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Students' Perspective on the Individual Abilities of Children and Their Appreciation of the Educational Process

Abstract

In an empirical quantitative study, the aim of which was to examine more thoroughly the representation of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children in preschool education from the point of view of students, 321 respondents participated – students of the first and second cycles of preschool education programmes of faculties from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia. The main findings of the study indicate that although students highly value the recognition and appreciation of individual abilities in working with children, the degree of recognition of children's abilities is higher in relation to their appreciation in practice, as well as a more optimal appreciation of the individual abilities of children without than with developmental difficulties.

Keywords: *children of preschool age, students of preschool education, individualisation, inclusion*

Introduction

Individualisation in the educational process in kindergarten starts from the knowledge that each child has individual differences in personal experience, knowledge, skills, reasoning, temperament, learning style, gender, interests, cultural and family context with which he enters the learning process and that these differences, due to developmental specificities, are most pronounced and visible precisely at preschool age (Šindić, 2021, pp. 21–31). If we start from the knowledge that individual differences between children should be considered a resource and wealth of education (Zaborniak-Sobczak, 2022, pp. 133–144), it is pedagogically more justified to call individual differences individual abilities. As a didactic principle, individualisation implies an approach in which optimal development is provided to all children in accordance with their abilities, including gifted and children with developmental difficulties (Radović et al., 2021, pp. 63–79). The beginnings of individualisation related only to educational work with children with learning and participation barriers, which has grown into an inclusive approach in the previous and current centuries. An inclusive approach at an early age focuses on individual needs, abilities and interests, and the use of the necessary resources to provide such children with adequate support in development and learning while avoiding labelling (Bouillet & Miškeljin, 2017, pp. 1265–1295). Thematic analysis of interviews by Kucirkova et al. (2021, pp. 1839–1861) found that educational professionals value any type of individualisation abilities (e.g., adapting content, supporting student choice). In their research, Knauder & Koschmieder (2019, pp. 66–76) find that individualised student support is an important and valuable goal for teachers, while Jung et al. (2018, pp. 144–155) point out that even in formative assessment studies, an approach to individualisation is visible, while adjustments are usually left to teachers later. The results of a study conducted in Slovakia indicate that teachers and preschool teachers respect the differences, abilities and different educational needs of a child or student, while affirmative attitudes about this are more prevalent among preschool teachers (Cabanová & Kasáčová, 2022, pp. 207–217). Żyta and Kazanowski (2023, pp. 1839–1861) found in their research that students of preschool and early childhood education and special education in Poland perceive the need for high expertise and the development of competencies of preschool teachers, especially in working with children with an intellectual disability. Similarly, the research results of Zaborniak-Sobczak (2022, pp. 133–144) indicate that teachers and students of Pedagogical Faculties in south-eastern Poland pay special attention to the importance of developing competencies in the concepts of inclusive education.

Research Methodology

Research Background

The study is part of a broader quantitative, empirical research conducted in the academic year 2022/2023 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the Republic of Slovenia.

The research goal was to more thoroughly examine the representation of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children (realisation of individualisation and inclusion) in the educational process based on the self-declaration of 321 students of the first and second cycles of preschool education studies in faculties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia.

According to the research objective, the research hypotheses were set:

- (H1) Students of the first and second cycles of preschool education recognise and respect the individual abilities of preschool children.
- (H2) From the student's perspective, identification and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children are equally represented in the process.
- (H3) From the students' perspective, there is no difference in the level of appreciation of children's individual abilities without and with barriers to learning and participation in the educational process.
- (H5) Respondents of different years of study differ in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children in the educational process.
- (H6) Respondents with different years of work experience differ in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children in the educational process.

This quantitative research used the scaling technique to collect relevant data from respondents. The research was approved by the decision of the Committee for Ethical Assessment of Research of the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Juraj Dobrila in Pula, with a note that the research will be conducted in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia. During the implementation of the research itself, the code of ethics was fully respected. The respondents were given written instructions on how to fill out the questionnaire, and it was explained to them that the obtained data would be used exclusively for scientific purposes. They were guaranteed anonymity and the possibility of giving up further answers. The examination was carried out from November 2022 to March 2023.

Sample

321 students of the first and second cycles of the preschool education programme participated in the quantitative research. Of these, 103 are students of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina; 113 students of the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Juraj Dobrila in Pula, Croatia and 105 students of the Faculty of Education of the University of Primorska, Slovenia. The characteristics of the respondents regarding home faculty and country, year of study, years of service, and gender are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample structure

Sample characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Country	Bosnia and Herzegovina	103	32,10
	Croatia	113	35,20
	Slovenia	105	32,70
Year of Study	First-year	70	21,80
	Second year	94	29,30
	Third year	76	23,70
	First year (MA)	51	15,90
	Second year (MA)	30	9,30
Years of service	No working experience	156	48,60
	Less than one year	56	17,40
	From one to three years	36	11,20
	More than three years	73	22,80
Sex	Female	308	96,00
	Male	12	3,70
	Other	1	0,30
	Total	321	100,00

Instruments and Procedures

The research instrument was created for this research and consists of two parts. The first part referred to basic generalities about the respondents (4 items). The

second part of the instrument with a five-point Likert-type scale enabled the collection of data on the degree of identification of individual abilities of preschool children (7 items) and their appreciation in the educational process through an individualised (10 items) and inclusive approach for children with difficulties (5 items) from the perspective of preschool education students was created with the use of relevant literature on individual differences and their appreciation of the upbringing process (Šindić, 2021), and insights from practice. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of the scale is $\alpha = 0.857$, with corresponding values of item-total correlation, which indicates the emphasised reliability of the instrument.

Data Analysis

When analysing the obtained data, an inferential statistical approach with elements of a descriptive approach was applied. Emphasis is placed on testing the significance of the difference of arithmetic means (Paired Samples T-test and One-Way ANOVA). The collected data were processed with the help of statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 26.

Although the Kolmogorov-Smirn test verified that the distributions of the research variables, which relate to individual abilities and their appreciation of the educational process through individualisation and inclusion, are not spread normally, the mentioned parametric statistical procedures were applied. Namely, we started from the fact that the analysis of variance is robust even though the distributions of the variables are not spread normally. Even if the distributions are not normally distributed, reliable results will be obtained using parametric F-tests, i.e., t-tests if the sample size per group is greater than 15 (Green & Salkid, 2016), i.e., over 30 (Pallant, 2009). This empirical work observed that the stated conditions were met, and parametric tests were chosen for the statistical analysis.

Results:

Applying the One-Way ANOVA procedure, it was determined that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of identification and appreciation of the individual abilities of children by preschool education students studying in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia ($F = 0.125$; $p = 0.883$) (Table 2). Considering the homogeneity of the sample regarding the recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children among students who attend universities in different countries, the results and the interpretation of the results apply equally to all three countries.

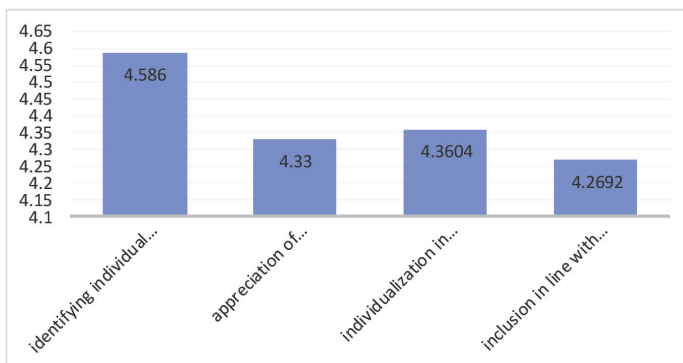
Table 2. The difference in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children by students of different faculties and countries (BiH, Croatia and Slovenia) (F-coefficient)

Faculty	N	M	SD	F	p
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Banja Luka	103	4,4091	0,52382		
Faculty of Educational Sciences Juraj Dobrila, University in Pula	113	4,4256	0,30751	0,125	0,883
Faculty of Education, University of Primorska, Kopar	105	4,3987	0,35041		

Recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children by students (H1)

In their answers, students chose higher degrees of agreement with affirmative statements related to the processes of identification and appreciation of individual abilities on a scale from 1 – completely disagree, to 5 – completely agree. Descriptive statistical indicators, obtained based on data on students' perception of the recognition and appreciation of individual abilities of preschool children in the educational process, are presented graphically (Graph 1) and tabularly (Table 3 and Table 4) in order to prove the hypothesis (H1). The study findings indicate that students highly value recognising children's abilities/differences ($M = 4.586$, $SD = 0.443$), and their appreciation of the educational process ($M = 4.43$, $Sd = 0.434$). Also, when appreciating individual differences, students value individualisation ($M = 4.360$; $SD = 0.445$) more than inclusion ($M = 4.269$; $SD = 0.558$). Based on the statistical indicators presented graphically and tabularly (Graph 1, Table 3, Table 4) and based on their interpretation, it can be concluded that the hypothesis (H1) has been proven.

Figure 1. Identifying and appreciating the individual abilities of children (M)



In order to determine whether the observed differences are statistically significant, a t-ratio was calculated.

Differences between identifying and appreciating the individual abilities of preschool children (H2)

The difference of the arithmetic means of the variables of the degree of identification and appreciation of individual abilities in the work is statistically significant ($t = 13.635$; $p = 0.001$) in favour of the degree of identification of individual abilities of preschool children by students (Table 3), so the hypothesis (H2) is rejected.

Table 3. The difference in recognition and appreciation of individual abilities of children in the educational process in kindergarten (t-ratio)

	N	M	Sd	t	df	p
identifying individual opportunities	321	4,586	0,443	13,635	320	0,000
appreciation of individual abilities in work	321	4,330	0,434			

The difference in the level of appreciation of the individual abilities of children with and without barriers to learning and participation in the educational process (H3)

The difference of the arithmetic means of the variables of the degree of appreciation of the individual abilities of children without and with barriers to learning and participation in work is statistically significant ($t = 3.530$; $p = 0.001$) in favour of the degree of appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children without barriers to learning and participation (Table 4), and the hypothesis (H3) is rejected.

Table 4. The difference in the level of appreciation of the individual abilities of children without and with barriers to learning and participation in educational work (t-ratio)

appreciation of individual abilities	N	M	SD	t	df	p
individualisation in educational work	321	4,360	0,445	3,530	320	0,000
inclusion of children with disabilities in the educational work	321	4,269	0,558			

Differences in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children in the educational process and the years of study and years of service of the respondents (H4) (H5)

The calculated F-coefficient ($F = 0.942$; $p = 0.440$) is statistically insignificant in relation to the five researched modalities of the variable of years of study (Table 5) and indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of identification and appreciation of individual abilities of children by students of different years study, and the hypothesis (H4) can be rejected.

Table 5. The difference in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children from the perspective of students of different years of study (F-coefficient)

year of study	N	M	SD	F	p
1 st year of undergraduate studies	70	4,388	0,357	0,942	0,440
2 nd year of undergraduate studies	94	4,431	0,466		
3 rd year of undergraduate studies	76	4,410	0,431		
1 st year MA studies	51	4,348	0,333		
2 nd year of MA studies	30	4,515	0,286		

The calculated F-coefficient ($F = 1.145$; $p = 0.331$) is statistically insignificant in relation to the four modalities of the variable of years of service (Table 6) and indicates that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of identification and appreciation of the individual abilities of children by respondents with a different number of years of service, so hypothesis (H5) can be rejected.

Table 6. The difference in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children from the perspective of students of different number of years of service (F-coefficient)

number of years of service	N	M	SD	F	p
no years of service	156	4,433	0,413	1,145	0,331
up to a year	56	4,348	0,473		
from one to three years	36	4,345	0,322		
more than three years	73	4,4477	0,344		

Discussion

The results of a quantitative study conducted with 321 preschool education students from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia indicate that students in all three countries highly value recognising and appreciating children's abilities. Similar insights that indicate that students, preschool teachers and other educational workers appreciate and point to the importance of appreciating children's differences through an individualised and inclusive approach were found in various research (Knauder & Koschmieder, 2019, pp. 66–76; Kucirkova et al., 2021, pp. 1839–1861; Zaborniak-Sobczak, 2022, pp. 133–144; Żyta & Kazanowski, 2023, pp. 1839–1861).

Students of all three countries more strongly recognise individual children's abilities than their appreciation through an individualised and inclusive approach. The question arises as to why children's individual abilities are not always respected when they are identified. Some of the answers to this question could be the insufficient training and lack of competence of educators for an individualised and inclusive approach, as indicated by some contemporary research (Nikolić et al., 2017, pp. 43–54; Tetzlaff et al., 2022, pp. 101655; Jung et al., 2018, pp. 144–155; Šindić et al., 2020, pp. 87–98).

The findings of the study indicate that students have a lower appreciation of the peculiarities of children with learning and participation barriers compared to the peculiarities of other children and that the educational process is more optimally adapted to the individual abilities of children who do not have developmental difficulties, which indicates additional challenges in inclusive processes. It could be explained by the fact that it is more demanding to appreciate the specificities of children who strongly deviate from the hypothetical average, due to the need for additional engagement of various experts and the need for high expertise of preschool teachers and the complexity of preschool teachers' competencies in the context of inclusive education (Zaborniak-Sobczak, 2022, pp. 133–144; Żyta & Kazanowski, 2023, pp. 1839–1861). Tetzlaff et al. (2022, p. 101655) point out that one of the burning issues in the theory and practice of research into teachers' pedagogical practice is the issue of adapting to students' differences. Even though there is no unanimous opinion, the main goal of individualisation remains the harmonisation of teaching with the special students' needs.

The last two findings of the study indicate that the respondents of different years of study and service do not differ in the degree of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of children concerning the years of study

and service, which may also indicate insufficient use of formal, non-formal and informal education in the direction of training students and preschool teachers for an individualised and inclusive process. The absence of statistically significant differences in the level of recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children and the years of study of the respondents reveal that formal education at the preschool teacher training course is not crucial in the context of identifying and appreciating the individual abilities of preschool children, and point to the need to reflect on the modernisation of university teaching in this regard topics and strengthening the competencies of students for inclusive and individualisation processes. The solution to the problem could be sought within the transformative learning of students and preschool teachers (Garnier, 2022, pp. 129–138), as well as in some innovative approaches to social learning, following the positive examples of the practice of Open Education and Flexible Forms of Learning (Juszczyk & Kim, 2016, pp. 163–173).

The limitations of the study are that the data were collected by self-reporting by the respondents, which may affect their objectivity, and that the sample is composed of relatively young people without or with a short working experience, which reduces the accuracy of insight into the differences in the recognition and appreciation of the individual differences of children by preschool teachers of different length of service.

Conclusions

The contribution of the study is reflected in the elucidation of the current problems of preschool education, which relate to the recognition and appreciation of the individual abilities of preschool children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia from the point of view of preschool education students, which opens up a series of research questions related to the needs of preschool teachers' competence development for individualised and inclusive processes and finding, shaping and checking adequate learning models that will contribute to their development.

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