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CHANGE IN PRESCHOOL AS PERCEIVED BY FUTURE TEACHERS*

Introduction: The primary objective of this project was to identify the areas of change future educators, as creators of educational environments, should implement within preschool education at the onset of their professional careers. Contemporary preschool teachers possess considerable autonomy in executing their professional responsibilities. Their initial preparation for the profession encompasses, among other aspects, specialized knowledge, interpretive competencies for understanding educational contexts, and the capacity to initiate change.

Research Aim: The study aimed to identify specific areas of change novice teachers should implement in the operations of a preschool facility. It was hypothesized that students –future early childhood and elementary school educators – would articulate their knowledge, observations, experiences, thoughts, and assessments having completed 1) the coursework in preschool and early school pedagogy and 2) their teaching practice in preschool settings.

Method: This research project employed an interpretive paradigm within a qualitative framework. Written statements served as primary research material for detailed content analysis. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative analyses was a key aspect of the research design. The study included 98 female students of preschool and early school pedagogy from three academic centres.

Results: In their written statements, the surveyed individuals proposed numerous educational changes that, in their view, a novice teacher/preschool creator could implement.

Conclusions: Through content analysis, it was determined that the areas of proposed change pertain to: modifications in educational methods and content, a deeper understanding of a child's perspective and well-being, arrangement of preschool space, organizational adjustments, and creation of new roles and tasks for teachers.

Keywords: kindergarten teacher, change in education, kindergarten

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INTRODUCTION

Change is an inherent aspect of a teacher's profession and human existence, necessitating continuous reflection and adaptation. As Bauman (1999) noted, "the contemporary world seems to be changing faster than at any other period in history. In the face of their accelerated pace, changes cannot be treated as extraordinary events: deviations from the rule, disruptions of the norm" (p. 19). According to Cudowska (2017), a teacher's attitude is the most crucial factor in educational change, driving bottom-up improvement in education that unfolds in the daily work of schools. This process is particularly dependent on teachers' ongoing professional development, their shared understanding and vision of change, internalization of the values underpinning it, and a readiness to enact these values in their daily work with pupils and in their personal growth. While teachers' influence on educational changes varies (Antroszko, 2019), they should consistently analyse reality, observe institutional actions, and anticipate future directions. This theoretical framework, proposed by Potulicka (2001) posits that each individual educator is the critical point in change because the degree of change can be greater through individual efforts. Each educator has some control over what they do. Contemporary preschool teachers have significant autonomy in performing their professional duties, including selecting goals, content, methods, and strategies for implementing the curriculum, as well as creating conditions for planned activities (Leżańska & Plóciennik, 2021). Future educators (Kwiatkowski, 2018) should be prepared during their studies to initiate changes within their institutions. This preparedness is vital, as modern times continually present a myriad of scientific, social, economic, geopolitical, and technological shifts, along with health-related challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for remote learning for children.

Initial teacher preparation encompasses professional knowledge, interpretive competencies for understanding educational contexts, and the skills to implement change and create effective learning environments (Kulete, 2002). The knowledge constructed by future preschool teachers during their studies is a result of:

- Professional experiences gained through teaching practice.
- Reflection on these experiences informed by the academic knowledge provided during their coursework.
- Observed changes within socio-educational practices.

Knowledge is constructed through a long-term process of theoretical and practical education. Personal knowledge represents a synthesis of scientific understanding and practical experience, inherently unique to each individual. As Zbróg (2019) explains, this personal knowledge "can take the form of schematic solutions or, conversely, a reconstructive, reflective, contextual character, fostering continuous, conscious deliberation on the meaningfulness and effectiveness of one's actions" (p. 125).

This theoretical perspective highlights experiences and knowledge of future teachers regarding proposed educational changes. It showcases potential and stance of young preschool educators. It also presents their rich thinking about changes in preschool education and their role within the new socio-cultural reality and digital landscape.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND AIM

The research goal was to identify areas of change that a young teacher should implement in preschool education at the beginning of their professional career. It was assumed that female students – future young teachers/creators of preschool education and education in grades 1-3 – would present their reflections, observations, experiences, generalizations, and evaluations after completing theoretical classes in preschool and early school pedagogy, as well as mid-year and continuous teaching practice in institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research project falls within the interpretive paradigm and employs a qualitative perspective. Qualitative data collection and analysis procedures were utilized as part of the research. The research material for detailed content analysis (Konarzewski, 2000) consisted of written statements from female students. These statements focused on the areas/elements of change they identified as necessary for a young teacher/future preschool creator to implement in their work within contemporary preschool institutions and preschool units attached to primary schools.

Participants, in their written statements prompted by the researcher, presented their knowledge and reflections on the shape of preschool education. They offered numerous proposals for educational changes and possibilities for shaping educational institutions that they would implement upon starting work. The smallest units of content – themes or expressions – contained in the language used by the future teachers were analysed. This process yielded a range of categories. The boundaries of individual categories were precisely defined to ensure they did not overlap. Initially, many categories were constructed to combine them into a few thematic areas in the final stage. The analysis showed that these areas related to:

- Changes in educational methods and content.
- Understanding the child's perspective, the child's well-being.
- Arrangement of new preschool spaces.
- Organizational changes.
- Creation of new roles and tasks for the teacher.

Application of triangulation of quantitative and qualitative analyses (Urbaniak-Zajac, 2018) was an important element of the research. Individual categories were described using quantitative analyses to highlight the most frequently emphasized areas. Collected material was discussed in the article in relation to these five areas, starting with the most frequently cited categories within each domain.

A purposive-random sampling method was used to select participants for the study. The research included 98 female students in their third (17%), fourth (31%), and fifth (52%) years of integrated master's studies in preschool and early school pedagogy. These students were enrolled in both full-time (53%) and part-time (47%) programs across three academic centres: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, and Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce.

This research project allowed for an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of future teachers, who reflected on their existing knowledge, skills, and experiences. In their statements about changes worth implementing at the start of their professional careers, the students drew upon knowledge gained from academic coursework during their master's studies. Additionally, they drew on their teaching practice in preschools and project-based activities undertaken throughout their education.

RESULTS

Changes in Educational Methods and Content

The changes proposed by future teachers/creators of preschool education primarily focused on methodological solutions in conjunction with curriculum content. Analysis of their statements showed a concentration into two areas: methodological approaches (194 responses, representing 32% of all analysed data) and curriculum modernization (35 responses, representing 5% of all analysed data). Qualitative analyses facilitated identification of categories, while quantitative analyses were used to organize the responses by their frequency. The areas of change concerning preschool methodology and curriculum content were analysed separately. Within the proposed methodological changes, the following categories were identified:

- Expanding the learning environment to virtual spaces, such as utilizing platforms, mats, 3D printers, interactive floors and walls, applications (16% of responses in the methodology area).
- Project-based learning (16% of responses).
- Field trips, outdoor activities, and outdoor education (13%).
- Collaborative learning with peers/teamwork (10%). This approach fosters relationships among children as they work together to solve complex problems. It is based on creating a task situation, assigning roles, and fos-

tering cooperation among children, significantly increasing learning speed (Brzezińska, 2008; Dumont et al., , 2013).

- Children's play with peers and learning through play (9%).
- Experiential learning (7%).
- Artistic workshops (music, vocal, theatre) and creative workshops (7%).
- Mindfulness and emotion regulation training, such as "Emotion Mornings" (4%).

The analyses also revealed many smaller or niche methodological proposals, collectively accounting for 12% of responses in the methodology area. These distinct categories included:

- Critical thinking workshops.
- Problem-based thinking (A student is given a problem to solve would have to analyse the issue, identify the problem, and find a solution through trial and error).
- Storytelling/narrative creation.
- Educational games.
- Workshops: with experts, sensoplasty, movement-based, and culinary (including learning cutting, baking, and healthy eating).

Richness of the proposed changes indicates that future young teachers are reflecting on novel solutions (Kuszak, 2014) and benefiting from a comprehensive curriculum that promotes modern approaches within a constructivist paradigm (Klus-Stańska, 2009).

Five percent of participant responses included suggestions of changes to existing curriculum content. They proposed omitting outdated and overly simplistic topics and instead introducing subjects stemming from daily circumstances, pre-schoolers' passions, and interests. They emphasized expanding content to include digital literacy, robotics, coding, DIY skills, global education, education for sustainable development, values education, collaboration, ecological awareness, and building relationships with nature, intercultural understanding, local issues, social problems, and money management. Here are some exemplary student opinions regarding educational content (no 3). "...Integration of global education components and social values is crucial; children should understand from a very young age how important collaboration, respect for diversity, and shared responsibility for the common good are" (no 3). "...these are essential for cultivating responsible global citizenship" (no 3).

Analyses highlight the methodological preparedness of future female teachers. They also emphasize their recognition of the tensions between the everyday methodological realities in preschools and the expectation of modern solutions. These modern approaches are rooted in neuroscience, the social and cognitive constructivism paradigm, and connectivism related to the digital age and artificial intelligence (Szponar, 2015).

Understanding a Child's Perspective and Well-being

A significant area for proposed changes, highlighted by 163 respondents (27% of all analysed responses), centred on perceiving educational practices through the lens of the child and their well-being. Well-being is recognized as a crucial human resource, encompassing personal, social, and emotional dimensions (Seligman, 2005, 2011; Wojciechowska, 2001). Qualitative and quantitative analyses in this area revealed several key categories:

- Focus on individual needs, interests, and passions, and individualization of work (23% of responses related to a child's perspective).
- Developing social and emotional skills (21% of responses). Within this, significant emphasis was placed on children's mental health, with teachers actively building psychological resilience and stress-coping mechanisms. Respondents also highlighted the importance of children genuinely recognizing their strengths and weaknesses and fostering their self-confidence, which accounted for 16% of responses in this category. According to the participants, it is crucial to employ a counsellor for difficult situations at the institution and establish a child support team. They believe a counsellor – someone consistently available, trusted, and with ample time – would allow children to seek help with any issue. Teachers who are primarily focused on the educational process do not always have the immediate capacity to give a child this dedicated attention.
- Children's participation in preschool is directly linked to their responsibility (e.g., "Children's Council"). According to the participants, children's co-decision-making should extend to various aspects of the preschool environment and activities. This includes arranging classrooms and learning corners, selecting library materials, purchasing toys, planning celebrations, establishing welcome routines, implementing weekly themes, coordinating collaborative theatre productions, and choosing materials for sensory play and board games (13%).
- Motivating and assessing children in ways that promote development without undue pressure. This approach includes implementing motivating praise, mentorship, developmental portfolios, descriptive assessments, formative evaluations, and constructive feedback (12%).
- An atmosphere of happiness, security, relaxation, and rest, alongside stress-free learning, respect, and tolerance. This also encompasses an "education for uniqueness" that genuinely appreciates and accepts every child (7%).
- Child-friendly spaces focused on the culture of language and relationships. This would involve frequent conversations about children's real problems and experiences, addressing issues like poverty, diverse family models, or challenges related to friendship (4%).

- Children's independence, opportunities for numerous attempts, learning from mistakes, and freedom to use all elements of the classroom (4%).

These analyses were used to outline the vision of a child and childhood presented by future teachers, aligning with humanistic and emancipatory pedagogy. This approach advocates for child empowerment and participation of all stakeholders in the educational process.

Arranging New Preschool Spaces

In the constructivist approach, teachers are responsible for arranging high-quality environments that support children's development (Andrzejewska, 2015). Future teachers proposed changes related to the material environment and to create resources essential for various play, work, and learning activities. The concept of the teacher shaping the preschool space appeared in 96 responses, accounting for 16% of all responses. Areas identified through qualitative and quantitative analyses pertained to creating new spaces, modernizing existing corners, and altering interior aesthetics. Proposals for new preschool spaces included:

- Science laboratories for experimentation, research, and discovery, integrating various fields of life (17% of responses concerning space). Exemplary student opinions: (no 8) "Each room would be a different realm for exploration – a sensory room with sand and water, a science laboratory where children conduct experiments" (no 8).
- Nature-based spaces and vegetable and herb gardens that develop all senses (16% of responses).
- Sensory gardens (14%) "Every room would have different sensory zones" (no 4).
- Zones for relaxation, rest, and quiet (10%). "In every preschool and school, there could be a special quiet zone, where children could calm down, rest, or work independently on their projects in a silent, peaceful environment" (no 18).
- Zones for creative activities (9%).
- Physical activity, including learning through movement and learning the balance between movement and rest (5%).
- Zones for collaborative problem-solving, conflict resolution, clarifying misunderstandings, and discussions (3%).
- Space for culinary activity (3%).
- Interactive cognitive playgrounds (2%).

Additionally, 17% of responses focused on classroom aesthetics, including changing colour schemes, using chalkboard paints, reducing overstimulation, and incorporating modular furniture. Future teachers also emphasized the modernization of existing thematic play corners and outdoor preschool playgrounds (4%). The students believe that in their future professional roles, they should consciously

create educational spaces, arrange developmentally supportive environments for every child with diverse needs, and introduce innovative solutions.

Organizational Changes

Another area of proposed changes by future teachers involved new suggestions for facility organization (60 responses, accounting for 10% of all responses). Analysis identified five categories of proposed changes. The largest proportion, 37% of responses in the organizational changes area, concerned teacher-parent collaboration, fostering positive relationships, planning joint initiatives, and developing reports on their implementation. According to the respondents, this collaboration would create an inspiring environment for both teachers and parents. Other proposals included:

- Reducing group sizes or employing multiple teachers (lead teacher, support teacher, special education teacher) to support each child better (25% of responses).
- Jointly establishing the daily plan, daily themes, and visualizations in education by teachers and children (13%).
- Not using supplementary books/textbooks for pre-schoolers (10%).
- Decreasing documentation in favour of more direct work with each child (10%).
- Changing meal organization (5%).

Creating New Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

In recent years, the evolving responsibilities of teachers have notably included adapting to remote education and integrating immigrant and refugee children into preschool groups. Within the analysis of preschool teacher responsibilities, 59 responses were identified, representing 10% of all statements gathered in the study. This area revealed three distinct domains: increasing autonomy of new teachers, providing multi-faceted support for teachers, and emphasizing new roles for the teachers.

As much as 54% of responses in the area of teacher tasks pertained to greater autonomy in shaping preschool education. In the respondents' opinions, it is crucial for young teachers, with their enthusiasm, energy, and passion for the work, to have more opportunities to think outside the box, more freedom for creative and innovative actions, and for their colleagues to impose fewer traditional solutions. Given their modern initial training and up-to-date pedagogical and psychological knowledge, they should be able to spread their wings. Staff and principals of institutions should trust young teachers and provide them with space for their activities. Here are some exemplary student opinions about young teachers: "Young teachers, those just starting their professional journey, have the most ideas; they are creative and full of enthusiasm. Their opinions should be considered to en-

courage them in further creative work. Unfortunately, some experienced teachers don't like young people's enthusiasm, and it gets stifled at the outset" (no 10). "A young teacher is someone with a lot of courage and passion for their work. They are not afraid of failures or taking risks because they know they can always handle any difficult and complex situation" (no 54). "The aspect of freshness is something I hope our generation of teachers will introduce" (no 53).

Students also highlighted the need for greater support for teachers (27% of responses). Their suggestions for changes in this area included: organizing regular, free training; increasing the profession's prestige and salaries; providing mentorship; or employing a psychotherapist; implementing fit and competency tests for class tutors. They also emphasized the need to receive support from the principal and governing body during project implementation and in difficult situations, such as conflicts with parents.

In describing proposed changes within preschools, the surveyed students emphasized new roles for teachers (19% of responses): becoming a creator of preschool classroom space, a visionary of the place, a mentor who discovers children's interests with them, a creator of supportive spaces for understanding and safety, a guide to the world of knowledge, a passionate individual, a child's companion, and someone closer to the child – listening attentively and engaging in conversations with them.

Based on the analyses conducted, categories have been identified that illustrate the vision of changes in the teaching profession. Further, they reveal the critical issues observed by the students. The categories hitherto analysed encourage further deepened scholarly investigations.

DISCUSSION

The surveyed individuals offered numerous proposals for educational changes in their written statements, suggesting what new teachers/preschool creators could and should implement. They presented personal insights and reflections stemming from their experiences, which, according to Kawecki (2004), are characterized by their distinctiveness, subjectivity, and uniqueness. During their initial university training, each prospective teacher constructs their understanding of professional work, which can include directions for change in preschools and the role of an educator.

Various factors influence the formation of future teachers' professional knowledge. These include directors and mentor teachers during teaching practice, tasks undertaken by students in educational projects and volunteer work, activities in student clubs, and the academic content from pedagogy, psychology, and related sciences offered during their studies, as well as the young people's critical reflec-

tion (Klus-Stańska, 2015; Zbróg, 2019). Content analysis revealed that proposed changes pertain to: modifications in educational methods and content, a deeper understanding of the child's perspective and well-being, arrangement of preschool space, organizational adjustments, and creation of new teacher roles and responsibilities. Their initial training encouraged students to reveal their views on:

- children's mental health, well-being, and development within the socio-cultural environment.
- the teaching-learning process in preschool, including curriculum content, methods, institutional organization, collaboration among educational communities, and assessment and motivation systems designed to foster effective learning for pre-schoolers.
- contemporary challenges and responsibilities faced by teachers.

This process yielded a multi-faceted and individualized vision for future teachers concerning changes in educational practice, all grounded in the social construction of knowledge. The findings regarding the role and responsibilities of contemporary preschool teachers align with nationwide research conducted by Bałachowicz (2017), Klus-Stańska (2015), Kuszak (2014, 2021), Leżańska & Płóciennik (2021), Nowicka (2018), and Zbróg (2019). The constructivist paradigm, central to the training of preschool and early school pedagogy teachers, appears to encourage future educators to emphasize changes in the educational environment – methodological, material, and relational—to better suit the preschoolers' interests, passions, and diverse needs. Research by Andrzejewska (2013) presents similar results. Furthermore, the students' emphasis on fostering positive relationships and building a culture of cooperation/partnership between preschool teachers and families within the realm of organizational changes aligns with trends in preschool education development across the European Union (Lewandowska & Andrzejewska, 2021; Leżańska & Płóciennik, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS

This present research identified areas within preschool work that, in the opinion of the participants, warrant change, improvement, emphasis, or addition. The analyses provided insight into the vision of preschool education from the perspective of future teachers. Specifically, they concerned methodological and organizational solutions, modern arrangement of educational spaces, and the teacher's role and responsibilities. The findings highlight significant sensitivity of future teachers to children's well-being and mental health, as well as their attentiveness to the contemporary functioning of teachers in educational settings.

This study encourages reconsideration of the current initial training for preschool and early elementary teachers, particularly regarding both scientific knowl-

edge and practical preparation. When discussing initial teacher preparation, the research findings prompt reflection on the following questions:

- In which paradigms are the competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes) of future preschool teachers currently developed?
- What are the barriers and areas of their experiences, and do they align with contemporary scientific discoveries, educational reform directions, and current socio-economic and cultural contexts?
- How can students' experiences and reflections be utilized in educational practice, for instance, during the implementation of educational projects collaboratively run by universities and educational institutions?

LIMITATIONS

The present study is not void of limitations. One example is that illustrated issues pertain to specific student populations (integrated master's studies in preschool and early school pedagogy) across three academic centres and cannot be generalized. Participating students' motivation for written statements and their occasional lack of detailed and reliable presentation of their perspectives within the studied area may form another limitation of this study

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ZMIANA W PRZEDSZKOLU W PERCEPCJI PRZYSZŁYCH NAUCZYCIELI

Wprowadzenie: Kluczowym elementem projektu było poznanie obszarów zmian, jakie powinien wprowadzić w edukacji przedszkolnej młody nauczyciel/ kreator przestrzeni edukacyjnych na starcie pracy zawodowej Współczesny nauczyciel przedszkola ma szeroką autonomię w zakresie realizacji zadań zawodowych. Wstępne przygotowanie do zawodu obejmuje m.in. wiedzę profesjonalną, kompetencje interpretacyjne pozwalające na rozumienie sytuacji edukacyjnych i umiejętności wprowadzania zmian.

Cel badań: Celem badań było określenie obszarów zmian, jakie powinien wprowadzić młody nauczyciel w pracy placówki przedszkolnej. Założono, że studentki-przyszłe młode nauczycielki wychowania przedszkolnego i edukacji w klasach I-III zaprezentują własną wiedzę, spostrzeżenia, doświadczenia, przemyślenia i oceny po zajęciach na kierunku pedagogika przedszkolna i wczesnoszkolna i zrealizowanych praktykach w przedszkolach.

Metoda badań: Zrealizowany projekt badawczy mieści się w paradygmacie interpretatywnym, w perspektywie jakościowej. Materiałem badawczym do szczegółowych analiz treści były wypowiedzi pisemne studentek. Ważnym elementem badań było zastosowanie triangulacji analiz ilościowo- jakościowych. W badaniach wzięło udział 98 studentek kierunku pedagogika przedszkolna i wczesnoszkolna z trzech ośrodków akademickich.

Wyniki: Badane osoby w wypowiedziach pisemnych podawały wiele propozycji zmian edukacyjnych, które ich zdaniem może/powinien wprowadzić młody nauczyciel/ kreator przedszkola.

Wnioski: W drodze analiz treści stwierdzono, że obszary odnoszą się do: zmiany w metodach i treściach edukacyjnych, rozumienia perspektywy dziecka i jego dobrostanu, aranżacji przestrzeni przedszkola, zmian organizacyjnych oraz kreowania nowych ról i zadań nauczyciela.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczyciel przedszkola, zmiana w edukacji, przedszkole