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MOTIVATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
IN THE FIELD OF FOSTERING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT³

Abstract. The research presented in this paper was conducted in 2024 in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, Republic of Serbia. The aim of the study was to examine the level of preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development (ECD) and to determine whether differences in motivation exist depending on years of work experience and level of education. Additionally, the study aimed to provide a broader insight into the frequency and methods of professional development that preschool teachers have undertaken in this field. The theoretical framework of the research is based on motivation theories (Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation and self-determination theory). In the context of preschool education reforms, professional development is crucial for implementing modern approaches in practice. The research had an exploratory character, and the sample was convenient (N = 91 preschool teachers). The data were analyzed using the SPSS statistical program, applying descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine statistically significant differences. The results indicated a high level of motivation (4.37 on a five-point scale) among preschool teachers for professional development in fostering early childhood development. Statistically significant differences were found in self-assessed motivation based on years of work experience, $F(3, 85) = 3.953, p = .011$. Further analysis revealed that the level of education had a statistically significant impact on motivation for professional development, but only in the context of working with gifted children, $F(4, 84) = 3.777, p = .007$. Although participants expressed a high level of motivation, as many as 38.5% of preschool teachers reported that they had not yet engaged in professional development in this field, indicating a potential gap between declared motivation and its realization. The findings can contribute to improving educational practices and professional development strategies, serving as a foundation for developing various forms of training and enhancing higher education for future preschool teachers. Additionally, the study opens avenues for further research aimed at fostering the well-being of children in early childhood.

Keywords: motivation, fostering early childhood development, professional development, preschool teachers.

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As support tools during the paper preparation process (providing feedback on the IMRaD structure and style, general idea generation – i.e., *brainstorming*, and checking reference formatting in accordance with APA standards), as well as for translating the abstract and this paper into English (with review by the translator), the AI tools GhtGPT-4o and GhtGPT-o1 were used. They were not used as sources or for data analysis.

Introduction

Early childhood is conceived as a unique period of life and the most intensive developmental phase in the life cycle (UNICEF Serbia, 2019). Owing to the high degree of neuroplasticity, which enables the formation and strengthening of neural connections (Johnson & De Haan, ³2011, Nelson, 2000), it represents a period of exceptional speed in brain development. Research (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Hart & Risley, 1995) emphasizes the importance of a stimulating and supportive environment during early childhood (from conception to eight years of age). Johnson and De Haan (³2011), who investigated brain development in the early stages of childhood, also highlighted the importance of interactive experiences, showing how certain neurological structures develop precisely in interaction with the environment, confirming the significance of a nurturing setting. In other words, early development is significantly the result of interaction with the environment, including relevant adults (Baucal, 2012; Engle et al., 2007).

Children have the right to grow up in an environment that enables them to reach their full potential in life (UNICEF Serbia, 2019). Early intervention, which involves targeted and planned support activities for early development and its promotion, is part of strategies for the realization of children's rights, equality, and inclusion (Heckman, 2006). J. Heckman points out that "investment" in early interventions (in education, health, nutrition, etc.) brings multiple returns to society through the later success of these children, lower dropout rates, and better employability (Heckman, 2006).

The combined efforts of relevant adults – parents/legal guardians, preschool teachers, school teachers, professional associates, and the local community – based on an integrated approach to care, upbringing, and education (Stojanovic, Kovacevic, & Bogavac, 2018), can decisively contribute to creating conditions in which every child can realize their full potential. The Preschool Education Program – *Years of Ascent* [orig. *Osnove programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja – Godine uzleta*] in the Republic of Serbia (2018) underscores the importance of fostering early childhood development in accordance with contemporary theoretical standpoints (co-constructivism, post-structuralism, and neurobiological knowledge about the nature of early brain development). In order for strategies and procedures in developing a real-life (situated) curriculum to be adequately and qualitatively applied in day-to-day educational work, professional development of the relevant adults – in the first instance, preschool teachers – is required. Supporting this statement, and for the sake of achieving children's well-being, continuous attention should be paid to examining the knowledge, skills, and values of relevant adults regarding early childhood development, as well as their motivation to engage in professional development in this domain.

Motivation is crucial in the process of education, both for children and for preschool teachers. Various theories of motivation help preschool teachers understand how to foster early development in children, but also how to maintain and strengthen their own motivation. Motivation theories are important not only for working with children but also for the professional development of preschool teachers. In Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivation (Peramatzis & Galanakis, 2022), the author distinguishes between factors that can cause dissatisfaction and those that can cause satisfaction at work. According to this theory, there are two groups of factors: hygiene factors and motivators. Hygiene factors are conditions that do not directly cause motivation, but their absence can cause dissatisfaction. These factors include salary, working conditions, job security, interpersonal relations, and organizational policy and administration. Without them, employees may be dissatisfied, but their presence does not guarantee motivation for advancement. Motivators are factors that can increase employee satisfaction and encourage greater commitment, professional growth, and professional development. These are factors such as recognition, responsibility, advancement, achievements, and personal growth. The presence of these factors can significantly increase motivation.

Motivation – an internal or external driving force that directs an individual toward a certain goal, or a state in which we are internally aroused by certain needs, drives, desires, or motives to behave in a certain way (Nedimovic & Djordjev, 2024) – plays a central role in the readiness and commitment of relevant adults to implement fostering (creative) activities in professional practice (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) emphasizes that intrinsic motives are key for long-term motivation and individual well-being. The authors believe that people are naturally motivated to grow, learn, and develop, as well as that three basic psychological needs – autonomy, competence, and relatedness – must be met in order for that to occur. In line with this theory, continuous professional development is seen as a key lever for strengthening both competence and sustained high motivation (Billett, 2010; Eraut, 2004). According to S. Billett (2010), preschool teachers' self-assessment of motivation is important for enhancing practice, while D. H. Pink (2011) argues that workers –including preschool teachers – perform most effectively when they have a sense of autonomy, purpose, and opportunities for personal growth.

Research points to a connection between motivation and preschool teachers' professional development. Nedimovic and Prtljaga (2018) stress the importance of the preschool teacher's role in recognizing and developing the creative potential of preschool children, noting that the preschool teacher's motivation, along with their competencies, is crucial for successfully carrying out supportive activities. Nedimovic, Djordjev, and Cinc (2022) emphasize the role of a motivated and competent preschool teacher who continuously pursues professional development, in line with the concept of lifelong learning. Djordjev and Sturza Milic (2022) underscore the importance of transferable skills for preschool teachers, which enable adaptation to different contexts and individual needs of children.

In the study by Nedimovic and Djordjev (2024), conducted in 2022 on a sample of 154 preschool teachers from AP Vojvodina, the researchers examined the motivation of preschool teachers to engage in professional development for applying transferable skills in fostering early development. They concluded that one of the areas for future enhancement of preschool practice is precisely encouraging preschool teachers' motivation for creating and implementing activities geared toward early development. In a study involving 289 preschool teachers from Serbia and Slovenia (Zveglic Mihelic, Stancic Nosonjin, Gojkov Rajic, & Valencic Zuljan, 2022), the authors examined how different types of motivation influence preschool teachers' attitudes toward their careers and professional development. The results indicated that intrinsic and altruistic motives play a dominant role in choosing this profession in both countries. It also emerged that the type of motivation affects how preschool teachers experience their profession, which factors they consider key for career development, and what expectations they have regarding further professional development. The study's findings serve as a basis for improving initial and ongoing preschool teacher education, pointing to the need for programs aimed at preserving and strengthening intrinsic and altruistic motives, as well as providing adequate support in developing a professional identity. Wagner and French (2010) explore the impact of social and institutional contexts on preschool teachers' motivation for professional growth and changes in practice. Quantitative analysis of survey data on motivation and work attitudes, combined with qualitative insights, highlighted the predictors of intrinsic interest in professional training and showed that the interplay of motivation, professional development, and the work environment can both support and hinder desired changes in working with children. The results contribute to understanding the factors that shape preschool teacher motivation, which has implications for the design and implementation of professional development programs.

All of the above leads us to focus our research on the motivation of relevant adults, primarily preschool teachers, for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development. We believe that uncovering and gaining deeper insight into the factors of motivation for professional development can contribute to improving strategies and forms of

professional development, and thus to a higher-quality application of modern approaches in preschool education.

The subject of the research is to determine the current state of educational practice regarding preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development, in line with contemporary theoretical standpoints (co-constructivism, post-structuralism, and neurobiological knowledge about the nature of early brain development) that underpin the Preschool Education Program – *Years of Ascent* [Osnove programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja – Godine uzleta] (2018), viewed from the perspective of the preschool teachers themselves as relevant adults.

The research problem involves examining preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in fostering early childhood development, as well as determining potential differences in motivation depending on length of work experience and level of education. Accordingly, the key question addressed by the research can be formulated as follows: *How motivated are preschool teachers for professional development in fostering early childhood development, and are there differences in their motivation based on length of work experience and level of education?*

The aim of the research is to examine the level of preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development, as well as to determine whether there are differences in motivation depending on length of work experience and level of education. Also, with the goal of obtaining a broader picture, the research aims to ascertain the extent to which, and the ways in which, preschool teachers have so far engaged in professional development in this field.

Based on the aim, the following *hypotheses* have been formulated:

- H1: There are statistically significant differences in preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in fostering early childhood development, depending on length of work experience – preschool teachers with more years of experience demonstrate lower motivation for professional development compared to those with fewer years of experience;
- H2: The level of education has a statistically significant impact on preschool teachers' motivation for continued professional development in fostering early childhood development;
- H3: More than two-thirds of preschool teachers have previously engaged in professional development in the field of early childhood development and its fostering;
- H4: Preschool teachers most frequently engage in professional development for fostering early childhood development through accredited professional development programs.

In line with the aim and the stated hypotheses, the following variables were defined: level of education (secondary education, post-secondary education, college, specialization, master's) and years of work experience (up to 10 years, 11 to 20 years, 21 to 30 years, and more than 30 years). Although gender was initially considered as a potential variable, it was excluded from the analysis because the vast majority of the sample consisted of female respondents (see *Sample description*).

Method

Research design. – The study was conducted using the method of systematic non-experimental observation.

Instrument. – For data collection, a questionnaire was created and distributed electronically (via Google Forms). The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part included questions on the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents, including gender, level of education, and years of work experience. It also contained scales for preschool teachers' self-assessment of their motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development. Answers were given on five-point Likert-type scales (1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *partially disagree*, 3 – *undecided*, 4 – *partially agree*, 5 – *strongly agree*). The second part of the questionnaire was designed to gather information on the extent to which, and the ways in which (formal education, accredited programs, electronic sources, horizontal exchange, something else), preschool teachers had engaged in professional development in this field so far.

Research procedure. – The research was carried out in October and November 2024 in the Republic of Serbia. The questionnaires were distributed electronically in order to include a representative sample of preschool teachers from various preschool institutions, primarily in the territory of AP Vojvodina.

Data processing. – All collected data were processed in the SPSS statistical program. Classical descriptive statistics (arithmetic mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages) were used for describing the characteristics of the sample and basic response patterns. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine statistically significant differences.

Sample description. – A convenient sample was used. The research included a total of 91 respondents, primarily female preschool teachers (94.5%), with over half (53.8%) holding higher education degrees. The average length of work experience was 13.32 years ($Sd=9.15$), with a range from 1 to 35 years.

Research ethics. – Participation was voluntary, with prior information about the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. The questionnaires were anonymous, and all data were processed in accordance with ethical guidelines, ensuring privacy and confidentiality of responses.

Results

The obtained results indicate that preschool teachers exhibit a high level of motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development. On a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 means “I completely disagree,” 2 means “I partially disagree,” 3 means “I am undecided,” 4 means “I partially agree,” and 5 means “I completely agree”), preschool teachers rate their own motivation with an average score of 4.37 (Figure 1).

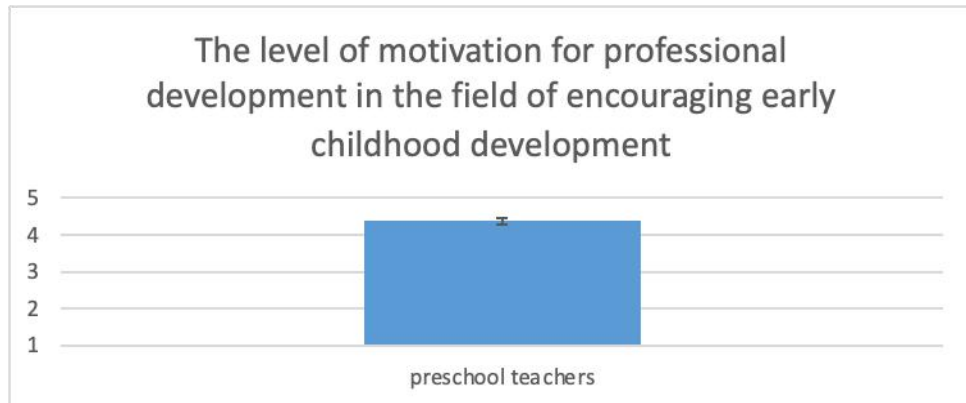


Figure 1. *Preschool teachers' self-assessment of motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development*

Additional analysis revealed certain statistically significant differences in the self-assessment of motivation for professional development in the domain of fostering early childhood development, depending on length of professional experience, $F(3,85)=3.953$, $p=.011$. Specifically, preschool teachers who have been working for more than 30 years agree less with the statement "I am motivated to strengthen and develop professionally for fostering early childhood development in order to ensure children's well-being" than do those with fewer years of service (Figure 2). This finding confirmed Hypothesis H1, which states that there are statistically significant differences in preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in fostering early childhood development depending on their length of work experience. As we can see, preschool teachers with 30 or more years of experience exhibit lower motivation for professional development compared to preschool teachers with fewer years of professional experience.

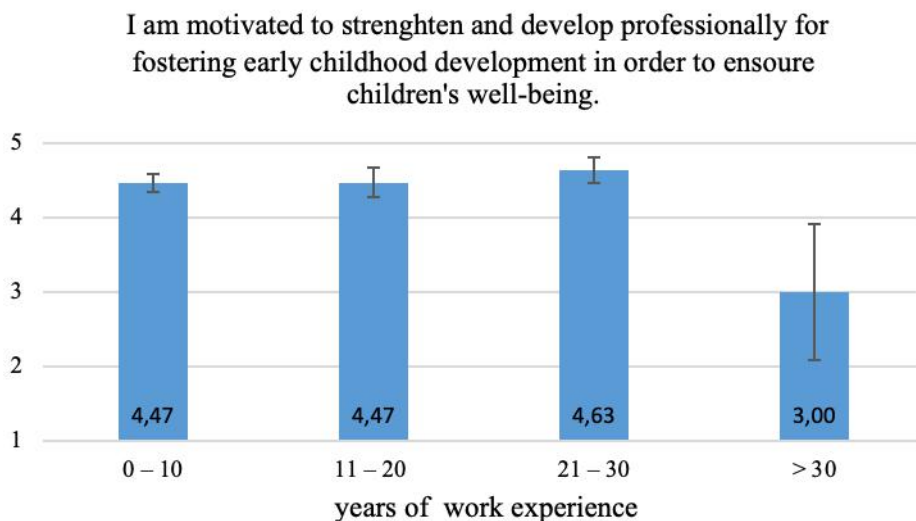


Figure 2. *Preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in fostering early childhood development by years of work experience*

A more detailed analysis of the obtained results (Figure 3) shows that the level of education has a statistically significant effect on preschool teachers' motivation for further professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development only in the context of working with gifted children, $F(4,84)=3.777$, $p=.007$. Preschool teachers who have completed secondary education agree less with the statement "I am motivated to strengthen and develop professionally for fostering early childhood development in order to ensure the well-being of gifted children" than those who have completed a master's degree or college; preschool teachers who have completed a post-secondary education agree less with this statement than those who have completed a master's degree or college; Figure 3). This finding partially confirms H2, which states that the level of education has a statistically significant impact on preschool teachers' motivation for further professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development.

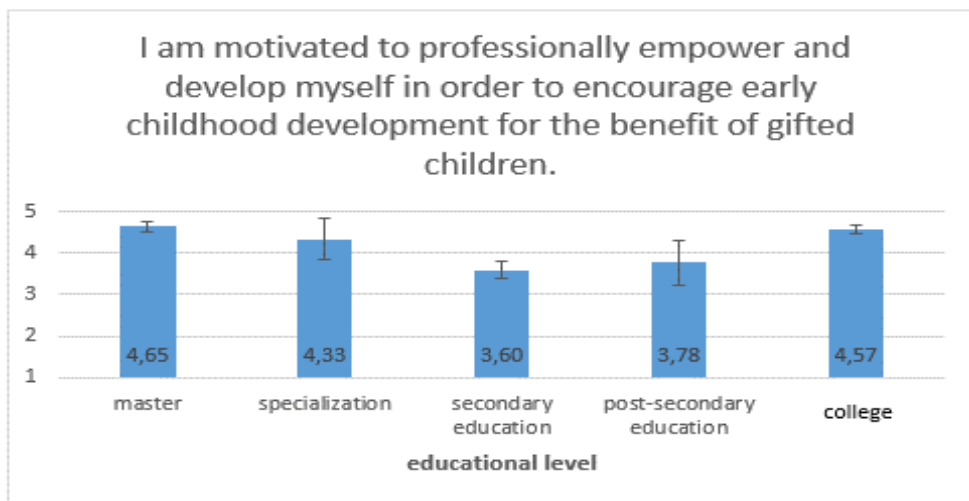


Figure 3. Preschool teachers' motivation for professional development in fostering early childhood development by level of education

Slightly more than half of the preschool teachers (61.5%) who participated in the research report that they have so far engaged in professional development in the field of early childhood development and its fostering (Figure 4), while as many as 38.5% report having had no professional development in this domain. Based on these results, Hypothesis H3, which posited that more than two-thirds of preschool teachers have previously undergone professional development in the field of early childhood development and its fostering, has not been confirmed.

Have you previously undergone professional training in the field of early childhood development and its encouragement?

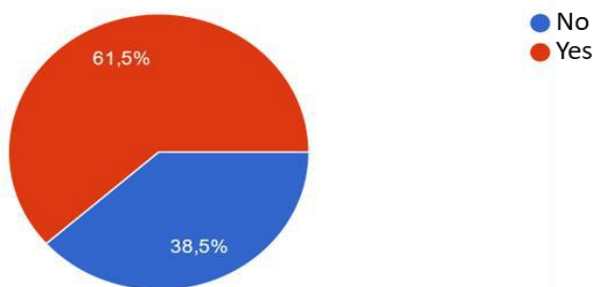


Figure 4. *Preschool teachers on professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development*

The research results (Figure 5) indicate that Hypothesis H4, which posited that preschool teachers primarily engage in professional development for fostering early childhood development through accredited professional development programs, was not confirmed. Preschool teachers report that they have predominantly (76.8%) furthered their professional development for fostering early childhood development through horizontal exchange (with colleagues). They further point out professional development via electronic sources (67.9%), while accredited professional development programs (66.1%) rank only in third place.

Preschool teachers

Please specify how you have developed your skills in this field so far.

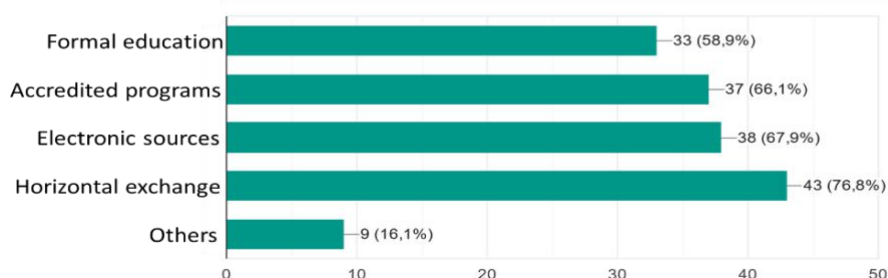


Figure 5. *The ways in which preschool teachers have developed professionally for fostering early childhood development*

Discussion

The results obtained in the research presented in this paper showed that preschool teachers with 30 or more years of work experience have a significantly lower level of motivation for professional development in the field of fostering early childhood development compared to their colleagues with fewer years of service. A decrease in motivation, especially among more experienced preschool teachers, is also reported in the study by Kizevski and Radovic (2024). This study analyzes preschool teachers' perceptions of their job in Serbia, including job satisfaction, work-

related difficulties, and the status of the profession in society. Special emphasis is placed on experienced preschool teachers (15+ years of work experience) and changes in their motivation over the course of their careers. The authors note that the results indicate relatively low overall job satisfaction, which may affect motivation, particularly among more experienced preschool teachers. Younger preschool teachers (0–5 years of work experience) demonstrated the highest enthusiasm but were also more prone to rapid disappointment. More experienced preschool teachers (15+ years of work experience) often cited monotony and lack of stimulation as key factors in reduced motivation.

The finding in our research that preschool teachers with 30 or more years of work experience show lower motivation for professional development compared to those with fewer years of work experience can also be interpreted and explained by burnout syndrome. Burnout among preschool teachers is often linked to length of service, as long-term exposure to stress in working with children, parents, and administrative tasks may lead to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. In addition to numerous health consequences, burnout affects work capacity, motivation, and the overall work environment (Maric, Maksimovic, & Bulat, 2020). Burnout among teachers has been studied and recognized in many countries as a public health issue. In Southeast Europe, research on burnout among preschool teachers has been conducted in Croatia, Greece, and Romania, showing high prevalence associated with age and years of professional experience. In Serbia, burnout has been examined for over two decades in various professions, mainly among healthcare workers (Piperac, Terzic-Supic, Maksimovic, Todorovic, Karic, Soldatovic, Cvjetkovic, Jeremic-Stojkovic, & Petricevic, 2024). In the research by Piperac et al. (2024), the prevalence of burnout was studied in a sample of 482 preschool teachers in Serbia. The results showed that the overall burnout rate was 27.1%. The findings of this study indicate a significant prevalence of burnout among preschool teachers, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Preschool teachers with more years of work experience may be at greater risk of burnout due to prolonged exposure to stressors, which can lead to pronounced fatigue and diminished motivation.

Furthermore, our research results show that the level of education significantly affects motivation for professional development, but only in the context of working with gifted children (preschool teachers with a secondary vocational degree or a post-secondary degree exhibit lower motivation to develop professionally for working with gifted children compared to those who have completed college or a master's degree). Previous research on a sample of students from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Serbia, and Poland (Simonji Cernak, Beljanski, Maric, Djordjic, Kocvarova, & Wnek-Gozdek, 2024) that focused on differences in certain dimensions of motivation (intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation) with respect to the variable of education level similarly pointed out that there are significant differences in academic motivation dimensions depending on respondents' level of education – (intrinsic) motivation is less developed in respondents with a lower level of education.

The finding from our research shows that the level of education is associated with motivation for professional development in fostering the early development of gifted children. Our results indicate that preschool teachers who have completed secondary education are less motivated than those who have completed a master's degree or college, and that preschool teachers who have completed a post-secondary education are less motivated than those who have completed a master's degree or college. These observed differences are statistically significant. A previous study of 830 preschool teachers from Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia (Bratina & Veselinov, 2022) shows insufficient representation of courses during their studies that focused on working with gifted children (Bratina & Veselinov, 2022: 119). Accordingly, special attention should be devoted to creating opportunities for preschool teachers to develop professionally in fostering the early development of gifted children, both through formal education and other forms of training.

The next finding in our research – that as many as 38.5% of preschool teachers report not having undergone professional development in the domain of early childhood development and its fostering – points to the need for creating more suitable conditions for professional development. This could help address the observed discrepancy (indicated by our research results) between the high level of motivation for professional development on the one hand and its actual implementation in the field of early childhood education on the other. The finding also suggests a need for additional investigation into the barriers to accessing professional development and the potential reasons why some preschool teachers have not had the opportunity to participate in such programs.

Furthermore, preschool teachers report that they have primarily (76.8%) advanced their professional development for fostering early childhood development through horizontal exchange (with colleagues), followed by professional development via electronic sources (67.9%), while accredited professional development programs rank in third place (66.1%). These results underscore the significance of horizontal exchange but also imply potential risks associated with using electronic sources for professional development. Namely, in the online “electronic” space, there are risks involved in selecting topics and content deemed useful or relevant, which may have very questionable (scientific and professional) value. Moreover, the finding from this research that professional development through accredited programs (in terms of frequency) ranks “only in third place” (after horizontal exchange and electronic sources) could indicate a need to evaluate these programs and their topics, as well as to implement activities that would guide practitioners toward relevant accredited programs.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate a high level of motivation among preschool teachers for professional development in fostering early childhood development, which aligns with previous research conducted in the same region (Nedimovic & Djordjev, 2024). However, a discrepancy is observed between stated motivation and its realization, given that only slightly more than half of the surveyed preschool teachers have so far engaged in professional development in this area.

It has also been confirmed that the length of work experience has a statistically significant impact on motivation for professional development, with preschool teachers who have more professional experience exhibiting lower levels of motivation. By contrast, the level of education emerged as a statistically significant motivating factor only in the context of fostering the early development of gifted children.

These findings: (a) underscore the need for further encouragement of continuous professional development among preschool teachers, particularly those with longer work experience, (b) indicate that efforts should be intensified to create conditions that enable preschool teachers to engage in professional development through various forms aimed at fostering early childhood development, and (c) imply a need for professional development of preschool teachers in the context of working with gifted children. The results can serve as a basis for improving professional development strategies in preschool education, as well as for enhancing higher education programs for future preschool teachers. Further research in this field could contribute to a better understanding of the factors influencing motivation for professional development, which would additionally improve practice and the quality of early childhood education in the Republic of Serbia. We also believe that the chosen topic itself serves as motivation for further reflection and research aimed at ensuring the well-being of all children in early childhood.

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