



Do Slovenian Preschool Teachers Have Sufficient Autonomy and what are Their Expectations?

Irena Janžekovič Žmauc^{1*}

¹Department of Preschool Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia.

Author's contribution

This whole work was carried out by the author IJZ.

Original Research Article

Received 17th March 2014
Accepted 14th April 2014
Published 28th April 2014

ABSTRACT

Aims: To investigate preschool teachers' opinions and expectations of their professional autonomy (choice of teaching methods and didactic manipulatives, planning activities for children) and the differences regarding their rank and years of work experience in Slovenia.

Study Design: This study was a quantitative study which used a questionnaire survey.

Place and Duration of Study: We sent questionnaires to employees in public kindergartens in Slovenia (Podravska and Central Slovenia regions) in November 2013.

Methodology: Participants were preschool teachers (N=312). A 34-item questionnaire was used to collect data. The respondents ranked their opinion on a 5-point Likert-type scale. To calibrate statistically significant differences among preschool teachers we applied χ^2 -test or Kullback 2 \hat{I} test and t test for independent samples. We used a descriptive and causal non-experimental method of empirical educational research.

Results: Preschool teachers' level of autonomy according to choice of teaching methods ($\chi^2=23.259, df=4, P=.000$) and didactic manipulatives ($2\hat{I}=33.246, df=6, P=.000$) was statistically significantly different with respect to their rank. Older preschool teachers (those with over 21 years of work experience) evaluated their autonomy in the choice of teaching methods ($t=-3.449; df=295,124; P=.001$) and didactic manipulatives ($t=-3.800; df=289,210; P=.000$) as being higher (full autonomy) than did their younger colleagues (those with up to 20 years of work experience). An approximate t test showed statistically

*Corresponding author: Email: irena.janze@gmail.com;

significant differences-younger preschool teachers evaluated their desire for autonomy more highly (i.e., they wanted more autonomy) than did older preschool teachers.

Conclusion: Experienced preschool teachers exhibited higher level of autonomy and wished to maintain it the current level in the future. Younger preschool teachers desired more autonomy. Their view of autonomy was correlated with their professional development.

Keywords: Autonomy; expectations of autonomy; preschool teachers; Slovenia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article we are interested in the autonomy of Slovenian preschool teachers. By preschool teacher autonomy, we have in mind what Little [1] and Benson [2] called »teacher autonomy«. Teacher autonomy has been defined as the freedom of teachers to decide on and select their own teaching methodologies, design their own tasks, and evaluate the outcomes themselves. Teachers have a right to decide on and take responsibility for the selection or designing of materials and strategies for their students and to cooperate in finding solutions to the pedagogical problems in schools.

Preschool education in Slovenia is part of the education system under the Ministry of Education. Most of the regulations apply to both preschool and other teachers, so our findings about teacher autonomy generally should be valid for preschool teachers in particular.

There have been teacher movements for schools and teacher autonomy throughout history. The pillars of the struggle for autonomy were mainly members of the Cultural Pedagogy (Diesterweg, Oestreich) [3]. In Slovenia there has never been a large-scale movement for autonomy of preschool teachers.

Before 1999 preschool teachers had little or no autonomy. Authors like Devjak et al. [4] explain that the National Institute of Education (Zavod za šolstvo RS) forwarded instructions to the headmasters, who then relayed them to the preschool teachers. Preschool teachers' work was not autonomous [4]. The change to a democratic political system in 1991 led to the introduction of more democratic models in early childhood education as well. In 1995 a White Paper (Bela knjiga) [5] was issued, followed by the Organisation and Financing of Education and Education Act (Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja) [6] and the Kindergarten Act (Zakon o vrtcih) [7] in 1996 and finally, in 1999, the curriculum for kindergartens (Kurikulum za vrtce) [8]. All of these documents allow for preschool teacher autonomy.

It is interesting that preschool teachers generally were not even asked about what they needed or would like in terms of professional autonomy. With the introduction of the curriculum for kindergartens [8] in 1999, state regulations began to require or at least allow autonomy for preschool teachers. With its requirement of greater professional autonomy for preschool teachers, the new curriculum increased sharply the teacher's role in the planning and implementation of preschool educational activities [9]. Four years later a partial evaluation of preschool teacher autonomy was carried out. In 2002 Kroflič et al. [10] found that preschool teachers had relatively highly evaluated their professional competence. Data indicated that preschool teachers had very few opportunities to make decisions about life in

kindergarten. Some authors such as Kroflič et al. [10] have estimated that non-democratic leadership style in kindergartens is one of the major obstacles to preschool teacher autonomy. They point out that preschool teacher autonomy in Slovenia is more or less limited to play rooms. This means that preschool teachers have the freedom to decide how to educate children, but not to make decisions about the work and life of the kindergarten as a whole.

Establishing the conditions for greater autonomy is the professional responsibility of kindergarten administration and staff [8]. Before, during, and after the introduction of autonomy, additional professional training for preschool teachers was organized. Preschool teachers have now been autonomous for 15 years, so we are interested in their views about their autonomy in certain areas of work and their expectations. Specifically, the motivation of this survey was to establish whether they want more or less autonomy. The significance of the study is finding if the current regulatory options of preschool teacher autonomy are consistent with the preschool teacher' opinion and what their expectations for the future are.

1.2 About Preschool Teacher Autonomy

Researchers [11] identify the importance of teacher autonomy. Autonomy leads to a sense of empowerment where workers can grow within their profession and have more responsibility. Real autonomy can be accomplished only in a supportive and nurturing organization [11]. Autonomy is important for employee motivation and is a source of professional satisfaction [12]. That is why preschool teacher autonomy is so highly valued. Referring to Deci and Ryan [13], autonomy has generally been *associated* with more intrinsic motivation, greater interest, more creativity, more cognitive flexibility, a more positive emotional tone, higher self-esteem, more trust and better physical and psychological health than has control [13].

Autonomy is similar to professionalism in terms of continuing professional development. Researchers [14,15,16] suggest that teachers pass through a number of developmental stages from beginner to expert practitioner. The most commonly cited model was developed by Fuller [17,18], who identified the stages as: care for self (primary survival as a teacher); care for the task (which focuses on actual performance) and care for impact (relating to positive influence on students). The continuing professional development of preschool teachers, as well as improvements in the conditions that affect their work (e.g., positive climate, regulations, etc.) can lead to increases in autonomy.

In what areas of their work are preschool teachers in Slovenia autonomous? They are free to decide on teaching strategies, content, and activities carried out in the kindergarten, as provided by the curriculum for kindergarten [8]. In public kindergartens in Slovenia, preschool teachers have the ability to select and implement activities for children, provided that they meet the written goals of early childhood education as stipulated in the national curriculum [8,19]. Preschool teachers have a choice of teaching strategies, resources, and content through which children can achieve these objectives [19]. Preschool teachers can also autonomously decide on the time and content of planning activities for children, and they have a choice of teaching methods (storytelling, demonstrations, etc.), learning formats (individual, group, pair), and teaching aids or manipulatives (cubes, posters, computers, etc.)

Preschool teachers have little doubt as to their professional autonomy, especially at the beginning of their careers, when they do not have much work experience [9]. The acquisition of work experience and achievement leads to preschool teachers' rank or professional titles,

which in turn results in pay raises. Promotion is governed by the Rules on the Promotion of Employees in Education Ranks [20]. The first article [20] sets forth a three-tiered structure through which teachers may progress from having the lowest professional rank (rank0) initially to becoming a »mentor« (rank1), then an »advisor« (rank2) and finally a »counselor« (rank3). Experience, work performance, and participation in professional development programs and various other activities play a key role in a teacher's upward promotion through the hierarchy.

With the exception of a few related studies [10,21] no major research on preschool teacher autonomy in Slovenia has been carried out. Related studies pointed out that preschool teacher autonomy in Slovenia is more or less limited to decision how to educate children [10] and after the curriculum reform the teachers felt that their level of autonomy is not changed or only slightly increased [21]. The author's motivation for this research is to obtain preschool teachers' opinion and expectations on autonomy because such research was not done before the reform which was implemented in 1999. In 1999 the new curriculum [8] was implemented from the top, introducing preschool teacher autonomy (preschool teachers were not asked for an opinion). The purpose of this study is also to investigate an opinion if Slovenian preschool teachers have sufficient autonomy and what their expectations are. We assumed that older or more experienced teachers would tend to have more knowledge and higher ranks, so we tried to determine whether there were significant differences between younger and older preschool teachers, as well as between preschool teachers with different ranks, regarding their views of and expectations about autonomy.

1.3 Research Questions

1. Are there any statistically significant differences among preschool teachers with different ranks in terms of level of autonomy in three key areas? These three areas are planning activities for children, choice of teaching methods, and choice of teaching aids or manipulatives.
2. Are there any statistically significant differences among preschool teachers with different ranks in terms of their rate of desire for autonomy in the three areas?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences among preschool teachers regarding their years of work experience and rate of autonomy in the three areas?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences among preschool teachers regarding their years of work experience and rate of desire for autonomy in the three areas?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sample and Research Design

The research sample represents a simple random sample from a hypothetical population. The sample of 312 preschool educators represents 6.76% of all preschool teachers in Slovenia. In November 2013, we sent out questionnaires to kindergartens and asked teachers to complete and return them.

We used the descriptive and causal non-experimental method of empirical educational research [22].

2.2 Participants

Participants were from public kindergartens in Slovenia (Podravska and Central Slovenia regions). Their participation was voluntary. Participants did not receive any compensation for their participation in this research. We have sent 650 questionnaires. 383 (59%) of preschool teachers completed the questionnaire. Due to some missing data, a final sample consisted of 312 preschool teachers was included for the statistical analyses. Almost all participants were women (there are only 39 male preschool teachers in all of Slovenia) [23]. 52% of participants had 21 or more years of work experience, 48% had less than 20. 27% had the lowest professional rank (rank0), 30% had received the mentor (rank1), and 43% had been promoted to adviser or counselor (rank2 or 3). There was a small percentage of counselors, so we merged them with advisers into one category.

2.3 Instrument

The research instrument that was used to gather data for this study was designed by the author herself, utilizing the literature [9,21]. The questionnaire was made up of 34 items. The first four items describe respondents' demographic characteristics, including: gender, work experience, rank, academic qualification. The second part included 15 items which describe respondents' opinions regarding their autonomy at work in different areas of preschool education. The third part included 15 items describing respondents' expectations regarding their autonomy in different areas of work. Due to space limitations, not all items can be presented in this article. Different areas of work (choice of teaching methods, choice of teaching aids or manipulatives, planning activities for children, etc.) were selected from the description of the tasks for preschool teachers [7,8,19]. In second part of questionnaire preschool teachers completed 15 questions regarding their opinion about autonomy at work in different areas (e.g. What is your opinion on choice of planning activities for children to achieve the objectives, What is your opinion on choice of teaching methods, What is your opinion on choice of teaching aids or manipulatives, What is your opinion on choice in determining the time of the implementation of the curriculum objectives, etc.). Each question was answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: I am not autonomous at all, 2: I am a little autonomous, 3: I am semi autonomous, 4: I am fairly autonomous, 5: I am completely autonomous). In the third part preschool teachers completed also 15 questions regarding their expectations about autonomy at work in different areas (e. g. What is your expectation on choice in planning activities for children to achieve the objectives, what is your expectation on choice of teaching methods, what is your expectation on choice of teaching aids or manipulatives, what is your expectation on choice in determining the time of the implementation of the curriculum objectives...). Each question was answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1: I do not want to be autonomous at all, 2: I want to be a little autonomous, 3: I want as much autonomy as I have it now, 4: I want to be more autonomous, 5: I want to be completely autonomous). The questionnaire was reviewed by two researchers. The questionnaire is sufficiently reliable on the basis of Cronbach's alpha coefficient (for preschool teachers' opinion about their autonomy is 0.781; for their expectations about their autonomy it is 0.741). The 5-point Likert-type scales are valid (48.072 % of the variance is explained with the first factor on the scale about the preschool teachers' opinion about autonomy and 42.019% of the variance is explained with the first factor on the scale about the preschool teachers' expectation of autonomy).

2.4 Procedures and Data Collection

We obtained permission to carry out this research from the headmasters of the kindergartens. No personal details such as participants' names were required. Preschool teachers were asked to respond to the different sections of the questionnaire by simply ticking the appropriate answer. The second part of the survey required the respondents to rank the variables on a scale of 1 ('I am not autonomous at all') to 5 ('I am completely autonomous'). The third part of survey asked the respondents to rank the variables from 1 ('I do not want to be autonomous at all') to 5 ('I want to be completely autonomous').

2.5 Data Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires was computer coded and processed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0, and several sets of statistical analysis were performed. We used statistical methods of descriptive statistics [22]: the mean (arithmetic mean) rate variability (standard deviation), methods of inferential statistics for research questions 1 and 2 (χ^2 -test or Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test (hypothesis of independence)). For research questions 3 and 4 we also used Levene's F-test of homogeneity of variances, t-test for independent samples (or analysis of covariance of independent variables) [24]. We used 95% confidence interval ($P = .05$).

2.6 Objectives

Our objectives were to identify the opinions of preschool teachers about their professional autonomy and whether they believe they are given sufficient autonomy in planning activities for children and in selecting teaching methods, aids or manipulatives. We also wished to determine whether there were differences between younger and older preschool teachers, and among different teachers with different professional ranks. What are their expectations of autonomy? Do they want more, the same, or less autonomy at work in the future than they have presently? The findings of Preschool teachers' opinions and expectations of autonomy and the differences between them depending on their rank and years of work experience will be a major scientific contribution to knowledge in the field of professional development of preschool teachers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Research Question 1

Table 1. Statistical differences among preschool teachers grouped according to their rank and rate of autonomy in the 3 key areas (χ^2 -test or Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test)

The three key areas of autonomy	N	χ^2	$2\hat{I}$	df	P
a)Planning activities for children	312	7.346	/	6	.290
b)Choice of teaching methods	312	23.259,	/	4	.000
c)Choice of teaching aids or manipulatives	312	/	33.246	6	.000

The sample included 312 (N=312) preschool teachers as presented in Table 1. There were 27% preschool teachers of the lowest rank (rank 0), 30% had received the rank1 (mentor), and 43% had been promoted to adviser or counselor. There was a small percentage of counselors, so we merged them with advisers into one category. Almost all preschool

teachers think they are completely autonomous or fairly autonomous, or semi autonomous at planning activities for children and in choice of teaching methods and aids or manipulatives. A smaller part of preschool teachers think they are a little autonomous and almost no preschool teacher think they are not autonomous at all. We were interested if there are statistical differences among preschool teachers according to their rank and rate of autonomy in the 3 key areas (Table 1). The independence hypothesis for case b) is: in the choice of teaching methods there are no statistically significant differences among preschool teachers in terms of their ranks and rates of autonomy. The value of the chi-square test of the independence hypothesis for case b) ($\chi^2=23.259, df=4, P=.000$) were statistically significant (Table 1). Preschool teachers' evaluation of their own autonomy in the selection of teaching methods showed a statistically significant difference with respect to their rank. Preschool teachers at the »adviser« or »counselor« levels rate their methodological autonomy higher than do »mentors« and preschool teachers of the lowest rank. Advisers and counselors are more likely to consider that they have full autonomy in this area. Preschool teachers' evaluations of their own autonomy in the choice of teaching aids also shows a statistically significant difference according to their rank ($2\hat{I}=33.246, df=6, P=.000$) (Table 1). Advisers and counselors are more likely than the other two groups to consider that they have full autonomy in the choice of teaching aids or manipulatives. In case a) there are no statistically significant differences among preschool teachers in planning activities for children (Table 1). State regulations [5,6,7,8] allow autonomy for all preschool teachers in the same way. Hmelak finds out that preschool teachers have little doubt to their professional autonomy, especially at the beginning of their careers [9]. From our results we can agree with Hmelak [9] and conclude that higher ranks are important for preschool teachers' opinions about complete autonomy. Higher ranks (counselor, adviser) mean more experience, work performance, and more participation in in-service training and various other activities for promotion through the ranking hierarchy. To be a more autonomous preschool teacher, it is important to have more knowledge, taking part in further in-service training and improving professional practice. Other conditions for complete autonomy are also important: like democratic leadership style in kindergartens [10], regulations allowing the autonomy [5,6,7,8] etc. Regarding their rank, preschool teachers were more or less content with their level of autonomy in three different areas. Differences among preschool teachers by their rank and rate of desire for autonomy are presented in Table 2.

3.2 Research Question 2

Table 2. Statistical differences among preschool teachers by their rank and rate of desire for autonomy in the three key areas (χ^2 -test or Kullback $2\hat{I}$ test)

The three key areas of autonomy	N	χ^2	$2\hat{I}$	df	P
d)Expectations of autonomy in planning activities	312	6.553	/	6	.364
e)Expectations of autonomy in choosing teaching methods	312	8.812	/	6	.184
f)Expectations of autonomy in selecting teaching aids or manipulatives	312	/	19.687	6	.003

The sample included 312 (N=312) preschool teachers as presented in Table 2. There were 27% preschool teachers of the lowest rank (rank 0), 30% had received the rank 1 (mentor), and 43% had been promoted to adviser or counselor. There was a small percentage of counselors, so we merged them with advisers into one category. Most of the preschool teachers wish the same level of autonomy as at present. The value of the chi-square test of

the independence hypothesis for case d) ($\chi^2=6.553$, $df=6$, $P=.364$) and case e) ($\chi^2=8.812$, $df=6$, $P=.184$) were not statistically significant (Table 2). There were a statistically significant differences among different preschool teachers' ranks regarding their rate of desire for autonomy in the selection of teaching aids or manipulatives ($2I=19.687$, $df=6$, $P=.003$) (Table 2). Preschool teachers of lowest rank are more likely to desire more autonomy in this area than advisers and counselors. In cases d) and e) there were no statistically significant differences among preschool teachers by their rank and rate of desire for autonomy (Table 2). Preschool teachers of the lowest rank were more likely than the other two groups to consider that they have pretty much autonomy (not full autonomy) in the choice of teaching aids or manipulatives. Quite a lot of preschool teachers felt they did not have complete autonomy in selecting teaching aids or manipulatives so they expressed a desire to want full autonomy. We were surprised that the same did not happen in case e) (Table 2). Preschool teachers of lowest rank wish more autonomy in selecting teaching aids or manipulatives. That could be connected with professional development and developmental stages from beginner to expert practitioner [14-16]. Regarding their rank, Slovenian preschool teachers had no great desires for more autonomy in planning activities or in choosing teaching methods.

3.3 Research Question 3

Table 3. Statistical differences among preschool teachers according to years of work experience (WE) and evaluation of autonomy in key areas (independent t-test)

The three key areas of autonomy	Years of work	N	F%	Mean.	Std. dev.	t	df	P
g) Planning activities for children	up to 20 years of WE	149	48	4.42	0.659	-1.578	310	.116
	more than 21 years of WE	163	52	4.54	0.650			
h) Choice of teaching methods	up to 20 years of WE	149	48	4.43	0.650	-3.449	295, 124	.001
	more than 21 years of WE	163	52	4.67	0.567			
i) Choice of teaching aids or manipulatives	up to 20 years of WE	149	48	4.24	0.811	-3.800	289, 210	.000
	more than 21 years of WE	163	52	4.56	0.676			

The calculation of arithmetic mean in cases h) and i) showed that, on average, among younger preschool teachers (those with up to 20 years of work experience) and older preschool teachers (those with more than 21 years of work experience), there were differences in how they rate their autonomy regarding choice of teaching methods and selection of aids or manipulatives (Table 3). Most of the preschool teachers think that they are completely autonomous or fairly autonomous. Mean answers for younger and older preschool teachers about opinion on autonomy in planning activities for children, choice of teaching methods and aids or manipulatives are between 4 and 5 (Table 3). That means they mostly think they have pretty much or complete autonomy. In all three cases g), h) and i) the mean is slightly higher by older preschool teachers than by younger ones (Table 3). Standard deviation in all three cases is around 0.6, only in case i) it is higher in younger preschool teachers (Table 3). They gave more diverse answers about their opinion on

autonomy. To determine whether the difference among preschool teachers according to years of work experience and evaluation of autonomy in three key areas was statistically significant, we used the two-tailed t-test for independent samples. Before that, we used Levene's test for equality of variances, which is a prerequisite for using the t-test. We found that the variances in the two samples differ significantly in case h) ($F=26.222$, $P=.000$) and in case i) ($F=4.340$, $P=.038$) (Table 3). That means that we could not use the t-test, so we instead used an alternative approximate method. It showed that the difference in case h) was statistically significant ($t=-3.449$; $df=295,124$; $P=.001$), as was the difference in case i) ($t=-3.800$; $df=289,210$; $P=.000$) (Table 3). We concluded that there are differences between the arithmetic means in elementary crowd and that, therefore, the older preschool teachers (those with more than 21 years of work experience) evaluated their autonomy in the choice of teaching methods and in the choice of teaching aids or manipulatives more highly (full autonomy) than did younger preschool teachers (those with up to 20 years of work experience). The t-test for independent samples in case g) shows no statistically significant difference among younger preschool teachers (those with up to 20 years of work experience) and older preschool teachers (those with more than 21 years of work experience) (Table 3). More older than younger preschool teachers have an opinion that they have full autonomy, although state regulations [5,6,7,8] allow autonomy for younger and older preschool teachers in the same way. From our results we can agree with Hmelak [9] that preschool teachers have little doubt to their professional autonomy, especially at the beginning of their careers.

3.4 Research Question 4

Table 4. Statistical differences among preschool teachers according to years of work experience and evaluation of desire for autonomy in key areas (independent t-test)

The three key areas of autonomy	Years of work	N	F%	Mean.	Std. dev.	t	df	P
j)Expectations of autonomy in planning activities	up to 20 years of WE	149	48	3.37	0.701	2.028	269,365	.044
	more than 21 years of WE	163	52	3.23	0.513			
k)Expectations of autonomy in the choice of teaching methods	up to 20 years of WE	149	48	3.32	0.640	2.377	263,993	.018
	more than 21 years of WE	163	52	3.17	0.453			
l)Expectations of autonomy in the selection of teaching aids or manipulatives	up to 20 years of WE	149	48	3.46	0.767	3.165	253,841	.002
	more than 21 years of WE	163	52	3.22	0.509			

As presented in Table 4 the calculation of arithmetic mean in case j), k) and l) shows that, on average, among younger preschool teachers (those with up to 20 years of work experience) and older preschool teachers (those with more than 21 years of work experience) there are differences in expectations of autonomy in the three key areas. In all three cases j), k) and l) the mean is slightly higher in younger preschool teacher than in older ones (Table 4). That

means younger preschool teachers wish a little more autonomy than older preschool teachers. Mean between 3 and 4 means that most of preschool teachers wish as much autonomy as they have now (3) or they want to be more autonomous (4). Standard deviation is higher in younger preschool teachers than older ones in all three cases (j k and l) as presented in Table 4. Younger preschool teachers gave more diverse answers about their expectations on autonomy. Most of younger preschool teachers wish for more autonomy, small part of them wish for less autonomy. We used the two-tailed t-test for independent samples. Levene's test for equality of variances indicates that the variances in the two samples differ significantly in cases j) ($F=19.689, P=.000$), k) ($F=26.222, P=.000$) and l) ($F=46.634, P=.000$). We used an approximate t test, the results of which showed that the differences in cases j) ($t=2.028; df =269,365; P= .044$), k) ($t=2.377; df=263,993; P=.018$), and l) ($t=3.165; df=253,841; P=.002$) were statistically significant (Table 4). We concluded that there are differences between the arithmetic means in elementary crowd and that, therefore, younger preschool teachers (those with up to 20 years of work experience) evaluated their desire for autonomy more highly (i.e., they want more autonomy) than did the older preschool teachers (those with more than 21 years of work experience). Younger preschool teachers wish more autonomy in planning activities for children, in the choice of teaching methods and aids or manipulatives. That could be connected with professional development and developmental stages from beginner to expert practitioner [14-16]. Regarding years of work experience Slovenian younger preschool teachers have more desire for more autonomy in planning activities for children in choosing teaching methods, aids or manipulatives. Usually preschool teachers beginners are younger and of the lowest rank. Our finding from Table 2 that preschool teachers of lowest rank wish more autonomy in selecting teaching aids or manipulative is consistent with finding from Table 4 that younger preschool teachers wish more autonomy. State regulations [5,6,7,8] allow autonomy for younger and older preschool teachers in the same way. We have found out that Slovenian younger preschool teachers wish for more autonomy, older preschool teachers want as much autonomy as they have it now. It would be interesting to evaluate the expectations of autonomy of the younger preschool teachers in 10 to 20 years' time, when they are older expert practitioners. Will there be a higher satisfaction level of their autonomy or will they want for more? We assume that the results will be the same as now because autonomy is similar to professionalism in terms of continuous professional development.

4. CONCLUSION

No major research on preschool teacher autonomy in Slovenia has been carried out before, with the exception of a few related studies [10,21]. The author's motivation was to find out whether preschool teachers think they have sufficient autonomy and whether they want more or less autonomy. We assumed that older or more experienced teachers would tend to have more knowledge and higher ranks, so we tried to determine whether there were significant differences between younger and older preschool teachers, as well as between preschool teachers of different ranks, regarding their views of and expectations about autonomy. The significance of the study was in the finding provided by survey data, i.e. current regulatory options of preschool teacher autonomy are consistent with the preschool teachers' opinions.

Preschool teachers with their rank (rank 2 or 3) adviser or counselor rate their autonomy in the selection of teaching methods more highly than do mentors and those with lowest rank. Advisers and counselors were more likely to consider themselves as having full methodological autonomy. Advisers and counselors were also more likely to see themselves as fully autonomous in the selection of teaching aids or manipulatives. Preschool teachers of

the lowest rank were more likely to desire more autonomy in this area than advisers and counselors.

The older preschool teachers (those with more than 21 years of work experience) evaluated their autonomy in both of the aforementioned areas more highly (full autonomy) than did younger preschool teachers (those with up to 20 years of work experience). Therefore it is logical that younger preschool teachers would desire more autonomy. They evaluated their desire for autonomy more highly (i.e., they want more autonomy) than did the older preschool teachers. We believe that preschool teachers' views with respect to autonomy are associated with their stage of professional development from beginner to expert practitioner [14,15,16] and that they tend to doubt their autonomy somewhat at the beginning of their careers [9]. We believe that becoming more autonomous is a process that preschool teachers have to progress through gradually.

In Slovenia, teacher autonomy is a relatively new idea, so teachers are still at the beginning of the long journey from learning to implementation. Experienced teachers are satisfied with their level of autonomy and want to maintain it in the future. Younger teachers desire more autonomy, which is most likely due to their level of professional development. We believe it is less likely that the desire for more autonomy is related to desire for changes in the system, because regulations [5,6,8] already allow preschool teachers the freedom to choose their own teaching methods and select their own teaching aids or manipulatives, as well as autonomy in planning activities in accordance with the curriculum. We propose to keep legislation on preschool teacher autonomy in Slovenia the same in the future, and to place a greater emphasis on continuing professional training combined with learning from best practices, especially for younger preschool teachers. The next research step is to explore the role of the teacher's decision-making at the workplace as a potential factor in determining the children's decision-making. We are pleased that preschool teachers think they have sufficient autonomy and that younger preschool teachers wish for more autonomy. That means they will have to progress in terms of continual professional development.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Not applicable. All ethical considerations for using human participants were observed during data collection. The survey was conducted in kindergartens where there was Head approval.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Little D. Learning as dialogue the dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*. 1995;23(2):175-81.
2. Benson P. Autonomy as a learners' and teachers' right. In: Sinclair B, McGrath I, Lamb T, editors. *Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy: Future directions*. London: Longman. 2000,111-17.
3. Medveš Z. The head teacher and self-evaluation. *Modern Pedagogy*. 2002;53(1):28–46. Slovenian language.

4. Devjak T, Skubic D, Polak A, Kolšek V. Early childhood education: From the old to the new. Ljubljana: Faculty; 2012. Slovenian language.
5. The White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia. (Krek J, editor). Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sports; 1995. Slovenian language.
6. Law on the Organization and Financing of Education / ZOFVI / Ur.IRS, No. 12/1996, 14/2003-UPB1, 55/2003-UPB2, 115/2003-UPB3, 98/2005- OCT4, 16/2007-UPB5 , 40/2012-ZUJF; 1996. Slovenian language.
7. Kindergarten Act. Hours. I. RS, No. 100/2005, 62/2010-ZUPJS. Slovenian language.
8. Kindergarten curriculum. Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sport, Office of the Republic of Slovenia šolstvoLjubljana: Ministry of Education in Sport; 1999. Slovenian language.
9. Hmelak M. Professional development of teachers of preschool children. Doctoral dissertation. Maribor: Faculty of Arts; 2012. Slovenian language.
10. Kroflič B, Batistič Zorec M, Cemič A, Plestenjak M, Turnšek N, Vilič I. The views of teachers and educators of preschool children to kindergarten curriculum for the qualification and their deployment changes. Ljubljana: Faculty; 2002. Slovenian language.
11. Dondero GM. Organizational climate and teacher autonomy: Implications for educational reform. *International Journal of Educational Management*. 1997;11(5):218-21.
12. Van Gelderen M. Autonomy as the guiding aim of entrepreneurship education. *Education+Training*. 2010;52(8):710–21.
13. Deci EL, Ryan RM. The support of autonomy and the control of behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1987;53(6):1024–37.
14. Bolam R. Emerging policy trends: Some implications for continuing professional development. *Journal of In-service Education*. 2000;26(2):267-80.
15. Harland J, Kinder K. Teachers' continuing professional development: Framing a model of outcomes. *British Journal of In-service Education*. 1997;23(1):71–84.
16. Lee M. The development of In-service education and training as seen through the pages of the *British Journal of In-service education*. *British Journal of In-service Education*. 1997;23(1):9–22.
17. Fuller FF. Concerns of teachers: A developmental characterization. *American Educational Research Journal*. 1969;6:207–26.
18. Fuller FF, Brown OH. *Becoming a teacher*. In: Ryan K, editor. *Teacher Education (74th Yearbook of the National Society of Education)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1995.
19. Hocevar A, Smith M. Šebart curriculum for kindergartens vs. Pedagogical Approach Reggio Emilia: the alleged differences and similarities. In: Devjak T, editor. *Pedagogical concept Emilia and Reggio curriculum for kindergarten: the similarity in diversity*. Ljubljana: Faculty; 2010. Slovenian language.
20. Rules on promotion of employees in education in titles; 2002. Accessed 28 December 2013. Available: <http://www.uradnolist.si/1/objava.jsp?urlid=200254&stevilka=2686>. Slovenian language.
21. Marentič Požarnik B, Kalin J, Šteh B, Valenčič Zuljan M. Teachers in the renovation - their professional autonomy and accountability. Ljubljana: Scientific Institute Faculty of Arts; 2005. Slovenian language.

22. Kožuh B. Statistical methods in educational research. Ljubljana Faculty of Arts; 2011. Slovenian language.
23. Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia; 2013. Accessed 26 February 2014. Available: http://www.stat.si/novica_prikazi.aspx?id=4578. Slovenian language.
24. Sagadin J. Topics in research methodology of teaching, 2. Rebuilt and enlarged edition. Ljubljana: Institute of Education and Sport; 1993. Slovenian language.

© 2014 Žmauc; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:

The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history.php?iid=488&id=21&aid=4421>