradi dovednosti za vpliv starosti (trditve zastopa 31,87 % anketirancev); novosti in zanimivosti (trditve zastopa 4,4 % anketirancev); toplina odnosa in navezanost otrok/na otroke (trditve zastopa 36,26 % anketirancev).

Razvoj znanosti prispeva k potrebi po strokovnem usposabljanju skozi vseživljenjsko učenje, kar pozitivno vpliva na razvoj kompetenc, na kar kažejo rezultati raziskave izobraževalne prakse v Sloveniji (Retar in Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2017), ki je skladna z našimi ugotovitvami.

Podobno kot v naši raziskavi in v kvantitativnem vrednotenju vzgoje in izobraževanja v Republiki Sloveniji (Erčulj idr., 2008) so vzgojitelji visoko ocenili lastno usposobljenost, s čimer izražajo pozitiven odnos do otroka. Raziskave kažejo, da se odnos, navezanost in sodelovanje z otroki razvijajo spontano skozi različne stike med preoblačenjem (Belasco idr., 2019), hranjenjem (Belza idr., 2019), fizičnim dotikom, uspavanjem in odzivom na otrokov jok. Raziskava Sagastui idr. (2020) nakazuje specifičnost odnosa in komunikacije z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja v kontekstu proste igre za podporo avtonomije in samoodločanja.

Na podlagi samoocene vzgojiteljev o pripravljenosti za delo z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja jih 12,09 % navaja pomen predhodnih poklicnih izkušenj. Podobne ugotovitve najdemo tudi v raziskavah v Bosni in Hercegovini, Nemčiji in Turčiji (Barenthien idr., 2020; Partalo idr., 2022; Sucuoglu idr., 2014; Šindić in Pribišev Beleslin, 2019).

Dve tretjini anketirancev iz Bosne in Hercegovine (66,67 %) in več kot tretjina anketirancev iz Slovenije (37,51 %) je navedlo, da jih je dodiplomski študij malo ali sploh nič pripravil na delo z otroki prvega starostnega obdobja. Tudi rezultati SWOT analize, izvedene v Bosni in Hercegovini leta 2019, kažejo na slabšo pripravljenost dodiplomskih študentov za delo z otroki do treh let v primerjavi s pripravljenostjo za delo z otroki od treh do šestih let (Šindić, 2019).

Najbolj zastopana kompetenca je učinkovito poučevanje in delo z otroki ter komunikacija in odnosi, najbolj razvita kompetenca pa sodelovanje z delom v okolju, kar kaže na pomen strokovnih učnih skupnosti.

Pomembna ugotovitev našega dela je potreba po obogatitvi in posodobitvi dodiplomskega študijskega programa za vzgojitelje z vsebinami, ki se nanašajo na vzgojo, predvsem na vzgojo otrok do tretjega leta starosti v obeh državah. Izsledki raziskave kažejo na potrebo po dodatnem strokovnem izpopolnjevanju na tem področju. V nadaljnjih raziskavah bi se bilo smiselno bolj ukvarjati s temi problemi, ki odpirajo nova

raziskovalna vprašanja. Omejitev študije je, da temelji le na samooceni vzgojiteljev, kar zmanjšuje objektivnost dobljenih rezultatov.

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