

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF SOME TEACHER COMPETENCIES FOR WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of this study is to define teacher competencies and some specific differences in self-assessment with regard to the completion of studies according to the new or the old curriculum. Efforts were also made to gain insight into the specific deficiencies of the competencies related to the integrated education and training of children with developmental disabilities.

Methodology. The research was conducted on a sample of 212 regular primary school teachers who dealt with children with disabilities in their work. A questionnaire constructed for the purposes of this research was used. Previously, a pilot study was conducted. Participants were divided into two groups. One group of teachers who were educated according to the old program and teachers who were educated according to the new program in the broad context of working with children with disabilities.

Results. The obtained results indicate differences between the observed groups and the need for continuous (self) assessments of teachers' responsibilities to enable students with disabilities to learn and thrive in line with their abilities as well as to find alternative ways to meet their different needs in a wider sense. Also, teachers are aware of the need for continuous training in this area. These findings have contributions in the scientific and practical sense.

Key words: students with developmental disabilities, competencies, teachers, self-assessment, lifelong education



INTRODUCTION

In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competencies are, among others, responsibility and autonomy of the individual. Those competencies indicate the ability to apply knowledge, skills, as well as personal, social, and methodological abilities in the workplace or during learning, both in private and professional development. The key competencies are those which are necessary for all individuals for personal confirmation and development, active citizenship, social integration, and employment (European Parliament, 2006).

A person can be defined (Kaslow, 2004) as qualified to perform a particular job, and the definition of competence itself includes motivation and action to achieve some degree of qualification. Competencies refer to the ability of an individual to understand and perform certain tasks adequately and efficiently, in accordance with the expectations people have of him/her as a professional qualified in a certain area.

In recent years, in regular education, the schools are facing new challenges in working with students with disabilities (Đuranović, Klasnić, & Lapat, 2013; Bouillet & Kudek Mirošević, 2015; Nketsia, 2016). Numerous questions and dilemmas are emerging that require a scientific and professional reflection of all participants in the educational process, as well as other subjects which are directly or indirectly associated with these challenges (Đuranović, Klasnić & Lapat, 2013).

Research indicates (Gallagher & Malone, 2009; Milenović, 2011; Ivančić & Stančić, 2013; Zrilić, 2013) that many teachers feel that they are not sufficiently prepared to support students with disabilities in regular education. They have many dilemmas, for example, regarding professional competencies, motivation, adequate professional and other support etc. Also, the research of Zrilić and Marin (2019) on the development of professional competencies of Croatian teachers from their own perspective, shows how teachers consider themselves competent to work in a modern school and strive for continuous improvement and lifelong learning, because they have no knowledge about all the developmental disabilities. This is particularly important given that the level of support for individualised teaching methods for students with disabilities is closely related to teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of disadvantaged students into the regular education system (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014).

On the other hand, some authors (Smole & Vršnik Perše, 2018; Radetić-Paić, 2018; Zrilić & Marin, 2019) came up with conclusions which indicate that a relatively large number of teachers still pointed to the problem of insufficient personal knowledge in the field of work with students with special needs as well as developmental disabilities in primary school. They conclude that teachers and professional associates should be more involved, both in the problem of identification and a systematic additional further education and advanced training. Also, they state that teachers point out difficulties in teaching when it comes to introducing innovations to work with students with disabilities.

Igrić (2015) states that in the beginning, there is uncertainty and resistance among teachers, especially those who meet students with disabilities in their classroom for the first time. Over time, teachers gain a sense of self-confidence and professional competence not only in lower education but also in higher grades (Sadler, 2013).

It can be concluded that the education of students with disabilities requires a change of the role of a teacher in developing programs and strategies for students with disabilities as well as the availability and cooperation with the educational rehabilitator (Igrić, 2015).

Teachers should also have specific competencies (Vizek Vidović, 2009), which are particularly important in planning and implementing individualised approaches to work with students with disabilities. In this context, different competencies are important such as dedication to encouraging student achievement and progress, development and support of learning strategies and counselling of students and parents. Also, it is important, among others, to create a learning-friendly environment with the possibility of applying what has been learned. At the end it is important to adapt the curriculum to the specific context of education. In inclusive education of children with special needs, the role of teachers is crucial, because they take care of the inclusive climate in the classroom and proper teaching with adaptations in the process of teaching and learning (Kovač, Ščuka, & Čangran, 2017).

Teachers need to be reflexive practitioners who know certain methods of teaching or activities that can stimulate the creativity of their students, create a better contribution to personalised learning and acquiring new skills (*The Strategy of Professional Training for the Professional Development of Educational Workers, 2014-2020*). Namely, studies in the educational practice (Kovač, Ščuka, & Čangran, 2017; Baguisa & Ang-Manaig, 2019) found that the quality of the educational process depends on the manifestation of teachers' professional competencies that significantly contribute to the way students behave, which includes knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to integrated education. Teachers must avoid prejudices, manage their own expectations for children with disabilities, and focus on positive assessment of strong areas of children with disabilities in different areas. Finally, a change of focus by teachers is needed by incorporating playful and concrete activities into their methodological practices, based on the suggestions issued by all participants in this process (Tome, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Objectives, hypothesis and purpose of the research

The aim of the research is to gain insight into the assessment of a teacher's own competencies and to establish specific differences in their self-assessments with regard to the old and new study curriculum. The purpose of the research was also to gain insights into the specific skills shortages associated with the integrated education and training of students with disabilities. Given the

objective and the purpose of the research, the zero hypothesis was set that we defined in the following way:

H_0 : Regardless of the completed study curriculum – old or new – teachers equally assess personal competencies regarding the integrated education and training of students with developmental disabilities.

The hypothesis is based on the following assumptions:

- 1) teachers who completed the studies according to the new curriculum have competencies of higher quality since the curriculum is richer in content; what is more, during their studies, they were more engaged in working with students with disabilities due to a more frequent integration (Radetić-Paić, 2018);
- 2) teachers who completed the studies according to the old curriculum have more experience in direct work with this type of students (Radetić-Paić, 2018).

Namely, the old program, valid before 2005, included shorter professional teacher education programs. The new program, according to the European Commission guidelines and the Bologna Reform in the Croatian education system, raised teacher education to the master university level, which includes, among other things, a larger number of subjects related to working with children with disabilities, but also a higher level and quality of knowledge.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

The research sample consisted of 212 teachers. The study involved 97.5% female and 2.5% male participants. 38.6% of teachers completed the study under the old curriculum and those who finished the study according to the new curriculum amounted to 61.4%. The research was conducted among teachers of eight regular primary schools in Croatian Istrian County through an online questionnaire. During the research, all ethical standards were respected. With the help of school administration, all participants were informed of the goal of the research and given the instructions on how to fill in the questionnaire and use the data for strictly scientific purposes. Completion of the questionnaire was anonymous and voluntary and participants could give up answering at any time.

MEASURING INSTRUMENT

The study used an instrument designed precisely for the purpose of this research, which was previously subjected to a pilot-study on a smaller sample (Goldin, 2017).

In order to determine the suitability of the measuring instrument for the study, a factor analysis was performed, preceded by a data validity test for

the factor analysis. The verification showed that the data are suitable for the application of the factor analysis. Namely, the following values were obtained: according to the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin's test (KMO = .85) and the Bartlett's sphericity test (χ^2 (190) = 3598.5, $p < .001$).

Furthermore, the validation of the instrument was performed, and the results of the confirmatory factor analysis of the instrument (20 items) indicate a four-factor solution that explains 69.68% of the variance. The factors are the following: *knowledge*, *skills*, *attitudes*, and *readiness*. The reliability of the *skills* scale ($\alpha = .72$), *attitudes* ($\alpha = .86$), and *readiness* ($\alpha = .91$) is satisfactory; the value of the *knowledge* scale has low reliability, which is $\alpha = .23$.

The descriptive data indicate a negative asymmetry of distribution of the results on all factors, which may indicate low sensitivity of the instrument.

In the final version, the measuring instrument consisted of 20 items (see Table 1) evaluated by a five-degree Likert type scale (1 = I completely disagree, 2 = I partially disagree, 3 = I cannot decide, 4 = I partially agree, and 5 = I completely agree).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the descriptive level, the arithmetic means of the answers of the teachers who completed the studies according to the new, richer curriculum and those who completed the studies according to the old curriculum (Table 1) show that the first group of teachers present a higher level of agreement with the almost all offered statements except for the statements: 1: "I consider myself sufficiently educated to teach students with developmental disabilities" and 4: "I am ready to accept one student with developmental disabilities in my class", in which the higher degree of agreement was expressed by the teachers who completed the studies according to the old curriculum. The highest degree of agreement is visible with the statement 3: "In my opinion, teachers are offered enough opportunities for further education for teaching students with developmental disabilities", while the highest degree of disagreement is related to the statement 9: "I believe that students with severe hearing loss can be part of a regular class section". It can also be noticed that the greatest dispersion of the results is visible with the statement 20: "I am ready to accept a student with behavioural disorder in my class" and the statement 5: "I am ready to accept more than one student with developmental disabilities in my class", whereas the lowest dispersion of the results may be observed with the statement 6: "I know how to use didactic tools and aids in teaching students with developmental disabilities".

Table 1.
The data obtained by descriptive analysis

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean			Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Mean		
Statement 1	131	2.9847	1.29487	.11313	2.7609	3.2086	1.00	5.00	
	81	3.3210	1.11610	.12401	3.0742	3.5678	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	3.1132	1.23780	.08501	2.9456	3.2808	1.00	5.00	
Statement 2	131	4.3511	.95211	.08319	4.1866	4.5157	1.00	5.00	
	81	4.3086	1.12519	.12502	4.0598	4.5574	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	4.3349	1.01930	.07001	4.1969	4.4729	1.00	5.00	
Statement 3	131	2.5802	1.08808	.09507	2.3921	2.7682	1.00	5.00	
	81	2.5556	1.06066	.11785	2.3210	2.7901	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	2.5708	1.07522	.07385	2.4252	2.7163	1.00	5.00	
Statement 4	131	4.1069	1.16521	.10181	3.9055	4.3083	1.00	5.00	
	81	4.2346	1.14315	.12702	3.9818	4.4873	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	4.1557	1.15579	.07938	3.9992	4.3121	1.00	5.00	
Statement 5	131	3.0534	1.37736	.12034	2.8154	3.2915	1.00	5.00	
	81	3.0247	1.35992	.15110	2.7240	3.3254	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	3.0425	1.36756	.09392	2.8573	3.2276	1.00	5.00	
Statement 6	131	4.6183	.80821	.07061	4.4786	4.7580	1.00	5.00	
	81	4.3580	1.00385	.11154	4.1361	4.5800	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	4.5189	.89476	.06145	4.3977	4.6400	1.00	5.00	
Statement 7	131	4.0840	1.13027	.09875	3.8886	4.2793	1.00	5.00	
	81	3.7531	1.24027	.13781	3.4788	4.0273	1.00	5.00	
Total	212	3.9575	1.18165	.08116	3.7976	4.1175	1.00	5.00	

Statement 8	1	131	4.0305	1.15651	.10104	3.8306	4.2304	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.8519	1.20531	.13392	3.5853	4.1184	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.9623	1.17578	.08075	3.8031	4.1214	1.00	5.00
Statement 9	1	131	4.1603	.95930	.08381	3.9945	4.3261	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.6173	1.07898	.11989	3.3787	3.8559	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.9528	1.03843	.07132	3.8122	4.0934	1.00	5.00
Statement 10	1	131	3.9771	1.13994	.09960	3.7801	4.1741	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.7407	1.08141	.12016	3.5016	3.9799	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.8868	1.12128	.07701	3.7350	4.0386	1.00	5.00
Statement 11	1	131	3.7176	1.21703	.10633	3.5072	3.9279	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.4938	1.29541	.14393	3.2074	3.7803	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.6321	1.24927	.08580	3.4629	3.8012	1.00	5.00
Statement 12	1	131	3.7023	1.28119	.11194	3.4808	3.9237	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.6667	1.27475	.14164	3.3848	3.9485	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.6887	1.27583	.08762	3.5159	3.8614	1.00	5.00
Statement 13	1	131	3.8244	1.15346	.10078	3.6250	4.0238	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.7654	1.18608	.13179	3.5032	4.0277	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.8019	1.16359	.07992	3.6444	3.9594	1.00	5.00
Statement 14	1	131	3.8550	1.21606	.10625	3.6448	4.0652	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.7778	1.21450	.13494	3.5092	4.0463	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.8255	1.21316	.08332	3.6612	3.9897	1.00	5.00
Statement 15	1	131	3.1145	1.32805	.11603	2.8849	3.3441	1.00	5.00
	2	81	2.9259	1.23266	.13696	2.6534	3.1985	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.0425	1.29274	.08879	2.8674	3.2175	1.00	5.00
Statement 16	1	131	3.1298	1.36662	.11940	2.8935	3.3660	1.00	5.00
	2	81	2.9877	1.15644	.12849	2.7319	3.2434	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.0755	1.28939	.08856	2.9009	3.2500	1.00	5.00

Statement 17	1	131	3.9008	1.16259	.10158	3.6998	4.1017	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.6296	1.30809	.14534	3.3404	3.9189	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.7972	1.22432	.08409	3.6314	3.9629	1.00	5.00
Statement 18	1	131	3.8321	1.19069	.10403	3.6262	4.0379	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.4815	1.37941	.15327	3.1765	3.7865	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.6981	1.27439	.08753	3.5256	3.8706	1.00	5.00
Statement 19	1	131	3.6336	1.36554	.11931	3.3976	3.8696	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.4074	1.33957	.14884	3.1112	3.7036	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.5472	1.35697	.09320	3.3635	3.7309	1.00	5.00
Statement 20	1	131	3.5954	1.35180	.11811	3.3618	3.8291	1.00	5.00
	2	81	3.3086	1.42865	.15874	2.9927	3.6245	1.00	5.00
	Total	212	3.4858	1.38536	.09515	3.2983	3.6734	1.00	5.00

Description of statements:

- Statement 1 I consider myself sufficiently educated to teach students with developmental disabilities.
- Statement 2 I want to continue to train for the education of students with developmental disabilities.
- Statement 3 In my opinion, teachers are offered enough opportunities for further education for teaching students with developmental disabilities.
- Statement 4 I am ready to accept one student with developmental disabilities in my class.
- Statement 5 I am ready to accept more than one student with developmental disabilities in my class.
- Statement 6 I know how to use didactic tools and aids in teaching students with developmental disabilities.
- Statement 7 In my opinion, students with severe vision impairment can be a part of a regular class section.
- Statement 8 I am ready to accept a student with severe vision impairment in my class.
- Statement 9 In my opinion, students with severe hearing loss can be a part of a regular class section.
- Statement 10 I am ready to accept a student with severe hearing loss in my class.
- Statement 11 In my opinion, students with severe speech, language, and voice disorders can be part of a regular class section.
- Statement 12 I am ready to accept a student with severe speech, language, and voice disorders in my class.

- Statement 13 In my opinion, students with reduced intellectual abilities can be a part of a regular class section.
- Statement 14 I am ready to accept a student with reduced intellectual abilities in my class.
- Statement 15 In my opinion, students with autism can be a part of a regular class section.
- Statement 16 I am ready to accept a student with autism in my class.
- Statement 17 In my opinion, students with severe motor disorders can be a part of a regular class section.
- Statement 18 I am ready to accept a student with severe motor disorders in my class.
- Statement 19 In my opinion, students with behavioural disorders can be a part of a regular class section.
- Statement 20 I am ready to accept a student with behavioural disorder in my class.

Description of marks:

Mark 1 Study participants who completed the teacher education according to the new curriculum.

Mark 2 Study participants who completed the teacher education according to the old curriculum.

Source: own research.

The factor analysis yielded the data shown in the Table 2. Limit value in F distribution at significance level .05 with 1/210 degrees of freedom is 3.84. It can be noticed that the obtained F-values with three statements exceed the limit value. It applies to the following statements: statement 6: "I know how to use didactic tools and aids in teaching students with developmental disabilities", statement 7: "In my opinion, students with severe vision impairment can be part of a regular class section" and the statement 9: "In my opinion, students with severe hearing loss can be part of a regular class section".

Table 2.
The data obtained by factor analysis

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Statement 1	Between Groups	5.659	1	5.659	3.742	.054
	Within Groups	317.624	210	1.512		
	Total	323.283	211			
Statement 2	Between Groups	.090	1	.090	.087	.769
	Within Groups	219.131	210	1.043		
	Total	219.222	211			
Statement 3	Between Groups	.030	1	.030	.026	.872
	Within Groups	243.908	210	1.161		
	Total	243.939	211			
Statement 4	Between Groups	.816	1	.816	.610	.436
	Within Groups	281.047	210	1.338		
	Total	281.863	211			
Statement 5	Between Groups	.041	1	.041	.022	.882
	Within Groups	394.577	210	1.879		
	Total	394.618	211			
Statement 6	Between Groups	3.391	1	3.391	4.302	.039*
	Within Groups	165.533	210	.788		
	Total	168.925	211			
Statement 7	Between Groups	5.480	1	5.480	3.980	.047*
	Within Groups	289.138	210	1.377		
	Total	294.618	211			
Statement 8	Between Groups	1.598	1	1.598	1.157	.283
	Within Groups	290.100	210	1.381		
	Total	291.698	211			
Statement 9	Between Groups	14.759	1	14.759	14.567	.000*
	Within Groups	212.769	210	1.013		
	Total	227.528	211			
Statement 10	Between Groups	2.796	1	2.796	2.237	.136
	Within Groups	262.487	210	1.250		
	Total	265.283	211			
Statement 11	Between Groups	2.505	1	2.505	1.610	.206
	Within Groups	326.797	210	1.556		
	Total	329.302	211			

Statement 12	Between Groups	.064	1	.064		
	Within Groups	343.389	210	1.635	.039	.844
	Total	343.453	211			
Statement 13	Between Groups	.174	1	.174		
	Within Groups	285.505	210	1.360	.128	.721
	Total	285.679	211			
Statement 14	Between Groups	.298	1	.298		
	Within Groups	310.244	210	1.477	.202	.654
	Total	310.542	211			
Statement 15	Between Groups	1.780	1	1.780		
	Within Groups	350.838	210	1.671	1.065	.303
	Total	352.618	211			
Statement 16	Between Groups	1.011	1	1.011		
	Within Groups	349.782	210	1.666	.607	.437
	Total	350.792	211			
Statement 17	Between Groups	3.679	1	3.679		
	Within Groups	312.599	210	1.489	2.472	.117
	Total	316.278	211			
Statement 18	Between Groups	6.152	1	6.152		
	Within Groups	336.528	210	1.603	3.839	.051
	Total	342.679	211			
Statement 19	Between Groups	2.561	1	2.561		
	Within Groups	385.968	210	1.838	1.393	.239
	Total	388.528	211			
Statement 20	Between Groups	4.116	1	4.116		
	Within Groups	400.841	210	1.909	2.157	.143
	Total	404.958	211			

Source: own research.

The *F*-values obtained with the stated statements – statement 6, statement 7 and statement 9 show us that there are statistically significant differences between the answers given by the teachers who completed their studies according to the new curriculum and the teachers who completed the studies according to the old one. Given the significance level, these differences are significant at the level of 5%. Therefore, we can dismiss the null hypothesis for these statements and claim that for the distributions with these statements, there are no presumptions for their normality.

No statistically significant differences were noted with other statements, which means that distributions related to them belong to a larger sample i.e. there are presumptions for their normality.

CONCLUSIONS

Following the obtained results of the null-hypothesis by which we assumed that, regardless of the curriculum - *new* or *old* - according to which they completed their study, teachers equally assess their personal competencies regarding the integrated education and training of students with developmental disabilities, and therefore, except for three out of twenty statements, it can be accepted as it is. Namely, the differences between the observed groups can be statistically considered significant in only three statements. In this context, the limitation may mean that the results are significant only for the Croatian educational system.

Also, taking into account the possible limitation when interpreting the results related to the sample, a relatively unevenly distributed sample with respect to the completion of the study of the participants, the low reliability of the knowledge scale and a relatively weak sensitivity of the instrument, the obtained results point to relatively small differences in estimates of their own competencies. Namely, generally speaking, teachers who have completed their studies according to the old curriculum are more likely to evaluate their competencies in that context, especially regarding acceptance of children with severe disabilities related to hearing impairment, as well as the use of didactic materials and aids in teaching students with developmental disabilities. On the other hand, teachers who have completed their studies according to the new curriculum considered themselves sufficiently educated to teach students with developmental disabilities, but, in their opinion, they are not offered enough opportunities for further education to work with students with disabilities.

The teachers' responsibility is to enable children with disabilities to learn and thrive in accordance with their abilities and therefore, it is very important to train teachers for such work. The adapted curriculum with favourable educational climate and communication in the classroom environment and with good cooperation with members of the families of students with disabilities would enable educational success (Jurčić, 2012; Radetić-Paić, 2013; Ljubetić, 2014). In this context, it is necessary for teachers to provide support programs from training to practical assistance in their daily work (Bouillet, 2010).

Finally, it is suggested that teaching practice and teaching in pairs will enable students with disabilities to formulate complex questions and discuss them with their mentor. It is important that these students have the ability to respond proactively through critical thinking and building constructive solutions. This can increase their resilience and enable better quality of implementation of inclusion (Drljić & Kiswarday, 2016).

From all of the above, the assumption follows that the definition and articulation of the necessary competencies are important not only for the professional activities of a profession, but also for the possibility of developing the curricula of the teaching profession (Ricijaš, Huić & Branica, 2006). The education of teachers to work with children with developmental disabilities must help teachers to assimilate and apply information for the purpose of finding

alternatives to meet different needs of students (Opara, 2015). According to researches (Stančić, Horvatić & Nikolić, 2011), teachers are willing to improve their professional skills, but in this context, a constant (self) re-examination is necessary as well. Providing a greater offer of special support programs from teachers' training to practical assistance in the daily work, which is based on a positive education, may improve the subjective experience of teachers and students. Both teachers and students should feel good in class, adding a meaningful value to it. Then, their positive qualities and advantages may be enhanced (Chen, 2018).

Positive education breaks through the traditional education's parochialism on having a bias towards trouble-solving. And finally, it must not be forgotten that the task of a teacher is to make all students, even those who "differ" from the majority, feel accepted and safe. Through various strategies and interventions, a teacher must ensure the smooth and coordinated functioning of the class (Smole & Vršnik Perše, 2018).

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