

**GIMNAZIJA CELJE – CENTER**

**Jurka LIPIČNIK VODOPIVEC in Maja HMELAK**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR AND  
COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Prevod** Urška Petrič Les

Celje, oktober 2025

## SPREMNA BESEDA AVTORICE STROKOVNEGA PREVODA V ANGLEŠČINO

Pričujoče delo ima pomembno mesto v strokovnem in pedagoškem prostoru predšolske vzgoje, saj celostno in poglobljeno osvetljuje profesionalni razvoj vzgojitelja predšolskih otrok od začetkov v preteklosti do danes ter njegovo vlogo v današnji sodobni družbi. Kot profesorica angleškega jezika s književnostjo in pedagogike, zaposlena na šoli, kjer poučujem angleščino (tudi) v programu *Predšolska vzgoja*, prepoznavam posebno vrednost te monografije tako z vidika strokovne vsebine kot z vidika njene pedagoške in didaktične uporabnosti, hkrati pa sem v njej in v besedilu za prevod našla poseben osebni izziv.

Dijaki srednješolskega programa *Predšolska vzgoja* se v obdobju intenzivnega osebnostnega, socialnega in intelektualnega razvoja postopno oblikujejo kot posamezniki in prihodnji strokovni delavci. Prav v tem obdobju se srečujejo z vprašanji poklicne identitete, profesionalnih vrednot ter razumevanja vloge, ki jo bodo nekoč (verjetno vsaj večina) prevzeli v svojem poklicnem okolju. Monografija jim pri tem ponuja dragocen in strokovno utemeljen vpogled v lik vzgojitelja, njegovo profesionalnost, odgovornost ter pomen stalnega strokovnega in osebnostnega razvoja, hkrati pa jim odstira pot do spoznanja, kako dolga in zahtevna je bila pot do izobraževalnega programa, kot ga poznamo danes in v katerem se imajo priložnost izobraževati. Lahko je tudi ne bi imeli.

Posebna dodana vrednost prevoda v angleščino je tudi v njegovi terminološki bogatosti in jasni konceptualni strukturi, kar omogoča smiselno povezovanje strokovnih vsebin z učenjem tujega jezika. Dijaki v okviru splošnega predmeta *Tuji jezik (angleščina)* postopno pridobivajo temeljno strokovno terminologijo v angleščini, ki je nujna za razumevanje sodobne strokovne literature, nadaljnje izobraževanje ter profesionalno komunikacijo v mednarodnem prostoru, ki ga imajo preko različnih sistemov in projektov možnost in priložnost obiskati. Besedilo tako predstavlja pomembno izhodišče za razvijanje strokovnega besedišča, poglobljeno razumevanje ključnih pojmov ter povezovanje jezikovnih znanj s strokovno vsebino predšolske vzgoje.

Monografija dijakom ne ponuja zgolj teoretičnega znanja, temveč jih spodbuja k razmisleku o pomenu profesionalne odgovornosti, etike, refleksije lastne prakse ter vseživljenjskega učenja. Na ta način pomembno prispeva k oblikovanju njihovega strokovnega mišljenja in postopnemu razvoju profesionalne identitete.

Zaradi svoje znanstvene utemeljenosti, jasnosti in aplikativne vrednosti delo predstavlja dragocen učni in strokovni vir, ki lahko dijakom programa *Predšolska vzgoja* pomembno pomaga pri razumevanju poklica vzgojitelja ter pri povezovanju strokovnih in jezikovnih znanj. Prepričana sem, da bo monografija koristna tako dijakom kot tudi učiteljem (tujega jezika), strokovnim delavcem in vsem, ki se ukvarjajo s področjem predšolske vzgoje in izobraževanja.

Urška Petrič Les, prof.

avtorica strokovnega prevoda

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
WHO IS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR	5
THE EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS THROUGH HISTORY	6
The development of early childhood education from 1872 to 1918	7
The development of early childhood education from 1918 to 1938	9
The development of early childhood education from 1938 to 1945	10
The development of early childhood education from 1945 to 1989	11
The development of early childhood education from 1989 to the present day	21
EDUCATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS	23
Scientific and professional education	23
Practical training	24
PROFESSIONALISM AS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR TRAINING	28
Characteristics of preschool educators' professional development	29
The role and importance of the preschool educators' professional development	31
Principles of the preschool educators' professional development	33
AN INDIVIDUAL'S DECISION TO PURSUE A CAREER AS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR	36
OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THEIR WORK	42
Preschool educator and working with children	42
The role of the preschool educator in cooperation with parents	45
Cooperation with other kindergarten staff in organising life and work in the kindergarten	47
The role of preschool educators in promoting effective work and daily life in kindergarten	49
SATISFACTION AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THEIR WORK	52
Lifelong learning of early childhood educators	54
Continuous professional development of early childhood educators	56
Career advancement of early childhood educators	57
Self-actualisation at work	57
Working conditions	57
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR AND COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	59
ENSURING THE QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	62
CONCLUSION	64
SUMMARY	66
REVIEWS	69

## INTRODUCTION

Early childhood educators or preschool teachers (the masculine form is used throughout this monograph) work with a sensitive population and are exposed to constantly new tasks and challenges that require a high level of professionalism. It goes without saying that educators who are themselves educated and who are constantly improving their professional skills are more successful in educating and teaching children. This is true today and has been true throughout history. The role of the educator has developed and improved through the educator themselves and through their learning, which we now call lifelong learning or professional development.

The professional development of early childhood educators could therefore be defined as a process of lifelong learning that encompasses the personal, professional and social dimensions of educators. At the same time, it is a process (Vonta, 2005) in which we can achieve a balance in the realisation of all dimensions of professionalism and thus a higher quality of our work and job satisfaction.

The professional development of preschool teachers represents a continuum that encompasses the education of early childhood education students and the continuous professional development of early childhood educators. The education of preschool education students takes place within the framework of the higher education study programme Preschool Education. It covers the areas of the official/valid and hidden curriculum as well as the personal development of future educators. In the 1990s, Slovenia underwent political, economic and social changes that led to a process of reforming the education system, including preschool education. One of the consequences of this reform process is the requirement for high professional qualifications for educators, who must be broadly well-informed and professionally competent. Specific theoretical knowledge and practical experience can only be acquired through appropriate education. Continuous professional development of preschool teachers has been established practice in recent years. According to the findings of L. Marjanovič Umek, U. Fekonja, T. Kavčič and A. Poljanšek (2002), the basic purpose of this is to improve work, enhance knowledge and strengthen professional competence. Educators learn about new and alternative methods and forms of work, new content, new perspectives on child development, different ways of stimulating child development, new technology, etc.

The extent to which education and training (Rosić, 2009) will respond to new demands and challenges in practice, and how effective this will be, depends on the quality of the work of educators and the educators themselves. That is why one of the fundamental questions that various experts and authorities are dealing with today is how to educate and prepare educators to successfully perform their professional tasks and how to ensure their continuous professional growth and development.

## WHO IS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

The profile of preschool teachers has changed constantly throughout human history, but the expectations of society have remained almost unchanged: that they should "perform their work diligently, be a source of quality knowledge and a role model, and always work in the best interests of children under their care" (Toman, 2001, 23). J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (2010) emphasises that the preschool teacher is the first person to whom the child is entrusted outside the home environment or family care. Their influence on the child is significant and extends far into the child's future, which is why inappropriate guidance can cause irreparable damage. For this reason, anyone who decides to become a preschool teacher should make this decision after careful consideration and with a clear conscience. Only those who are prepared to take responsibility for the safety and development of children can become preschool teachers. M. Cenčič and B. Čagran (2002) emphasise that the teaching profession should be chosen by individuals who have consciously and carefully decided to work with children who are in the most demanding and sensitive period of their development. This is precisely why the teaching profession is demanding and responsible on the one hand, as the influence of preschool teachers on children during this period is even stronger and has an impact on the rest of their lives. On the other hand, it is a profession that also enriches those who pursue it.

"The qualities of the educator, both professional and human, have been and will always be the most decisive factor in the level of preschool education" (Plestenjak, 1990, 27). Educators not only nurture, but also educate and teach children, combining their efforts with those of their colleagues and parents to create the most appropriate learning environment for children. They also continuously educate themselves and familiarise themselves with new methods and forms of working with younger children, new technology and various ways of encouraging children's abilities and skills (Cenčič and Čagran, 2002). M. Batistič Zorec (2003) notes that recent professional literature places increasing emphasis on the knowledge, abilities and skills of educators, e.g. professional competence and commitment. They must be experienced, attentive and participatory observers of children. Only in this way can they get to know their interests and notice their potential abilities. They must be familiar with the characteristics of child development and learning and, on this basis, be able to plan a curriculum for children of different ages. Educational behaviour is not just the effective implementation of any planned activity, but simply being there, being in the classroom, being in every situation. This educational activity falls within the scope of the hidden curriculum.

## THE EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS THROUGH HISTORY

According to Valvasor (1977), childcare began in the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. In the year 1041, the wealthy townsman Pavel Berlach is said to have founded an orphanage and bequeathed all his property to it, as he had no heirs. There, they raised pupils and orphans. When they grew up, they were also taught a trade, so that they could find employment.

Since there were many orphans in Ljubljana, Empress Maria Theresa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century ordered the orphanage in the city to be renovated. Thus, in 1755, they began to accept children into the orphanage. At that time, Josip Janez Hofman issued a proclamation stating that the orphanage would also accept children from other places, not just Ljubljana. The aim of the orphanage was to train children for future work with German nobles and townsmen. The children were taught to read and write in German, and the boys also received religious instruction in German and arithmetic for commercial and craft apprentices. In addition to the above, the girls were taught spinning, knitting and other handicrafts (Pavlič, 1984). It should be emphasised that orphanages were not of a protective nature. The oldest record of preschool care can be found in 1756. This kindergarten was run by Mrs Anna Marija Magisskraut and her son, and it operated in Maribor. Here, Mrs Magisskraut and her son taught preschool children to sit, recognise letters and learn to pray according to Catholic custom (Pavlič, 1991).

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, charitable activities for children were widespread in Europe. When the first two children's shelters were established in Vienna in 1830, an association of wealthy citizens was founded for this purpose and rushed to follow suit.

On 4 November 1834, the first nursery school or children's shelter, as it was called (Kleinkinder-Bewahranstalt), was opened in Ljubljana. At the beginning of its operation, 19 children were enrolled, and by the end of 1834, there were 116. Their parents were employed, and the children were between two and five years old. Most of the families were from the poorer sections of the population. The institution was initially supported by voluntary contributions from wealthy citizens. However, since these were not sufficient, the society organised lavish parties, the profits of which were used to maintain the shelter. The state and the municipality contributed nothing. Thus, the care for shelters, and consequently for the children of poorer families, depended on the goodwill and contributions of wealthier people. (Pavlič, 1991).

Charitable societies for the maintenance of shelters needed a legal basis for their establishment. As stated by S. Pavlič (1984), on 21 February 1883, an imperial decree allowed the establishment of such societies, but they had to be under the supervision of the diocesan consistory. Shelters were not allowed to apply for support from public funds, but had to be maintained solely through voluntary contributions, and the children in them could not be older than five years of age. The shelters taught and raised children according to the following basic principles: obedience, religious education, and respect for parents and superiors.

However, the need for childcare was growing. At the beginning of 1843, they purchased Mihael Melavij's building at 63 Šentflorjanska Street for the needs of the kindergarten. This provided them with much more suitable and larger premises for their care activities, as by 1882 the institution already had 237 children. There was also a garden. Education in these shelters was of secondary importance. In 1885, one year after the death of the institution's great benefactor, Prince-Bishop

Dr. Ivan Krizostom Pogačar, who had significantly contributed to its success, the institution was renamed the Children's Kindergarten at the suggestion of Prelate Rozman. A trained gardener and her assistant were employed, and the kindergarten received a new statute. By 1889, 170 children attended the institution, 60 of whom received lunch during the winter. The number of children declined after new kindergartens were opened in other parts of the city. (Pavlič, 1991).

The first Slovenian nursery school was therefore merely a shelter where employees' children were looked after for a few hours a day. At first, children had to bring their own lunch, but later they received free lunch. Kindergartens with primary preschool education activities were only systematically opened in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the adoption of the Primary School Act in 1869. At that time, kindergartens were established based on Froebel's model, which implemented Comenius' idea of a mother school. The staff working in these institutions were not adequately trained. The work was mostly done by female teachers who opened kindergartens out of a love for children, but more often than not, they did so for money. Thus, a need gradually arose for the training of staff who would be qualified to work in kindergartens. The path that had to be traversed was long and complicated. To make it easier to understand the development of educator training, we have divided it into the following periods:

- the development of early childhood education from 1872 to 1918,
- the development of early childhood education from 1918 to 1938,
- the development of early childhood education from 1938 to 1945,
- the development of early childhood education from 1945 to 1989,
- the development of early childhood education from 1989 to the present day.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM 1872 TO 1918**

As noted by S. Pavlič (1991), in 1805 the political school administration stipulated that teachers must have a permit from the provincial school authorities to open kindergartens, and in 1808 a government decree required that they also have teaching experience. An additional qualification was required for opening kindergartens, which candidates had to prove with an appropriate certificate of professional competence. Until 1869, there were no courses or public schools in Slovenia where girls could learn the teaching profession. It was stipulated that future teachers had to know the prescribed literature for the teaching course, the material for the four grades of primary school, pass an exam before the diocesan school inspector and teach in class. They prepared for these exams in private schools, most often at the Ursuline Sisters. From time to time, the Ursuline Sisters held one-year teaching courses, where they themselves taught all primary school subjects. The exception was Idrija, which organised the first educational teaching course for female teachers in 1861. Teachers from the main school taught six of their graduates free of charge in all subjects required for the teaching profession. In order to obtain recognition of their qualifications, they then had to pass an examination in general education and pedagogical subjects required for secondary schools under the supervision of the diocese. With this education, they could teach women's handicrafts at primary schools or open kindergartens or private primary schools.

With the opening of kindergartens, the question of training nursery nurses and preschool teachers arose, as their current education did not meet the requirements for the education and care of preschool children. S. Pavlič (1991) cites the Parisian doctor Firmian Marebeu, who as early as 1840 taught women who were prepared to care for children the basic rules of hygiene. As the author reports, a good two decades later (1868) schools for nursery nurses began to be established in Europe. The first known school for nursery nurses began operating in 1868 in Vienna as part of a Jewish children's shelter. This was followed by the establishment of similar schools in Vienna within the framework of the first kindergarten (1874), teacher training colleges (1883) and in 1885 within the framework of a girls' boarding school. Following the Viennese model, schools for the training of nursery nurses and entertainers (nursery teachers and educators) began to be established throughout the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

The State Primary School Act of 1869 required that every women's teacher training college have a kindergarten for practical training. The curriculum of the women's teacher training college from 1869 included the following subjects:

- Religious education
- Education (pedagogy) with practical exercises
- Language of instruction
- Geography
- History
- Arithmetic and geometric design
- Natural history
- Natural sciences.
- Calligraphy
- Freehand drawing
- Music
- Women's handicrafts
- Physical education

If a kindergarten was attached to the teacher training college, one additional hour of pedagogy was added to the basic curriculum in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade (i.e. six hours).

A law passed in 1872 stipulated that any nursery school gardener who wished to run a kindergarten independently had to demonstrate two years of practical experience in a kindergarten. Thus, in 1886, a nursery school was opened at the women's teacher training college in Ljubljana, and special one-year courses were organised to provide the education necessary to run a kindergarten. The following year, 17 nursery school teachers passed their professional examinations in Ljubljana (Pavlič, 1991).

Candidates who were at least 16 years old, of good moral character, healthy, with a sense of music and the required education could apply for admission at the teacher training college. If they did not show satisfactory progress within three months, they had to leave the course. They were taught by female teachers from the teacher training college, nursery school teachers and teachers from the girls' training school. The training was based on the curriculum shown below.



1. Religious education	1 lesson
2. Educational science and the theory of early childhood education	3 lessons
3. Practical exercises in kindergarten	8 lessons
4. Language and practical lessons	6 lessons
5. Freehand drawing	2 lessons
6. Design	2 lessons
7. Singing	2 lessons
8. Physical education	1 lesson

The table shows the syllabus for the one-year course for kindergarten teachers, which was in force from 1886 onwards. After completing the course, candidates took a professional examination in all of the above subjects for the profession of kindergarten teacher.

Kindergarten teachers who had already passed the professional examination often met and organised consultations. There, they demanded two-year courses, arguing that a one-year course was too short to take on a responsible task such as the education of preschool children and that after one year they were still too young to work successfully in kindergartens.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM 1918 TO 1938**

After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, most of the Slovene territory was incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929.

State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs showed little interest in establishing preschool education institutions and thus in training preschool teachers. It only stipulated that kindergarten teachers must also pass an additional exam on Serbo-Croatian songs, games and practical exercises in kindergarten, reports S. Pavlič (1991).

Under the 1929 National Schools Act, nurseries were renamed recreation centres. These were established in larger towns and industrial centres.

The National Schools Act of 1929 stipulated that a woman teacher could work at a recreation centre only if she had passed the kindergarten teaching examination. A permanent title as a recreation centre teacher could be obtained only after successfully completing a practical recreation examination, which could be taken only after two years of successful practice at a recreation centre. Those who failed to pass the examination within four years lost their employment. However, the Act did not require the development of a training programme for preschool educators (Pavlič, 1984).

In 1933, a new National Schools Act came into force. It also introduced Regulations on Taking the Practical Examination for Recreation Centre Teachers. The provisions stated that recreation centre teachers who had passed the teacher's matura examination or the teacher's diploma examination were entitled to take the recreation centre teacher examination after twenty (20)

months of appropriate practice in a children's recreation centre. If a candidate received three failing grades, or two failing grades consecutively within one year, she was not entitled to sit the examination (Pavlič, 1984).

The exam consists of a theoretical and a practical part. The theoretical part of the exam consists of a written and an oral part. The written part of the exam consists of pedagogical subjects and subjects from the field of the national language and literature. Each written exam lasts a maximum of four (4) hours. The oral part of the exam includes testing knowledge in the field of administration and legislation, psychology of young children and the science of children's recreation centres. The oral testing of knowledge of the above subjects lasts twenty-five (25) minutes, while the oral part of the exam for other subjects lasts fifteen (15) minutes.

The practical part of the examination is a performance in a kindergarten. Before the performance, candidates prepare a written presentation in front of the commission, which lasts a maximum of four (4) hours. Before the performance begins, the commission reviews the presentation. If the assessment is positive, the candidate proceeds to the performance; this part of the exam lasts at least forty (40) minutes, followed by a defence of the written preparation and an explanation of the pedagogical principles. With their performance, they must demonstrate that they can successfully and independently perform the work in a kindergarten.

On the basis of the Law on National Schools and the Law on Teacher Training Colleges, regulations on the education of nursery school teachers began to improve. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that at that time, nursery schools told overly long stories and recited too much. This placed too much strain on the children, who did not even understand the overly long stories. Thus, they came to the conclusion that nursery school teachers were not adequately trained. The decree itself required that children play, sing and move around a lot in the playground. However, the teachers did not implement this in practice. The reason for the inadequate implementation of the requirements in practice can certainly be found in the one-year courses, which were simply too short (Pavlič, 1991).

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM 1938 TO 1945**

Just before World War II (15 August 1940), the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia issued Regulations on the Education of Nursery School Teachers (Pavlič, 1984). It stipulated that a regular course should be opened at teacher training colleges and that the costs of maintenance should be covered by the provincial budget of the royal provincial administration. Candidates who had previously wanted to train for this profession prepared themselves and then took exams at teacher training colleges. According to S. Pavlič (1991), statistical data from 1940 show that there were 2,249 preschool children enrolled in 56 kindergartens with 84 classes and 17 recreation centres with 31 classes in the Drava Banovina. They were looked after by 85 nursery school teachers.

Between 1941 and 1945, i.e. during the Fascist occupation, the number of kindergartens and children attending them decreased significantly. The German occupiers abolished all Slovenian kindergartens in Štajerska and Gorenjska and began establishing German kindergartens. In these kindergartens, 421 kindergarten teachers germanised the children (Pavlič, 1991).

In occupied Ljubljana, there was a nursery school teacher who, together with her colleagues, took care of the education, care, food, clothing and footwear of 107 illegal children and 76 children living with their mothers.

We have no data on the education of teachers during this period, although courses for partisan teachers and activists were held in the liberated territory.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM 1945 TO 1989**

Even before the war, and especially after it, the question arose of how to find teaching staff who would be successful in the responsible work with children and in helping parents. As we had little experience from the past, training educators was a challenge in terms of how to remedy the severe shortage of such personnel as quickly as possible.

In the new country, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, it was necessary to reorganise and redesign the education and care of preschool children and, with it, the training of preschool teachers. In order to carry out the tasks of institutional preschool education, they needed culturally and socially mature, highly educated teachers. After the war, it was utopian to expect that, given the circumstances and the short time frame, such people would be found. At first, it was necessary to provide teaching staff who enjoyed this profession.

As stated by S. Pavlič (1991), the As early as July 1945, the Ministry of Social Policy took over the administration of preschool institutions and began organizing training courses for preschool educators as part of a social and political school. The first course, with 33 candidates, took place from 1 September to 30 November 1945 in Ljubljana. The course was conducted in accordance with the 1940 Regulations on the Education of Nursery School Teachers. In its final report, the examination board proposed that courses for the training of nursery school teachers should last at least six (6) months, if not a year. The committee also proposed the need for one month of practical training and emphasised the necessity of compulsory refresher courses lasting one (1) month. The number of candidates in a single course should not exceed 25.

Systematic and organised training of preschool teachers began after 1945. In September 1946, the first one-year preschool teacher training college was established in Ljubljana. The college operated as part of the teacher training college. This marked the beginning of regular schooling for preschool teachers in Slovenia. Classes began in October of the same year. A one-year teacher training school was also established in Maribor. The one-year preschool teacher training college operated until the establishment of a four-year secondary vocational school for preschool teachers, i.e. until the school year 1951/52 (Pavlič, 1984).

The conditions for admission to the preschool teacher training college were identical to those for admission to the teacher training college: according to the rules of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of Slovenia from 1947, those who successfully completed the fourth year of secondary grammar school and had a good grade in conduct were enrolled in the teacher training college. The entrance exam consisted of 1. Slovenian, 2. Russian and 3. Mathematics in

written and oral form, and history and geography in oral form. An additional condition for admission to the preschool teacher training college was a minimum age of 18 (Čopič, 1973).

In the school year 1949/50 (Smasek, 1984; Pavlič, 1991), the Federal Ministry of Education of the Republic of Yugoslavia established:

- a four-year secondary vocational school for preschool teachers,
- a one-year school for assistant preschool teachers in Ljubljana, and
- a five-month course for assistant nursery school staff.

At the same time, the one-year school for preschool school teachers was abolished.

The secondary preschool teacher training school provided a four-year programme of education for preschool educators.

The curriculum of the four-year secondary vocational school for preschool teachers changed frequently. The first curriculum, according to which the education of educators was conducted, is shown in the following table.

From the establishment of the Secondary School for Preschool Educators in Ljubljana (1949) until the discontinuation of five-year schooling in 1979, the education of preschool teachers followed various curricula. Below, the first four-year curriculum and the last five-year curriculum of the teacher training school are presented.

Subject	Weekly Number of Hours by Year of Study			
	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year
General Pedagogy	–	2	2	1
Psychology	–	2	3	–
Preschool Pedagogy with Practice	–	–	5	10
Foundations of Philosophy	–	–	–	2
Civic Education (State-Building)	–	–	–	2
Slovene Language	5	4	4	4
Foreign Language	2	2	2	2
History	2	2	2	2
Geography	2	2	2	2
Natural History	2	3	2	2
Chemistry	3	–	–	–
Physics	2	2	–	–
Mathematics	4	2	–	–
Hygiene	2	2	–	–
Manual Work	2	2	2	–
Singing	2	2	2	2
Music	<i>(in all years: 15 minutes per week)</i>			
Drawing	2	2	2	–
Physical Education	2	2	2	2
Preschool Education	1	2	2	2
Rhythmics	2	2	2	2
<b>Total weekly hours</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>35</b>

The table shows the number of hours for each subject in each year and the total number of weekly hours per year in the four-year secondary vocational school programme for preschool teachers, which was adopted in the 1949/50 school year, and education under this programme began in the 1959/60 school year (Smasek, 1984). The curriculum was valid until the 1955/56 school year.

However, it soon became apparent that the four-year training programme for preschool teachers was too extensive and demanding, as the students had to acquire not only theoretical knowledge but also the skills needed to implement the programme in nurseries, which of course takes time, as it involves experiential learning. Therefore, in 1966, the Council for Education and Culture of the People's Republic of Slovenia extended the training by one year.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Hours per Week by Grade</b>	<b>1st Grade</b>	<b>2nd Grade</b>	<b>3rd Grade</b>	<b>4th Grade</b>	<b>5th Grade</b>
Ethics	-	-	-	-	-	1/2
Philosophy	-	-	-	-	1/2	-
Self-Governance Based on Marx	2/2	2/2	2/2	-	-	-
Pedagogy	-	-	2/2	2/2	2/2	2/2
Preschool Pedagogy	-	-	-	4/4	6/6	
Psychology	-	-	2/2	3/3	3/2	
Slovenian Language	4/3	3/3	3/4	3/4	3/4	
Foreign Language (English, German)	3/3	3/2	2/2	2/3	-	
History	2/2	2/2	1/1	2/2	-	
Geography	2/1	2/2	2/1	2/2	-	
Mathematics	3/3	3/3	-	-	-	
Biology	2/2	2/2	2/2	2/1	-	
Chemistry	2/2	2/1	-	-	-	
Physics	2/2	2/1	2/2	-	-	
Hygiene	-	-	2/1	-	2/2	
Home Economics	-	1/2	2/2	-	2/3	
Music Education	3/2	1/1	2/1	2/2	2/1	
Small Instruments	-	1/1	1/1	-	-	
Piano	15 minutes weekly	15 minutes weekly	15 minutes weekly	15 minutes weekly	15 minutes weekly	15 minutes weekly
Art Education	2/2	2/-	-/2	2/2	-	
Design	-/2	-/2	2/2	-	2/2	
Physical Education	2/2	1/2	1/2	2/2	2/2	
Rhythmic Movement Education	2/2	2/1	1/1	2/2	2/2	
Defence and Safety	-	2/2	1/2	-	-	
<b>Total</b>		<b>30/30</b>	<b>30/30</b>	<b>30/30</b>	<b>30/30</b>	<b>28/28</b>

Thus, Secondary School for Preschool Educators in Ljubljana was the only five-year college for teachers in Slovenia until 1961. In 1961, at the initiative of the Association of Friends of Youth, a Secondary School for Preschool Educators was established in Maribor, which initially operated within the framework of the Pedagogical Secondary School and only became economically independent in 1963. From its inception, the Secondary School for Preschool Educators in

Maribor educated teachers through a five-year programme, which had already been implemented in Ljubljana for several years (Smasek, 1984).

Thus, for twelve years, i.e. until 1962, the Secondary School for Preschool Educators in Ljubljana was the only one of its kind in Slovenia to offer different variants of four- and five-year programmes for preschool educators. Below is presented the curriculum of the five-year Secondary School for Preschool Educators from 1974. This is also the last of the curricula for the training of teachers before the introduction of the reform for teaching staff in Slovenia.

The last valid curriculum for 5-year Secondary School for Preschool Educators, which included the subject Self-management with the foundations of Marxism, was adopted in 1974. The curriculum was valid for a 5-day working week.

As stated by B. Stražar (1984), in the 1975/76 school year, Secondary Schools for Preschool Educators in Slovenia began to introduce new syllabi and curricula in line with the principles of the reform of teacher training. The reform already incorporated the ideas of the Targeted Education Act, which was adopted in 198. As a result, in the 1975/76 school year, educational work at the Secondary School for Preschool Educators in Ljubljana was carried out according to three syllabi or curricula:

- Year 1 began with education based on the curriculum introduced after the reform of pedagogical workers in September 1975: this curriculum and syllabus were finalised in 1977 and envisaged a five-year education.
- Year 2 and 3 followed the 1973 curriculum for Secondary Schools for Preschool Educators (introduction of the subject Self-management with the foundations of Marxism).
- Year 4 and 5 of education were based on the 1972 syllabus, which introduced a five-day working week.

The curricula for the school years 1972/73 and 1973/74 provide for 40 weeks of teaching in each school year, while the curriculum for the school year 1975/76 provides for only 38 weeks of teaching. The syllabi for the academic years 1972/73 and 1973/74 do not mention teaching practice, while the curriculum from 1975/76 provides for 8 weeks of teaching practice, which means that there were 30 weeks of teaching and 8 weeks of teaching practice (Stražar, 1984).

As part of the modification to the Secondary Education Act in 1974, an amendment was adopted stipulating that secondary school must not last more than four years. This was of decisive importance for the Secondary School for Preschool Educators, as it required a change in its five-year educational programme. Thus, in 1974/75, temporary plans were introduced for the training of teaching staff in grammar schools with a pedagogical orientation and in Secondary School for Preschool Educators. Thus, in 1977, the Professional Council for Education and Training, within the scope of its powers, confirmed a syllabus and a curriculum for the training of preschool teachers up to the 4th year of secondary school, which was not complete in terms of content and envisaged further training. New changes in the education programme reappeared in 1979. In the 1978/79 school year, secondary school students were educated according to different programmes. The fifth year was taught according to the 1973 programme, while the fourth year was taught according to the reformed 1977 programme. Thus, two generations from different programmes completed their education at the teacher training school that year: the five-year and

four-year programmes (Information on the issues of training preschool teachers in pedagogically oriented education and proposals for some solutions, 1979).

The problem of training preschool teachers during this period required an urgent solution, as it was found that the four-year education program did not fully prepare them for independent work, but it did allow them to obtain a secondary education and the possibility of working as an assistant preschool teacher.

The SRS Institute for Education prepared a trainee programme which, in addition to an introduction to the work, also included the application of theory in practice as well as a theoretical education programme designed to provide trainees with the minimum theoretical qualifications for working with preschool children after completing their internship. The programme mainly covered the content that was planned for the fifth year of education. The practical part of the internship programme was carried out in educational and childcare organisations, which had to have departments for all age groups, i.e. from 0 to 7 years, and be equipped and arranged in accordance with the minimum requirements for the construction and equipment of educational and childcare organisations.

In the practical part of the internship programme, the trainees were introduced to the life and work of educational and childcare organisations, and they observed the work of children in departments of all ages. Under the guidance of a mentor, they gradually carried out educational work ranging from individual to targeted activities. At the end, they independently led and planned the entire educational work, gradually becoming involved in working with parents and participating in the field.

Throughout the entire internship, the educational work was supervised by a mentor teacher, who assisted with the introduction to work and the application of theory into practice. The mentor teacher was required to have the appropriate education and professional qualification, to be successful in educational and other tasks within the educational organization, to be adequately trained, and to be familiar with new responsibilities. For this purpose, teacher training schools organised a two-day seminar. Upon successful completion of the internship, the trainee teacher had the right to take the professional examination.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Curriculum in School Year 1972/73</b>	<b>1973/74</b>	<b>1975/76</b>
Ethics	60	60	-
Philosophy	80	60	-
Chapters in Philosophy	-	-	128
Self-Governance Based on Marxism	-	200	190
Pedagogy	240	240	578
Preschool Pedagogy	420	420	-
Psychology	320	300	261
Slovenian Language	700	680	668
Foreign Language	400	400	459
History	320	280	152
Geography	280	280	152
Chapters in Social Sciences	-	-	228
Mathematics	240	240	228
Physics	220	220	152
Chemistry	140	140	152
Biology	300	300	152
Chapters in Biology	-	-	133
Hygiene (Health Education)	140	140	144
Home Economics	260	260	174
Art Education	-	-	76
Music Education (with Methodology)	320	320	292
Small Instruments	80	80	-
Piano (Instrument)	50	50	46
Visual Arts (with Methodology)	280	240	326
Design	280	240	-
Rhythmic Physical Education (with Methodology)	340	340	197
Physical Education (with Methodology)	360	360	406
Defence and Protection	140	140	133
Productive Technical Education	-	-	76
<b>Total</b>	<b>6070</b>	<b>5990</b>	<b>5552</b>

The five-year education program lasted from 1958 to 1979. Classes were held five days a week, with one day dedicated to practice in a kindergarten.

The new changes occurred in 1979, namely:

- In the 5th year, education followed the 1973 program.
- In the 4th year, education followed the reformed program from 1975 or 1977.

In the 1979/80 school year, the pedagogically oriented secondary school trained preschool teachers in the third and fourth years of specialised education according to a temporary curriculum, which included the following subjects (Arko, 1999):



<b>Subject</b>	<b>Annual number of hours</b>	
	<b>3rd Year (1979/80)</b>	<b>4th Year (1979/80)</b>
Slovenian Language and Literature	152	171
Self-management with Foundations of Marxism	38	—
Foreign Language	95	76
Psychology	95	133
Pedagogy	133	209
Topics from Social Sciences	144	114
Topics from Biology	76	57
Health Education	38	38
Physical Education with Methodology	76	95
Home Economics with Methodology	76	57
Art Education with Methodology	95	76
Music Education with Methodology	95	95
Rhythmic Movement Education with Methodology	57	57
Instrument	15 minutes per week individual	—
<b>Total</b>	<b>1140 + instrument</b>	<b>1178 + instrument</b>

The above curriculum was adapted by the SRS Institute for Education on the basis of the curriculum and teaching plans for the third, fourth and fifth years of education for preschool teachers from 1977 (Stražar, 1984).

In addition to the subjects listed, the school organised classroom observations for students in the third and fourth years and voluntary activities in line with the educational interests of future preschool educators. The fundamental essence of the reform of targeted education is to link education with work. The inclusion of 4<sup>th</sup> year graduates of pedagogical school's – preschool teacher programme into direct practice was essentially a simplification of this principle. Thus, girls were involved in the educational and care process without prior theoretical knowledge, which is the basis for the successful implementation of educational practice (Stražar, 1984).

The Law on Education and Care of Preschool Children from 1980 regulates the education and care of preschool children as part of a unified system of education and training in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia. This Act stipulates that educational work in preschool institutions is led by a teacher who must have secondary or higher professional education, except in departments for children with physical and mental disabilities (Stražar, 1984).

In 1980, the Law on Targeted Education was adopted, which also covered the education of teachers at Secondary Schools for Preschool Educators. It stipulated that education must include:

- education for acquiring professional qualifications,
- further education and
- on-the-job training.

Secondary education programmes included:

- a secondary education programme,
- a secondary education continuation programme and
- shortened secondary education programmes.

The Act also stipulates that programmes must be vertically linked, and each programme must also specify the duration of education, namely:

- a maximum of two years for a shortened secondary education programme,
- a maximum of four years for a secondary education programme,
- after a continuing secondary education programme, a maximum of two years.

As stated by B. Stražar (1984), following the enactment of the Law on Special Education, users and providers of special educational communities for pedagogical orientation adopted an educational programme, Preschool Teacher, which began to be implemented on 1 September 1981.

<b>Subject</b>	<b>1st Year</b>	<b>2nd Year</b>	<b>3rd Year</b>	<b>4th Year</b>	<b>Total Hours</b>
Slovenian Language and Literature	140	140	140	175	595
Art Education	70	—	—	—	70
Music Education	—	52	105	105	262
Visual Arts Education	—	70	105	105	280
Instrument	—	12	12	12	36
Foreign Language	105	105	88	70	368
Biology	70	52	70	52	244
Physics	70	52	—	—	122
Chemistry	70	52	—	—	122
Mathematics	105	105	—	—	210
Self-management with Foundations of Marxism	70	70	70	—	210
Geography	70	52	70	—	192
History	70	70	70	—	210
Pedagogy	—	—	105	194	299
Psychology	—	—	88	122	210
Physical Education	70	70	70	87	297
Rhythmic Movement Education	—	35	52	53	140
Health Education	35	18	—	—	53
Home Economics	—	105	70	70	245
Hygiene and Care	—	—	70	—	70
Defense and Protection	70	70	—	—	140
Fundamentals of Technology and Production	105	105	—	—	210
<b>Total Hours (Curriculum)</b>	<b>1120</b>	<b>1130</b>	<b>1115</b>	<b>1115</b>	<b>4480</b>
Productive Work / Practical Training	80	80	16	20	196
Cultural Activities	30	30	12	12	84
Extracurricular Activities	30	18	—	—	48
Physical Education and Defense Activities	30	30	30	30	120
<b>Total Hours (Overall)</b>	<b>1290</b>	<b>1288</b>	<b>1317</b>	<b>1277</b>	<b>5192</b>

The syllabus and curriculum still retain most of the shortcomings that occurred with the reduction of education from five to four years. Many subjects that enabled students to acquire more specific professional knowledge, which is necessary for the implementation of educational activities, were omitted.

An important gain, however, is the work experience in educational and childcare organisations in the third and fourth years. However, there are shortcomings here too, as girls are only passively

involved in the educational process — as observers — which prevents them from gaining practical experience and putting theory into practice.

Thus, since 1980, graduates of the fourth year of Secondary Schools for Preschool Educators in the field of education have been entering the teaching profession, educated exclusively through a four-year programme of targeted education, with no opportunity for further education. The additional one-year internship period did not prove successful and was therefore discontinued after one year, in 1980.

Although the Law on the Education and Care of Preschool Children stipulates that the profile of a kindergarten teacher preschool children requires secondary or higher education, in practice, graduates of four-year Secondary Schools for Preschool Educators programmes have fewer employment opportunities in their profession than those who have completed a five-year programme. Furthermore, they were not given the opportunity to pursue further education in their field.

The path to introducing higher education was long and difficult. Divjak (1977) notes that the tendency of educators to achieve the right to in-depth education required a great deal of effort, work and proof, as well as a long and complicated path. While society around the world recognised early on that it matters who is entrusted with the care of children in the preschool period and introduced appropriate training for educators accordingly, in Slovenia we encountered major difficulties in implementing this requirement.

Experts in the field of education and preschool education worked together with teachers to enable teachers to pursue higher education at the Pedagogical Academy, as they found that they lacked sufficient theoretical knowledge to be able to professionally develop the field of preschool education and deepen their understanding of theory and practice. They needed to develop their practical skills and techniques and gain as much practical teaching experience as possible. It was necessary to achieve integration between practice and theory.

At the 16th session of the Assembly on 15 May 1984, the implementers of the special educational community for pedagogical orientation adopted the long-awaited programme for the education of preschool teachers at a higher level. The program began to be implemented in the 1984/85 academic year only for part-time study. In the following academic year, i.e. 1985/86, the following courses were introduced at the Pedagogical Academy in Maribor and Ljubljana organised training for the first generation of students in the preschool teacher training programme. Higher education lasts two years and follows a curriculum that covers three basic groups of subjects:

- a group of general education subjects,
- a group of professional-theoretical subjects,
- a group of specialised professional-theoretical subjects.

Subject Area	Year 1 L	Year 1 S	Year 1 PC	Year 2 L	Year 2 S	Year 2 PC	Total
SLO in DS SFRJ (Slovenia and the SFRY)	30	30	–	30	15	–	105
Sociology with Political Science	30	30	–	–	–	–	60
Political Economy	–	–	–	15	15	–	30
Contemporary Philosophy	–	–	–	30	30	–	60
Natural Sciences	30	30	30	–	–	–	90
Foreign Language	15	–	30	–	–	–	45
<b>Subtotal A</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>390</b>

Subject Area	Year 1 L	Year 1 S	Year 1 PC	Year 2 L	Year 2 S	Year 2 PC	Total
Slovenian Language	15	15	30	–	–	–	60
Youth Literature	30	30	–	–	–	–	60
Theory of Education	30	30	–	–	–	–	60
Preschool Pedagogy	30	–	–	30	–	30	120
Didactics with Educational Technology	45	15	15	–	–	–	75
Developmental Psychology	30	15	15	–	–	–	60
Basics of Pedagogical Methodology with Statistics	15	15	15	–	–	–	45
Motor Skills Development of Preschool Children	30	30	–	–	–	–	60
Health Education of Preschool Children	30	15	15	–	–	–	60
Selected Topics from Special Pedagogy	30	–	15	–	–	–	45
<b>Subtotal B</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>765</b>

Subject Area	Year 1 L	Year 1 S	Year 1 PC	Year 2 L	Year 2 S	Year 2 PC	Total
Methodology of Language Education	–	–	–	30	–	30	60
Methodology of Environmental Studies	–	–	–	60	–	30	90
Methodology of Physical Education	–	–	–	30	–	70	100
Methodology of Art Education	–	–	–	60	–	30	90
Methodology of Music Education	–	–	–	60	–	30	90
Methodology of Dance Education	–	–	–	30	–	30	60
Practicum in Puppetry, Drama, Film and Cultural Activities	–	–	–	15	15	30	60
Practicum in Technical Culture	–	–	–	15	–	15	30
Music Practicum	–	–	30	–	–	30	60
<b>Subtotal C</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>295</b>	<b>640</b>
<b>Subtotal A + B + C</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>435</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>340</b>	<b>1795</b>
<b>D. Physical Education</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>–</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>120</b>
<b>Practical Training (Internship)</b>	<b>4 weeks</b>						

Adapted from the curriculum of the Pedagogical Academy of Maribor, 1984, p. 2.

The table shows that in the first year, students acquire and expand their knowledge primarily in the field of general education and certain professional-theoretical subjects, while in the second year they acquire knowledge in the field of specific theoretical subjects. As part of this, they also perform in educational and childcare organisations. In the second year of education, students must also complete a four-week teaching practice in educational and childcare organisations.

Part-time students have slightly different requirements in higher education, as this education mainly involves preschool educators who have completed five years of specialised education.

Some subjects were therefore recognised, as the higher education programme was designed as a systematic continuation of specialised education after secondary school. As they are studying while working and have passed a professional examination, they are also exempt from performing tasks related to methodology and educational practice.

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FROM 1989 TO THE PRESENT DAY**

Preschool education, as a primary part of the education and training system, has undergone many systemic and content-related changes in the past. Over the last ten years, there has been an increasing demand for highly qualified educators. They are expected to have professional competence, which they must acquire through high-quality education based on theory and practice. According to Lučič (2007), future educators participate in the development and shaping of human beings as the greatest value, which is why their responsibility is so important. They are the executors and organisers of the educational process, as they are familiar with pedagogy, didactics and methodology, which systematically cover knowledge about the skills of education and training. Their general and professional education, their abilities, spiritual and ethical values, and their attitude towards work and children have a direct impact on successful education.

In the 1995/96 academic year, the Faculty of Education at the University of Maribor and the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana launched a three-year higher education professional programme for the education of preschool teachers, which is still running today. With the establishment of the University of Primorska in Koper, the Faculty of Education also began operating (after 2000), which, like the other two, implements a higher education professional programme for the education of preschool teachers.

A few years ago, the preschool education programme in Slovenia underwent a Bologna reform. The fundamental objectives of the Preschool Education programme are to train students to quality work with preschool children and those in the first grade of nine-year elementary school, for cooperation with their parents and colleagues and with other professionals in kindergarten, school and beyond. The general competences acquired by students during their studies are as follows:

- the ability to analyse, synthesise and predict solutions and consequences,
- the ability to apply knowledge in practice,
- the development of critical and self-critical judgement,
- communication and teamwork skills,
- initiative in the process of lifelong learning,
- sensitivity to the environment, cultural and national identity,
- planning and implementation of activities,
- understanding of individuals, their values and value systems.

The curriculum includes compulsory subjects with integrated practical training, elective subjects with integrated practical training, as well as classroom observation and presentations. In

addition, students have condensed practical training and physical education, which are not included in the curriculum. Compulsory subjects are divided into basic professional subjects and professional subjects. Elective subjects offer the opportunity to broaden and deepen professional and didactic knowledge in a specific subject area, to update it on the basis of the latest domestic and foreign literature, and to involve students in research projects. Upon successful completion of the three-year (six-semester) programme, graduates are awarded the title of certified preschool teacher.

When discussing professionalism in early childhood education as one of the factors influencing the design and implementation of high-quality early childhood education programmes, we agree that knowledge and skills are necessary, but that they alone are not sufficient (Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2010). Some authors (Cameron, 2008; Moss, 2007; Urban, 2008) believe that we must advocate for professionals who are able to continuously reflect on their own practice and who can find new solutions to the complex circumstances they face.

All this knowledge acquired through study is not always sufficient, which is why Šinkovec (2009) emphasises that, despite the fact that every individual needs a certain level of formal education to find employment, special attention should also be paid to informal education and work experience.

Numerous extracurricular and specific work experiences help individuals develop into well-rounded personalities who will be able to function in the labour market. Employers (Šinkovec, 2009) increasingly expect young candidates to be innovative, adaptable and coachable, and to have a positive attitude towards work. At the same time, they expect first-time job seekers to have specific professional knowledge, work habits, motivation for work and education, and responsibility towards work.

## EDUCATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Until 1996, when the The Kindergarten Act and the Organisation and Financing of Education Act were adopted in Slovenia, secondary education at a teacher training college was sufficient for preschool teachers to be considered professionally qualified. However, Article 40 of the adopted Kindergarten Act (1996) precisely defines the educational requirements for kindergarten employees. A preschool teachers must have:

- post-secondary or higher education, obtained through an education or study programme in preschool education, or
- higher education in a relevant field and a completed education or study programme for further training in the field of preschool education.

In Slovenian kindergartens, in addition to the preschool teacher, there is also a teaching assistant in each class, who must have:

- secondary vocational education, obtained through an education programme in the field of preschool education, or
- completion of the fourth year of general upper secondary school (grammar school) and a completed vocational course for working with preschool children.

The training of preschool teachers covers two important and closely intertwined segments, namely scientific and professional education and practical training. Before focusing on each segment, we would like to show where they intersect and how they are intertwined. Namely, a student, a future preschool teacher, learns during the course of their studies — through both theory and practice—how to teach and how to transfer knowledge to preschool children.

based on theory and practice, teaches how to teach or transfer knowledge to preschool children. Buitink (2009) talks about practical theory and mentions that some authors also use the term practical knowledge. In any case, it is a theory that students, future preschool educators, use in practice, i.e. when working with preschool children, or a theory that students, as future preschool educators, prefer to prove and demonstrate through practical work rather than defend theoretically. We focus on two things: the content (what we learn) and the changes related to it over time, and on the other hand, the path along which students, future preschool educators, develop — that is, their process of professional development.

## SCIENTIFIC AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

During their education, students learn basic didactic, methodological, pedagogical and psychological knowledge. Below we summarise M. Batistič Zorec (1997) and her definition of the knowledge that students acquire in various fields.

Knowledge about children and education, which involves specific knowledge of pedagogy (theories of education, didactics and preschool pedagogy), psychology (developmental and

educational), sociology, philosophy, special pedagogy and health education. Knowledge in these areas primarily includes various concepts of childhood and education in history and the present, as well as various theories on the development and learning of preschool children.

Theoretical and practical knowledge of individual educational areas (movement, language, mathematics, art, nature and society). Students acquire in-depth subject knowledge and upgrade their skills through methodology, which teaches them ways and forms of imparting this knowledge to preschool children at different stages of development.

Knowledge of communication with children and adults, including oral communication, reading, written expression, non-verbal communication and artistic expression. Students learn to converse (dialogue, group discussion), speak freely (rhetoric), convey information to listeners (adapting their speech to children of different ages, parents with different levels of education, non-experts, experts, etc.) and to listen to and consider the opinions of others. It is also important to train students to study professional literature independently (understanding, critical analysis, etc.), to write professional texts, to work in teams, etc.

Knowledge of the childcare system (school system, public and private kindergartens, legal, social and health institutions). Preschool educators must be informed about the services offered by institutions designed to help families and preschool children. It is also important to be familiar with children's rights.

Scientific thinking, which means that students acquire the ability to argue professionally, think critically, think analytically and synthesise ideas.

## **PRACTICAL TRAINING**

With the Bologna reform, practical training has become a new subject in many study programmes (Gavari Starkie, 2007), while the Preschool Education programme already included and implemented it before. As part of this training, students spend a certain number of hours (actively) participating in the educational process at a kindergarten. However, as Gavari Starkie (2007) also notes, they are not only present, but their task is to actively participate in the educational process in the kindergarten throughout the time, whereby they are expected to actively participate in the process, apply theoretical knowledge in practice, analysing the process, comparing professional experiences and taking a critical approach to events.

M. Plestenjak (1997) emphasises the importance of practical training for students' professional growth and defines the following functions of practical training:

Verification of career decisions: students often wonder whether they have made the right career choice. Their first contact with educational practice provides them with an answer, as they obtain first-hand information about professional work, the problems involved in this work and the working conditions.

Getting to know preschool children: practical experience enables students to thoroughly supplement and upgrade their theoretical knowledge of children. They learn how children think,



react, feel, how they differ from each other in terms of age, and how active they are. They determine which children they find it easiest to connect with, younger or older ones.

Linking theory and practice: during their practical training, students verify the reality and significance of theoretical knowledge on the one hand, and on the other hand, they link practical experience with theoretical principles. In this way, theory becomes more understandable, and practical activities, supported by theory, gain greater validity.

Experiential learning: the knowledge and skills needed to perform educational work cannot be acquired solely through lectures and studying text-books. In practical training, students learn from their own experiences, through their own activities and actions. Experiential learning is based on the idea that we learn best when we do things ourselves; comprehensive personal experience therefore plays a central role.

Verification of work skills: independent work in the department allows students to get to know themselves, their skills, interests and abilities. They determine how they feel at work, how skilled they are at leading and guiding a group, how skilled they are at establishing contacts, which areas of education they are better at, and how they adapt to working conditions. They learn what causes them the most difficulty and in which areas they will need to deepen their knowledge.

Teaching practice offers students insight into the profession and the specific implementation of teaching work in kindergarten, thus enabling them to connect this knowledge with theory. M. Plestenjak (1997) also refers to it in relation to the professional socialisation of future preschool educators. This term refers to familiarisation with the specific professional culture, values, norms, habits, skills and knowledge. At the beginning of their professional careers, students and educators learn to adapt their views and attitudes to the circumstances. They develop appropriate social strategies and ways of compromising between their own beliefs, interests and ideals and the external constraints, conditions and pressures demanded by the new environment. In this way, students gradually integrate into their own future professional structure.

To carry out the above-mentioned functions and goals of pedagogical practice, certain principles of its implementation must be followed. Cencič and Cencič (1994) define them as follows:

The principle of integration of theory and practice requires the interconnection of theoretical learning and practical pedagogical work. Practice is a learning process in which observation, thinking and action are intertwined.

The principle of appropriateness is realised through an appropriate balance between theoretical and practical training.

The principle of purposefulness and organization requires the conscious planning of practice. If we want to achieve its goals, we must focus on those contents and forms of work that allow students to develop. Activities that do not stem from these goals do not belong within the framework of the practice.

The principle of gradualness requires the quantitative and qualitative progression of practice, in proportion to the students' level of competence. The practice must begin with observation and conclude with independently leading a class under mentorship.

The principle of versatile connection and all-round professional activity ensures the comprehensiveness of practical training. It requires the inclusion of all essential activities of the educational system for which the students are being trained.

The principle of economy and rationality is achieved through the appropriate timing of individual activities. This allows us to use as little energy as possible and achieve as much as possible in a short period of time.

The principle of active and creative student participation requires optimal student activity. The emphasis of the practice must be on learning skills and not on writing reports and routine imitation.

*"The common thread in different concepts can be identified by one starting point: the direct active involvement of the individual in a normal, everyday life situation in which the individual gains experience, and, on the other hand, by the individual's reflection on the experience gained."* (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2002, p. 65)

One of the leading experts in this field, Kolb, says that "experiential learning is any learning that occurs in direct contact with the reality being studied ... It is a direct encounter with the phenomenon, not thinking about such an encounter or the possibility of doing something in a real situation" (Marentič Požarnik, 2003; according to Kolb, 1984, p. 38).

Practical training is only one method of experiential learning. The education of future preschool teachers also includes a number of other methods. Cencič and Cencič (1994) define the following:

Structural exercises and tasks; in these activities, students directly engage with certain content or with each other. The procedures for the exercises are precisely defined and proceed step by step. Participants in the exercises learn various skills and elicit specific reactions and emotional responses. Exercises can be performed individually, in pairs or in groups.

Role-playing; participants in role-playing focus their attention on a problem and adopt a pre-agreed way of behaving. It is an interactive activity that represents realistic behaviour in an imagined situation. Students usually only get a rough idea of what to do and react as they think someone else would react, or they stay "themselves" and act as they would in the imagined situation. With this method, students increase their sensitivity to their own and others' feelings, attitudes and behaviours. There are several variations of role-playing: closed play (pre-determined scenario), open play (participants freely adapt to circumstances), role-playing of their own personal characteristics, playing roles with opposite personal characteristics, and swapping roles in the middle of the game.

Simulations: Simulations are models or representations of individual segments of experience or reality in a simplified form in an unrealistic setting. Predefined rules and prepared materials determine the course of events to a certain extent, but participants can influence the course of events with their decisions. By participating in the activity, they actively solve a problem and thus create a direct experience, which they later analyse, evaluate, explore other possible solutions, examine the consequences of their actions and decisions, etc. Such learning is personal, as participants are directly involved in the learning process. Participation in the simulation motivates

them, stimulates their curiosity and connects cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects. It also helps them acquire social skills and the ability to empathise with others.

Simulations of mini performances; mini performances are one of the variants of microteaching (=a condensed form of teaching in terms of time and content, based on the assumption that "the complex activity of teaching must be broken down into more elementary skills and then, with immediate feedback, systematically developed to the point of mastery" (Marentič Požarnik, 1987, p. 29)). Participants are divided into several smaller groups, each of which then prepares a mini performance. It is performed by one of the group members, who acts as a teacher. The others simulate children or act as observers. The performer of the mini-performance must prepare in advance, and after the performance, there is an analysis and discussion among all participants. The student performer receives feedback that helps them improve certain skills. The use of audiovisual aids plays an important role in the analysis of the performance. For example, a recording of the mini-performance allows the student to confront themselves and provides them with direct insight into their behaviour.

In any case, we must be careful, as the skills acquired during our studies are not always sufficient. Although every individual needs a certain level of formal education to find employment, we should pay more attention to informal education and work experience. Only the latter helps individuals develop into well-rounded personalities, which will benefit them in the labour market. After all, employers also expect young candidates to be flexible, innovative, manageable and to have a positive attitude towards work. At the same time, they notice a lack of useful knowledge, work habits, motivation to work or study, and responsibility (Šinkovec, 2009).

The real challenge of practical training is how to prepare students to develop critical and independent thinking and the ability to self-evaluate effectively, based on all their theoretical and practical experience. This way of learning requires students (Gavari Starkie, 2007) to adopt an active attitude and behaviour that will enable them not only to expand and deepen their knowledge, but also to transform and renew their knowledge and skills. This raises a number of questions (Buitink, 2009) regarding the acquired, learned relevance of practical theory or practical knowledge, its structure and the possibilities for changing and updating it.

## PROFESSIONALISM AS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR TRAINING

Constant changes in science, technology, culture, economics and politics bring about changes in the field of education and training. This requires the constant review of existing goals, strategies, programmes, content, methods and forms of work, and the development of new ones, the implementation of which must lead to an improvement in the quality of the education and training system (Rosić, 2009). Education and training are complex phenomena and, above all, processes that must be continuously and systematically developed and adapted to the current needs of society and, above all, children, from a pedagogical, didactic and methodological point of view.

M. Brusnjak (2007) emphasises that experts around the world and in Slovenia are increasingly concerned with the quality of the education system and the quality of kindergartens. At the same time, it is clear to everyone that qualitative changes cannot be achieved from the outside, but arise from the internal will of the management, professional staff and other members of the collective. In this regard, the most effective process is certainly one that encourages autonomy and self-evaluation among professional staff.

An external factor binding on European Union countries and signatories is the Lisbon Strategy, signed in 2000, whose main objective is to raise and improve the quality of education. In its communication to the Council and the European Parliament on improving the quality of teacher education (2007), the Commission stated that in 2002, the European Council in Barcelona adopted specific objectives for improving education and training systems, as the quality of teaching (and education) is one of the key factors in increasing its competitiveness in a globalised world. To this end, reforms must be stepped up to ensure high-quality education systems that are both efficient and equitable. Improving the quality of education is therefore an important objective of education systems.

B. Marentič Požarnik (2000) notes that we are living in a time of fundamental change, when expectations of schools and education are increasing and the role of teachers is changing, becoming more demanding. At the same time, they are working in more difficult circumstances — increasing competition, financial rationalisation, centralisation of decision-making on curricula and knowledge standards on the one hand, and increasingly difficult-to-manage pupils on the other. All these challenges and threats require a higher level of professionalism from teachers, which is made possible by the highest quality teacher training, which should help develop the necessary level of professionalism of the 'teacher as a thinking practitioner'.

All of this can also be applied to preschool educators and their training. In order to ensure the high-quality professional development of educators, we must provide appropriate conditions or, as B. Marentič Požarnik (2000) states, appropriate circumstances. The author (2000, p. 10) explains that "in order to improve the quality of their work, 'teachers of teachers' and the institutions in which they work need a more favourable working climate and working conditions". This includes, among other things:

- the balanced structure of study programmes in pedagogical fields (at least approximate alignment with comparable international, especially European, programmes);

- equal treatment of this field in comparison with other, more “*academic*” study programmes, particularly with regard to issues of systemisation, habilitation, postgraduate studies, equipment, facilities, etc.;
- appropriate standards (for group size, especially in seminars, practical classes, and observations) and, in this connection, adequate staffing (a sufficient number of teachers and assistants, including those responsible for organising practice);
- appropriate status of participating (host) schools and mentor teachers.

If we transfer the author’s line of reasoning (and adapt it appropriately) to the field of preschool teacher education, we can conclude that the changes crucial to the quality of a teacher’s work must necessarily take place “from within”—at the level of thinking and decision-making. These changes are either encouraged or hindered “from the outside”, and in this context high-quality education, based on contemporary insights into (preschool teachers’) learning, plays a key role in enhancing teachers’ professionalism and autonomy, both of which are necessary for successful reform. There is still a long way to go in this respect, but along this path we must not forget the “hidden curriculum”—that is, how preschool teachers experience expectations, pressures, opportunities, and constraints in their everyday professional environment.

The teaching profession is demanding, difficult and stressful. It has evolved from a semi-professional to a professional occupation that requires high-quality general and professional training for individuals or teachers. There is a tendency to equate teacher training with that of teachers, whereby the training of educators should be adapted to new educational guidelines, both practical and professional. In this regard, the presence of pedagogical, psychological, linguistic, literary and kinesiological content in educator training is very important, followed by high-quality methodological education and training, knowledge of pedagogical research methodology and educational practice in kindergarten (Lučić, 2007)

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

The professional development of preschool educators can be understood as a lifelong process, within which two main processes occur: personal maturation on the one hand and the acquisition of professional knowledge and experience on the other (Plestenjak, 1997). These two processes must be intertwined, as this creates the best conditions for quality education and training in the pre-school period.

Postmodern society is a society of constant change that requires adaptation on the part of both individuals and organisations. This also applies to kindergartens. P. Peček (2003) says that kindergartens that adapt more quickly to their environment and learn from it are more successful. They are learning organisations in which everyone, from teachers to the management team, is educated. Teachers learn from each other, exchange their professional opinions, knowledge and experience, as well as work failures, and thus develop together. Their mutual cooperation represents a kind of bridge between the development of teachers and the development of the

kindergarten as an organisation. The foundation of the kindergarten as a learning organisation is therefore a culture of cooperation, which includes cooperative relationships between employees, cooperation in planning life and work in the kindergarten, and, last but not least, a sense of collective belonging to the kindergarten.

There are many definitions of professionalism, referring to values, ethical codes, knowledge, skills and responsibilities that guide thinking and behaviour in the teaching profession (Jalongo and Isenberg, 2000). And because the components of this professionalism are subject to change, it is entirely understandable that professionalism is not a static category that does not change, but is itself dependent on social change. Professionalism can also be defined as the continuous effort we devote to the process of becoming professionals (Caulfield, 1997). "It is precisely this tendency that leads to excellence, even in cases where it does not observe or evaluate, we could call professionalism. Finally, we can define professional development as a process in which we can achieve balance in the realisation of all dimensions of professionalism and thus higher quality of our work and job satisfaction" (Vonta, 2005, p. 14).

Most research on the professional development of educators focuses on educators' qualifications as an important indicator of programme quality and the resources with which educators should be equipped (Saracho and Spodek, 2007). L. Darling-Hammond and G. Sykes (1999) cite the following dimensions that determine the professional level of the teaching profession:

- a defined core of specialised knowledge that the general public does not possess;
- participation in procedures leading to a licence, certification, or the attainment of standards;
- motivation originating from the professionals themselves;
- the practitioner's autonomy to use and apply their professional knowledge in various institutions, to make decisions, exercise judgement, and reflect on their practice;
- prestige and reputation within the wider community.

T. Vonta (2005) emphasises that professional development influences educators' job satisfaction and vice versa. The involvement of educators in professional development also changes relationships at the level of educator-other educator, educator-parents, educator-management, educator-wider community, and thus changes the reputation of the profession. All too often (Martin and Kragler, 1999), structured professional development is limited to current (political) requirements or programme needs, neglecting the holistic development of a work culture whose purpose is to encourage internal factors and motivation that enable educators to work even in more demanding circumstances.

The concept of professional development goes hand in hand with the concept of career, several definitions of which are highlighted by R. Cvetko (2002):

- "A career comprises all the jobs that an individual performs during their professional life." (Cvetko, 2002; according to Werther and Davis, 1986, p. 258)
- "A career is the pattern of all work-related experiences that guide and connect the course of an individual's life." (Cvetko, 2002; according to Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1993, p. 12)

- A career is “a planned or unplanned sequence of jobs or activities that includes elements of advancement (in terms of subjective perception), self-fulfilment, and personal development within a defined period of time.” (Cvetko, 2002; according to Lipičnik, 1998, pp. 179–80)

## **THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Education and upbringing are among the most complex and, at the same time, most responsible human activities. Established knowledge depends on many internal and external factors, one of the most important of which is undoubtedly the preschool educator (Rosić, 2009). K. Lučlć (2007) agrees that the preschool educator is not solely responsible for the education and upbringing of preschool children, but that their role in preparing children for life is very important. Preschool education is the first institutional form in the education system and covers children until they start school. In order for the educator to be able to use appropriate methodological approaches, they must be professionally qualified for this activity. Only in this way do their pedagogical, didactic, and methodological professional knowledge, as well as their knowledge of general, developmental, and educational psychology, come fully to the fore, together with their abilities and personal qualities as a person: democracy, respect for children’s rights, creativity, love for children, love for the preschool teaching profession, etc. As V. Rosić (2009) concludes, knowing each child and their abilities enables the preschool teacher to adopt the appropriate approach to both individual and group work.

The professional development of preschool educators is therefore inevitable, whereby, as explained by C. Jaruszewicz and M. Johnston White (2009) argue that a professional climate can emerge and exist in any early childhood programme if there is interest in it. Regardless of whether it preserves and nurtures or neglects and disregards the needs of those individuals who are present and working in a given space, the professional climate, and with it the professional development of the individual, depends on many factors. In general, these can be divided into external factors (laws, politics, etc.), which we as individuals cannot directly influence, and internal factors (approaches, methods, motivation, etc.), which we can directly influence.

The professional development of preschool teachers goes through different stages, which we need to keep in mind when planning professional development. A teacher who is just starting their career and a teacher who has been working in this profession for many years are at different stages of development, and taking this into account leads to better working and social atmosphere and to more appropriate interpersonal relationships in the kindergarten.

Experts do not entirely agree on the definition of the individual stages of professional development of educators. Vonta (2005) refers to Jalong and Isenberg (2000), who distinguish four stages: beginner, advanced beginner, expert and specialist practitioner. P. Peček (2003) highlights Hargreaves and Fullana (1993), who, based on a study conducted on a population of teachers, defined the following seven stages of a teacher's career, which are summarised below.

1) The beginning of a career (from the first to the third year of teaching)

The initial stage of a career is divided into two sub-phases: the survival phase and the discovery phase. In the first phase, the individual is confronted with reality, and a gap may emerge between their ideals and everyday work. This can lead to self-doubt and doubts about their abilities. The discovery phase helps them overcome this, as they realise that they are part of a collective, that they have their own pupils, their own class, and their own programme. Both sub-phases take place simultaneously and, in Slovenia, correspond to the induction (traineeship) phase.

2) The stabilisation phase (from the fourth to the sixth year of teaching)

The stabilisation phase represents commitment to the profession and signifies that the teacher assumes obligations and responsibilities in their professional life. They become increasingly professional, already possess certain experience, and grow “freer” and more spontaneous in the classroom. All teachers enter this phase.

The next two phases run parallel to each other. A teacher's career development follows one or the other.

3) The experimentation or activism phase (from the seventh to the eighteenth year of teaching)

The teacher seeks changes in their professional life and is open to new challenges and work circumstances. This may include a desire to work with different groups of pupils (e.g., different age groups) or a general desire to change the school's work. During this phase, the teacher may begin to question the suitability of their career choice.

4) The self-evaluation or self-doubt phase (from the seventh to the eighteenth year of teaching)

This phase involves a kind of “mid-career crisis”. The teacher experiences a range of feelings, from a sense of routine and monotony to a desire for radical changes in both professional and personal life.

The next phases also run parallel, and the teacher can easily follow one path or the other.

5) The phase of calmness and detachment (from the nineteenth to the thirtieth year of teaching)

This phase is characterised by a shift from the teacher's initial enthusiasm to calmness. The gradual loss of energy is compensated by greater self-confidence and self-acceptance. The teacher develops realistic expectations of their abilities.

6) The conservatism phase (from the nineteenth to the thirtieth year of teaching)

Teachers in this phase may exhibit resistance to innovation and nostalgia for the past. They often complain about the younger generation, believing that pupils are less disciplined and less motivated to work. In interpersonal relationships, the teacher becomes more prudent, considerate, and cautious.

7) The withdrawal phase (from the thirty-first to the fortieth year of teaching)

During this phase, two trends may emerge. A teacher approaching retirement may begin to withdraw from the profession, directing their energy toward other areas of life and seeking quieter years. Alternatively, a teacher may become more active and creative, for example by becoming a highly successful mentor to younger colleagues, beginning teachers, and trainees.

All these stages of career development can also be found in the case of a preschool teacher, who is the main bearer of the educational process in kindergarten. The educational process, as



explained by K. Lučić (2007), the educational process is primarily a creative process, a form of self-creation by the preschool educator, in which the educational activity depends on his personality and example and is worth as much as the preschool educator himself (Lučić, 2007). This is why it is so important for preschool educators to have clear guidelines for their development, both in their educational work with children and in their career paths. P. Peček (2003) emphasises that the most harmonious and high-quality transition in a professional career proceeds through the following phases: from the beginning of the career to stabilisation, then through a phase of experimentation to a calm distance, followed by a peaceful retreat.

Just as F. Froebel in the early 19th century used the metaphor of the kindergarten to describe an environment characterised by carefully nurtured relationships in both space and among participants (teachers and children), the metaphor of a “teachergarten” can be used to understand the professional environment in which teachers develop, confront challenges, and offer solutions for their reflections, ideas, and questions for the benefit of the entire learning community (Jaruszewicz and Johnston White, 2009). To this end, it is necessary to ensure that all preschool educators are actively engaged in their professional development, are personally interested and motivated, and receive support in these efforts.

## **PRINCIPLES OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS’ PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

P. Peček (2003; adapted from Oldroyd and Hall, 1991) lists the following principles of professional development for preschool educators:

- The goals of the kindergarten must be clearly defined;
- The educational needs of both teachers and the kindergarten must be accurately identified;
- Professional development should be based on the actual knowledge and needs of the teachers;
- It is the responsibility of the leadership to provide high-quality training for their staff;
- The process of staff development must be continuously monitored and evaluated;
- The cost of training must be calculated, and the quality must correspond to the resources invested;
- Support from the management team must be an integral part of staff development.

The responsibility for the successful professional development of all employees in the kindergarten lies with the management. P. Peček (2003) states that the main task of the management team of any organisation is to provide professional support, professional development and training for all employees. The professional development of employees can only be successful if it is in line with the goals, vision and mission of the kindergarten. It depends on the conditions in the working environment, especially on the relationships between colleagues, on the way employees think, and above all on the management of the kindergarten. Managers must create an atmosphere in which employees are aware that they are primarily responsible for their own development and progress.

T. Vonta (2005) defines ten basic conditions or requirements that determine the success of professional development for educators:

1) Taking into account the stages of professional development Planning education or professional training, acquiring knowledge and skills, cooperation and motivation of educators depend on the stage at which the educator currently finds themselves.

2) Individualisation and differentiation of approaches: this requirement is based on the recognition that not every approach to professional development is suitable for every educator. The individuality of the educator must be taken into account, based on their current level of development. In order to achieve a balance between the interests of the individual and those of the community, the professional development of educators must be in line with the vision of the kindergarten.

3) Reflection on one's own practice: the requirement for critical reflection on one's own practice is at the core of professional development. This means that preschool educators systematically and critically reflect on their experiences and the context in which a particular practice takes place. Reflection requires the ability to analyse the consequences of one's decisions and to observe children's reactions and feelings. For example, preschool educators analyse the consequences of using certain educational procedures and materials, taking into account the messages they receive from children.

4) Cooperation: professional development is most successfully achieved through cooperation with the team. Through dialogue, educators learn from each other and share their knowledge and experience. If an educator closes themselves off within the four walls of their department, this prevents them from fully interpreting and analysing their practice.

5) Self-assessment and self-training: self-evaluation enables teachers to identify areas in which they will focus their professional development. Preschool educators are aware of the areas in which they are strong and those in which they need additional training, but they do not show this if they feel threatened. Preschool educators need to feel safe, so the team must build respectful relationships and high-quality communication.

6) Subjective assumptions and implicit theories or mental models must become visible: every preschool educator has subjective perceptions and beliefs about childhood and child development, about education and training, and about the mission and vision of the kindergarten. Experts define these views as implicit pedagogy or educators' subjective theories. M. Batistič Zorec (2004. p. 137) states that preschool educators' subjective theories encompass "both their implicit and explicitly expressed views and values, which are reflected in their behaviour and relationships with children". They are both a product of the cultural and historical circumstances of the society in which the preschool educator lives and works, as well as their personal history, life and professional experience, and knowledge. Preschool educators' subjective conceptions must become visible and be included in their professional development.

7) The content and typologies of professional knowledge are diverse: individual authors define it differently. T. Vonta (2005) cites Marentič Požarnik (2000), who includes in professional knowledge content knowledge, general pedagogical, psychological, special didactic, curricular and practical, explicit or implicit knowledge.

8) An inviting leadership paradigm, teamwork, and a culture of collegiality and democracy: The fulfilment of this requirement is reflected in the collaboration among team members, the provision of mutual support, and the respect for individual differences. A culture of collegiality can only be fostered through leadership that monitors and evaluates progress in the service of development, rather than for control. A culture of collegiality is reflected in common goals, shared responsibility for success, a constant striving for improvement, and a focus on lifelong learning and employee well-being. The team emphasises the strengths of each member and openness in its operations. It is based on mutual support, trust and respect. A culture of collegiality can only be developed in a culture of democracy that encourages the participation of each individual in the formation, implementation and evaluation of ideas.

9) Knowledge about how adults learn: in adult education, we must take into account the individual's learning style and general knowledge about the adult learning process. The latter must be based on a culture of cooperation and active participation of participants. In addition to achieving a certain level of general and professional knowledge, the professional development of preschool educators also includes a great deal of personal experience in the field of work. By sharing this experience with other professionals at the nursery, educators contribute to the development of the entire team.

10) Evaluation in terms of recognition and professional development: the evaluation of an educator's work and progress undoubtedly contributes greatly to their successful professional development. Evaluation enables the achievement of personal and institutional goals, increases the professionalism and autonomy of educators, and contributes to the recognition of good practice. It highlights the strengths and weaknesses of preschool educators, on the basis of which they can then plan further steps and make appropriate decisions about changing their work.

Professional development is a gradual process that goes through several stages, the first of which is definitely the decision to become a preschool educator.

## **AN INDIVIDUAL'S DECISION TO PURSUE A CAREER AS AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR**

The role of the educator has changed constantly throughout human history, but the expectations of society have remained almost unchanged: that educators should "perform their duties with dedication, be a source of quality knowledge and a role model, and always work for the benefit of their ward" (Toman, 2001, p. 23). J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (2010) emphasises that the educator is the first person to whom the child is entrusted outside the home environment or family care. Their influence on the child is significant and extends far into the child's future, so inappropriate guidance can cause irreparable damage. For this reason, anyone who decides to become a preschool teacher should make this decision with careful consideration and conscience. Only those who are prepared to take responsibility for the safety and development of children can become preschool teachers.

According to M. Cenčič and B. Čagran (2002), only those individuals who have consciously and thoughtfully decided to work with children in the most demanding and sensitive stage of development should choose the profession of preschool teaching. For this reason, the profession is, on one hand, challenging and responsible, as the teacher's influence on children at this stage is particularly strong and affects all aspects of the child's later life. On the other hand, it is a profession that also enriches the teacher personally and professionally.

"The qualities of a teacher, both professional and human, will always be the most important factor in the level of preschool education." (Plestenjak, 1990, p. 27) Preschool educators not only nurture, but also educate and teach children, combining their efforts with those of their colleagues and parents to create the most appropriate learning environment for children. They also continuously educate themselves and familiarise themselves with new methods and forms of working with younger children, new technology and various ways of stimulating children to develop as many of their abilities and skills as possible (Cenčič and Čagran, 2002).

M. Batistič Zorec (2003) notes that recent professional literature places an increasing emphasis on the knowledge, abilities and skills of preschool educators, e.g. professional competence and commitment. They must be experienced, attentive and cooperative observers of children. Only in this way can they understand their interests and recognise their potential abilities. They must be familiar with the characteristics of child development and learning and, on this basis, be able to plan a curriculum for children of different ages. However, educational behaviour is not just the effective implementation of any planned activity, but simply means being there, being in the classroom, being in every moment. This educational activity falls within the scope of the hidden curriculum.

"Working with preschool children is professional work that cannot be framed or prescribed, nor can solutions be found suitable and good for all children." (Grum, 2003, p. 108) However, there are certain guidelines and legal regulations that define this profession. The key national documents in the field of preschool education in kindergartens in Slovenia are:

The Kindergarten Act (1996) — defines the organisation and content of preschool education in kindergartens, the basic tasks of kindergartens, the principles of preschool education, the objectives and content of programmes and their financing. It also defines the educational requirements for preschool teachers/educators and their assistants and their work obligations. The work obligations of preschool teachers include preparing for educational work, planning and implementing educational work, working with parents, and participating in the organisation of life and work in the kindergarten. It sets out the basic tasks of kindergartens, defines the objectives of preschool education, and specifies the number of children in a group, which may not exceed twelve children in the first age group and twenty-two children in the second age group.

Curriculum for Kindergartens (1999) — provides a professional basis for work in kindergartens. It sets out global educational goals, principles of preschool education, basic knowledge about child development and learning, and the role of adults. It covers six areas of activity: movement, language, art, society, nature and mathematics. For each area, it defines general objectives and suggests examples of activities and content that represent possible ways of achieving the objectives. Interdisciplinary activities such as moral development, traffic education, health and safety care are also intertwined throughout the individual areas.

However, the Kindergarten Act is not the only document that defines work and life in kindergartens, as certain guidelines can already be found in the White Paper on Education and Training in the Republic of Slovenia (2011). This document sets out the principles and objectives of preschool education, which are defined similarly to those in the Kindergarten Act. Some solutions for introducing changes in kindergartens are also proposed.

In regulations and guidelines, certain common points can be identified: everywhere, there is an emphasis on educational activities within the kindergarten that promote a child's holistic, optimal, and healthy development in all aspects of their personality—physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual. All sources agree that success in quality preschool education is possible only with the support and cooperation of teachers and the kindergarten, working together with parents as equal partners in the education and upbringing of preschool children.

When choosing a career, we are guided by various tendencies, with personal motivation playing an important role. Psychologists justify career choices with various motivational theories. Among the best known are various variants of the psychoanalytic theories of S. Freud, A. Adler and A. Maslow's pyramid theory of needs. Less well known is London's motivational theory of career choice (London and Noe, 1997), which explains that the decision to choose a particular career depends on the ability to identify with the work in that career, a realistic view of one's abilities, and also on the individual's persistence regarding the circumstances, which may not support such decisions at all. This theory, which emphasises income as one of the most important motives for choosing a profession, does not correspond to the motives of future educational professionals, who are predominantly motivated by the joy and desire to work with children and various altruistic influences (Donohoue Clyne, 1998; Cenčič, 2000).

Compared to similar studies on the teaching profession, there is very little research on the motivation for choosing the preschool educator profession. Studies examining the reasons why young people decide to become teachers have been conducted for more than 80 years. L. G. Daniel and C. M. Ferrell (1991) analysed nineteen of them and, based on their findings, created a

hierarchical list of reasons that influence young people to choose teaching as their life's work. The ten most common reasons are:

- Affinity for children and young people, and a desire to work with them
- Confidence in one's work and/or adequate pay
- Favourable working conditions (e.g., working hours, long holidays)
- Interest in a specific subject
- Opportunities for lifelong learning
- Possibility to teach as well as work in other professions
- Work for the benefit of humanity
- Influence of a relative or teacher
- Interest in the field of education
- Opportunity for a creative and stimulating profession

A study conducted by C. Montecinos and L. E. Nielsen (1997) among students of primary education and preschool education confirmed that a fondness for children (e.g. a desire to make a difference in a child's life) was the main reason for choosing a teaching career. Other important reasons include: previous experience working with children, the desire to emulate exemplary teachers they had during their own schooling, and the influence of family (parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc.).

Years ago, M. Cencič and B. Čagran (2002) undertook similar research, presenting the results of an empirical study aimed at identifying the motivational factors for choosing to study and pursue a career as a preschool teacher. The analysis of the research showed that the most important reason for Slovenian students was also the desire to work with children. This is followed by, with minor differences: students' awareness that this profession allows them to use all their abilities, that it is useful public work, that they are role models for children and that at the same time they are fulfilling their desire to obtain a university degree. Based on the factorisation of the sample of variables, the authors present five groups of basic motivational factors:

- Intrinsic calling for the teaching profession
- Influence and self-fulfilment
- Socio-economic benefits
- Alternative goals
- Aspirations and stereotypes

Similar groups of reasons, but for choosing the teaching profession, were also identified by M. Ivanuš Grmek and M. Javornik Krečič (2005). They combined the individual reasons for choosing the teaching profession into five groups by abstracting common characteristics and using the factorisation already performed in the above-mentioned study by Cencič and Čagran:

1) Self-fulfilment reasons reflect the desire for personal and professional growth as well as meaningful and influential work. This group includes the following reasons:

- Teaching is a useful public service for society as a whole;
- As a teacher, I will be able to serve as a role model for children and young people;
- The teaching profession provides opportunities for lifelong professional development;
- The profession allows me to use all of my abilities.

2) Altruistic reasons are an internal motivation factor for students, primarily based on personal interest. These reasons include:

- I want to work with children and young people;
- I have always wanted to become a teacher;
- I could not see myself in any other profession;
- This profession provides satisfaction derived from the work itself.

3) Material reasons reflect external motivation for choosing a course of study, based on favourable socio-economic outcomes, opportunities for advancement, and further education. This group includes:

- Attractive working conditions (e.g., shorter working hours, holidays, etc.);
- Studying in this field provides opportunities for further education;
- The qualification offers employment opportunities in other professions;
- This profession ensures financial security at retirement;
- The profession provides a fairly good personal income.

4) Reasons based on inspiration and stereotypes reflect both personal and external aspirations, as well as stereotypes about professions. These reasons include:

- My parents' desire for me to obtain an academic degree;
- University education is important to me;
- Representation of this profession in my family;
- This profession is considered suitable for women.

5) Alternative reasons express external motivation for choosing a course of study due to not meeting the conditions for admission to the desired programme. These reasons include:

- Grades and achievements in secondary school were insufficient to enrol in another faculty;
- I somehow ended up in this programme;
- By chance or coincidence;
- I was unable to study according to my original wishes.

M. Hmelak (2013) conducted a study on the reasons for choosing a profession among preschool education students and preschool teachers. She classified the individual reasons among preschool teachers into five groups, based on previous factorisation (Cencič and Čagran, 2002; Ivanuš Grmek and Javornik Krečič, 2005):

1) Self-fulfilment reasons:

- The work of a preschool teacher is a valuable public service for society as a whole.
- As a preschool teacher, I will be able to serve as a role model for children or young people.
- This profession offers me the opportunity for lifelong professional development.
- The profession will allow me to use all of my abilities, e.g., musical, dance, verbal, etc.
- I am good at organizing people.
- As a preschool teacher, I will be able to influence the development of society.
- I have many things I can give to children.

- I want to have an impact on children.

## 2) Altruistic reasons

- I have always wanted to become a preschool teacher.
- I want to work with children (or young people).
- I could not imagine myself in any other profession.
- This profession will give me satisfaction derived from my work.
- The teaching profession is truly the right profession for me.
- I have always liked kindergarten.
- I was born for this profession.
- I want to influence or change education.

## 3) Material reasons

- This profession offers attractive working conditions (shorter working hours, holidays, etc.).
- This profession provides a fairly good personal income.
- The profession ensures economic (financial) security upon retirement.
- With this qualification, I will also be able to work in other professions.
- Studying in this field gives me the opportunity for further education.
- Work in a kindergarten is a stimulating and creative profession.
- There is a high likelihood of employment in this profession.

## 4) Reasons from aspirations and stereotypes

- This profession is represented in my family (relatives).
- This is a suitable profession for women.
- University education is important to me.
- My parents wanted me to obtain an academic degree.
- The preschool teaching profession has a high status in our society.

## 5) Alternative reasons

- Grades and achievements in secondary school were too low to enrol in another faculty.
- In some way, I ended up in this programme.
- It was simply by chance or coincidence.
- I was unable to study according to my original wishes.

The researcher found that among preschool education students and preschool teachers, the most important motivational factors for choosing this field of study are self-fulfilment reasons, followed by altruistic reasons. Both are primarily connected to intrinsic motivation and a strong desire for influence and self-realisation. For almost all respondents, the most important aspect of their studies—and later of their profession—is fulfilling their own potential, whereas the least important are alternative reasons, which involve external (coercive) factors, such as insufficient points for another programme, unfulfilled wishes, etc. Some partial deviations from the findings of other studies (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010; Cenčič and Čagran, 2002) on similar samples (preschool education students) were observed. While M. Hmelak finds that the most common reason for choosing the preschool teaching profession is self-fulfilment, encompassing both the



desire to influence and the desire for personal and professional realisation, J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (2010) and M. Cenčič and B. Čagran (2002) report that preschool education students most often choose this profession due to altruistic reasons, reflecting a sense of intrinsic calling to the study and profession. In both cases, however, these reasons are closely associated with intrinsic motivation.

## **OBLIGATIONS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THEIR WORK**

The work of a preschool teacher in a kindergarten generally encompasses the following three areas:

- Work with children, which includes preparing for educational activities, planning and implementing them, and monitoring and evaluating the educational work;
- Collaboration with parents, through both formal and informal forms of interaction;
- Collaboration with other kindergarten staff (assistant teachers, other professionals, and the kindergarten leadership) in the organization of daily life and work within the kindergarten.

### **PRESCHOOL EDUCATOR AND WORKING WITH CHILDREN**

This includes:

1. Preparation for educational work: This also involves preparing the space and selecting appropriate educational materials and resources. A well-organised space with properly arranged equipment and accessible toys is an important element of kindergarten quality. Educational materials and toys must be within children's reach, furniture must be adapted to children's height and safety requirements, and children must have spaces for privacy and rest. According to the Kindergarten Curriculum (1999), the organization of space must follow these principles:

- The space must be healthy, safe, and pleasant, both indoors and outdoors.
- It must ensure privacy and intimacy.
- It must offer flexibility and stimulation, meaning that the arrangement of the classroom changes according to the age of the children and the activities taking place.

2. Planning and implementing educational work: At the micro-level, planning assumes that the teacher organises their direct educational work in the kindergarten. To achieve quality preschool education, it is not enough to plan; the plan must also be implemented in practice, which is referred to as the implemented curriculum.

3. Monitoring and evaluating educational work: Although this is not legally defined as a preschool teacher's duty, it is certainly one of the most important aspects of their work. By systematically collecting data and critically analysing their work, the preschool teacher obtains useful feedback. Based on these data, they can assess the success and effectiveness of their work and make necessary adjustments. According to R. Pipan, B. Stražar, I. Okoren, S. Petrič, and V. Zmaga Glogovec (1993), at the micro-evaluation level, the preschool teacher primarily assesses to what extent the set goals have been achieved. The basic condition for evaluation is the analysis of one's own work, in which the teacher checks whether the sequence and timing of activities were followed and evaluates their methods, materials used, and achieved outcomes. The preschool

teacher evaluates whether the organization and implementation of the educational process provided opportunities to meet children's needs and whether the chosen content enabled the achievement of developmental goals in all areas of child development. They also assess whether the activities promoted children's independence, self-expression, social interactions, and engagement, and whether the teacher took into account children's initiatives, interests, and involvement. Evaluation must also include the teacher's observations of inadequate or ineffective actions in their work. By critically reflecting on their shortcomings, the teacher takes the first step toward improving their work. Only after identifying their weaknesses can they seek appropriate professional solutions to address them. The purpose of evaluation is therefore to gain insight into the current state, with the collected data serving as a basis for implementing necessary changes.

If we take a closer look at the work of a teacher, we can see that it is very diverse in terms of content. Due to the requirement for greater professional autonomy of educators, which is one of the novelties introduced by the Curriculum for Kindergartens (1999), their responsibility in planning and implementing educational activities has also become much more pronounced, since, as emphasised by R. Kroflič et al. (2001), this document itself does not yet ensure professional planning at the operational level. The document does not specify concrete educational terms or operational educational preparations. Content warnings (Bahovec, Krajnc, Cvetko, Marjanovič Umek and Videmšek, 1999) are not some kind of "recipes" for how educators should act in educational circumstances. They should be understood primarily as professional suggestions to help educators develop specific content and methodological solutions. The content chosen by the educator is not an end in itself or a goal, but must be adapted to the child's developmental needs, abilities and interests. The fundamental starting point for planning and implementing educational work is a thorough understanding of the laws of child development, their needs, characteristics and abilities, and identifying the current stage of development of individual children. At the same time, one must be aware of

*the possibilities offered by the space and time allocation of activities, especially the educational climate and events that characterise the quality of social relationships. Only in this context does the educational theme come to life as a concrete problem-solving challenge /.../. (Kroflič et al., 2001, p. 22).*

Let us mention some of the more important activities of the implementation curriculum that are important for understanding the work obligations and tasks of preschool educators:

- Play is the most effective form of learning for children. According to L. Marjanovič Umek and M. Zupančič (2001), it represents the child's cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development, as well as the connections between knowing and not knowing, the actual and the possible, the probable and the improbable. Play is characterised by intrinsic motivation, positive emotions, unreality, and flexibility (Kroflič et al., 2001).

There are different types of play, and to encourage and develop the quality of play—and thereby promote positive interactions and the development of children's cognitive and social skills—E. D. Bahovec and Z. Kodelja (1996) emphasise the importance of the teacher's involvement in play.

Certain rules apply (Senica, 2000), according to which the teacher: provides conditions for play; ensures a pleasant atmosphere; introduces children to the possibility of choice, rather

than imposing solutions; allows the child to make autonomous decisions; does not intervene in or interrupt the play; joins the play as a co-player; encourages play using a variety of materials; does not limit the play by time; takes the child's play seriously, giving the child the opportunity to develop their own strategies and personal decisions.

- Routine activities – these are part of the hidden curriculum and include mealtimes, care and hygiene, rest and sleep, arrival at and departure from the kindergarten. There are many descriptions of how teachers carry out routine activities (Brglez and Makuc, 2002; Brečko, 2002), but all agree that the basis for implementing the daily routine is respecting the characteristics of each age group and the individual differences in children's development. The teacher must respect the child's choices, interests, and needs.

- Promoting a child's communication skills – the teacher does this primarily through personal example, professionalism, and communicative competence. E. D. Bahovec and Z. Kodelja (1996) emphasise that there must be enough time in the kindergarten for conversation, storytelling, explanation, description, dramatization, and role play, as it is crucial for the child to develop language abilities, including the ability to form and understand texts in different communicative situations for various purposes. J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (2004) highlights that an empathetic teacher can observe children's behaviour and also recognise the feelings accompanying it, identify the emotional and motivational factors, and adapt communication to each child. The teacher must gain the child's trust, since emotional connection is the bridge to good communication, which can only be achieved through a positive social-emotional climate in the classroom, characterised by relaxed, open relationships based on connectedness, care, understanding, and respect.

- Promoting a child's social-emotional development – A. Lipovec (2000), A. Brečko (2000), and S. Kračun (2000) note that emotional intelligence is more important for a child's success and happiness than IQ measured by standardised tests. Emotional intelligence helps the child develop self-esteem and respect for themselves and others. Its key components include empathy, self-confidence, expression and regulation of emotions, adaptability, independence, problem-solving in interpersonal situations, a sense of belonging and acceptance, respect, and kindness.

- Discipline – M. Juhart (2003) states that children need boundaries, because without them they feel insecure and left to their own devices. Boundaries provide a sense of safety, but children also explore and test these limits, which helps them understand their current abilities and encourages them to try new ways of behaving. By learning what is right and wrong, children gradually develop correct behaviour. A. Lipovec (2003) emphasises that boundaries should not be permanent or rigid; they must adapt to the child's age, developmental progress, and capacity to understand information. Setting rules and limits is a lifelong process, primarily based on mutual respect. It is also crucial that rules apply to the teacher; by following the rules they have helped establish, the teacher becomes a role model for the children. Clearly defined rules and boundaries are the foundation of effective discipline. When a child breaks a rule, the teacher must respond appropriately while consistently applying the agreed-upon consequences. Punishment should unambiguously relate to the child's action or behavior, not to their personality. Through this type of discipline, the child learns to take responsibility for their actions.

- Observing children and monitoring their development – D. Belak and M. Železnik (2002) argue that observing and assessing a child's current development is essential for planning their further potential development, and the insights gained are also useful for parent-teacher discussions and educational guidance. Two types of observation are distinguished:

Occasional observation, aimed at generally understanding what is happening in the group, carried out at any time during educational activities to determine when children need help, guidance, encouragement, or redirection.

Planned observation, carried out occasionally and purposefully, usually when the teacher needs in-depth information about an individual child, their development, behaviour, and reactions.

The goal of observation is determined in advance (who and what is being observed), and the teacher organises specific educational situations to help gather accurate and useful data.

## **THE ROLE OF THE PRESCHOOL EDUCATOR IN COOPERATION WITH PARENTS**

Parents play the most important role in raising children, and kindergartens and kindergarten teachers must take this into account. M. Pšunder (2000) emphasises that kindergarten education cannot replace family education, but rather complements it. The effectiveness of educational interventions can only be achieved through cooperation and collaboration between the kindergarten and parents. "The basic idea that we follow in our work and cooperation with parents stems from the thesis that we can expect better results in the field of socialisation if we work professionally with both children and parents at the same time (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 1996, p. 46). While parents raise their children mostly spontaneously, preschool educators guide their development consciously and professionally. J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (1996) points out that the educational methods of parents and educators often differ greatly, which is why cooperation between the kindergarten and parents is a necessary condition for the appropriate complementarity of family and institutional education. Mutual cooperation is based on common goals and tasks. Guiding a child's development is a shared responsibility of both parents and educators — both strive for the child's progress and a happy future. In doing so, they must take into account the division of responsibilities and the distinction between individual competences. The kindergarten offers services to parents, but must not interfere with their rights or privacy of the family, which means that it must respect the culture, identity, language, beliefs, values, habits, customs and other characteristics of the parents (Bahovec et al., 1999, p. 24).

The White Paper on Education and Training in the Republic of Slovenia (2011) and the Curriculum for Kindergartens (1999) define the principles that kindergartens must follow when cooperating with parents and involving them in the organised educational process:

- parents have the right to publicly available information about the various programmes offered by institutional pre-school education;
- parents have the right to be kept informed of their rights and responsibilities on a regular and systematic basis;
- parents have the right to gradually introduce their child to the kindergarten (they can spend a certain amount of time with their child in their group);

- parents have the right to participate in the planning of educational work;
- parents have the right to exchange information and have in-depth discussions about their child with the preschool teacher.
- parents have the right to actively participate in the educational work in agreement with the preschool teacher.

On the other hand, as co-creators of education in kindergarten, parents must also respect the limits of their co-decision-making and the professional autonomy of the kindergarten and the teacher.

Successful cooperation between parents and preschool educators (kindergarten) is an important aspect of the quality of preschool education. A prerequisite for good cooperation is an equal partnership based on mutual respect and trust. K. Teršek (2002) lists several requirements that educators must meet in order to establish such a relationship: a confident, open and relaxed manner; professionalism and responsibility; a willingness to listen, talk and invite parents into the community; clearly explaining and presenting their expectations and listening to those of the parents; finding appropriate solutions to any criticism and not feeling overly threatened; decisively presenting any problems and resolving them as they arise; emphasising the importance of cooperation for the benefit of the children. Preschool educators must also take into account the fact that parents are different, as are their wishes, needs and views on the work of the kindergarten. In relation to them, they must give them the opportunity to express themselves within the framework of their rights and responsibilities.

Interpersonal relationships are closely linked to communication. Regardless of differences in views, experiences and expectations, educators strive to maintain honest and open communication with parents. Their communication skills are important in this regard, as they are closely related to their attitudes, values, expectations and self-image (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2005). Personality traits are also essential here, an insecure and uncertain teacher would, in their interactions with parents, make mutual understanding more difficult.

J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (1996; 2000; 2005) also emphasises the importance of so-called reflective communication, which is based on the equality of the preschool educator and parents, and whose fundamental elements are speaking and listening, reflecting on what has been heard, and communicating one's thoughts. Such communication enables a joint search for solutions, as the partners establish a dialogue in which they constantly exchange their thoughts, feelings, ideas and feedback. A prerequisite for reflective communication between parents and educators is that a reflective educator is involved. Such an educator (Lepičnik Vodopivec, 1996; 2000; 2005):

- Listens to parents and children and reflects on what they hear;
- Openly communicates to parents what they have seen, heard, and thought;
- Does not misuse their position of authority, but strives to develop equal communication;
- Accepts parents' suggestions, opinions, and ideas, and is willing to adjust their own views;
- Seeks the positive in parents' proposals;
- Respects parents, their personality, and individuality;
- Works together with parents to find appropriate solutions;
- Does not impose themselves.

Forms of cooperation between the preschool educator (kindergarten) and parents can be:

- formal: parent-teacher meetings, consultation hours, written notices, kindergarten publications; these are forms that are specified by the Kindergarten Act (1996) and must be observed and used by the kindergarten;
- informal: various meetings, picnics, events, workshops, communication by telephone, e-mail, notice boards, daily exchange of information when children arrive at and leave the kindergarten, etc. These are often preferred by parents and teachers, which is why they are most commonly used and, above all, rational and relevant.

## **COOPERATION WITH OTHER KINDERGARTEN STAFF IN ORGANISING LIFE AND WORK IN THE KINDERGARTEN**

The concept of a modern kindergarten and the resulting changes in lifestyle and work in the kindergarten also require a different approach to work planning. This takes place on several levels, "from the national curriculum to the annual work plan, which is developed at the kindergarten level, to the direct preparations of the teacher /.../" (Kroflič et al., 2001, p. 11). At this point, we will focus on the macro level of planning, through which the teacher participates in the organisation of life and work in the kindergarten. Annual work plan of the kindergarten is the central document of the kindergarten, which ensures "the organised and systematic implementation of broader long-term goals of preschool education, meeting the needs of children, parents and employees, and the environment in which the kindergarten lives and works" (Pipan et al., 1993, p 67). With the annual work plan, the kindergarten determines the organisation and detailed content of life and work in the kindergarten. It is adopted by the kindergarten council. Developing the annual work plan is an interactive process in which all participants in the educational process are involved, especially kindergarten teachers, professional staff, the headteacher, external factors and also parents (Pipan et al., 1993, p. 68). It should be noted that parents have the right to participate in planning life and work in the kindergarten, but with due regard for the autonomy of the kindergarten and the appropriate division of powers and responsibilities between them and the kindergarten.

The macro level of planning also includes the teacher's annual work plan. This is a comprehensive plan for one school year, in which the teacher defines the framework for achieving quality work and life for children in the class. R. Pipan et al. discuss the framework guidelines that teachers include in the preparation of their annual work plans:

- Goals of preschool education, which guide and obligate the teacher in their work;
- Methods for carrying out routine activities;
- Primary activities and content planned by the teacher according to the age and abilities of the children in the group;
- Pair work (in Slovenia), where the teacher plans how to collaborate with an assistant;
- Program and methods of collaboration between the teacher and parents;

- Equipment and arrangement of the classroom;
- Professional development of the teacher;
- Collaboration of the teacher with specialists inside and outside the kindergarten;
- Teacher's suggestions for improving the quality of work in the kindergarten.

Kroflič et al. (201) note that planning educational work is necessary from two perspectives, namely:

- planning prevents the intrusion of various ideological pressures and manipulations into educational institutions;
- parents have the right to be familiar with the educational concept of the kindergarten their child attends.

Since the preschool teacher also influences children through educational factors that are not explicitly defined in the official curriculum, researchers (Pipan et al., 1993) emphasise the need to integrate elements of the hidden curriculum into the planning, implementation, and evaluation of institutional education. This is particularly important at the preschool level, where children are more emotional and sensitive, and rely heavily on feelings of acceptance and safety. Considering the hidden curriculum greatly impacts the quality of implementing official curricular activities, especially in achieving non-cognitive goals (e.g., development of values, motivation for learning, moral development, etc.).

This also includes collaboration with the teaching assistant—a professional role found only in Slovenia, so these findings do not apply to Croatia. Only the most essential aspects are mentioned here.

Working in pairs or tandems means that the professional staff jointly plan, implement, and evaluate their work. If the assistant is not familiar with the planned forms of work, they cannot effectively participate in the educational process. N. Doler (2005) emphasises that more extensive and in-depth planning by the teacher and assistant should take place outside of their working hours, while ongoing coordination and sharing of ideas can also occur during direct work with the children.

M. Hrapot (2002) lists the basic characteristics of an effective tandem:

- Clearly defined goals that the pair agrees on together;
- Systematic approach to planning and implementing work;
- Open and genuine communication;
- Personal and joint reflection or evaluation of work;
- Adequate working conditions;
- Motivation, shared decision-making, and shared responsibility;
- Provision of safety, psychological support, and a sense of belonging;
- Personal and professional growth (e.g., joint professional development).

We would also like to emphasise the importance of the working atmosphere within the team. This is a prerequisite for the successful and high-quality functioning of the kindergarten as an institution, which P. Peček (2003) refers to as a learning organisation. The foundation for this is a culture of cooperation, which includes cooperative relationships between employees,



participation in planning life and work in the kindergarten, and a sense of collective belonging. A professional climate, as defined by C. Jaruszewicz and M. Johnston White (2009), can emerge and exist in any collective or early childhood programme if there is interest in it.

## **THE ROLE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS IN PROMOTING EFFECTIVE WORK AND DAILY LIFE IN KINDERGARTEN**

“Almost all experts in preschool education agree that the teacher’s role is central to the effectiveness of the preschool education program” (Bahovec and Kodelja, 1996, p. 64). The openness and process-oriented approach of the Kindergarten Curriculum in recent years has significantly changed the teacher’s role.

The traditional role of the teacher as the leader of the educational process, who directs, supervises, and controls everything, has been replaced by a role as organiser, mentor, advisor, co-player, coordinator of activities, attentive observer, and critical analyst. The teacher is a holder of initiative and ideas, and must be creative, responsible, autonomous, and professionally competent.

As already noted, the teacher independently sets operational educational goals, thoughtfully selects content, and chooses the most appropriate forms and methods of work. K. Špoljar (1993) asserts that the teacher has become a designer of the educational program, developing and adapting it according to their experience. In planning and implementing educational work, the teacher places the child at the centre, taking into account their characteristics, abilities, needs, and developmental specifics, thereby ensuring continuity in the educational process.

Different authors define the teacher’s roles in various ways. M. Pšunder (2000) states that in the kindergarten, the teacher assumes three mutually coordinated roles, namely:

- Employee: The teacher is bound to the structure that employs them, adhering to legislation and the rules of the educational process.
- Professional/Expert: The teacher is committed to their profession, which they must know, follow, and develop; they convey their knowledge in a way that is accessible to children.
- Human being: The teacher, as a person, cannot be idealised, but must possess certain qualities—love and human warmth in communication, care for children, humanity without excessive sentimentality, and the ability to encourage, assess, understand, differentiate, and give courage.

Based on his work in kindergarten, M. Brusnjak (2002) defines and describes the content of the individual roles of a teacher, as summarised below.

- Activity planner: The teacher designs and plans the implementation curriculum (content, forms and methods of work, educational materials, and spatial organization) in cooperation with the assistant teacher. Planning must take into account children’s developmental laws and characteristics. The implementation curriculum must be aligned with the annual work plan.

- Activity organiser: The teacher organises activities in the classroom, learning corners, cloakroom, and outdoors. They primarily choose activities that allow children freedom of choice, exploration, and the discovery of original solutions.
- Coordinator: The teacher connects and integrates different contents and activities. Through healthy communication, they guide interactions among children.
- Creator of rules and boundaries: The rules created together with children are clear and unambiguous. They apply throughout the entire year and must be respected by everyone.
- Advocate of children's rights: The teacher ensures children's safety, dignity, happiness, long-term benefit, and overall well-being.
- Co-player: Play must be internally motivated and enjoyable for the child. The teacher allows children to develop the play independently and joins in based on professional judgment or at the children's request. They do not impose solutions but allow children to develop their own strategies.
- Observer: The focus of observation is the child's development, interests, abilities, and individual characteristics. Observation should be systematic and recorded continuously.
- Conversational partner: The teacher encourages the development of children's communication skills. Time must be taken for conversation, storytelling, and description, as children develop their language abilities through these interactions.
- Mentor: The teacher provides appropriate challenges and treats children's efforts and solutions seriously and objectively. They help children recognise their own progress and experience it as success, regardless of peers' achievements.
- Confidant: To foster positive emotional, cognitive, and social experiences, the teacher must create an atmosphere of mutual trust. This is especially important when helping children overcome emotional difficulties. Children must feel accepted and welcome in the group.
- Role model: The teacher serves as a role model through respectful behaviour and attitude toward children, their parents, and all people in general. They also model strong communication competence.
- Mediator in social interactions: Children need support in establishing new relationships with peers, new environments, and new experiences. The teacher promotes desirable behaviour and conflict resolution in socially acceptable ways. This role requires emotional warmth, empathy, emotional stability, and the ability to establish a positive social climate in the group.
- Companion: The teacher continuously monitors children's development and activities and must be available whenever a child needs support.

With the reform of early childhood education, which places the child and their developmental needs at the centre, a justified demand has emerged for a high level of professional competence, autonomy, and responsibility on the part of the preschool teacher. Such a preschool teacher can only be one who has chosen this profession independently and confidently, primarily due to inner, personal motivations, that is, with a desire for high-quality work with children and for passing knowledge on to future generations.

Within the study Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care (2011), researchers point out that the quality of early childhood education cannot be defined solely

through the competences of individuals, but rather through the connection among competent individuals, which the authors describe as a “competent system”. Among the conditions that influence the development of such a competent system, researchers include good working conditions that reduce staff turnover between institutions, as well as continuous pedagogical support focused on documenting practice, critically reflecting on it, and co-creating pedagogical practice as a process based on constant interaction between theory and practice.

The Curriculum for Kindergartens, as one of the key national documents in the field of early childhood education, also encourages “individual approaches by the teacher and the assistant teacher to identify their strengths and develop specific pedagogical solutions that enhance the quality of educational interaction and the achievement of shared educational goals” (Kroflíč et al., 2001, p. 23).

## **SATISFACTION AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THEIR WORK**

Like every individual, preschool teachers also hold certain expectations regarding their profession and themselves as educators. At the same time, job satisfaction emerges as an important factor of professional development. In order to understand both more clearly, they must be placed within a broader social context.

T. Vonta (2005) emphasises that across the developed world, increasing attention is being devoted to high-quality early childhood education, as accumulated evidence (Van der Gaag, 2002) shows that quality preschool education has a positive impact on health, education, social capital, and equality. These categories, in turn, contribute to economic growth, which ultimately supports the overall development of humanity. Given all these changes, it is therefore understandable (Vonta, 2005) that expectations regarding the roles assigned to preschool teachers have also evolved.

Whereas earlier authors (1994) referred to only three roles of the teacher—roles that can also be applied to the preschool teacher (employee, professional, and human being)—T. Vonta (2003), drawing on various sources (Gonzalez-Mena & Stonehouse, 2000; Jalongo & Isenberg, 2000; Saracho & Spodek, 2003), identified several key roles (competences or abilities) that contemporary education systems require of preschool teachers:

- a reflective practitioner, who carefully weighs and reflects on education and upbringing and is capable of making ethical decisions;
- an advocate for children, who recognises that the child is the central focus of educational processes;
- a child development specialist, who applies professional knowledge of child development in order to respond to the needs of all children;
- a facilitator of learning, who understands cognitive-psychological and socio-cultural theories and their relevance for implementation in practice;
- a creator and designer of learning environments, who knows how to create safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate physical learning environments;
- a curriculum developer, capable of planning activities, thematic units, projects, and programmes that reflect respect for diversity and the uniqueness of children, families, and communities;
- a decision-maker, who is able to choose quickly and effectively among possible alternatives;
- an education planner, who understands different modes and levels of collaborative planning and the organization of daily life, and is able to implement a meaningful curriculum aligned with children's interests and needs;
- an evaluator, who understands and applies principles of assessment and monitoring of outcomes and effects while tracking both children's progress and his or her own professional practice;
- a mediator and role model, who guides children's behaviour and models problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills;

- a counsellor, who serves as a source of information for families and builds trust and respect between preschool and school, among family members, between different families, and between families and the community;
- an emerging professional, who investigates his or her own practice, seeks pathways for professional growth, and evaluates personal progress;
- a resource manager, who knows where to obtain and how to use physical and human resources in order to support and empower children, their families, and his or her own professional development.

The professional development of preschool educators is therefore dependent on the time and space in which the individual is situated, and it cannot be separated from broader societal changes. These changes influence educators and co-shape their professional development, while also affecting the preschool as a social institution. According to B. Lipičnik (1994), career formation, which he places alongside professional development, is influenced by seven general factors:

- Demographic and social trends are reflected, among other things, in a decline or increase in the number of children, which can significantly influence an educator's career trajectory.
- Advancing technology, including developments in information technology and multimedia; a large proportion of continuing professional development programmes is specifically aimed at familiarising educators with new technologies.
- New employment policies, which may be brought about by technological advancement through the employment of new professionals, for example IT specialists.
- New organisational forms, such as team teaching in the first grade of the nine-year primary school, which represent an entirely new career development path for both teachers and preschool educators.
- Economic pressure, which may manifest as a decline in economic prosperity in a particular local environment and can negatively affect the quality of life and work in early childhood education institutions.
- Political changes, including Slovenia's accession to the European Union, which has enabled kindergartens to participate more extensively in various international projects and forms of cooperation.
- Social changes in the external environment of early childhood education institutions, which cause continuous changes in the tasks and roles of the kindergarten as an organisation and thus also influence the personal and professional development of preschool educators.

Influences on the professional development of preschool educators are always linked to the expectations held by individual educators. These expectations primarily include:

- lifelong learning,
- professional training and continuing professional development,
- career advancement (both in professional titles and salary grades),
- self-actualisation at work,
- favourable working conditions.

All of these indicators represent an excellent starting point for the self-evaluation of a preschool educator's professional development and job satisfaction. Self-evaluation is a form of internal evaluation carried out by the preschool educator and enables an analysis of individual areas of personal and professional development, thereby influencing the quality level of the preschool educator's professional practice in the kindergarten. At the same time, self-evaluation reveals the working conditions within the kindergarten as well as opportunities for further professional development.

## **LIFELONG LEARNING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

Contemporary society requires individuals who are capable of adapting to constant changes and demands while at the same time enriching and expanding their (professional) knowledge. It is therefore unrealistic to expect that preschool educators will acquire all the knowledge necessary for the successful performance of their professional duties during their initial formal education. Educator education is a lifelong process that is significantly enriched through professional practice. This is referred to as lifelong or continuing learning and education.

Rečnik et al. (2004, p. 132) define lifelong learning as “a series of continuous learning processes, both formal and non-formal, through which individuals enrich their knowledge, improve technical and other professional skills, and develop their abilities in response to their own needs or the needs of the groups in which they live.” Lifelong learning, as a continuous process, aims to enable individuals to update, deepen, and refine their knowledge, skills, and competencies.

B. Eneroth (2008) identifies three types of learning situations within lifelong learning, as presented by the European Commission: formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Formal learning is acquired through organised education and leads to a certificate or diploma. It is characterised by the learner's intentional acquisition of knowledge. The same applies to non-formal education, which is likewise structured (in terms of time, support, and organisation), but unlike formal education, it does not take place within an educational institution and does not result in the awarding of a certificate or diploma. Informal learning, on the other hand, is the outcome of everyday activities related to work, family life, and leisure. It is not structured and does not lead to certification. While it can be intentional, in most cases it is unintentional or even accidental.

L. Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002) include, among indicators of education quality, for example, the participation of employees in educational activities, the consideration of their needs and interests in further education, as well as the financial and organisational conditions that enable participation in educational programmes.

P. Peček (2003) notes that education and training of kindergarten staff are experiencing a shift from traditional concepts towards more modern approaches. In this context, she refers to Cheng (1996, cited in Peček, 2003), who argues that:

- Educational processes within traditional concepts are externally driven. They are planned and led by educational authorities or external experts, and preschool educators are not expected to participate in the planning of educational activities. Consequently, such

educational programmes do not meet all the educational needs of employees. New educational concepts are kindergarten-oriented: educational activities correspond to the needs of the kindergarten and its staff; employees actively participate in planning educational activities, contribute their ideas, and test them in practice.

- Traditional educational concepts are directive in nature. Education is primarily intended to address various problems rather than to meet the specific needs of a particular kindergarten and its employees. New educational concepts are developmental: educational activities are planned in accordance with the developmental needs of a specific organisation, individual groups, or individuals.
- Traditional educational concepts are largely unsystematic. They lack a long-term development strategy and systematic management of the kindergarten. New educational concepts are continuous and systematic, with a clearly defined long-term development strategy; the kindergarten is systematically managed, and educational activities are integrated into the annual work plan.
- The content of traditional educational concepts is incomplete. It places excessive emphasis on technical knowledge and focuses on changing employees' behaviour. The content of new educational concepts is holistic, with an emphasis on the development of diverse skills, values, and beliefs of employees.
- Traditional educational concepts are focused on the individual. They aim at individual development and advancement, thereby neglecting the progress of groups of employees within the kindergarten and the organisation as a whole; education is intended only for preschool educators and not for other staff members. New educational concepts focus on the individual, groups, and the kindergarten as a whole. Educational activities are intended for all employees, not only preschool educators.
- In traditional educational concepts, teaching is predominantly conducted by external experts and lecturers, who are not always sufficiently familiar with the specific context and conditions of a particular kindergarten and may therefore provide inappropriate or irrelevant examples. In new educational concepts, lecturers—both external and internal—are professionals with relevant expertise.
- In traditional educational concepts, the role of participants is passive. Educational methods are monotonous, and lectures are predominantly theoretically oriented. In new educational concepts, participants are active. A variety of methods and forms of work prevail, such as seminars, pedagogical workshops, national and international projects, discussions, guided debates, pair work, peer observations, study circles, and similar activities.
- Motivation of employees in traditional concepts is primarily external, for example rewards in the form of promotion or reduced workload. In new educational concepts, intrinsic motivation is paramount, such as employees' desire for professional growth and self-development.
- In kindergarten as a learning organisation, everyone is educated, including teachers, the management team and other professional staff. It is important that they approach education in a systematic and planned manner, which must be in line with the development needs of employees as well as the needs and vision of the kindergarten. As an organisation, the kindergarten must offer its employees appropriate opportunities and

conditions for education, such as (co-)financing education, offering appropriate education programmes, cooperating with external experts and institutions, and ensuring appropriate organisational conditions.

In a kindergarten as a learning organization, all staff members engage in professional development, including preschool educators, the management team, and other specialist personnel. It is essential that they approach education systematically and in a planned manner, ensuring that it aligns with both the developmental needs of employees and the needs and vision of the kindergarten. The kindergarten, as an organization, must provide its employees with appropriate opportunities and conditions for professional development, such as (co-)funding of training, access to suitable educational programs, collaboration with external experts and institutions, and the provision of adequate organizational conditions.

## **CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

Working with preschool children requires a well-developed personality, unique creativity, and a highly educated and professionally competent educator (Lučić, 2007). Therefore, continuous professional development of educators is essential to ensure high-quality educational activities. Professional education does not end with graduation; rather, the need for it arises with each encounter with practice, new experiences, activities, and the individual characteristics of children. Professional development is thus an integral part of the education of pedagogical staff. L. Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002) identify several indicators of continuous professional training, including planning, selection, and implementation of various forms of ongoing professional development, diversity of offerings, relevance of content, number of training hours, accessibility, and use of professional literature. The primary purpose of professional development is to improve the educator's work, supplement their knowledge, and strengthen their professional competence. Educators thus become familiar with new and alternative methods and forms of work, new content, novel perspectives on child development, various ways to stimulate children's development, new technologies, and more. Professional development should rely on experiential learning methods that activate the educator's prior experiences.

In Europe, various models of continuous professional development for teachers and preschool educators have been developed. Instead of traditionally knowledge-transfer-focused concepts, there is an increasing emphasis on kindergarten- and educator-centred approaches.

Continuous professional development is regulated, specifically by the Regulation on Further Education and Training of Professional Staff in Education (2004), whose main objectives are: to ensure the professional competence necessary for teaching a specific subject or performing a particular professional role; to support the professional and career development of each educator; to contribute to the development of public kindergartens and schools and the entire education system, thereby increasing its quality and efficiency. The regulation also specifies the conditions, methods, and procedures for continuing education and training of professional staff



and principals in public kindergartens and schools, the point system for programs for career advancement, and the rules for funding these programs.

## **CAREER ADVANCEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**

L. Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002) state that the indicator of career advancement in professional titles refers, for example, to the current status and the possibilities for promotion, as well as advancement in salary grades. Similar to continuous professional development, career advancement in professional titles also has a legal basis. In Slovenia, it is regulated by the Rules on the Promotion of Employees in Education to Professional Titles (2002).

According to Article 1 of this regulation, employees in education can advance to the titles of mentor, advisor, and counsellor. When considering promotion, factors such as length of service, work performance, participation in professional development programs, and the performance of various additional professional tasks are taken into account.

Regarding preschool teachers specifically, the assessment of an individual teacher's work performance is conducted by the principal, based on: success in working with children, collaboration with parents, teamwork and cooperation with other staff members and professionals, use of professional knowledge acquired through education, and other tasks that are specific to the position or professional field (Article 15, 2002).

## **SELF-ACTUALISATION AT WORK**

According to L. Marjanovič Umek et al. (2002), self-actualization mainly refers to the opportunity to express one's own initiative (e.g. when introducing changes and innovations in the kindergarten), assess one's professional competence, find work interesting, and experience a sense of accomplishment. If a kindergarten teacher feels that their work is useful and successful, they develop a sense of belonging to their profession and field. A prerequisite for expressing the teacher's initiative is a safe environment, supported by colleagues and, most importantly, the kindergarten principal. Preschool teachers expect the principal to encourage them to try new working methods, engage in discussions on various professional perspectives, and provide support in case of dilemmas or difficulties. All of this requires appropriate interpersonal relationships based on trust and effective communication.

## **WORKING CONDITIONS**

Working conditions (Fekonja et al., 2002) refer to preschool teachers' satisfaction with material and environmental factors, such as the premises, equipment and teaching materials, working hours, vacation, the stressfulness of the work, social interactions, and material security (e.g., job

reliability and performance-related incentives). The reform of the preschool system, including interventions such as reorganizing kindergarten spaces and modernizing educational tools, has greatly contributed to improving working conditions.

At this point, we want to emphasise work stress and (over)load of teachers as an important factor in professional development. B. B. Youngs (2000, p. 46) defines stress as “a physical, cognitive, and chemical reaction of the body to circumstances that cause confusion, irritability, or arousal”. Whether we perceive a situation as stressful depends on our individual experience of that circumstance.

Teachers must face stress, manage it, and maintain control over their behaviour; otherwise, stress can completely exhaust them. The negative effects of stress can be significantly mitigated by proper social interactions. Particularly important are a sense of connectedness and support both in the workplace and in private life. Recognition of work, acknowledgment by superiors, and incentives for good performance greatly influence an individual’s confidence and motivation.

According to a study by M. Hmelak (2013), students of early childhood education and preschool teachers expect more personal-professional engagement and development in their profession, and less formal career advancement. This was especially evident among newcomers to the study or profession, who, according to the data, have a high need for external validation of their work. The author concludes that the causes are mainly their lack of experience, limited contact with practice, and consequently low confidence and insufficient critical reflection of their own work.

Observation, assessment, and critical reflection are among the most important responsibilities of a teacher. According to R. Pipan et al. (1993), teachers use these processes to determine the extent and ways in which they have achieved set goals, what they themselves have gained, and what children have benefited from.

Increasingly, preschool teachers are expected to actively contribute and take responsibility for their own professional growth, which is based on self-evaluation of their work with children and of themselves as educators. This allows them to identify potential shortcomings in the field of early childhood education. Through critical reflection and evaluation of practice, teachers discover the areas of professional development that require focused attention and effort. Support from colleagues, management, experts outside the kindergarten, and parents as the teacher’s key partners in children’s education is essential. Similar findings are reported by numerous international authors (MacNaughton, Rolfe, and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001; Urban, 2008; Vonta, 2009; McMillan and Walsh, 2011; Peeters and Vandenbroeck, 2011; Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care, 2011), who emphasise highly qualified professionals as a key factor in delivering high-quality preschool education.

It must also be highlighted that highly skilled personnel positively influence children’s developmental outcomes (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart, 2004; Fukkink and Lont, 2007). M. Urban (2008) points out the effort to align quality with professionalism and cites policies in the late 1990s aimed at professionalizing the workforce by raising qualification levels to achieve higher standards of quality.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR AND COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Day by day, both teachers and early childhood educators face the demands and expectations of children, students, parents, professional colleagues, management staff, and government officials. All of this affects the educator's emotions and, consequently, their self-concept; under excessive pressure, they may even lose their sense of self (Darby, 2008). Therefore, it is important that an early childhood teacher is not only a well-educated expert in their field, but also a personally strong individual with firm values and a clear worldview. They must be able to approach a child, show empathy, demonstrate love, respect, and appreciation. To express all of this effectively, a preschool teacher must feel deep affection for children and for the educational profession (Plestenjak, 1990, p. 27). Only a preschool teacher capable of this can choose the profession meaningfully. Lortie (1977) demonstrated that the primary motivation for entering teaching is the desire to facilitate and improve learning for students, pupils, or children, and to bring positive changes to their lives.

Bečaj (1996) emphasises that, alongside professionalism—which includes the necessary knowledge and skills—a positive self-concept of all adults in the kindergarten is extremely important, particularly that of the preschool teacher, who is the second most significant adult in a child's life after the parents during their time in preschool. A positive self-concept among adults involved in the educational process also fosters a favourable general culture in the kindergarten, which is essential for achieving ambitious goals, strategies, and the overall mission of high-quality preschool education. Kobolt (1996, p. 26) highlights that “we must not forget the preschool teacher's personality, life path, childhood experiences, and perception of themselves in their professional role and life.”

J. Musek and V. Pečjak (1994) define personality as the totality of mental, behavioural, and physical characteristics that distinguish one individual from another. Similarly, Rečnik et al. (2004) define personality as the collection of traits and characteristics of a human being as an individual. Both definitions emphasise that personality is a whole composed of an individual's traits. The development of personality is influenced by the interaction of three main groups of factors: heredity, environment, and personal activity. It is thus an interactive process:

- Heredity: Genetic factors significantly affect physical characteristics, such as sex, body structure, weight and height, blood type, nervous system structure, eye, hair and skin colour, fingerprints, etc. Heredity also influences some mental characteristics, such as abilities and temperament.
- Environment: We distinguish between natural (physical and biological) and cultural (social) environments. The natural environment is important for survival, while the cultural environment greatly affects personality development. Socialization, in particular, allows the individual to develop into a social being capable of living with others.
- Personal activity: These are factors arising from conscious personal initiatives and ideas. Humans are active beings who control themselves and their environment, regulating their behaviour consciously. Personal activity allows deliberate decision-making, especially regarding major life choices, such as education, career, or life partner.

A preschool educator's personal traits and various skills are especially visible in the implementation of the hidden curriculum, which, according to M. W. Apple (1992), is crucial because children acquire daily habits in the first months of kindergarten. According to J. Lepičnik Vodopivec (2004), interpersonal relationships and communication with children, parents, and preschool teachers highlight the preschool teacher's role and empathy. Empathetic early childhood teachers can perceive not only children's behaviour but also the accompanying emotions, accept each child as they are, identify emotional-motivational factors influencing behaviour, select appropriate educational strategies and methods, and adapt communication to each child. Empathy (Miljak, 1996), as part of personality, is reflected in the hidden curriculum and functions as implicit pedagogy.

Personality maturity is closely linked to personal development. Musek and Pečjak (1994, p. 146) define it as: "Personality maturity means a developed and harmonious functioning of the personality, enabling the individual to manage life appropriately and constructively."

Signs of a mature personality include: a realistic, positive, yet critical approach to reality, oneself, and others; ability to plan and pursue life goals; consistent behaviour aligned with these goals; desire for continuous personal growth. Only a preschool teacher (Darby, 2008) who knows themselves, can analyse and understand their feelings, emotions, and traits, can perceive their work and life positively, reflected in constructive interpersonal and professional relationships, contributing to both professional and personal development.

M. Cencič and B. Čagran (2002) state that a preschool teacher must not only be a well-educated professional in their field but also a personally mature individual with a clear worldview, optimism, self-confidence, communication skills, innovation, adaptability, empathy, understanding, and a genuine love for children. On the other hand, Batistič Zorč (2001, p. 25) warns that "over-idealization, according to which a teacher should be a 'versatile', or a 'perfect' person, can easily do more harm than good".

Many experts in the past have studied the personality of the early childhood teacher, seeking to identify the most important traits and abilities that influence the effectiveness of their work. Plestenjak (1990) notes that various authors most often highlight the following qualities as essential for preschool teachers:

- Solid general and professional education
- Love for children and the teaching profession
- Personality traits such as humanity, independence, responsibility, ease, liveliness, optimism, objectivity, tolerance, understanding, creativity, attentiveness, self-criticism, emotional stability, observational skills, intelligence, persistence, emotional warmth, friendliness, sense of humour, etc.

Education alone is not sufficient for high-quality educational work. It must be complemented so that "knowledge, expertise, and education merge into a new quality of personality, into cultured behaviour" (Divjak, 1977, p. 34). A preschool teacher, through their work and approach, significantly influences the child and helps lay the foundations for the child's future. It is also important to emphasise the role of the preschool teacher's self-concept. A low self-concept can strongly limit them in performing their work, so a high but realistic self-concept is necessary for

professional effectiveness and, consequently, for the optimal development of children. B. B. Youngs (2000) describes the characteristics of preschool teachers with high self-concept and low self-concept:

A preschool teacher with high self-concept controls their own life and is emotionally stable, confident, decisive, and optimistic. He or she recognises their own value and achievements without needing constant approval from others. They responds positively to people, striving to be useful, kind, receptive, and approachable; Develop and maintain strong interpersonal relationships and seeks constructive cooperation; values personal relationships, aiming to know children and colleagues as individuals; maintains a compassionate and empathetic attitude toward themselves and others, encourages and praises children and colleagues; gain satisfaction from pedagogical work; seek feedback and considers advice constructively; are psychologically resilient in facing challenges, confident, and willing to embrace new experiences; actively participate in many activities, expresses curiosity, and experiment with new methods; take responsibility for their actions.

A preschool teacher with low self-concept holds a poor opinion of themselves, lacks self-confidence, and constantly underestimates their abilities; feels inferior, insecure, pessimistic, and uncertain; may emotionally withdraw or adopt a passive-aggressive attitude toward children and colleagues; is hesitant and self-doubting, avoids risks and new challenges; resists new educational concepts and methods; lacks confidence in their own abilities, assuming colleagues are more competent; may excessively criticise colleagues, management, children, and parents; seeks excessive approval from others due to lack of trust in their own judgment; rarely defends their own opinions, especially when challenged.

M. Primožič (2003) emphasises that all stakeholders influencing the preschool teacher's image—including colleagues, management, educational institutions, and the state—should ensure that:

- Preschool teachers have the conditions, opportunities, and motivation to develop a positive self-concept;
- The staff collective in a kindergarten has the conditions and opportunities to cultivate and maintain high-quality relationships and professionalism through knowledge, values, attitudes, and beliefs;
- Management provides positive motivation through praise, encouragement, and recognition;
- The state acknowledges the importance of early childhood education in the national program, including its significance in reward and recognition systems;
- Educational institutions, during the training of future teachers, provide opportunities not only to acquire knowledge and skills but also to internalise the values of the chosen profession.

## ENSURING THE QUALITY OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Continuous changes in science, technology, culture, the economy, and politics bring about corresponding changes in the field of education. These changes require constant evaluation of existing goals and the creation of new objectives, strategies, programs, content, methods, and forms of work, all aimed at improving the quality of the educational system (Rosić, 2009). Education is a complex phenomenon and, above all, a process that must continuously and systematically develop, adapting to societal changes and, most importantly, to the needs of children from pedagogical, didactic, and methodological perspectives.

M. Brusnjak (2007) emphasises that experts both globally and in Slovenia are increasingly concerned with the quality of the educational system, particularly the quality of kindergartens. It is clear that quality improvements cannot be imposed from the outside; rather, they emerge from the internal motivation of management, educators, and other members of the staff. The most effective processes are those that encourage autonomy and self-evaluation among professionals.

For the European Union countries and signatories, an important external factor is the Lisbon Strategy, signed in 2002, whose main goal is the effort to raise and improve the quality of education. In the Commission's 2007 communication to the Council and the European Parliament, *Improving the Quality of Teacher Education*, it was stated that the European Council in Barcelona in 2002 set specific goals regarding the improvement of education and training systems, as the quality of teaching (and education) is one of the key factors for enhancing competitiveness in a globalised world. Strengthening reforms to ensure high-quality, efficient, and equitable education systems is therefore essential. Improving the quality of education is a primary goal of education systems.

B. Marentič Požarnik (2000) notes that we live in a time of fundamental change, when expectations of schools and education are increasing, and the teacher's role is becoming more demanding. Teachers work under more difficult circumstances, including increasing competition, financial rationalization, centralised curriculum decisions, and diverse and increasingly challenging students. These challenges require a higher level of professionalism, which can be supported through high-quality teacher education aimed at developing the "reflective practitioner" model.

All of these considerations are applicable to early childhood teachers and their professional education. To ensure high-quality professional development, appropriate conditions and circumstances must be provided. Marentič Požarnik (2000, p. 10) explains that "for a qualitative improvement in their activities, teachers and the institutions in which they work need a favourable working climate and conditions. This includes, among other things:

- Balanced pedagogical study programs, at least roughly aligned with comparable international, especially European, programs;
- Equal recognition of early childhood education compared to more "academic" programs regarding systematization, habilitations, postgraduate studies, equipment, and facilities;
- Appropriate standards (e.g., group sizes, especially for seminars, practical exercises, and mentoring) and corresponding staffing levels (sufficient teachers and assistants, including for organizing practical work);
- Suitable status of participating (mentoring) schools and mentor teachers".

If we transfer and appropriately adapt Marentič Požarnik's reasoning (2000) to early childhood teacher education, it can be concluded that significant improvements in the quality of a preschool teacher's work must occur from within—at the level of thinking and decision-making—while external factors can either support or hinder this development. For raising preschool teacher professionalism and autonomy, which are essential for successful reform, high-quality education based on contemporary understandings of learning (including how teachers learn) plays a crucial role. Finally, attention must be paid to the “hidden curriculum”—how preschool teachers perceive expectations, pressures, opportunities, and limitations in their everyday work environment. Understanding these subtle, often implicit factors is essential for achieving meaningful and sustainable professional development.

The teaching profession is demanding, difficult, and stressful. It has evolved from a semi-professional role into a fully professional occupation, requiring a highly qualified individual, i.e., an early childhood teacher. Current trends point to the equalisation of early childhood education with general teaching qualifications, meaning that teacher education and training for early childhood educators should be adapted to new educational guidelines, both practical and theoretical. In this regard, the education of early childhood teachers must emphasise pedagogical, psychological, linguistic, literary, and kinesiology-related content, as well as high-quality methodological training, familiarity with pedagogical research methodology, and practical experience in early childhood educational settings (Lučić, 2007).

## CONCLUSION

In today's era of constant and rapid social changes, the professional development of early childhood educators is a necessity. Ideally, it should also be a personal interest of each employee. As some authors note (Marentič Požarnik, 2000; Rosić, 2009; Brusnjak, 2007), expectations for kindergartens and preschool educators are increasing, particularly regarding their ability to adapt to changing social and, above all, children's needs. In this context, the personal (internal) interest or contribution of the individual and of the leadership or organization as a whole is decisive for the success and quality of professional development.

Because professional development intertwines both personal and professional growth—from initial study to employment in a kindergarten—we have approached the topic broadly. First, we looked at the historical development of the early childhood teaching profession, and then we addressed important segments of professional development. A crucial aspect is the decision to pursue study and a career in early childhood education, which is one of the most decisive choices in a person's life. To facilitate this decision, it is essential for the individual to first know themselves, their desires, and their interests, which is why special attention is given to the personal development of the educator.

A large part of this discussion focuses on the preschool educator's professional education and continuous professional development. Both areas are linked to understanding the importance of the educator's satisfaction and expectations regarding their profession and their self-concept. Personal characteristics reflect an individual and influence both their relationship to themselves and to others.

Professional competence in decision-making and actions regarding children is rightly expected of a preschool educator as a professional and autonomous person in early childhood education. The prerequisite is strong subject-specific knowledge in areas directly related to children, as well as in areas affecting personal growth and development. Preschool educators are also expected to demonstrate critical thinking and make judgments in the best interests of the child. This is what we call lifelong learning, understood by many authors (Rečnik, 2004; Eneroth, 2008; Marjanovič Umek et al., 2002) as a range of learning processes—both formal and informal—carried out continuously to improve, update, and expand knowledge, skills, and competencies while also promoting personal growth.

From this perspective, we see how essential and continuous professional development is for preschool educators, and how strongly personal and professional growth are intertwined. First, it is necessary to address both personal and professional matters internally—getting to know oneself and acquiring adequate education. Only then can one engage in relationships with others, where both personal components (adaptation, collaboration) and professional components (contributing ideas, perspectives, methods, and practices) are expressed. With every success and advancement—personally, professionally, and collaboratively within and outside the team—preschool educators grow and develop in terms of their professional development.

When researching professional development, one cannot ignore satisfaction and future expectations as one of the most recognisable and representative forms of personal and professional reflection or self-evaluation. This is a core component of professional development,



which not only highlights past achievements and growth but also, through critical self-analysis, guides the direction of further activities in personal and professional development.

Many authors (Jaruszewicz and Johnston White, 2009; Martin and Kragler, 1999, 2005; Lepičnik Vodopivec, 2010; Hmelak, 2013, etc.) agree on the importance of preschool educators' professional development, arguing that only in this way can high-quality early childhood education be ensured. High-quality education, in turn, positively impacts health, education, social capital, equality, and economic growth. Importantly, professional development depends not only on internal (personal) factors but also often on external factors, including laws, current political conditions, and social circumstances.

## SUMMARY

The monograph *Early Childhood Educators and the Care for Their Professional Development* focuses on the educator of preschool children and their responsibility for their own professional growth.

The role of the early childhood educator has constantly evolved throughout human history. However, societal expectations have remained relatively unchanged: preschool educators are expected to carry out their work diligently, serve as a primary source of quality knowledge, and act as a model for proper behaviour. Most importantly, they are expected to always act in the best interest of the child and support their overall development. The early childhood educator is often the first person to receive a child directly from the family environment, and their influence on the child extends far into the child's future life. Because inappropriate behaviour by a preschool educator can have irreversible consequences, it is essential that individuals choose this profession consciously and responsibly, and particularly those who are capable of taking responsibility for the safety and development of children.

The profession is guided by numerous state regulations that determine the educational requirements for preschool educators and their assistants and prescribe their work duties. These laws also define the organization and content of preschool education in kindergartens, setting the fundamental tasks of these institutions, principles of early childhood education, program objectives and content, as well as funding and oversight of law enforcement. As such, understanding these regulations is essential for comprehending the scope of an educator's work. The educational requirements for preschool educators and their assistants are outlined in the first chapter, alongside their work obligations. Additionally, the main legal provisions governing the organizational and content-related aspects of preschool education in Slovenian kindergartens are briefly presented, as defined in the Kindergarten Act (1996). Among other things, this Act states that the fundamental tasks of kindergartens include assisting parents in the comprehensive care of children, improving the quality of family life, and creating conditions for the development of children's physical and mental capacities.

Preschool education, according to this law, is conducted based on principles of democracy, pluralism, autonomy, professionalism, and responsibility, ensuring equal opportunities for children and parents, respect for diversity, the right to choice, and the balance of various aspects of children's physical and mental development. Many early childhood experts agree that the preschool educator's role is central to the effectiveness of preschool programs. In recent years, following the process-oriented and open approach of the Kindergarten Curriculum, the role of the preschool educator has significantly evolved. Where once the preschool educator functioned as the director of the educational process—controlling, monitoring, and managing everything—they are now an organiser, mentor, advisor, collaborator, coordinator, attentive observer, and critical analyst. The preschool educator is expected to be the driver of initiatives and ideas, displaying creativity, responsibility, autonomy, and professional competence. They independently set operational educational goals, select content thoughtfully, and choose the most appropriate forms and methods of work. In this sense, the educator has become a creator or designer of the educational program, developing and adapting it according to experience and acquired knowledge, always prioritizing the child and their holistic development, considering

characteristics, abilities, needs, and developmental specifics, thereby ensuring continuity of the educational process.

In summary, the profession of preschool education is highly complex and demanding. With the reform of early childhood education placing the child and their developmental needs at the centre, there is an increasing demand for high professional competence, autonomy, and responsibility of educators. The Kindergarten Curriculum emphasises that both educators and assistants must approach the educational process and each child individually, identify and leverage their strengths, and create specific pedagogical solutions that enhance the quality of educational interactions and the achievement of shared educational objectives. The preschool educator's personality plays a crucial role in all interactions, not only with children but also with colleagues, parents, and the wider environment.

To better understand the profession of the preschool educator today, it is necessary to examine its historical development, particularly the evolution of kindergartens. Our focus here is primarily on the area of present-day Slovenia. According to surviving historical sources, child care began as early as the first half of the 18th century and became more widespread during the reign of Maria Theresa in the 18th century, when the Empress ordered the renovation of an orphanage in the city, which began admitting children in 1757. The earliest record of preschool care dates back to 1756, when a children's kindergarten in Maribor was managed by Mrs. Anna Maria Magisskraut and her son. In 1834, the first children's kindergarten—or children's shelter, as such institutions were then called following the model of Vienna—was established in Ljubljana. Over time, the demand for child care continued to grow, leading to the opening of additional kindergartens, which first officially received the name children's kindergarten in 1885. Kindergartens with the primary activity of preschool education were systematically opened only in the second half of the 19th century, following the enactment of the Primary School Act of 1869.

With the opening of kindergartens, the question of training caregivers and preschool educators arose, as their existing education did not meet the requirements of preschool care and education. It was only in 1868 that schools for child caregivers began to be established in Europe. The first known such school started operating in 1868 in Vienna within a Jewish children's shelter. This was followed by the establishment of similar schools in Vienna within the framework of the first children's kindergarten (1874), a teacher training school (1883), and a girls' boarding school (1885). Following the Viennese model, schools for training child caregivers (kindergarten assistants and educators) began to be established throughout the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, including much of the territory of present-day Slovenia. After the dissolution of Austro-Hungary, most of the Slovenian territory became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which in 1929 was renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The SHS state showed little interest in establishing preschool institutions and, consequently, in the education of preschool educators. It only issued provisions requiring kindergarten assistants to additionally pass exams in Serbo-Croatian songs, games, and practical activities in the kindergarten. Children's kindergartens were renamed under the 1929 Primary Schools Act, and were established primarily in larger cities and industrial centres. In 1933, a new Primary Schools Act came into force, which also introduced rules for conducting practical exams for educators. Regulations concerning the education of preschool educators gradually began to improve. Systematic and organised education for

preschool educators truly began after 1945, with the establishment of the first one-year preschool educator school in Ljubljana in September 1946.

Today, early childhood education and professional training are highly developed and diversified, allowing preschool educators to reach high levels of qualification. Continuous professional development is an integral part of the profession. Living in a postmodern society of constant cultural, political, and social changes requires both individuals and organizations to adapt, reshaping the roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of educators. This calls for greater autonomy and professionalization, emphasising the importance of professional growth. Professional development combines internal components (personal interest, motivation, satisfaction with the profession, and expectations for professional growth) and external components (work responsibilities, career advancement, working conditions, salary, and reputation).

There are many definitions of what professionalism is, generally referring to the values, ethical code, knowledge, skills, and responsibilities that guide a preschool educator's thinking and actions. Since the components of professionalism are subject to change, it is entirely understandable that professionalism is not a static category; it also depends on societal changes. Therefore, professionalism can also be defined as a continuous effort devoted to the process through which one seeks to become a professional. At the same time, we must not forget the educator's qualifications, which are an important indicator of program quality and the tools with which educators should be equipped. It is also important to emphasise that professional development is a lifelong process, during which an individual goes through various phases of development. This process is guided by the principles of professional development, which highlight different conditions and requirements that determine the success of an educator's professional growth (e.g., reflection on one's own practice, implicit theories, teamwork, etc.).

Today, kindergartens that adapt more quickly to their environment and learn from it tend to be more successful. They function as learning organizations, where everyone—from educators to management—continually develops. Educators learn from one another, exchanging professional opinions, knowledge, experiences, and even work-related failures, thus developing together. Mutual collaboration among educators acts as a bridge between individual professional development and the growth of the kindergarten as an organization. The foundation of the kindergarten as a learning organization is therefore a culture of collaboration, which includes cooperative relationships among staff, joint participation in planning the life and work of the kindergarten, and, ultimately, fostering a sense of collective belonging to the institution. That is why the professional development of early childhood educators is essential in today's rapidly changing society. While societal expectations of educators and kindergartens continue to grow, the personal interest and contributions of each preschool educator and the institution as a whole are decisive for the success and quality of professional growth.

## REVIEWS

### I

The scientific monograph *Early Childhood Educator and Commitment to Professional Development* focuses on the preschool educator as a professional in their field, who cultivates their professionalism through both continuous professional development and personal growth. It is a systematically designed and content-rich monograph, distinguished by its scientific and professional review of the field of professional development of preschool educators in Slovenia, both historically and today.

The monograph is composed of numerous sections, logically organised into subchapters. In the first chapter, the authors briefly define the profile of the preschool educator. The following chapter presents, systematically and in depth, the historical development of preschool educator training from 1872 to the present. The third chapter emphasises the importance of appropriate education for preschool educators, which is then logically complemented in the next chapter by the justification of professional development and its placement in today's Slovenian context. Subsequent chapters examine the reasons individuals choose the profession of preschool educator, define the duties and responsibilities of preschool educators in their work, and explain the role and significance of job satisfaction and expectations regarding one's professional future. The authors also address personal development as an important segment of professional growth, and finally, highlight the importance of ensuring quality in the process of professional development for preschool educators.

The work of Jurka Lepičnik Vodopivec and Maja Hmelak is scientifically and professionally relevant. The monograph's contribution to science lies primarily in its comprehensive elaboration of the theoretical approach and in defining the preschool educator from the perspective of their care for their own professional development. This has a significant impact both on the development of the preschool educator themselves and on the quality of their work with children in kindergartens and with people more broadly in society.

The text is clearly structured and content-wise well-organised, giving the monograph a mark of contemporaneity and relevance. Its value is further enhanced by the fact that, alongside high-quality scientific and professional work, it also has considerable practical applicability. Based on numerous insights and concrete proposals for the enhancement and further professional development of educators, it facilitates reflection and the application of these findings in practice. As such, it is extremely useful for preschool educators, as well as for researchers, professionals, and university-level students engaged in professional development and lifelong learning.

The monograph is distinguished by its rich scientific-professional terminology and consistent use of a scientific apparatus, including a large number of recent Slovenian and international bibliographic sources in the field. The language and writing style are high-quality and comprehensible, and the bibliographic standards are cited consistently and systematically.

Tatjana Devjak

## II

The scientific, professional, and practical-pedagogical value and justification of this work is evident in its clear and comprehensive theoretical elaboration of the topic, based on the study of a large number of scholarly sources and their expert application to the current professional development of preschool educators.

Through clear theoretical reasoning and expert argumentation, the authors have accurately cited numerous relevant works, demonstrating their excellent familiarity with both international and domestic literature in the field of professional development of preschool educators.

A particular scientific contribution of this monograph lies in its comprehensive elaboration of the theoretical definition of professional development of educators as a holistic, multidimensional, and dynamic phenomenon that significantly impacts the quality of education and care in preschool institutions.

The monograph is excellently structured and provides useful content for readers of various scientific and professional backgrounds. It serves as an encouragement for the effective implementation of different forms and aspects of professional development of preschool educators, both in theory and in practice.

*Nevenka Tatković*

**EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR AND COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL  
DEVELOPMENT**

Jurka Lepičnik Vodopivec in Maja Hmelak

**Prevod**

Urška Petrič Les

Samostojni prevod strokovne knjige

1. objava

**Naslov izvirnika**

**VZGOJITELJ PREDŠOLSKIH OTROK IN SKRB ZA LASTNI PROFESIONALNI RAZVOJ**

**Založnik**

Gimnazija Celje – Center

**Celje, 2025**

**Založba izvirne izdaje**

Založba Univerze na Primorskem, Koper, 2018

**URL:** [https://www.gcc.si/wp-content/uploads/Gradiva/Vzgojitelj\\_predsolskih\\_otrok.pdf](https://www.gcc.si/wp-content/uploads/Gradiva/Vzgojitelj_predsolskih_otrok.pdf)

Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani

**COBISS.SI-ID** [264639747](#)

ISBN 978-961-97308-0-5 (PDF)