

Defining dimensions of the concept “good/quality kindergarten teacher”

Rozalina Engels-Kritidis

Abstract: Defining dimensions of the concept “good/quality kindergarten teacher”: For the purpose of assessing of quality of preschool education, this publication presents a methodology aimed at researching the concept of the “good/quality kindergarten teacher” as part of a wider research in the field.

Key words: good teacher; quality kindergarten teacher; quality in preschool education; personal qualities; specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades now we have been witnessing fundamental changes in society's relationship, as well as the specific expectations and responsibilities bestowed to educational institutions the world over. Fortunately, this is happening mostly on the basis of “approaching the modern human as a multifaceted, complex and autonomous figure, taking the initiative and the responsibility for its own development (Rasheva-Merdzhanova 2012: 14 [9]). In the past, pupils were seen as passive receptors of knowledge and influence, while nowadays the focus is on the active role of the pupil in the process of interaction and communication. Paradigms oriented towards personal training are, logically, unlocking new expectations from pedagogues which, consecutively, lead towards the need for building new competencies in both future and active teachers. Although the perception of a good teacher includes a core of definite and, so to speak, eternal connotations, the influence of the societal level of development and especially the dynamic way of modern life is unavoidable. Osad'an & Hanna (2015) [6] aptly define that “the 21st century generation must learn how to deal effectively in a world where information travels near the speed of light, facts can be found within seconds, and vast communities form every day on the Internet. No longer are reading, writing, and arithmetic enough to succeed in the world and in a career”. On the other hand, it is logical that the role of teachers considered as the “second parents” is continuously expanding, mainly because of the fact that outside the home, these adults are the ones responsible for teaching the kids good manners while broadening their intellectual capacity at the same time (Osad'an & Burrage, 2013: 498 [5]).

The question of what constitutes effective teaching has been researched for decades. According to Hollins (2011: 395) [2], “teaching is a complex and multidimensional process that requires deep knowledge and understanding in a wide range of areas and the ability to synthesize, integrate, and apply this knowledge in different situations, under varying conditions, and with a wide diversity of groups and individuals. In quality teaching, this knowledge is applied in ways that provide equitable access and opportunities that build upon and extend what learners already know in facilitating the ability to acquire”.

As Wang et al (2011: 336) [8] claims that although it is popularly believed that quality teaching is a major factor in affecting student performance and that teacher education should be held accountable for developing quality teachers, there appears to be a lack of conceptual clarity about what constitutes quality teaching and how particular notions of quality teaching are related to specific teacher learning opportunities. It is generally assumed that quality teaching plays a major, if not the most important, role in shaping students' academic performances (Wang et al 2011: 331) [8]. In their study, Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) [7] examined the measurable impact that teachers have on student achievement and concluded that as far as this connection could be caught in research, there definitely is such.

The effect of the level of teachers' professional skills, as well as their personal qualities, on the quality of the educational process has been discussed in several studies.

Wang et al (2011: 331) [8] claims that “quality teaching from a cognitive resource perspective is related to the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions teachers bring into the profession”. Quality teaching is linked to one’s competence as demonstrated on academic and professional tests, and such competence is presumably one of the central predictors for how effective a teacher becomes. Quality teaching is as well associated with the credentials one holds for teaching. This notion surfaces especially during discussions of whether all students have been taught by teachers who hold licenses in the fields that they are teaching.

Bearing in mind the importance of interactions during the initial seven years of a child’s life, as well as the wide gamut of qualification requirements for preschool pedagogues throughout the world (see Oberhuermer, Schreyer & Neuman 2010) [4], the understanding of the essence of the concept of “good kindergarten teacher” becomes much more interesting and worthy of qualitative analysis. Obviously, outlining the characteristics of the “good children’s teacher” is invariably tied to the issue of the quality of preschool education as a whole. La Paro et al (2012) [3] claims that the study of *quality* in early childhood education is increasingly relevant because research has continued to demonstrate consistent associations between various aspects of classroom quality and improved social and academic outcomes for young children. According to La Paro et al, some researchers have conceptualized early childhood education quality in terms of global quality with two primary components—“structural” and “process” quality. Examples of indicators of structural quality include classroom materials, curriculum, teacher education, and teacher-child ratio. These indicators are often the regulated aspects of classrooms and programs. Indicators of process quality focus on the more dynamic aspects of early childhood education, including human interactions occurring in the classrooms such as teacher-child and peer-to-peer interactions. Structural quality and process quality, each a component of global quality, provide unique and essential information to understanding early childhood classrooms. La Paro et al summarize that the quality continues to be an amorphous term with varying definitions within early childhood education. La Paro et al also draw the attention towards the fact that characteristics of teachers and the relationships between teachers and children have been related to quality in the literature. The field continues to move toward examining the central role of the teacher in classroom quality, and individual teacher characteristics are increasingly being studied as possible predictors of classroom effectiveness. La Paro et al underline as well that findings from recent studies focused on teacher-child interactions suggest that these relationships play a critical role in children’s development.

The question of outlining the essence of the quality of preschool education is directly connected to researching and establishing methodologies for its measurement and assessment. This publication describes the author’s methodology, aimed at defining dimensions of the concept “good/quality kindergarten teacher” in students of the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” preparing for preschool and primary school teachers.

METHODOLOGY FOR DETERMINING THE CONCEPT OF “GOOD/QUALITY KINDERGARTEN TEACHER”

Research was carried out on the opinions of seventy two (72) students of the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, enrolled in the “Primary and Preschool Education” specialty, which is a 4-year Bachelor’s degree program, awarding graduates with the qualifications for working as preschool teachers (with children aged 2-7 years old) or primary school teachers (with children aged 7-11 years old). Half of the participating students (36) were approached at the beginning of their university education; the other half (36) participated during the middle of their last year. The main method used for research is analysis of the students’ individual written essays on the subject “My idea of a good/quality kindergarten teacher”. For the first-year students,

assessment on the quality of the essays formed 50% of their overall assessment for the "Introduction to the Specialty" class, while the graduate students' essays formed part of their assessment on the "Current Pedagogical Practice" class, which is part of their seventh semester curriculum. In other words, the students were motivated to give their best in writing the essays. The first-year students' essays were collected during October 2013, while the graduate year essays were collected during January 2015. All students provided informed consent for the use of their essays in analysis; however, in order to avoid bias, the students were not informed of the specifics of the research procedure. Although it should be clear that the research presented here does not aim for representativeness, it should nevertheless outline some important tendencies in defining the field of the issues under research.

The collected essays were subjected to qualitative analysis aimed at distribution of the contained opinions regarding the essence of the notion of "good/quality kindergarten teacher" into an unlimited number of semantic categories, provisionally divided into two main groups:

- General personal qualities: mainly qualities, but also some skills, attitudes, etc. which are mainly inherent qualities of the person as a whole (see Table 1);
- Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. (see Table 2).

In parallel to the qualitative analysis, the quantity of repeating categories was determined while adhering to the rule that each separate category would be accounted for only once for each essay, even in such rare cases when the category is mentioned multiple times or the same skill, quality, etc. is described in different wording. The analysis was performed by the author; all included qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. were defined as separate categories concurrently with the essays' assessment and on the basis of the opinions contained therein. The author has not added any additional categories and has tried to the best of her ability to objectively unite similar semantic fields under one category. In other words, the categories shown in Table 1 and Table 2 do not include all possible qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. that make up the notion of a "good children's teacher", but rather represent their gamut in the way it was defined in the essays of the participating students. The selection of categories is open to expansion with new ones in the future.

Table 1: General personal qualities

Responsible	A hero	Modest	Radiant
Attentive	Meticulous, striving for perfection	Astute	Impartial
Kind, smiling, cheerful, friendly	Organized	Principled	Encouraging
With broad general knowledge, erudite	Courageous	Strong in spirit	Incentivizing
Flexible	Loves children	Self-critical	Well-meaning
A friend and confidant	Consistent	Self-respecting	Discerning
Caring	Highly intelligent	Enduring	Active
Just	Dependable	Open-minded	Approachable
Optimist; positive	Honest	A free thinker	Tolerant
Selfless	Creative, imaginative	Advisor	Is able to self-assess adequately
With a sense of humour	Confident	Purposeful	Young
Interesting	With a large heart	Up with the times	Discreet; tactful
Patient	Balanced and calm	Convincing	Knows how to forgive
With high moral values	A good person	A good public speaker	
Communicative, sociable	Conscientious	Observant	
	Tender	Presentable and well-dressed	

Table 2: Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc.

<p>A factor in the child's development; a major influence in children's lives Proud of his/her profession Has won children's love Familiar with each child's potential Experienced, good child psychologist Has a solid professional theoretical basis Has a good rhythm of teaching Loves his/her job; has a positive attitude towards his/her work Has a university degree in preschool education Keeps children under supervision/control Plans ahead adequately Creates a welcoming material environment for children Explains things in terms understandable by children Progressive, innovative A guide and mentor An inspiration (inspires children towards knowledge) Leads the child forward, towards development Develops the child's inquisitiveness Develops the child's creativeness Follows appropriate individual approaches Continuously improves and self-improves his/her professional qualifications Hands out punishment, but in a just way Controls his/her negative emotions A role-model Title Calling Uses games and play in his/her methodology Creates a positive emotional environment Keeps a little piece of his/her childhood Educates in manners as well as knowledge Feels joy for the children's achievements Knows how to behave and speak with the children; has the correct approach towards children Earns the children's respect Is like a parent Supportive, ready to help the children Establishes discipline Understands the children, is empathetic Stern, only when required Stern, but fair</p>	<p>Uses modern information and computer technologies Instills critical thinking in children Explains in a fun way Interacts instead of simply influencing Knows how to stimulate activity in the children Manager of the children's group (management skills) Knows how to predispose towards sharing Never displays any physical aggression Uses various techniques and methods Does not play "favourites" and allows no prejudice Displays shrewdness when needed Seeks collaboration with parents Displays intercultural competence in pedagogy Works well with colleagues and staff Distributes his/her time equally among the children Charismatic Artistic Makes good use of non-verbal communication Always explains <i>why</i> Has musical skills Has fine art skills Physically active, has physical culture Uses illustrative methods and tools Focuses on insight and understanding instead of remembrance only; develops children's thinking Sets realistic goals Entertainer Presents children with several different viewpoints on a specific issue Strikes a balance between development of personal qualities and skills related to modern technology Ensures feedback Discerns each child's talent(s) Is efficient in practicing his/her profession Is open to learning from children Provides clear and precise instructions Ensures empirical experience acquisition Ensures learning through emotional experience Organizes pedagogical interaction in accordance with the applicable regulations Does not raise his/her voice</p>
---	--

After defining 136 categories on the basis of the students' essays (see 60 General personal qualities in Table 1 and 76 Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. in Table 2), the results were processed using Microsoft Excel 2010; the aim was to show the predominant categories in each group, as well as some percentage comparisons. Additional statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 19 to establish some key differences between the opinions of each group of students.

This publication will not go into detail regarding the differences in the essence of ideas such as personal qualities, skills, attitudes, etc., but will use the aforementioned provisional grouping to facilitate the display of the results. It is however important to note the difficulty in provisionally grouping the categories into general personal qualities and specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. It was especially difficult to process the second group, which is comprised of more varied notions (professional qualities, skills, relationships, attitudes, comparisons, etc.). On the other hand, some of the categories assigned to the second group (e.g. Artistic, Does not raise his/her voice; Progressive, innovative, etc.) could essentially be defined as general personal qualities; however, due to the context of their usage in the essays, it was considered that they relate mostly to qualities or skills that are displayed during the practice of the teacher's profession, and

were therefore included in the specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. group.

When specifying the modern functions of a teacher, Rasheva-Merdzhanova (2012) [9] pays special attention to the role of the teacher as a partner, advisor, entertainer, mentor, role model, friend, artist, and diplomat – all of them characteristics which were mentioned in students' essays as being of vital importance for the teacher's profession in today's world. It is noteworthy that, in some form or other, the students' essays touch upon Stronge, Ward and Grant's (2011: 340) [7] "Teacher Effectiveness Dimensions", which have been defined by making a review of a large number of publications connected with the topic of the teachers' effectiveness, among which Instructional delivery focused on Instructional differentiation, Instructional clarity, Instructional complexity; Use of technology; Feedback; Classroom management, etc., as well as some personal qualities like Caring, positive relationships with students; Fairness and respect; Enthusiasm, etc. All of the above evidences a proper orientation of students, even the first-year ones, with regard to the essence of quality education, including preschool education.

CONCLUSION

The personality and the professional skills of teachers undoubtedly form the basis for quality education; this is especially true for preschool pedagogues.

In the part of the author's research presented herein, the described methodology was used to survey the opinion of university students, but it could also be applied to teachers, preschool education experts, etc. On the other hand, the list of 136 categories presented in this publication is being used by the author as the basis of creating a questionnaire, which is to be used as a tool for objective and detailed assessment of the quality of work of in-service kindergarten teachers.

Some other fields for future analyses have been marked here, but some additional perspectives can be mentioned in relation to research already underway by the author. Statistically-important percentage differences of mentions of each category by graduate students as compared to first-year ones have already been researched and commented in Engels-Kritidis 2015 [1]. Future analysis of the differences of opinion on the "good/quality kindergarten teacher" between male and female students, as well as between Bulgarian and foreign students of the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" would be both interesting and would present wider horizon of the dimension of the notion about "good/quality kindergarten teacher". Useful research could also be conducted on the specifics of the viewpoints of students with special educational needs, as well as some in-depth comparative analyses on the opinions of the students from this publication's research as compared to similar students from universities in other countries. A series of upcoming publications by the author will present and detail these aspects.

The profile of the ideal kindergarten teacher, as defined by the students, could be said to highlight the need for filling some blanks in study plans and curriculums; however, it also demonstrates a modern viewpoint on the personal qualities and professional skills of the preschool pedagogue that is in line with modern educational tendencies worldwide. This can also be taken as a positive assessment of the preparation of kindergarten teachers in the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

REFERENCES

[1] Engels-Kritidis, R. The concept of "good/quality kindergarten teacher"– comparative points of view of first-year university students in preschool and primary school pedagogy speciality versus graduates. *Journal of Preschool and Elementary School Education*, 1/2015 (7). Special Issue on topic: "The quality of elementary school education: teachers' qualifications and competences" (in press)

[2] Hollins, E. R. Teacher Preparation For Quality Teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education* 2011 62(4), pp. 395-407.

[3] La Paro, K. M., J.K. Lower, A.C. Thomason, V.L. Kintner-Duffy and D.J. Cassidy. Examining the Definition and Measurement of Quality in Early Childhood Education: A Review of Studies Using the ECERS-R from 2003 to 2010. *Early Child Research and Practice*, Volume 14 number 1, 2012, on-line access: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ975649.pdf> (retrieved on 12th July 2015)

[4] Oberhuemer, P., Schreyer, I. & Neuman, M.J. *Professionals in early education and care systems – European profiles and perspectives*. Opladen & Farmington Hills, MI: Barbara Budrich, 2010

[5] Osad'an, R. & I.A. Burrage. Gender bias in primary education: a theoretical analysis. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences*, Volume 8(4), pp. 497-503.

[6] Osad'an, R & R. Hanna. 21st Century Students in a Globalized Society, *FINE Journal*, Volume 2/2015 (in print)

[7] Stronge, J. H., T. J. Ward and L.W. Grant. What Makes Good Teachers Good? A Cross-Case Analysis of the Connection Between Teacher Effectiveness and Student Achievement. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 2011, 62(4), pp. 339-355

[8] Wang J., E. Lin, E. Spalding, C. L. Klecka and S. J. Odell. Quality Teaching and Teacher Education: A Kaleidoscope of Notions. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 2011, 62(4), pp. 331-338

[9] Рашева-Мерджанова, Я. Предизвикателството „трансформация“ пред професията „учител“ – в контекста на социалното взаимодействие. Сборник с доклади от II есенен научно-образователен форум „Съвременни предизвикателства пред учителската професия“, 2012, стр. 11-22

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Assoc. Prof. Rozalina Engels-Kritidis, PhD, Preschool and Media Education Department, Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education, Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski”, e-mail: rozalinae@yahoo.com