

KINDERGARTEN PRINCIPALS' PROFESSIONAL OBSERVATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

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In the theoretical part the authors define the professional development of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers, their pedagogical work, the role of observations in kindergarten, and especially the principal's professional observations. In their research, they were interested in how professional observations affect the professional development of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers. Using a questionnaire, they determined how often professional observations are conducted, how the principal's observations contribute to professional development according to the respondents, and how preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers perceive professional observations and the subsequent discussions. The obtained data were processed using the SPSS program, and the results were interpreted. It was found that assistant preschool teachers more often perceive these professional observations as an additional psychological, physical, and time burden. However, preschool teachers more often perceive them as a way to transfer good practices, but also as something uncomfortable and stressful.

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STROKOVNE HOSPITACIJE RAVNATELJEV IN PROFESIONALNI RAZVOJ VZGOJITELJEV

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Avtorici v teoretičnem delu opredelita profesionalni razvoj vzgojitelja in pomočnika vzgojitelja, njuno pedagoško delo, vlogo hospitacij v vrtcu in še posebej ravnateljeve strokovne hospitacije. V raziskavi ju je zanimalo, kako strokovne hospitacije vplivajo na profesionalni razvoj vzgojitelja in pomočnika vzgojitelja. S pomočjo anketnega vprašalnika sta ugotavljali, kako pogosto se izvajajo strokovne hospitacije, kako ravnateljeve strokovne hospitacije po mnenju anketirancev prispevajo k profesionalnemu razvoju ter kako vzgojitelji in pomočniki vzgojiteljev doživljajo strokovne hospitacije in pogovor, ki sledi po njih. Pridobljene podatke smo obdelali s pomočjo programa SPSS in pridobljene rezultate interpretirali. Ugotovili smo, da pomočniki vzgojiteljev pogosteje te strokovne hospitacije občutijo kot dodatno psihično, fizično in časovno obremenitev. Jih pa vzgojitelji pogosteje dojemajo kot način prenosa dobre prakse, pa tudi kot nekaj neprijetnega in stresnega.



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1 Introduction

Professional observations, both conducted by the principal or by colleagues, represent a good way to monitor and evaluate the pedagogical work of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers. By conducting the observations, the principal or another professional staff member not only gains insight into the interpersonal relationships among employees, the interactions within the classroom, the prevailing atmosphere in a class, and the opportunity to document all observed aspects, but it also involves recognizing and understanding specific pedagogical phenomena that occur during the pedagogical process (Koren, 2007). The timing and manner in which the principal or another professional staff member conducts professional observations depend on their discretion and the person being observed. Principals or other professional staff members often choose to conduct observations when indirect methods (daily, monthly, yearly preparations, notes, journals, etc.) do not provide all the necessary information for understanding the pedagogical process, or when they wish to directly observe the pedagogical work of an educational employee (Tomić, 1990). Before visiting the classroom, it is essential to determine the purpose and content of the monitoring, along with clear and understandable goals, as observations significantly impact the professional development of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers. Following an observation, preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers receive feedback, ideas, opinions, and experience from the observer (principal or another professional staff member (Majhen, 2004). All of this significantly influences preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers, providing them with a new impetus that serves as encouragement for their professional development and growth and thus significantly affects both their professional as well as personal development.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Professional Development of Preschool Teachers and Assistant Preschool Teachers

The only constant in life is change, especially in the field of education. Due to the demands for high standards and greater quality of work, preschool teachers must continually engage in professional development (Peček, 2009). OECD (2012) emphasizes the necessity of investing in the education of preschool teachers to

achieve high-quality results. The professionalism of preschool teachers, which includes values, ethical codes, skills, knowledge, and responsibilities, is a dynamic category dependent on social changes (Lepičnik Vodopivec and Hmelak, 2018). Caulfield (1997, in Lepičnik Vodopivec and Hmelak, 2018) describes it as a continuous effort to become professionals.

The career path of a preschool teacher consists of various stages, each with its own role, characteristics, and consequences. Individuals must independently shape their professional development, facing resistance to learning and change (Peček, 2009). The professional development of preschool teachers covers the entire life, from initial education to retirement (White Paper, 2011). Nekrep, Prah, and Slana (2006) highlight the need for continuous adaptation and upgrading of knowledge and skills. Hriberšek (2014) emphasizes the importance of in-depth professional assessment and quality education for professional development. Peček (2009) gives reasons for professional development, including improvement of work, including improvement of work, development of expertise and satisfaction at work.

In modern society, the roles and functions of schools are changing, imposing new demands on professionals. OECD (2009) emphasizes the need for professional development as preschool teachers face various challenges. The system of an ongoing education and training for professionals, as a form of lifelong learning, is crucial for their continuous development (Nekrep, Prah, and Slana, 2006). Professional development should be continuously evaluated and adjusted according to efficiency and needs (Nekrep, Prah, and Slana, 2006). Angus-Cole (2021) highlights various aspects of professional development, including work improvement, knowledge acquisition, collaboration with others, and reflection. Vonta (2009) emphasizes that the professional growth of preschool teachers affects the quality of children's education.

In the process of lifelong learning, preschool teachers develop their knowledge, skills, and practices while being responsible for their personal and professional activities (Hriberšek, 2014). Competencies that include knowledge, skills and personality traits are crucial for the work of preschool teachers (Zore, 2014). Internal and external factors influence the professional development of preschool teachers, where cognitive, social, and emotional-motivational aspects of personality are important internal factors, while external factors include environmental influences

(Ažman, 2012). Motivation, as a significant psychological factor, encourages preschool teachers to work effectively (Havkić, 2021).

Monitoring the educational process is essential for the comprehensive evaluation and improvement of the quality of professional work (Erčulj, 2015). The Inspectorate of the Republic of Slovenia for Education and Sport and the principals play a key role in monitoring and supervision (Gajšek, 2019). Bevc, Fošnarič, and Sentočnik (2002) emphasize the goals of monitoring pedagogical work, including raising the quality of education, supporting professional development, improving leadership, and self-evaluation.

In conclusion, the professional development of preschool teachers is crucial for ensuring a high-quality educational process. Systematic monitoring and continuous improvement are key elements that enable professionals to respond appropriately to the challenges of modern society.

2.2 Professional Observations in the Kindergarten

Professional observations in kindergarten represent a direct way of observing the pedagogical process and collecting data on the work of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers in educating children (Murgelj, 1996). During the internship, students observe their mentor, and later, the mentor or principal observes their work (Valenčič Zuljan et al., 2007, p. 14). Erčulj (2007) emphasizes that classroom observation requires special skills and must be concluded with feedback and further activities for improvement.

The reasons for conducting observations are diverse, including development-oriented detection of the real situation in the classroom and counseling preschool teachers how to improve their work (Erčulj and Širec, 2004). Observations can also serve to supervise professional work and assess the quality of teaching, which helps to guide and direct the preschool teaching staff (Murgelj, 1996). The process of monitoring and guiding preschool teachers' work requires that principals consider several key principles, including the responsibility of the observer and the teacher, the focus on the improvement of the institution, the balance between monitoring the process and the results, and the competence of all participants (Erčulj and Širec, 2006).

Observations are conducted in three models: evaluational (principal's observations), developmental (they are carried out by consultants from the Institute of Education), and collegial or mutual observations (conducted by colleagues within the kindergarten) (Gosling, 2002). The educational process in kindergarten is a central activity, so it is important for the management to gain insight into the quality of work. Observations help principals in the planning and implementation of additional professional training and encourage the professional development of professional staff (Murgelj, 1996). Direct observation of the pedagogical process is not the only way to obtain data, so the entire process should be considered (Erčulj, 2013).

Observations have an advisory, informative, and developmental-informational purpose. Sometimes, they also have a supervisory and evaluative purpose, depending on specific goals (Murgelj, 1996). Their purpose is to identify pedagogical problems and formulate measures to solve them (Tomić, 1990). Despite the importance of observations, they can be a disturbance and emotional burden for preschool teachers. In his work, Majhen (2004) states that the resistance to observations does not stem from the teachers' poor training or readiness for work. Many preschool teachers experience resistance due to the following factors:

- since they are aware that they are being observed, they are more nervous and consequently perform the activity less well
- they are often critical of their own work and believe that someone else would perform the activity better,
- there is often a fear that the teaching method used by the teacher may not be the best,
- because when being observed, preschool teachers often do not know the objectives of observing,
- because they do not know what the observer will observe.
- because the observation has not been announced in time and - there is a fear of the post-observation interview.

The supervision process should take place in stages, including a planning meeting, observation, and feedback (Tomić, 2002). Key principles include establishing trust between the educator and the observer, directing attention to improving pedagogical work, using objective data, and collaboration between the observer and the educator to improve both sides. It is important to plan the observations together with

preschool teachers in order to avoid misunderstandings and emphasize their importance (Erčulj, 2013).

Principal's Professional Observations

Conducting observations is an important activity of the principal because it enables him to gather the necessary information on the quality of the teacher's and assistant's work in the classroom and the work of the kindergarten as a whole through various methods and techniques. The principal may collect data on the course of the pedagogical process through indirect observation, mainly by using written sources such as daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly preparations, records, journals, etc. However, observations are the method that allows the principal to directly observe and collect data on the teacher's and assistant's work. They can be conducted randomly or systematically. The principal decides to visit a classroom when indirect methods and techniques do not provide enough information about the quality of pedagogical work within the classroom. When the principal decides to observe randomly, he primarily perceives those phenomena that attracted his attention at a given moment (Murgelj, 1996, p. 17). Whereas systematic monitoring involves predefined aspects of observation, with observations being recorded in real time (Tomič, 1990).

Feedback and discussions with the teacher after an observation can have various shades, either positive or negative, but it is crucial that it is constructive and focused on assistance and improvement. It is essential to avoid humiliation, as pointed out by Majhen (2004). The goal of the discussion is not only to point out the shortcomings and provide recipes for improving the work, but also to encourage the educator to self-reflection and jointly find ways for his/her professional development. This is emphasized by Erčulj and Širec (2004), who describe developmental feedback as a process of analysis, reflection, and development planning.

Communication principles play a key role in a successful discussion. It is necessary to create a trusting environment where the teacher actively participates, evaluates his/her work and the observer asks questions and directs the dialogue. It is important that the feedback focuses on the facts, avoids judgments, and relates to the teacher's work rather than his/her personality. Kosevski Puljić (2007)

emphasizes the characteristics of effective feedback, which should be descriptive, concrete, appropriate, useful, agreed upon, timely, and initially positive.

An important aspect is also the adaptation of the leadership style in providing feedback according to the individual characteristics of the educator. The three leadership styles presented (directive, collaborative, and non-directive) can serve as guidelines, with not one being the best, but selected according to the needs and complexity of the thinking of each expert (Bevc, Fošnarič, and Sentočnik, 2002). Feedback should be the starting point for encouraging the teacher's development, providing room for constructive discussion about improvements and progress.

The principal's observations can therefore be defined as an obligation, as a factor in the process of changing the educational practice and the process of monitoring the pedagogical work of each educator. Observations also provide insight into the quality of the pedagogical work of the entire educational institution and are a starting point for further changes in kindergarten and educational work (Širec et al., 2013). In their work, they state that properly planned and conducted observations can be used as an element for the professional development of each teacher and the development of the entire team and kindergarten as an educational institution.

3 Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate how professional observations affect the professional development of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers. We hypothesized that they have a greater impact on preschool teachers who are responsible for an appropriate preparation, implementation, and evaluation of the educational process in a group of children under their guidance.

We implemented a descriptive and causal non-experimental method of educational research. The research was based on a non-random sample from a specific situation. The sample consisted of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers. A total of 201 respondents answered the survey. Most respondents (27.9%) have been working for more than 21 years. 25.4% of respondents have 11 to 15 years of work experience, 17.9% of respondents have 16 to 20 years of work experience, and 14.4% have been working for 0 to 10 years. The largest share of respondents (68.2%)

are employed as preschool teachers, while a smaller share (31.8%) of respondents are assistant preschool teachers.

The data were collected through a survey questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of questions about objective facts (work experience, job position). The following questions were related to professional observations. The survey was conducted individually and anonymously via the 1KA online platform.

The data were processed with the SPSS program, presented in tables and determined the absolute (f) and percentage ($f\%$) frequencies. The Mann-Whitney U test was used for analyzing the differences between the statements according to the gender and job position of the respondents and the Kruskal-Wallis test to analyze the differences according to the age group and the years of work experience.

The findings of this study aim to contribute valuable insights into the impact of professional observations on the professional development of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers, shedding light on potential variations across demographic factors.

4 Results and discussion

First, we were interested in how often the **principal** conducts professional observations in kindergarten according to the respondents' opinions. The majority (36.8%) of respondents answered that the principal rarely conducts professional observations in kindergarten, while the least (4.5%) of respondents answered that the principal always conducts professional observations. 34.8% of respondents marked the answer "sometimes," 16.4% "often," and 7.5% „never." The outcome of the χ^2 -test indicated there are no statistically significant differences in relation to the respondents' years of work experience ($P = 0.436$), but there were significant differences in relation to job position ($P = 0.007$). From the data obtained, it can be concluded that the majority (42.3%) of respondents employed as preschool teachers chose the answer that the principal rarely conducts professional observations, while the majority (53.1%) of respondents employed as assistant preschool teachers chose the answer "sometimes." The fewest preschool teachers (5.1%) as well as assistant preschool teachers (3.1%) answered that the principal always conducts professional observations.

Discussion: The obtained data were somewhat surprising, as we expected more frequent professional observations by principals. We were even more surprised that as many as 7.5% of respondents answered that the principal never conducts professional observations in their kindergarten. The principal's professional observations are considered an obligation through which the principal monitors the educational practice. They also enable him to obtain additional or first-hand information about the work of the preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers in the classroom, positively influencing their professional development.

Further Inquiry: We then researched the opinion of the respondents on the impact of the principal's professional observations on their professional development.

Table 1: Number (f) and structural percentages (f%) according to the impact of the principal's professional observations on professional development

Impact of Principal's Professional Observations on Professional Development	f	f %
I believe that professional observations do not affect my professional development.	68	33,8 %
I believe that professional observations influence my professional development to some extent.	113	56,2 %
I believe that professional observations strongly affect my professional development.	20	10,0 %
Total	201	100,0 %

More than half (56.2%) of the respondents believe that the professional observations conducted by the principal have some influence on their professional development, while 10.0% believe they have a significant impact. The χ^2 test outcome showed that there were no statistically significant differences according to the years of experience ($P = 0.122$) and job position ($P = 0.457$).

In the following, we were also interested in the extent to which respondents agree with the offered statements about professional observations. For each statement, they expressed their agreement on a three-step scale. The results showed that 43.3% of respondents disagreed with the sixth and seventh statements. Regarding the eighth statement, more than half (55.2%) of respondents answered that they neither agree nor disagree with the given statement. Regarding all other statements, we noticed that the respondents agreed to a greater extent.

Table 2: The outcome of the Kruskal-Wallis test of differences in statements from T1 to T9 according to the respondents' work experience

Statements	Work experience	\bar{R}	χ^2	g	P
Professional observations represent an additional mental and physical burden.	0–5 years	102,38	5,461	4	0,243
	6–10 years	114,09			
	11–15 years	99,95			
	16–20 years	107,88			
	21 years and more	90,04			
Professional observations are something unpleasant and stressful.	0–5 years	98,71	3,778	4	0,437
	6–10 years	108,24			
	11–15 years	101,81			
	16–20 years	111,04			
	21 years and more	91,24			
Professional observations represent an additional time burden.	0–5 years	103,07	2,215	4	0,696
	6–10 years	105,57			
	11–15 years	98,91			
	16–20 years	108,17			
	21 years and more	93,82			
Professional observations cause the atmosphere in the classroom to be different from the atmosphere when there are no observations.	0–5 years	125,28	11,507	4	0,021
	6–10 years	101,90			
	11–15 years	102,91			
	16–20 years	101,31			
	21 years and more	86,03			
I prefer pre-announced professional observations.	0–5 years	123,29	9,371	4	0,052
	6–10 years	108,48			
	11–15 years	93,32			
	16–20 years	94,36			
	21 years and more	96,84			
Preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers with less than 10 years of work experience require more professional observations than those with more than 10 years of work experience.	0–5 years	78,66	30,702	4	<,001
	6–10 years	69,72			
	11–15 years	93,90			
	16–20 years	113,1			
	21 years and more	127,45			
Professional observations conducted by the principal are more relaxed and less stressful.	0–5 years	109,19	4,654	4	0,325
	6–10 years	89,74			
	11–15 years	109,27			
	16–20 years	90,24			
	21 years and more	101,97			
	0–5 years	98,00	3,359	4	0,500

Statements	Work experience	\bar{R}	χ^2	g	P
Professional observations conducted by other professionals are more stressful, but still relaxed.	6–10 years	100,17			
	11–15 years	111,82			
	16–20 years	92,50			
	21 years and more	98,59			
Professional observations represent a good way to transfer best practices.	0–5 years	96,43	3,347	4	0,502
	6–10 years	93,59			
	11–15 years	101,56			
	16–20 years	112,24			
	21 years and more	99,47			

The table above shows the extent to which respondents agree or disagree with the offered statements, depending on their years of work experience. The outcome of the Kruskal-Wallis test showed there are statistically significant differences in some statements, specifically in the 4th and 6th statements. As a minimum possible answer, answer 1 is defined – I do not agree, and the maximum answer is 3 – I agree. From the fourth statement, we can see that there is a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.021$). Respondents who have been working between 0 to 5 years agree with this statement the most ($R = 125.28$), while those who have been working for more than 21 years agree the least ($R = 86.03$). There are also statistically significant differences in the statement: "Preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers who have been working for less than 10 years need more professional observations than preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers who have been working for more than 10 years." ($p < 0.001$). Respondents who have been working for more than 21 years agreed the most with this statement ($R = 127.45$), while those who have been working for 6 to 10 years agreed the least ($R = 69.72$). There are no statistically significant differences for the remaining statements.

Table 3: The outcome of the Kruskal-Wallis test of differences in statements from T1 to T9 according to the respondents' job position

Statements	Job position	\bar{R}	U	P
Professional observations represent an additional mental and physical burden.	Preschool teacher	100,19	4273,500	0,737
	Assistant preschool teacher	102,73		
Professional observations are something unpleasant and stressful	Preschool teacher	101,72	4286,00	0,780
	Assistant preschool teacher	99,47		
Professional observations represent an additional time burden.	Preschool teacher	100,58	4327,000	0,872
	Assistant preschool teacher	101,89		
Professional observations cause the atmosphere in the classroom to be different from the atmosphere when there are no observations.	Preschool teacher	101,69	4289,500	0,779
	Assistant preschool teacher	99,52		
I prefer pre-announced professional observations.	Preschool teacher	98,03	3976,500	0,199
	Assistant preschool teacher	107,37		
Preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers with less than 10 years of work experience require more professional observations than those with more than 10 years of work experience.	Preschool teacher	102,13	4229,000	0,664
	Assistant preschool teacher	98,58		
Professional observations conducted by the principal are more relaxed and less stressful.	Preschool teacher	99,61	4194,000	0,591
	Assistant preschool teacher	103,97		
Professional observations conducted by other professionals are more stressful, but still relaxed.	Preschool teacher	95,90	3685,000	0,043
	Assistant preschool teacher	111,92		
Professional observations represent a good way to transfer best practices.	Preschool teacher	102,53	4174,000	0,483
	Assistant preschool teacher	97,72		

The table above shows the outcome of the Mann-Whitney U-test. As a minimum answer, answer 1 was defined – I do not agree, and the maximum answer is 3 – I agree. Based on the data obtained, it can be said that there are no significant differences between preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers in agreeing with the offered statements. However, a statistically significant difference occurred in the statement: "Professional observations conducted by other professionals are more stressful, but still relaxed." ($p = 0.043$). Assistant preschool teachers of preschool children agree with this statement the most ($R = 111.92$).

In Table 2, we were surprised by the difference in agreement with the sixth statement: "Preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers who have less than 10 years of experience need more professional observations than preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers who have more than 10 years of experience." Respondents who have been working for more than 21 years largely agreed with the statement, while those with 6 to 10 years of work experience disagreed the most. We believe that there should be no difference in the frequency of professional observations based on years of work experience between preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers; professional observations should be conducted for everyone regardless of their years of work experience.

In Table 3, we notice a statistically significant difference in the statement: "Professional observations conducted by other professionals are more stressful, but still relaxed." Assistant preschool teachers agreed more with this statement. We were somewhat surprised by this finding, as we expected that preschool teachers responsible for group work would agree more with the given statement.

5 Conclusion

The professional development of preschool teachers is a fundamental element of the quality of kindergarten operation. Therefore, it is important that the management understands it as a systematic, planned and controlled process, both at the individual level as well as at the level of the entire organization. In addition to traditional education (seminars, workshops, etc.), there are various more intensive practices and tools that enable systematic and in-depth professional learning. These tools include observations conducted by principals (Rupnik Vec, 2020). Well-planned and carried out observations can be used as one of the elements of the professional development

of preschool teachers and the development of the entire team and institution (Širec et al., 2013). The implementation of observations and feedback on its implementation are challenging tasks for which it is important that its participants are properly trained (Erčulj, 2020).

In this research, we assumed that the professional observations conducted by the principal would have a greater impact on preschool teachers responsible for the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of the educational process in a group of children they lead. Assistant preschool teachers only help them with this. Based on the results of the research, we cannot fully confirm this assumption. It was often observed that assistant preschool teachers more often perceive these professional observations as an additional mental, physical, and time burden, and they (more often than preschool teachers) feel that principals conduct them more frequently. However, preschool teachers more often perceive them as a way of transferring best practices.

However, one of the weakest points in the monitoring and evaluation of pedagogical work is still the use of findings or data obtained by the observer during the process of observation. The basic purpose of the data thus obtained is to plan the professional development of an individual in connection with improving the work of the entire educational institution (ibid.). Lešnik (2021) states that the starting point for the principal should be the awareness that conducting observations provides an important opportunity for the professional growth of preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers. Therefore, it is essential for the principal to believe that by monitoring the work of an individual preschool teacher, he encourages the improvement of practice and thus influences the provision of quality of the most important process in the educational institution, which is upbringing and learning. However, if a principal conducts observation merely because it is his/her duty, he/she cannot expect preschool teachers and assistant preschool teachers to see it as an incentive for better and more efficient work. Because it is precisely the monitoring that enables the principal to get in touch with teaching, discovering the preschool teacher's strong parts as well as weak ones, which the preschool teacher should develop a little further.

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