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## Preschool Study as Preparation of Future Preschool Educators to Cooperate with Parents

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2015.41.3.13

### Abstract

In the article the authors analysed cooperation of preschool teachers with parents. It is a complex area of operation for preschool teachers, which requires communication skills, management of potential conflict situations, approaches to identification and management of different family situations, as well as approaches to coping with stress and working with different people. During the research on the population of students and preschool teachers (616), the authors also found that this is an area which the students rated as difficult, expecting problems with it at the beginning of their career, whereas in-service preschool teachers estimated that they did not have many problems when interacting with their pupils' parents.

**Keywords:** *communication, employees, preschool, study programme*

### Introduction

The preschool teacher's cooperation with parents is a complex task which requires the teacher's communication and rhetoric skills, management of potential conflict situations and approaches to identifying and facing various family situations as well as coping with the stress caused by working with different people. As Teršek (2002) points out, the teacher must also consider the fact that parents are different; so are their desires, needs and attitudes toward the kindergarten. He<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The pronoun "he" is used for the preschool teacher.

must give them the opportunity to express themselves in the framework of their rights and responsibilities.

Cooperation with parents as an important aspect of preschool education quality is covered in the quality indicators that were already discussed in 1999 by Woodhead (1999), who divided them into three levels: *entry level indicators* (building, equipment, employees), *process level indicators* (relationships between children, style of upbringing) and *exit level indicators* (child health, school performance).

All of them should be included in preschool study and it is expected that students get some information about them. However, as stressed by Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja, Kavčič, as cited in Poljanšek (2002), in Slovenia it was decided to introduce three quality levels: structural, indirect and procedural. For the purposes of our discussion, we will mostly focus on the *indirect level*, which relates to the subjective conditions and options under which preschool education in kindergarten takes place.

The indirect level indicators represent interpersonal relationships that are essential for communication and cooperation between the teacher and parents, but also for ensuring quality, so it comes as no surprise that for professionals and parents of preschool children they are often more important than structural and procedural indicators or quality level, as they represent the parent as an active participant in the educational process. This leads to a change of roles and tasks for preschool teachers, but also to a different relationship between them and parents, relating to emphasizing mutual cooperation for the benefit of children. Just like the relationship between preschool teachers, their assistants and other co-workers, Batistič Zorec (2004) emphasizes, the relationship between preschool teachers and family/parents has changed as well. Instead of a paternalistic attitude of kindergarten toward the family, the Curriculum for Kindergartens today emphasizes the rights of the parent. One of the goals of the Curriculum (1999) is cooperation between parents and preschool teachers and it relates to the principle of cooperation with parents, according to which parents have a right to a constant exchange of information and a detailed conversation about the child with the preschool teacher and his assistant.

One of the causes of cooperation between parents and preschool teachers is that they do not affect the child only through education procedures, but also through their competence, trust and happiness they express in their interpersonal relationships (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 1996). The child feels and perceives these relationships between parents and teachers regardless of whether they are encouraged or avoided. If the relationship is good, the child perceives it and

this benefits his development (Pirnat, 1994, p. 81). Also, it is impossible not to cooperate with parents of preschool children, as children are extremely attached to their families. Integrating parents into kindergarten life should not be seen as a special feature of kindergarten or preschool teachers, but as an essential part of life (Vonta, 1998).

Good cooperation requires good communication, which is a basis for developing successful interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal communication includes intentional and unintentional, conscious and subconscious, planned and unplanned sending, receiving and processing of messages in direct interpersonal relationships between people, whereby they exchange their ideas and emotions based on a common system of symbols (Hogard & Roger, 2006). Communication between the preschool teacher and parents must be based on mutual trust and voluntarism; but as Kottler (2001) emphasizes, communication with parents is one of the most difficult and most sensitive tasks of the preschool teacher. Finnegan (2002) explains that communication is the basic element of daily life in all its spheres, like family, kindergarten, school, work environment and the broader living space. In all these spheres, communication and relationships allow us to develop and maintain our personality, interpersonal relations, interpersonal adjustment and cooperation.

Interpersonal relationships are closely related to communication. Regardless of differences in views, experience and expectations, the preschool teacher will strive for a sincere and open dialogue with parents. This depends on his *communication competence*, which is closely related to his views, values, expectations and self-image (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2005). Personality traits can be important as well, since an insecure and weak teacher would make mutual understanding with parents harder. In addition to all that, Lepičnik Vodopivec (1996, 2000, 2005) stresses the importance of the so-called *reflecting communication*, which is based on equality of the preschool teacher and parents. Its basic elements are speaking and listening, considering the received information and reporting about the results. Such communication enables joint searching for solutions, as both partners establish a dialogue through which they constantly exchange their thoughts, emotions, ideas and feedback.

Since cooperation with parents is one of the most important fields of operation for the future preschool teacher, one would justifiably expect that this field is paid special attention during studies. However, analysis of preschool education study programmes in Slovenia showed that contents related to cooperation and communication with parents are, in most cases, offered in a concise form as an optional subject. The Preschool Education study programme (Predšolska vzgoja

b.d.a) at the Faculty of Education in Maribor offers such a concise optional subject called Pedagogic Communication and Partnership between Kindergarten, School and the Family. The Preschool Education study programme (Predšolska vzgoja b.d.b) at the Faculty of Education of University of Ljubljana offers a similar concise optional subject called Interpersonal Communication, and another similar optional subject offered by the Faculty of Education at the University of Primorska in the framework of the Preschool Education programme (Predšolska vzgoja (VS) b.d.) is called Social Skills in Working with Children and Parents.

However, in the framework of mandatory subjects, there is no comprehensive, cohesive content or suitable subject that would prepare students for this very important aspect of the preschool teacher's work. In certain places (based on a more detailed review of individual mandatory subjects) there are certain broad indications of this topic as a part of the planned content, but it ultimately depends on the individual professor if and how much attention he will devote to this segment.

That is why we were interested in what students of preschool education and in-service preschool teachers think about potential problems in communication in general, and with parents and children in particular. Some findings concerning their understanding and perceptions about that are presented below.

## **Objectives**

The objective of the empirical study was to analyse potential problems in communication generally, and particularly with parents and children that the respondents expect during their first employment.

We were particularly interested in differences between backgrounds (students, teachers) and the respondents' status (beginners, established, experienced).

## **Research Methodology**

*The research methods* used were the descriptive and the causal non-experimental methods of empirical pedagogical research.

Based on the purpose of the task, we used a quantitative research procedure. When answering the research question we adopted an extensive approach at the faculty and in the kindergarten, using a questionnaire that allowed us to reach a large and representative sample of students and preschool teachers.

*The research sample* in the extensive part of the study at the inference statistics level contained a random sample of a hypothetical population. It included 616 respondents – 296 students and 320 preschool teachers.

All the respondents, both the students as well as preschool teachers, were categorized as either beginners, or established, or experienced at their level of education or employment. Among the students, beginners were those enrolled into the first year of the course, established were those in the second year, and experienced were those in the third year of their studies. For the preschool teachers, beginners were those with less than 5 years of work experience, established had 6–10 years of work experience and experienced were those with 10 or more years of work experience. Based on the data, the experienced group (47.9%) was the largest and the established group (23.5%) the smallest; the beginners made up 28.6% of the sample (both the students and teachers).

*We gathered data* through a questionnaire.

The data that was collected with the use of the questionnaire was computer processed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

For closed questions we defined the absolute ( $f$ ) and percentage ( $f\%$ ) frequencies, so we could present the obtained data in a table form. Based on the relationship between these variables we conducted the  $\chi^2$ -test. In the case of the low or empirical null distribution of frequencies or when these frequencies were lower than 5, we combined the related categories.

When processing the data that was obtained through estimation scales, we pondered the descriptively expressed evaluation levels in the following way: yes with a value of 3, partly with a value of 2 and no with a value of 1. These values were used to calculate the arithmetic mean for each statement individually. Individual statements were ranked based on arithmetic means and compared with each other. For the analysis of differences in individual statements in regard to the backgrounds we used the Mann-Whitneyev U-analysis and for the analysis of differences in individual statements in regard to the respondents' status we used the Kruskal-Wallis analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

Table 1 shows that at the beginning of their professional career the respondents do not expect larger problems in communication with children (1.29) – 76.9% of them answered 'No' (we do not expect problems in communication with children) – and maybe slightly more in communication with parents (1.55). They

were most worried about inadequate interpersonal communication (1.62) and bad interpersonal relationships (1.61), which definitely are an important aspect in cooperation with parents (and other persons). According to the majority of the respondents, these potential problems could be considered to be temporary or a completely normal and acceptable fear that occurs during a major change in life, e.g. first employment. During such events many individuals become insecure and doubt their (professional) skills, mostly because they want to prove themselves and not because it counts as a completely real experience. At the same time, these findings should not be ignored or taken for granted. They are an excellent indicator to those working in the field of education of young people and students, which areas still require more work to gain suitable and sufficient professional skills and, even more importantly, to be aware of their knowledge and skills and know how to use them under different circumstances.

At the next stage we looked at potential differences in the perception of potential problems during the first employment based on the respondent's background and status.

Based on the Mann-Whitney U-test, statistically significant differences related to the background appear in all statements.

According to all the statements, the students were more likely to detect certain problems in their first employment. More students (359.65) than preschool teachers (261.18) estimated that there would be inadequate interpersonal communication or that there would be bad interpersonal relationships (students: 379.85; preschool teachers: 242.50); the students also expected problems in communication with parents (378.79) and children (353.93). Thus, they were worried about all potential problems that could occur in a team, in an organisation or at work, (e.g., maths, science, music, etc.), not so much in actual communication. Generally, they were concerned about problems related to practice, i.e. practical work. Even though they have training in kindergarten every semester, it is focused more on specific subjects (for parents – they just observe this part). This is also in line with findings by certain other authors (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 1996; Peček, 2003; Vonta, 2005; etc.), who found that an individual's professional development, which includes skills for successful interpersonal communication and cooperation with others (parents), greatly depends on interpersonal relationships, connections, cooperation and help.

These results, according to which the students are more concerned about problems than the preschool teachers, are a good reason for considering the situation of the respondents at the time when they filled in the questionnaire. This primarily refers to the fact that the teachers were already employed at the time they partic-

**Table 1.** Number (f) and structural percentage (f %) of the respondents according to the answer to the question: "Which problems do you worry about during your first employment?" ranked based on average marks.

| Potential problems                      |     | Yes<br>(3) | Partly<br>(2) | No<br>(1) | Total | Average<br>mark |
|---|-----|------------|---------------|-----------|-------|-----------------|
| Inadequate interpersonal communication  | f   | 83         | 219           | 314       | 616   | 1.62            |
|   | f % | 13.5       | 35.6          | 51.0      | 100   |                 |
| Bad interpersonal relationship          | f   | 102        | 173           | 341       | 616   | 1.61            |
|   | f % | 16.6       | 28.1          | 55.4      | 100   |                 |
| Problems in communication with parents  | f   | 68         | 205           | 343       | 616   | 1.55            |
|   | f % | 11.0       | 33.3          | 55.7      | 100   |                 |
| Problems in communication with children | f   | 36         | 106           | 474       | 616   | 1.29            |
|   | f % | 5.8        | 17.2          | 76.9      | 100   |                 |

**Table 2.** Results of the Mann-Whitney U-test of differences in statements from T<sub>1</sub> to T<sub>4</sub> based on respondent background.

| Potential problems                      | Background | $\bar{R}$ | U       | P     |
|---|------------|-----------|---------|-------|
| Inadequate interpersonal communication  | Students   | 359.65    | -7.576  | 0.000 |
|   | Teachers   | 261.18    |         |       |
| Bad interpersonal relationship          | Students   | 379.85    | -10.676 | 0.000 |
|   | Teachers   | 242.50    |         |       |
| Problems in communication with parents  | Students   | 378.79    | -10.613 | 0.000 |
|   | Teachers   | 243.48    |         |       |
| Problems in communication with children | Students   | 353.93    | -8.298  | 0.000 |
|   | Teachers   | 266.48    |         |       |

ipated in the study and they already had concrete experience, while the students did not. Therefore, it should be assumed that during their first employment the teachers had the same worries or even greater ones than the students now, but that those fears were somehow dispersed with experience; and since the teachers' evaluations were made with some distance and with much more experience, they did not consider those problems as worrying as the students did. At the same time, this assumption leads to the following conclusion (as already assumed or

guessed): such an extent of worry about potential problems is probably only fear and excitement about new experience, but also a cause for reflection on potential changes or updates to Preschool Education study programmes.

**Table 3.** Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test of differences in statements from T<sub>1</sub> to T<sub>4</sub> based on respondent status.

| Potential problems                      | Status      | $\bar{R}$ | $\chi$ | g | P     |
|---|-------------|-----------|--------|---|-------|
| Inadequate interpersonal communication  | Beginners   | 325.98    | 6.104  | 2 | 0.047 |
|   | Established | 321.13    |        |   |       |
|   | Experienced | 291.86    |        |   |       |
| Bad interpersonal relationship          | Beginners   | 326.47    | 17.991 | 2 | 0.000 |
|   | Established | 343.14    |        |   |       |
|   | Experienced | 280.75    |        |   |       |
| Problems in communication with parents  | Beginners   | 336.17    | 13.678 | 2 | 0.001 |
|   | Established | 324.04    |        |   |       |
|   | Experienced | 284.35    |        |   |       |
| Problems in communication with children | Beginners   | 340.77    | 26.632 | 2 | 0.000 |
|   | Established | 325.87    |        |   |       |
|   | Experienced | 280.71    |        |   |       |

With the use of the Kruskal-Wallis test, statistically significant differences were found. They were identified in all the statements; inadequate interpersonal communication ( $P = 0.047$ ), bad interpersonal relationships ( $P = 0.000$ ), problems in communication with parents ( $P = 0.001$ ) and problems in communication with children ( $P = 0.000$ ).

In communication, which includes communication with parents and children, as well as suitable interpersonal communication, large differences were identified based on respondent status: the beginners tend to perceive problems more often. In other words, the beginners (325.98) are more likely than the established (321.13) and the experienced (291.86) to expect first employment problems in inadequate interpersonal communication. Also, the beginners (336.17) are more likely than the established (324.04) and the experienced (284.35) to expect first employment problems in communication with parents. However, in work atmosphere, which includes bad interpersonal relationships, it is the established (343.14) who most often listed problems during first employment.

While the beginners perceive communication problems as the largest among potential problems, the established are mostly concerned about bad working



atmosphere, which is extremely important for our perception and operation in relationships with others (including parents of children). Such results are extremely interesting and point to two things particularly: both during the studies and new employment the beginners perceive the largest problems in communication and establishing contacts. We agree that this could be legitimate consideration, when we enter relationships with new people in a previously unknown environment and can work as a defence mechanism, to the extent that this concern and anxiety do not last for a longer period of time. However, another thing that was revealed was that the established, i.e. the individuals who already operate in a new environment and have become familiar with the work and people, consider work atmosphere as the largest problem. Work atmosphere is a prerequisite for successful and quality operation of the kindergarten as an institution, which Peček (2003) refers to as a “learning organisation”. Its basis is the culture of cooperation, which includes cooperative relationships between employees, cooperation in planning kindergarten life and work, but also a sense of group membership.

Based on these results we can (again) state that they are most concerned about problems related to practice, i.e. practical work, especially the parts which require communication skills, management of potential conflict situations, approaches to identification and management of different family situations, as well as approaches to coping with stress and working with different people.

## **Conclusion**

In recent years many steps have been made in preschool education toward better quality of both university studies and education in kindergartens, including the professionalism of preschool teachers. Through various formal and informal forms of cooperation between kindergarten/preschool teachers with parents of preschool children we brought the kindergarten and the family – the preschool child’s most important environments – closer to each other.

This posed a critical question: To what extent should future preschool teachers be prepared for this important aspect of their work, namely communication and cooperation with parents? Based on the findings of our empirical study we conclude that students may in fact obtain some knowledge and insight into this field, which shows that some professors devote some attention to this field in the framework of their lectures. However, we find that this area, unless the student attends optional subjects or lectures on this topic, is more or less left to students’ own devices or individual research.

Further research is needed on communication skills of future preschool educators related to approaches to identifying and dealing with different parents and family situations.

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