

PERCEPTION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS REGARDING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract: This paper starts from a holistic paradigm as a theoretical approach to understanding reflective practice. The aim of the research was to examine the extent to which preschool teachers use reflective practice in their educational work. The sample includes 109 preschool teachers from institutions in Novi Sad and Belgrade, who expressed their views by responding to items in a scale of the assessment created for the needs of this research. The results indicate that preschool teachers do reflect on certain aspects of educational work in preschool settings, suggesting that most participants use reflective practice techniques. However, action research and critical reflection appear to be utilized to a lesser extent. In order for preschool teachers to identify a problem and solve it through action research, it is necessary to develop and enhance their skills in reflective practice. The pedagogical implications of the research results pertain to the advancement of initial teacher education, which should focus on developing and increasing professional competencies required for effective reflection. Through participation in action research, self-reflection, and group reflection with colleagues, preschool teachers strengthen their professional competencies for a reflective approach to educational practice.

Key words: reflection, reflective practice, preschool teacher

1.INTRODUCTION

In the literature, reflective practice is defined as a continuous process based on reflective thinking and learning from experience. Building on that basis, a preschool teacher plans, implements, evaluates, and introduces improvements to their own practice. Reflection continuously appears as a form of support for practitioners who learn, develop knowledge, and improve their work by reconsidering their practice [1].

Reflective practice represents a holistic process, a way of learning and researching in which theory is integrated with reflection and practice. Accordingly, the research presented in this paper is directed toward analyzing preschool teachers' attitudes about reflective practice. The preschool teacher as a reflective practitioner is regarded not only as an initiator of change and a catalyst for learning, but also as someone who is invested in their personal and professional development. Therefore, the reflective practitioner builds a reflective practice by thinking about it—before and after an activity, and by acting during the activity itself [2].

2.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

An overview of theoretical knowledge and relevant studies shows a strong popularization of the concept of reflective practice. Reflection as a specialized form of thinking was first identified by John Dewey [3]. According to his view, reflection arises from doubt or dissatisfaction related to an experience in a direct situation, which then leads to investigation and the resolution of a specific problem [4].

Reflective practice is grounded in a holistic paradigm and in the notion of education as a dialogical-social learning process involving interaction, discussion, exchange, and exploration [5]. Reflective practice signifies a comprehensive process in which the preschool teacher reflects on their own work, applying existing knowledge to find alternative methods as solutions for improving educational practice.

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According to Schön [6], there are three types of reflection:

- Reflection-on-action – thinking after an event has occurred,
- Reflection-in-action – thinking while working, and
- Reflection as action – knowing in action.

Reflection-on-action refers to critical thinking about an event that has already happened, consisting of the following phases:

- The teacher recognizes the situation to be considered.
- The teacher thinks about the situation both before and after the intervention.
- The teacher uses knowledge, experience, literature, and help from colleagues to bridge the gap between “before and after.”
- The teacher defines the key points for reflecting on their action and identifies what could be done differently.

Schön [6] defines reflection-in-action as thinking during the activity, so that observed problems can be solved immediately rather than after the fact. The preschool teacher’s experience is crucial in making real-time changes and requires “here and now” thinking. This type of practice is spontaneous and results in the creation of new practice.

Reflectivity is understood as the developmental process of experiential learning. Its essence lies in using experiences from practice and approaching them critically to make improvements. “The skills on which the concept of reflective practice is based are: thinking about one’s own practice, connecting theory and practice, and critical analysis and evaluation of actions” [7].

Reflective practice involves constant re-examination and thinking about one’s own actions from the perspective of theoretical knowledge, as well as verifying and re-examining that knowledge through practical work [8].

By critically considering one’s professional experience and asking questions such as “What?”, “Why?”, “How can I improve what is not working?”, “What are the implications of this research?” and “How can I enhance my practice?”, reflective practice becomes an effective tool for professional development [9].

The following reflective practice techniques are used for the continuous self-examination of practitioners and analysis of their own actions:

- Thinking about one’s own work by responding to questions about various aspects of educational practice
- Keeping journals – recording situations and events in one’s group
- Conducting action research
- Studying professional literature
- Analyzing documented situations
- Examining one’s own experiences from preschool practice
- Providing advice
- Communicating with children
- Exchanging experiences with colleagues [10].

In order to develop and improve their own practice, preschool teachers in modern preschool institutions are increasingly taking on the role of critical reflective practitioners. Reflective critique allows teachers to contemplate questions and processes, interpreting both interpretations and assumptions. In critical reflection, teachers take into account not only their knowledge and skills but also their experiences in a social context, so they can further develop their practice [7].

Reflective practice evolves through the following levels of reflection:

- Pre-reflection: Teachers respond to a situation in their group without conscious consideration of alternatives.
- Surface reflection: Teachers’ thinking focuses on the strategies used to achieve predetermined goals.
- Pedagogical reflection: Teachers think about educational goals, the theories underlying their approaches, and the links between theory and practice.

- Critical reflection: Teachers consider the implications for practice [11].

Reflectivity includes being aware of the influence that teachers—as practitioners—have on the research process and how their attitudes, perceptions, and feelings affect the situation being studied [12]. Problems are identified through reflective practice, while action research seeks to thoughtfully and systematically solve those problems. Presenting and sharing the results of action research conducted by preschool teachers contributes to reflective practice. In action research, preschool teachers act as researchers, participants, and practitioners simultaneously, which is why reflection occurs at every stage of action research. Critical action research is an evaluative process that consists of continuous, overlapping cycles—where the end of one cycle becomes the start of the next—through phases of planning, implementation, observation, and critical analysis. By going through this action research process, the preschool teacher becomes a reflective practitioner [7].

3.METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the research was to examine the extent to which preschool teachers use reflective practice in their educational work. For the purposes of this study, an instrument was constructed with an introductory section focusing on sociodemographic variables (gender, length of work experience). The second part of the instrument consisted of a Likert-scale assessment. For the domain of investigating the application of reflective practice techniques, existing items were summarized through a review of relevant literature and adapted for the needs of this study [10]. The structure of the items related to the domain of examining the level of reflection was developed according to the division of reflective practice into levels of reflection (pre-reflection, surface reflection, pedagogical reflection, critical reflection)[11]. The research was conducted in an online format. The collected data were processed using descriptive statistical methods in the SPSS 21.0 software package. Given the specific nature of the research topic, the study was conducted on a purposive sample of 109 preschool teachers from institutions located in Novi Sad and Belgrade. All participants were female.

In Table 1, the research participants' responses concerning the number of years of work experience in a preschool institution are presented.

Table 1 - Years of Work Experience of the Research Participants in a Preschool Institution

Years of Work Experience	%	N=109
1-5 year	26.6%	29
5-15 years	37.6%	41
over 15 years	35.8%	39

4.DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

The first step in the data analysis involved calculating the average values on the rating scale. The results of applying reflective practice techniques are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 - Application of Reflective Practice Techniques

Items	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
I reflect on my own work by answering questions about various aspects of educational practice.	109	1	5	3.72	.992
I conduct action research.	109	1	5	2.56	.995
I keep a journal—recording situations and events.	109	1	5	3.77	1.006
I document events in my group.	109	1	5	3.80	.814
I analyze documented situations.	109	1	4	3.23	.878

I study professional literature.	109	1	5	4.09	.845
I analyze my own preschool experiences— from the child's perspective.	109	1	5	3.24	1.017
I develop communication and dialogue with children.	109	3	5	4.57	.533
I exchange experiences with fellow preschool teachers.	109	2	5	4.08	.914
"Giving advice" – devising advice for an "imagined" colleague who has less preschool work experience.	109	1	5	3.29	1.108

Based on the descriptive data obtained (which were discussed earlier), and using the Scale items in this research, it can be concluded that the average values range from 2.33 to 3.80. Among the highest averages are "Analyzing documented situations" (M =3.23), "Analyzing my own preschool experiences" (M =4.33), "Analyzing documented situations from the preschool—child perspective" (M =3.23). From these four items, we see that the arithmetic mean was slightly higher in some areas. The highest scores are recorded for the items: "I develop communication and dialogue with children" (M=4.57), "I study professional literature" (M=4.09), and "I exchange experiences with my fellow preschool teachers" (M=4.08). These items reflect a clear perception among teachers regarding their application of reflective techniques.

By analyzing the content of these items, one can conclude that the preschool teachers who participated in the research through professional learning and exchange of experience with colleagues influence the change in their own practice. Through learning, practical work, and research activities, teachers improve their competencies for reflective practice. By carrying out this process, a preschool teacher becomes a practitioner who thinks in accordance with personal and institutional needs, aiming to enhance the quality of the educational process [13].

The respondents achieve the lowest average score for the item: "I conduct action research" (M=2.54). In order for preschool teachers to identify a problem and solve it through action research, they need to develop and strengthen their reflective practice skills. By implementing action research, the teacher becomes a reflective practitioner who contemplates professional experience with the goal of improving the quality of the educational process.

Table 3 - below shows the average values for the levels of reflection.

Items	n	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
I respond to a situation in the preschool group without consciously considering alternatives.	109	2	5	3.83	.870
I focus on strategies used to achieve predetermined goals.	109	2	5	3.62	.901
I think about educational goals, the theories on which the approaches are based, and the links between theory and practice.	109	2	5	3.17	.908
I think about the implications for educational practice	109	2	5	2.95	.907

By examining the results shown in Table 2, one can conclude that the arithmetic means for the items range from 2.95 to 3.83. Respondents achieved the highest scores on the following items: “I respond to a situation in my preschool group without consciously considering alternatives” (M=3.83) and “I focus on strategies used to achieve predetermined goals” (M=3.62). The lowest average score was obtained for the item “I think about the implications for educational practice” (M=2.95). This finding suggests that critical reflection is less represented in educational work. An average score of M=3.17 for pedagogical reflection indicates that most of the teachers who participated in the study are not sure whether they use this type of reflection. Preschool teachers often carry out reflection without realizing it is a reflective approach [14]. This points to the need for special attention to be paid to a reflective approach during the initial education of preschool teachers.

Reflective practice is a holistic process - a mode of learning and research in which theory is integrated with reflection and practice, and where reflection is essential for learning and change. It constitutes a dialogue between objective and normative theoretical knowledge, on one hand, and contextual and subjective practical experience (from which variations in teachers’ work emerge), on the other [15].

5. CONCLUSION

The research results indicate that teachers do reflect on certain aspects of educational work in preschool settings. This further suggests that the majority of respondents use reflective practice techniques. Teachers more frequently use journal entries as reminders of specific situations and activities in the group. It can also be observed that most respondents document children’s activities, record content, analyze it, and study professional literature. The preschool teachers who participated in the research generally agree that they analyze communication with children and exchange experiences among colleagues—a sign that they are interested in professional development. Analyzing one’s own preschool-related attitudes from the child’s perspective can influence implicit pedagogy and thus improve one’s practice. The reflective practice technique that appears least frequently in preschools is participation in action research.

Regarding levels of reflection, the research results indicate that pre-reflection and surface reflection are more common among respondents. As for teachers’ critical reflection, the findings suggest that preschool teachers generally do not think about the implications for educational practice. We may conclude that a reflective approach influences teachers’ professional learning and development, and in so doing, also affects the quality of the educational process itself. By participating in action research, engaging in ongoing professional development, practicing self-reflection, and engaging in group reflection with colleagues, preschool teachers strengthen their professional competencies for a reflective approach to educational work [2].

The pedagogical implications of these research results concern the improvement of initial preschool teacher education, which should serve to increase the professional competencies necessary for effective reflection. In order to connect theory and practice, three dimensions are highlighted in preschool teacher education: the metacultural, the experiential, and the reflective. Teacher education should rely on a constructivist paradigm that encompasses the acquired knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation involved in implementing the educational process [16]. During professional practice in a preschool setting, it is recommended that future teachers be exposed to methods of critically examining their own practice and engaging in critical reflection. With the aim of enhancing their practice, teachers should adopt the role of reflective practitioners, actively considering their work and their future professional development [17].

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