

Preschool Teachers' Perception of Their Satisfaction with Working Conditions and the Status of the Teaching Profession

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Abstract

Research shows that professionals in the educational system feel more satisfied when they are valued at work, when employers acknowledge their work and value their professional ideas. Since there is little research on preschool teachers' satisfaction, this research aims to analyze the perception of their satisfaction with working conditions and the status of the teaching profession. The research involved 536 preschool teachers in Croatia. Using a survey questionnaire with open-ended questions and a qualitative analysis, the research aim was to explore preschool teachers' perception of their satisfaction with working conditions and the status of their profession in society. The results show that preschool teachers are satisfied when there is a pleasant and stimulating working atmosphere, which includes good relationships and connections with colleagues, parents and children, but they are not satisfied with technical, material and organizational conditions. Their perception of satisfaction with the social status of the teaching profession mostly relates to their position in the early childhood and preschool education system. The participants highlight they are not perceived as competent and educated experts and their professional advancement is difficult or impossible. They also critically refer to the employment practice in some preschool institutions where insufficiently competent persons, i.e. persons with inadequate professional qualifications work as preschool teachers. The research results are an incentive for a deeper understanding of the possibilities to improve preschool teachers' employment and professional development and thus improve the quality of their life and work.

Keywords: job satisfaction, position in society, preschool education, profession status, stimulating working atmosphere

1. Introduction

According to Spector (1997), job satisfaction refers to the attitudes of employees towards their job, i.e. the feelings a person has about their job or certain job aspects or the degree to which a person likes (satisfaction) or dislikes (dissatisfaction) their job. Simply put, job satisfaction is the attitude through which an employee expresses how much they like or dislike their job. There are many aspects that influence job satisfaction, for example, working

conditions, the possibility of promotion, working organization as a whole, the level of personal or professional challenge, the level of professional autonomy, independent decision-making, job security, salary, working hours (Keles & Mine, 2016). The literature review shows that job satisfaction is operationalized in two ways: global and facet. The first, global approach views job satisfaction as a general attitude towards work. This approach implies that job satisfaction is more than the sum of satisfaction with individual job aspects, which means that the employee may be dissatisfied with a certain job aspect, but generally satisfied with their job. Therefore, people are simply asked how satisfied they are with their job in general.

The second, facet approach involves examining various job aspects which contribute to overall job satisfaction, such as salary, management, promotion opportunities, peer relationships, working conditions, etc. Different people can have different levels of satisfaction with different job aspects, which ultimately determines the overall job satisfaction (Kutleša, 2005). According to some studies, the global approach is more appropriate for comparing the satisfaction of people with different professions and different jobs, while the facet approach is more suitable for research on people who have the same or similar jobs, as it provides a more detailed and complete insight into the reasons for job (dis)satisfaction (Oshagbermi, 1999 as ctd. in Kutleša, 2005). Both approaches are applied in research, depending on the research aim. The global approach is more useful when comparing the results of work from different areas, while the facet approach is more suitable when comparing people working in the same area because it can give a more detailed insight into certain aspects of job satisfaction based on which the comparison is made (Lastrić, 2002).

Job satisfaction or dissatisfaction is often the subject of various research because it is considered a key prerequisite for deciding to leave or stay in a job. Matković et al. (2020) studied the job satisfaction of Croatian preschool teachers and found several fundamental components affecting preschool teachers' job satisfaction: working conditions (salary), access to professional training, organizational climate (support) and the number of children in educational groups. Similar results were confirmed in previously conducted research according to which preschool teachers are generally satisfied with their job. The highest levels of satisfaction are expressed in the categories related to educational work with children, interpersonal relationships and working hours, while teachers are least satisfied with the social status of their profession, the number of children in educational groups and their salary (Šašić et al., 2011). The social status of preschool teachers is essential because it determines their motivational efficiency and commitment to educational work and the profession in general (Jurčević Lozančić, 2015). Fiala and Sindik (2012) point to personal components of job satisfaction, which are based on personal beliefs (attitudes) that teachers have about their profession, emphasizing the positive personal attitude towards the profession and the sense of pride due to belonging to the preschool teaching profession. However, nowadays we are faced with a shortage of professional preschool teachers and an increase in preschool teacher fluctuation that are present not only at the national but also at the international level. In order to take a deeper look at this problem, it should be pointed out that

the reasons for the above are multiple and require a relevant and professional approach in seeking possible solutions.

According to the literature available (to us), much research on job satisfaction in education has been done on primary and secondary school teachers, while preschool teachers have been involved to a lesser extent, not only in Croatia, but also in the world, which was an incentive for conducting this research.

2. The Methodology of Scientific Research

2.1 Research aim and questions

Research generally shows that professionals working in the education system feel more satisfied when they are valued at work, when employers acknowledge their work and value their professional ideas (Aydin et al., 2013; Gorozidis & Papaioannou, 2014; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). Furthermore, they often indicate the importance of working conditions and a pleasant and stimulating collaborative atmosphere. In this context, the **aim** of this research is to analyze preschool teachers' perception of their satisfaction with working conditions and the status of their profession.

Two **research questions** were posed in the paper:

- What is preschool teachers' perception of their satisfaction with working conditions?
- What is preschool teachers' perception of their satisfaction with the status of their profession in society?

2.2 Participants

The study involved 536 preschool teachers. As for their work experience in preschool institutions, most participants have up to five years of service (39.9%), followed by 28.7% of those with 5 to 15 years, and 18.2% of those with 16 to 25 years, while the fewest number of preschool teachers (13%) have 26 and more years of service. As for professional qualifications, most preschool teachers have a college education (73.13%), followed by those with higher education (23.70%) and secondary education (2.42%).

2.3 Instrument and Collecting and Processing Data

This research is part of a larger study within a scientific project *Preschool Teachers' Job Satisfaction* (project manager: Prof. Anka Jurčević Lozančić, PhD), which was conducted in the academic year 2021/2022 to examine some of the characteristics of preschool teachers' job by analyzing the perception of their experiences (situations) related to job satisfaction.

Preschool teachers from preschool institutions in the city of Zagreb and Zagreb County participated in the research. For the purpose of this research, which was conducted online (using Google forms), two open-ended questions were formulated, asking preschool teachers to list three satisfying and dissatisfying experiences/situations at work.

2.4 Research Methods

The participants' answers to the two open-ended questions about their perception of satisfaction with working conditions and the status of their profession in society were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis method. The data were analyzed on the basis of units of analysis including all answers about the highest satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The process of analysis depended on data quantity and quality, i.e. the specific descriptions of the answers, meaning how clear and extensive participants' descriptions were. Based on the defined two units of analysis containing the responses of individual research participants (or parts of the responses) defined as coding units, initial codes were attached to the coding units representing the first level of data abstraction. Based on the initial coding and revision of codes according to the similarity in meaning, the codes were grouped into parent categories, and after reducing the number of codes certain categories were analytically merged or expanded with other categories.

3. Results and Discussion

In the further analysis, the defined categories were revised. The results were analyzed in accordance with the defined research questions to merge the categories and organize them into themes. Since the analyzed data can be viewed in the context of the correlation, the analysis includes two categories of content and thematic units related to preschool teachers' satisfaction with working conditions and the status of their profession, and within those categories the analysis also includes subcategories of dissatisfaction. The elaborated data are presented through the following two themes:

1st theme: *Preschool teachers' satisfaction with working conditions*

2nd theme: *Preschool teachers' satisfaction with the status of their profession*

Preschool teachers' satisfaction with working conditions

Participants associate satisfaction with the context of performing work, i.e. working conditions. In this sense, they highlight a pleasant and stimulating working atmosphere that includes good relationships and connections with colleagues, parents and children. Preschool teachers say that what makes them happy is that they have opportunities for innovation, creativity and creation at work, as well as the possibility to influence children's development. For some participants, it is also important to have creative material at their disposal. Some participants are satisfied with working hours, i.e. the fact that they do not work overtime, and some are satisfied with a decent salary. Furthermore, satisfaction also refers to the possibility of education and professional training, as well as the possibility of professional autonomy in terms of the choice of activities, organization of time, etc. It is important to the participants that their work and their profession are recognized and appreciated. When these criteria are met, they feel satisfied.

On the other hand, when it comes to preschool teachers' dissatisfaction with working conditions, generally it can be divided into two subcategories: dissatisfaction with technical

and material conditions and dissatisfaction with organizational conditions. Regarding technical and material conditions, the participants point out the lack of work materials, inadequate indoor (poorly arranged and inadequately equipped rooms, lack of working areas) and outdoor areas of the kindergarten (poorly arranged playgrounds, yard), lack of food, poor kindergarten hygiene, etc. Some participants say that they buy work material from their own funds (*When a lot of incentives are expected, and this material for incentives is purchased from my account*). Some participants say that they pay for training courses needed for their work.

Regarding the organizational aspect, there is a great dissatisfaction with having too many children in kindergarten groups, which significantly reduces the quality of educational work (*Most often this is due to having too many children in the group, which makes it almost impossible to approach the child individually on a daily basis*), but it also represents a violation of national pedagogical standards (*...violation of the preschool education act, violation of national pedagogical standards and banalization of problems that are pointed out until the moment when the situation escalates, which requires response from those in charge*). Participants highlight having (too) many children in kindergarten groups compared to the small number of teachers employed (*When I work alone in a group of 21 nursery children*). Some in this context talk about being stressed and feeling physically and mentally tired. An additional source of dissatisfaction is having too much administrative work at the expense of direct work with children (*Too much scribbling, and too little time dedicated to children; When I do (administrative) work that is not within my job scope, when we have to do some activities with children just for the sake of "taking pictures", ...unequal working conditions for all*).

Participants are also dissatisfied with other organizational job aspects, such as working overtime, poor organization of work during holidays, substitute teachers for longer periods of sickness absence, minimal overlaps in work, merging educational groups, etc. (*Failure to comply with national pedagogical standards to the detriment of the child and for the benefit of the employer, poor organization, especially in the case of substitute teachers for longer periods of sickness absence, being substitutes in different groups and facilities. Daily change of working hours; Not being allowed to plan my own vacation, I must use my vacation time when the principal decides*). In organizational terms, preschool teachers are dissatisfied with work and obligations imposed by superiors as well as role mixing, i.e. interference in preschool teachers' work done by technical staff (*I am dissatisfied when the cook or technical staff interfere with the work of preschool teachers, e.g. the preschool teacher tells a story to children and a housekeeper comes and interrupts the story asking whether there is a certain child in the kindergarten so that she can bring down their bed to sleep*).

Another cause of dissatisfaction in relation to organizational aspects includes the provision of adequate support for children with developmental difficulties (*There is an increasingly high number of children with disabilities and often no assistant or a third educator*) and the shortage of expert kindergarten staff. Some participants are also dissatisfied with the fact that they are imposed with jobs that are not their basic work obligations, such as bed lifting and bringing down and cleaning the tables. The following organizational aspect of dissatisfaction

relates to fixed-term work, due to which some preschool teachers cannot achieve job security for several years and are afraid of the termination or lack of continuation of the contract. Moreover, some participants point out that indefinite contracts are “*awarded*” to some preschool teachers without clear criteria, so it occurs that those colleagues who were hired after them get indefinite contracts before them. Participants are dissatisfied with the obsolete principles of work in certain kindergartens, work stagnation, noisy working environment, and they mention difficult adoption of novelties in work due to their older chronological age. They also complain about the stress caused by the traineeship period. Some participants do not perceive the overall working environment as stimulating, stating that they lack understanding provided by colleagues and superiors, support for innovation and incentives for professional development.

In the context of this category, there are also differences between private and public kindergartens, which are mainly expressed by participants from private kindergartens, stating that private kindergartens are in a disadvantageous position. Private kindergarten staff are also less satisfied with working conditions and salary (compared to public kindergartens). When it comes to dissatisfaction with organizational working conditions, the participants mention dissatisfaction with “*politics interfering in the work of kindergarten*”, which reflects in constant changes on the part of the founder, but also defining kindergarten working conditions done by founders who are not necessarily competent in this regard.

Furthermore, participants’ satisfaction is manifested in the insufficient access to professional training and education, either because teachers have to pay for education themselves or because they do not have time to attend courses. The last subcategory in relation to organizational aspects refers to pay dissatisfaction. Participants believe that salaries are too low, especially in private kindergartens, and that they are not motivating (*Completely dissatisfied with the salary, we are inadequately paid for our work and the responsibility we received! Also, when none of the superiors is committed to making wages more appropriate for preschool teachers*).

There is also criticism addressed to the academic community, i.e. professors teaching preschool education students and their insufficient knowledge of work in kindergartens (*I would like more expert staff and professors to spend more time in kindergarten with children and examine their theory of education and the correctness of some theses in professional literature, because a lot of what is written in professional literature does not work in a group of 20 and more children*). Some participants point out the disappointment due to the aforementioned conditions and context of work and perceive their satisfaction with working conditions in the following way: (*Preschool teachers lose enthusiasm and will for such a manner of working, i.e. constantly fighting with windmills, and (like me) focus their creativity on other things they could do in their life to preserve their mental health in time*).

Preschool teachers’ satisfaction with the status of their profession

The category related to preschool teachers’ satisfaction with the status of the teaching profession refers to the feeling that the educational work is little appreciated and that it has an

inadequate position in society. Participants state that they feel they are being “belittled” in society and that their work is seen as “babysitting” (*When we are sometimes belittled – ‘you only babysit’ (parents, wider community) or ‘bad students enroll in educational studies’; Other people seeing us as just babysitters; Other people thinking we do not do anything important*).

Participants believe their profession is not sufficiently recognized, not only by the general public, but also by the competent ministry, the professional and academic community and the media (*Degradation of the teaching profession by the Ministry of Science and Education, not perceiving our work as one of the most important at the level of education and much more!!!; Media voice, underestimation of the profession, underestimation of the profession by the professor at the faculty who educates future preschool teachers*). Through descriptions and examples of underestimating the teaching profession, participants warn that they mind not being considered competent and educated professionals and that their professional advancement is difficult or impossible. Talking about (dis)satisfaction with the status of their profession, participants also warn about the unfavorable position of early childhood education, which is ignored in relation to higher levels of education (*Lack of recognition of the importance of ECEC, degradation of the teaching profession; Educational work is not respected, our contribution to the child’s development and upbringing is not recognized*). The participants also critically review the employment practice in some kindergartens hiring people with inadequate professional qualifications (*Preschool teacher’s job is done by babysitters, hairdressers, caregivers, with three years of high school, they take over their shift and work in a group alone*).

Moreover, participants list some aspects of (dis)satisfaction that are related to them personally, or to their feelings and work. In relation to their personal feelings, lack of appreciation prevails, not only of the teaching profession, but also of preschool teachers as persons, of their efforts and work. Preschool teachers are dissatisfied when they are criticized, ignored and insulted in the context of cooperation with parents and relationships with colleagues. Furthermore, causes of dissatisfaction include failures at work, when they fail to carry out planned activities, help children, approach children and devote themselves to children as much as they deem necessary. Personal reasons for dissatisfaction include poor health and lack of free time.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this research was to analyze preschool teachers’ perception of their satisfaction with working conditions and the status of their profession. The results show that a pleasant and stimulating working atmosphere that includes good relationships and connections with colleagues, parents and children is important to preschool teachers for creating a sense of satisfaction. Preschool teachers say that it makes them feel satisfied when they have opportunities for innovation, creativity and creation, the opportunity for education and professional development, as well as the opportunity for professional autonomy in terms of the choice of activities and organization of time. If their work is acknowledged and their profession appreciated, they feel satisfied. But they also point out dissatisfaction with

technical and material conditions (lack of work materials in kindergartens, insufficiently equipped rooms and outdoor spaces such as playgrounds and kindergarten yards). When talking about the feeling of (dis)satisfaction, they highlight having (too) many children in educational groups and few employed preschool teachers, which is why they feel physical and psychological fatigue. Furthermore, causes of dissatisfaction include too much administrative work and working overtime, poor organization of work during holidays and substitutes for longer periods of sickness absence, as well as pay dissatisfaction, especially in private kindergartens. Preschool teacher satisfaction with the status of the teaching profession confirms the feeling that the educational work is little appreciated, that it has an inadequate position in society and that the teaching profession is often underestimated. The results obtained are similar to the results of international research showing that for professionals in the education system, unsatisfactory working environment is the predominant reason for the fluctuation of preschool teachers, with salaries being only a minor source of dissatisfaction (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Toropova et al., 2021). Moreover, inadequate working conditions negatively affect the status of the profession and make it difficult to employ new professionals (Ingersoll, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to improve the status of kindergarten teaching profession in society and make it more attractive. The conducted research indicates the need for further research of important determinants of job satisfaction aiming to identify the effects of dissatisfaction and propose mechanisms for improving preschool teachers' job satisfaction, thus improving early childhood and preschool education.

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