

Chapter 105

Preschool Teacher Identity

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ABSTRACT

The teaching process cannot be simplified to definitions of the best teachers as those possessing certain desirable teaching behaviours and skills (Katz, 2002). Although there are numerous factors that significantly influence learning and teaching, one might agree that specific teaching roles dominantly determine the quality of preschool teaching processes and learning outcomes. Furthermore, two equally important dimensions that characterize teaching roles, as linked with concepts of identity, are professional and personal dimensions. Therefore, one might be wondering: Who are contemporary preschool teachers? How do they define their self and identity? What determines identity that preschool teachers describe as theirs? Consequently, how do these identities influence the quality of process of early and preschool care and education? Answering these questions is no easy task since the concept of identity is defined in various ways in the more general literature (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). This chapter is focused on an analysis of preschool teacher identity from three specific aspects. First, since all identity models emphasize the cultural context within which preschool teachers' identity develops and its crucial role, contemporary changes in preschool teacher roles and a new study program called Early and Preschool Teacher Education and Care are analysed in the Croatian context. Secondly, in order to follow contemporary literature, theoretical models of identity are presented. Afterwards, based on such models, the personality traits and temperament of research participants are analysed within the context of preschool teacher identity. Finally, the chapter's third section analyses preschool teachers' values, motives, and narratives.

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In teaching, and perhaps especially in preschool teaching, the personal and the professional are intimately intertwined. These two aspects give each other significance, and are inexorably linked to the teacher's personal and professional identity. (Court, Merav, & Ornan, 2009, p. 208)

INTRODUCTION: CROATIAN CONTEXT OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' IDENTITY

Early and preschool care and education in the Republic of Croatia has a long tradition. Taking into account the results of scientific research on child development, educational practice in early and preschool education and recognition of the specific social environment and social priorities in our and other countries, the concept of organized out-of-family care and education of children from six months old to six or seven years old was shaped and realized. In this way, early and preschool care and education presents the first independent level of education, i.e. the initial level of the educational system in Croatia. It is organized through different institutions of early and preschool care and education: kindergartens, playgroups, nurseries in elementary schools, libraries, hospitals and travelling kindergartens. Early and preschool care and education is not compulsory in our country. The founders of the institution are local governments (municipalities and cities), physical and legal persons (private kindergartens), religious communities and other entities.

Croatian curricula of early and preschool education as understood in recent national history were developed from 1971 to 2010. The first two programs (from 1971 and 1983) have marked the deterministic-behavioral and adultocentric orientation focused on educator, who provides child transmission of the required information in the prescribed manner. Later two programs (from 1991 and 2010) are constructed according to the following two theoretical backgrounds:

a) humanistic-developmental concept with an emphasis on children's needs and rights and b) socio-constructivist theory which emphasizes that children are unique proactive beings, full of potential for discovering and learning and co-creators of their own development. Within this second theoretical model, children will be able to acquire information from the world by playing and exploring, learning and developing in their meta-cognitive abilities, and using their natural curiosity to learn in the optimal enabling environment and democratically oriented, empathetic and reflective educators are ensured (Edwards, 1998; Giudici & Rinaldi, 2002; Miljak, 2007, 2009; Rinaldi, 2006). The values contained in the National curriculum framework for preschool education, and general compulsory and secondary education from 2010 include *knowledge* (preparation of children for lifelong learning, comprehension and critical thinking, and managing in new situations, etc.), *solidarity* (the development of children's sensitization to other people's needs and environment), *identity* (the construction of personal, cultural and national identity of the child, education for diversity and tolerance respect) and *accountability* (encouraging children active participation in social life, development of responsible behavior and personal freedom and responsibilities) (Ministry of science, education and sports of Republic of Croatia, 2011).

The early and preschool educational system in Croatia is determined by the principles of democracy, pluralism, equal opportunities, autonomy, evolution, integrity and interdisciplinarity. The purpose of institutional early and preschool care and education presents a successful satisfaction of the children's needs and children's self-actualization in the age range from six months until entering primary school. It is focused on the appreciation and development of the child's personality, his abilities, knowledge important for healthy living and life managing, and cultural values to which the child belongs. However, the ways in which some Croatian kindergartens imple-

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