

Chapter 15

Contemporary Challenges and Preschool Teachers’ Education in Croatia: The Evaluation of the New Study Program of Early/Preschool Care and Education at Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of the new graduate study program Early and Preschool Care and Education (EPCE) was conducted recently in Croatia. Preschool teachers and graduate students were asked about their motivation for enrolling, the level of competencies developed during their study, and the predictive power of three significantly connected motives in relation to those competencies. Statistical analysis revealed highly positive perception of relevant competences gained. This finding confirmed the hypothesis that continuing professional development through formal higher education contributes significantly to improved preschool teachers’ performance while coping with changing and growing job demands. Moreover, subjects demonstrated highly intrinsic motivation for enrolling. Extrinsic motives were indicative of a more negative, while intrinsic motivation led to more positive, perception of learning outcomes and gained competencies. Overall, the evaluation was highly positive and the findings confirmed the importance of satisfying the professional needs of preschool teachers.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7244-4.ch015

INTRODUCTION

Recent theories concerning child development and studies in the field of developmental neuroscience (Gopnik et al., 2003) were utilised in preparing students to become quality preschool teachers. The role of preschool teachers has been changed dramatically in recent years (Bowman et al., 2001; IOM & NRC, 2012; Jacobson, 2009a; Tobin et al., 2004). Contrary to 'just looking after the kids' as well as in contrast with working methods employed before, today's preschool teachers actively listen and respond to children's thoughts and feelings, observe their activities and take account of their actions, while trying to find the appropriate procedures to assist children's development (Rinaldi, 2006). One preschool teacher believes that:

Our job does not present only preparation for one joint activity that shall be carried out during the day and over anymore, for what we have been educated at the university. Therefore, I consider it necessary to immediately make changes within college programs for preschool teachers and their duration for to be prolonged, otherwise new generations of kids will know more than their preschool teachers (Vujičić, 2011, p. 80).

New developmental theories suggest that a rather different approach in the education of future preschool teachers is required. In addition to developing their knowledge and skills, professional development courses should reflect the role of preschool teacher as a researcher. This role has been perceived as the one in which preschool teachers take the initiative to create, rather than consume new knowledge and new practices (Hopkins, 2001). Contemporary work in the institution of early and preschool education requires that preschool teachers make decisions, build professionalism by encouraging research and collaborative habits during all phases of preschool educator training (Kipper & Mischke, 2008). This

is important to ensure that teachers are not merely the mean of knowledge transfer.

The theoretical underpinning of this chapter is based on the work of such contemporary researchers as Fullan (1993, 1999, 2007), Elliot (1998), Bruner (2000), Stoll & Fink (2000), Datnow et al. (2002), Senge et al. (2003), Gardner (2005), Vujičić (2011) and Whitebook et al. (2012). They suggest that access to professional development of preschool teachers should be based on joint research and understanding of the complex phenomena that arise directly from educational practice. It is particularly important therefore, to reflect on the organisation of the academic education of future preschool teachers and how this provides for the: a) contemporary and dynamic roles of preschool teachers; b) new paradigm of early and preschool care and education based on changing relationships between adults and children; c) co-construction of curriculum based on the idea of reflexive practitioner educator; and d) the current perception of kindergarten as a learning organisation. All of these preschool teachers' properties were taken into account while new graduate study program of *Early and Preschool care and Education* at the University of Rijeka was developed. Therefore, the main research question that guided the evaluation of this graduate study program refers to program's usefulness for preschool practice and work in Croatia.

Development of Graduate study program: Early and Preschool Care and Education (EPCE)

The Faculty for Teacher Education at University of Rijeka initiated the graduate study program "Early and Preschool education and Care" (EPCE) in the academic year 2010-2011 when the first cohort of students was enrolled. This initiative put forward the University of Rijeka as the first one in Croatia to provide the graduate level of academic education for preschool teachers. The development of this academic degree could provide increased

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