

Social Professionalism in Recognizing and Inducing Inclusion

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Abstract: The professional competencies of teachers, educators, and pedagogues play a significant role in contemporary society which upholds the principles of inclusive policy. The foundation of social professionalism lies in the synthesis of various components: psychological, pedagogical, methodological, communicative, and informational. The European concept of understanding educational professionals today is based on a renewed perspective of competence and a high level of professionalism. Current global educational trends are oriented towards fostering an inclusive environment in education, as the primary goal of 21st-century education is to build a new society—one in which all individuals are equal and share the same rights, including the right to education.

This paper theoretically explores the key elements necessary for inducing an inclusive environment. It examines pedagogical strategies and their influence on specific components of quality, with the aim of developing social professionalism.

Keywords: social competencies, professionalism, competencies, inclusive society, European concept of education

INTRODUCTION

A wide range of factors contribute to a child's developmental potential, each of them denoting different stages of development. Following the initial and most intensive influence on personality development, the educator soon emerges as the "significant other" in the child's upbringing. Given that children spend a considerable and meaningful portion of their early years with educators and teachers in preschool institutions and schools, the role of the educator in shaping developmental characteristics is irreplaceable. Under the educator's influence, within an environment adapted to the child's age and functional capabilities, optimal conditions are created for stimulating the child's developmental potential.

Through their professional competence, humanistic orientation, and sensitivity to the needs of children, educators and teachers significantly influence the development of the child's competencies. A pleasant and stimulating atmosphere in the preschool environment, along with diverse forms of interaction between the child, the educator, and peers, has a direct impact on all aspects and potentials of the child's psychophysical characteristics. An affective bond is formed between the educator and the child—one that encourages, guides, and shapes the child's

personality, while also influencing other forms of interaction and relationships (Stojanović, 2010).

The philosophy of inclusion is founded on the idea of individual differences among children—their abilities, capacities, and skills. Inclusive education begins with recognizing these differences and integrating each child as a whole and unique individual

There are numerous reasons supporting the philosophy of inclusive education. Inclusion entails both structural changes and adaptations within the regular educational system, as well as a broader shift in societal attitudes, in order to ensure that quality education is accessible to children who are marginalized due to poverty, language, religious affiliation, or disability. The main reasons for adopting an inclusive educational philosophy lie in the principles of human rights and the universal right to education—principles that form the foundation of key international documents, many of which have been ratified by our country. These include: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the World Education Forum's Education for All and its Framework for Action, the National Action Plan for Children – Council for the Rights of the Child, the Law on the Prevention of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities, among others.

SOCIAL PROFESSIONALISM IN CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CLIMATE

There are numerous definitions of the concept of competence. The term itself—competence (from the Latin *competere*)—is associated with several meanings: 1) to be appropriate; to strive toward something; jurisdiction, scope of authority, authorization of an institution or individual, relevance; 2) a domain in which an individual possesses knowledge and experience; 3) entitlements or attributes that belong to someone (Klaić, 1978). In this paper, we rely on a comprehensive definition that integrates key characteristics relevant to the topic. "Competence is a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and habits that enable an individual to act actively and effectively in a specific situation or professional context. It implies having the necessary abilities, authority, skill, and knowledge" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1989). According to the Tuning Project (2007), competencies are defined as a combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, as well as ethical values.

The profession of educators and teachers plays a crucial role in the education and upbringing of children and young people, which continuously raises the question: what are the key competencies required in the training of educators, and how should the entire educational system support the implementation of high-quality teacher education?

In the context of defining educator and teacher competencies, it is crucial to distinguish those that are fundamental and indispensable, bearing in mind that they can range from very broad and general to highly specific and professional. According to the authors Spaić, Kukoč, and Bašić (2001), three dimensions of teacher competence can be distinguished:

- **Subject-matter competence** – knowledge related to a specific academic field;

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- **Pedagogical-didactic-methodological competence** – encompasses the knowledge and skills required to effectively mediate and communicate scientific content in teaching specific subjects;
 - **Psychological competence** – personal characteristics and traits of the teacher.

According to these authors, professional competence includes: a level of general knowledge; the ability to plan; the ability to carry out tasks; participation in projects; evaluation and self-evaluation; as well as continuous professional development.

The level of general knowledge includes three categories: receptive knowledge (being familiar with: to know, to be aware, to recognize, to become conscious of); reproductive knowledge (to know: to have knowledge and abilities, to be prepared); and productive knowledge (to apply: to be capable of using, to be ready, to be able to apply what one knows).

Certain dimensions of teacher competencies, such as professional and pedagogical domains, may overlap within the field of inclusive education competencies and the creation of a stimulating inclusive climate. This also encompasses working with highly gifted children, in which both convergent and divergent forms of thinking and production are particularly prominent.

The pedagogical-didactic-methodological competence of educators and teachers includes: knowledge and application of pedagogical-methodological theory and practice; the ability to instruct and monitor learning; proficiency in the field; familiarity with and adherence to school procedures and regulations; designing instructional content (planning, preparation, and programming for teaching); identifying and resolving educational challenges; understanding social and other circumstances that may influence a student's expression and behavior; effective communication with parents; and adapting and involving parents in the educational process.

This type of competence also includes skills related to work beyond the immediate group, where ability and knowledge are equally demonstrated. In planning, one must be aware of their various roles: as an animator, lecturer, collaborator, innovator, initiator, advisor, expert, source of knowledge, as well as a listener and observer. In short, there must be a clear awareness of one's responsibility.

Work competence includes the following: collaboration skills, dedication to the task, teamwork, a sense of responsibility, quality of work, language proficiency, and computer literacy. Work competencies also include practical knowledge such as conscientiousness (taking responsibility), optimism — an intrinsic motivation to work, perseverance in achieving goals regardless of outcomes, initiative, development and cultivation of proper oral and written expression, general communication, and linguistic literacy.

Competence related to general communication and linguistic literacy may also overlap with other dimensions of competence. Some authors in the literature consider it highly significant, even treating it as an independent dimension of competence.

There are several other classifications of competencies for educators and teachers that we have found significant for this study. One of the classifications most frequently mentioned in German pedagogical literature divides competencies into four dimensions: professional-subject competence, pedagogical competence, organizational competence, and communicative-reflective competence. Similarities can be observed across these competency domains, which suggests that nearly all authors discussing educator competencies refer to comparable dimensions. The differences lie primarily in the terminology used to describe these dimensions or in the way certain competency areas are grouped.

Pedagogical and psychological knowledge represent a crucial component in the work of educators. They are expected to possess fundamental knowledge of general pedagogy, as well as knowledge in general and developmental psychology and educational psychology. Globally, there is a growing emphasis on familiarity with the content, tasks, and methods within the field of special education, as educators need to be qualified to select appropriate approaches when working with children facing developmental disabilities. Educators and teachers should also be acquainted with alternative pedagogical ideas and approaches. It is essential that they adapt their work to the individual differences of children, which undoubtedly stems from their professionalism.

In addition to a classical understanding of teaching methods, approaches, and strategies, the educator or teacher must, in the course of their instructional practice:

- be familiar with appropriate methods for working with mixed-ability groups;
- be prepared and willing to engage in teamwork;
- be acquainted with strategies for maintaining students' motivation to learn;
- be capable of organizing an optimal and motivational learning and teaching environment;
- be skilled in organizing project-based learning;
- be acquainted with, and able to apply, methods of interactive, cooperative, and autonomous learning within the educational process;
- be able to implement and use modern information technologies;
- and be capable of setting clear boundaries for discipline—without resorting to coercion.

The competencies of preschool and primary school educators can significantly influence children's development, particularly in the following areas:

self-esteem, motivation, respect for diversity, integrity, creative curiosity, and readiness for group collaboration.

Understanding fundamental concepts and values, developing skills, and acquiring the necessary competencies in the field of early childhood and primary education are essential prerequisites for high-quality professional practice and represent a vital need of contemporary society.

Several segments of professionalism could be further developed and improved:

– **Reliability** – To be someone others can count on, ensuring that any agreement or task is fulfilled with quality and delivered on time.

1. – **Competence** – To be the right person for the job, so that others do not need to look elsewhere for the required expertise.
2. – **Punctuality** – A professional is characterized by the timely and high-quality completion of assigned tasks.
3. – **Respect** – Respect your own abilities and also recognize your limitations. Treat yourself kindly, with due respect and compassion. Treat everyone else the same. As one anonymous author said: "Treat others not according to their shortcomings, but in accordance with your own values and virtues."
4. – **Continuous Professional Improvement** – Be willing and open to continuously enhancing your knowledge. Learn from your own mistakes.
5. – **Positivity** – Think proactively, focusing on solutions. Don't get caught up in searching for blame or making excuses. Draw conclusions and move on. Positive thinking empowers us, and in that way, we will find a solution to every problem.
6. – **Supporting others** – If you see that someone wants to learn from you, support them in that effort. Professionalism is learned and continually developed. There is no point in criticizing or keeping it to yourself. The more people act professionally, the easier work and life become. Support others on their path, be a role model and a mentor, and you too will be touched by the positive energy that comes from sharing good things.
7. – **Focus** – Stay focused on what you are doing, that is, concentrate on your priorities. Give proper attention to the tasks that must be completed. Sometimes, this requires us to be flexible with our schedules. In doing so, we help ensure that our personal life does not interfere with work, and vice versa.
8. – **Active Listening** – People appreciate not only being heard, but also being understood. Engage actively in conversations. Strive to find out what people truly need. Be someone they can trust. In doing so, you build a sense of community. These are the people you'll most likely be able to rely on yourself, and they will turn to you as well. It is both a personal and professional opportunity.

By acting professionally, you build trust among people; your environment can rely on you and respect you, thereby also enhancing your competence in their eyes.

SOCIAL PROFESSIONALISM AS A FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL IN THE WORK OF EDUCATIONAL WORKERS

Regarding inclusive education, Ilić (2009) emphasizes the inevitability of professional competence for those implementing an inclusive program. He discusses competencies he terms professional, but under this dimension of competence, he includes a broader range of abilities, which entails methodological competence and methodical proficiency. The implication that emerges essentially points to the necessity of methodical competence in carrying out an

inclusive program, which involves professionalism. The author associates the first component, methodological competence, with the identification of individual differences in children. Thus, the first function that anyone implementing an inclusive program must perform is related to pedagogical diagnostics, which includes pedagogical, psychological, and special education competencies—also considered a form of professional competence. The second component refers to “methodical proficiency for the development and implementation of programs and models of individual, interactive, and collaborative learning in inclusive education” (Ilić, 2009). The author links methodological competence to professional competence, while also emphasizing its necessity and exclusivity in the implementation of the inclusive program. Methodological competence, i.e., pedagogical diagnostics, is also tied to professional competence. Reviewing this approach to competencies related to inclusive education, the author implicitly embeds the pedagogical-methodological dimension of competence as an essential aspect of competencies in inclusive education.

Levels of Competence Definition (Tuning Glossary, 2007) point to two categories: generic or general competences (transferable across different fields of activity) and subject-specific competences (discipline- or profession-specific). A professional profile is an extension of the qualifications framework for a specific field – it is based on determining the type and level of competences required to perform a certain type of work. When considering preschool (kindergarten) as an educational and social environment in which inclusive programs are implemented, this framework emphasizes the need for a specific set of competences, including professionalism as a key dimension.

EU standards and selected national standards (Scottish, Dutch) for preschool and educational professionalism:

☐ Competencies for working with people ☐ Competence in working with knowledge, technology, and information ☐ Competencies for working in and for society	☐ Professional knowledge and understanding (8) ☐ Professional skills and abilities (9) ☐ Professional values and professional commitment (6)	☐ Interpersonal competencies ☐ Pedagogical competencies ☐ Knowledge of the subject and teaching methodology ☐ Organizational competencies ☐ Competencies for collaboration with colleagues
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		☐ Competencies for collaboration with the external environment ☐ Ability for reflection and development
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European Standards, Table No. 1

From the table of European and some national standards for educational professionalism, we observe several dimensions of ideas and approaches. Besides the knowledge of methods, procedures, and teaching strategies, as well as being skilled in instruction and information transfer, educators and teachers should:

- know appropriate procedures for working with mixed groups;
- be ready and prepared for teamwork;
- be capable of organizing an optimal and motivating learning environment;
- be able to organize project-based work;
- and know how to set clear boundaries of discipline, but without coercion.

It is therefore essential for the educator to direct their work towards an individual approach to the child and to design and create an individualized work program focused both on the child and their family and social environment.

QUALITY INDICATORS FOR IDENTIFYING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS BASED ON SOCIAL PROFESSIONALISM

Most authors (Potkonjak, 2000) link the quality of education to its outcomes. Potkonjak argues that in order to achieve quality in education, it is necessary to ensure quality within the components or elements that make up the entire educational process. He points out that many of the important documents related to basic education indicators were prepared as early as 1987 for an international OECD conference. Setting indicators would enable a more rational management of the educational policy. In the elaboration of these documents, the indicators were grouped into several broad categories, such as:

1. The scope of student enrollment across various levels of education
2. Students and teachers analyzed in relation to education funding
3. Assessment of student learning outcomes

In nearly all materials prepared for discussions on "quality primary education," emphasis was also placed on the concept of a "common educational core," i.e., "shared knowledge and essential skills" (core curriculum and core skills). Within these discussions on the quality of primary education, it was acknowledged that teachers play a vital role, and that the competence and engagement of the teaching staff represent a fundamental precondition for

educational quality. Even when the inputs—such as students, curricular content, and instructional tasks—are of high quality, and the overall learning conditions are optimal, the outcomes will not be of high quality if the teacher's performance lacks effectiveness and professional excellence, despite all favorable prerequisites. While the content a teacher conveys to students and the intended educational objectives are undoubtedly important for achieving quality in education, it is equally—if not more—crucial to consider the manner in which this is implemented, specifically the “pedagogical strategies” employed to achieve the set goals and outcomes. This implies not only the teacher's “expertise”, but also a high degree of “professionalism”—that is, pedagogical competence necessary for effective educational work (Potkonjak, 2000). The emphasis is primarily placed on the teacher's own performance. The concept of “open professionalism” is introduced, which implies that teachers and educators should be willing to adopt and apply new approaches, methods, and tools with the aim of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of their educational work. Moreover, increasing attention is being devoted to the education and professional development of teaching staff. In times of significant social transformation, teachers must engage in continuous professional development throughout their careers. “Teachers are required to be capable of self-analysis and self-evaluation, as these represent the most reliable foundation (a critical basis of one's own work) for ongoing professional development (for ‘open professionalism’)” (Potkonjak, 2000). Several key elements emerge as crucial to the quality of primary education, including teacher expertise, continuous education and professional development, changing work conditions, openness, teacher motivation, and self-evaluation of one's own work. According to earlier educational objectives and the standards derived from them, the focus was primarily on acquiring knowledge and, if possible, on developing the ability to apply that knowledge. However, for the “cognitive outcomes” of education today, this is no longer considered sufficient. Greater importance is now given to cultivating cognitive skills, advancing mental processes, and equipping students with problem-solving abilities. Teachers are thus expected to implement an expanding range of new “pedagogical strategies,” adding significant complexity to their work.

The quality of primary education depends on all elements of education, especially on factors within the educational institution itself, as well as those outside it. Quality education implies establishing indicators and standards (levels, degrees, norms) for all components of education. The foundation for this standardization is an operationally formulated goal and objectives of education. These goals and objectives should be clearly defined and necessary conditions need to be created in practice in order to achieve them. Teachers play a key role in the effectiveness of primary education. The education and professional development of teaching staff must be aimed at efficiency and effectiveness. Evaluation and self-evaluation of teachers' work quality, as well as the overall evaluation of education quality (and changes in outcomes), are essential. Considering the established standards, it is necessary to maintain and develop quality. The conclusion of numerous discussions on education quality indicates that structural changes in the education system will have less impact on quality improvement, while far greater influence comes from changes within the educational process itself—its components, aspects, cycles, and organization. This means implementing adequate

"pedagogical strategies."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The skills and knowledge of teachers and educators are particularly reflected in their capacity to create an inclusive environment, both in working with children who face various types of difficulties and with those who demonstrate special talents. Through their professionalism, they contribute to the development of group management, collaboration with parents, and the skill of guiding parents toward group affiliation—both in terms of helping their child belong and encouraging a sense of group belonging among all children through teamwork and cooperation.

The educator should guide parents on how to support the development of their own child and how to foster the child's potential. Additionally, the educator should help all parents understand how to accept every child and appreciate their individual differences. It is essential for the educator and teacher to be familiar with psychological assessments of a child's condition and the recommended activities for support, as well as how to channel the child's developmental potential toward objectives in the cognitive, motor, language, and social domains.

In order to provide meaningful assistance and properly understand the challenges a specific child may be facing, the educator must be proficient in special education terminology and demonstrate a thorough understanding of psychological and pedagogical issues.

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