

## **EXPERIENCES FROM THE TEMPUS PROJECT: HARMONIZATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHER EDUCATION CURRICULA IN SERBIA**

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**Abstract.***The paper presents the outcomes of the activities carried out within the three-year-project Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia, implemented within the TEMPUS program including 8 partners from Serbia and EU, in the period between December 2013 and December 2016. The main aim of the project was to harmonize preschool teacher curricula in Serbia and to modernize it through exchanges with EU partners according to identification of desirable competencies which are supposed to permeate a modern preschool teacher education curriculum. Having compared the existing curricula and consulted the relevant literature, the legislative framework of the preschool teacher training in Serbia, as well as all the stakeholders, i.e. students and the world of labour, the team of experts within the project identified eleven areas in which key generic competencies were classified. These areas are as follows: professional competence for the organization of learning and teaching, including ability to develop program and activities stimulating and supporting development in each upbringing-educational field included in preschool curriculum, i.e. speech development, literacy, basic mathematical and science notions, development of motor skills, music, visual art, as well as creativity; professional competence for team work; professional competence for planning, monitoring and documentation of educational activities; organizational skills and pedagogical guidance of groups; knowledge of developmental and learning needs of children; knowledge of the system of preschool education; ability to use information and communication technologies in education; ability to plan one's own professional development; specific competences, knowledge and skills – arts, music, speech, drama, physical and health preservation competence; social inclusion, difference and diversity and transferable/transversal, i.e. soft skills. These main areas of competence are further elaborated into more specific competencies. The mere list of the identified main areas preschool teachers should*

*be competent in makes the profession complex and demanding, imposing serious challenges on higher education institutions providing their pre-service and in-service education, training and professional development.*

**Key words:** *kindergarten teacher, curriculum, key competencies, Tempus project.*

## **1. Introduction**

In the period between December 2013 and December 2016 a Tempus project *Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia* (Number 544141-TEMPUS-1-2013-1-RS-TEMPUS-JPCR, acronym TEACH) has been implemented. The ambitious and complex action was chosen for support within the last call of the Tempus IV program. The coordinator of the project is Preschool Teacher Training College “Mihailo Palov” in Vrsac, Serbia, and the consortium consists of the following higher education institutions: Preschool Teacher Training Colleges from Novi Sad, Krusevac and Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia, the association *Western Balkans Institute* from Belgrade and three partners from the EU: University in Maribor, Slovenia, Preschool Teacher Training College EÖTVÖS JÓZSEF from Baja, Hungary and The Manchester Metropolitan University, Great Britain. The motivation behind the action lies in the necessity to modernize VET colleges for Preschool Teachers Education in the Republic of Serbia through careful assessment of the needs and capacities of the partners involved. The action is based on the belief that quality education starts with quality teachers.

There are in total 10 vocational, i.e. professional colleges for Preschool Teachers Education in the Republic of Serbia. Even though teachers education in the educational systems in the Western Balkans has gained importance in the previous years and has been undergoing substantial reforms, vocational colleges for Preschool Teachers Education in Serbia were somewhat neglected in these processes. As a result, this educational sector has faced numerous challenges in aligning its study programmes to the European education area and failed to introduce the necessary novelties in teaching methodology and practical learning. The sector was characterized by the heterogeneous curricula and substantial differences in teaching methodology and training. Although in the past years students’ interest in the colleges in question has been steady, the number of qualified teaching staff has been declining, a trend in particularly apparent in natural sciences, i.e. math, IT, etc. Therefore, a need has arisen to harmonize and modernize preschool teacher education curricula in cooperation with EU partners.

This project introduced the necessary modifications in the given landscape of vocational, i.e. professional colleges as it managed to identify common and different elements in the curricula structures, harmonize the study courses and their level of difficulty (ECTS), and develop teaching methodology that will reflect the assessed needs of beneficiary schools and the European dimension of preschool teaching in close cooperation with the EU consortium partners. Also, the project fostered development of specific teacher training needed in order to implement new teaching methods and profiles of competences necessary for modern day preschool education in the European context.

The proposed action was in line with the recognized developmental aims stipulated in the Strategy for Development of Education until 2020 of the Republic of Serbia. This document describes the major issues existing in all educational levels. It stipulates that in the area of preschool education there is an issue of non-inclusive approach of teachers even though numerous analyses conducted by UNESCO, UNICEF, World bank, etc. indicate that the area of early education is of particular importance as it sets the ground for development of each individual in other educational cycles. For this reason a part of the Strategy document is related specifically to teachers' professional development through training and further education. Strategy for Development of Education until 2020 of the Republic of Serbia recognizes the sector of higher VET professional education as of great importance due to its aim to educate and prepare students directly to their participation at the labour market. In spite of many impediments acknowledged, including that of limited international and cooperation with economic entities, limited staff mobility, low participation in the research projects as well as the EU funded educational capacity building and technical assistance projects, the consortium managed to initiate the process of altering the present state and reach all of its predetermined aims.

This project primarily targeted teaching staff from partner institutions, i.e. professional colleges for preschool teacher education, and their students. In a broader sense, the project results will benefit the professional higher education as well as the preschool, early childhood education and care sectors.

The Tempus TEACH project has dealt with harmonization of preschool teacher training of 4 VET schools in Serbia. Specific project objectives were to:

- harmonize curricula through identifying the harmonization framework and developing individual harmonization plans;
- certify harmonized curricula at all participating VET colleges through re-accreditation and enrolment of the 1<sup>st</sup> generation of students;

- improve transversal skills of teachers through training of trainers (ToT sessions) and spill-over training sessions;
- improve teaching methodology and entrepreneurial competences of teachers through identifying learning outcomes and methods of achieving them;

It is worth mentioning that all the above stated aims have already been achieved through numerous activities carried out within the project.

## **2. Identification of desirable key competencies of preschool teachers**

One of the main aims of the project was to harmonize preschool teacher curricula in Serbia and to modernize it through exchanges with EU partners according to identification of desirable competencies which are supposed to permeate a modern preschool teacher education curriculum. The process was carried out through a number of steps: analysis and comparison of the existing curricula, research on the relevant literature and the legislative framework of the preschool teacher training in Serbia. Furthermore, the process also anticipated gaining insights into the matter of desirable preschool teacher competencies from all the stakeholders, including students, world of labour and parents. Having compared the existing curricula and consulted the relevant literature, the legislative framework of the preschool teacher training in Serbia, as well as all the stakeholders, i.e. students and the world of labour, the team of experts within the project identified eleven areas in which key generic competencies were classified.

These areas are as follows:

1. professional competence for the organization of learning and teaching, including ability to develop program and activities stimulating and supporting development in each upbringing-educational field included in preschool curriculum, i.e. speech development, literacy, basic mathematical and science notions, development of motor skills, music, visual art, as well as creativity;
2. professional competence for team work;
3. professional competence for planning, monitoring and documentation of educational activities; organizational skills and pedagogical guidance of groups;
4. knowledge of developmental and learning needs of children;
5. knowledge of the system of preschool education;
6. ability to use information and communication technologies in education;
7. ability to plan one's own professional development;
8. specific competences, knowledge and skills – arts, music, speech, drama, physical and health competence;
9. social inclusion;
10. difference and diversity;

11. transferable/transversal, i.e. soft skills.

These main areas of competence are further elaborated into more specific competencies, to be achieved through learning outcomes within courses included in the curriculum. As a result, a list of generic competences was created and they are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Desirable generic competences of preschool teachers

Area	Competencies
<p><b>1. Professional competence for the organization of learning and teaching</b></p>	<p>Creating a stimulating social and physical learning environment in the classroom.</p> <p>Able to observe and then document children’s behavior, development and learning.</p> <p>Able to use co-operative and interactive methods and techniques in learning and teaching to develop children’s knowledge and skills.</p> <p>Able to develop program and activities stimulating and supporting development in each upbringing-educational field included in preschool curriculum, i.e. speech development, literacy, basic mathematical and science notions, development of motor skills, music, visual art, as well as creativity.</p> <p>Able to formulate clear rules to create and maintain appropriate and acceptable behaviour in the group.</p> <p>Able to adjust chosen teaching methods to learning aims within child-oriented teaching.</p> <p>Able to organize a safe physical setting for children and adults.</p> <p>Is familiar with legislation regarding preparatory preschool programs and can apply this in practice.</p> <p>Is aware of the importance of creating an understanding of the relationships between socio-cultural and economic background and learning.</p> <p>Understands and has knowledge of the way early learning, and education more broadly, is organized and structured in the Serbian context.</p>
<p><b>2. Professional competence for team work</b></p>	<p>Understands and has knowledge of groups and teams and the ways in which they are formed, maintained and work.</p> <p>Knowledge and experience of establishing partnerships with key stakeholders (children, families, community, school).</p> <p>Recognizes the value of professional co-operation across disciplines and professional roles.</p> <p>Able to recognise and carry out role in a pre-school educational team, working closely with other colleagues as well as with child’s family</p>
<p><b>3. Professional competence for</b></p>	<p>Applying knowledge of planning and implementation of</p>

<p><b>planning, monitoring and documentation of educational activities</b></p>	<p>educational programmes in pre-school classrooms. Monitoring and documenting the development of individual and groups of children, either alone or in teams with other colleagues. Has the knowledge and skills to stimulate curriculum that enhances children’s cognitive, emotional, social and physical learning. Integrates knowledge, skills and abilities in specialized fields and understands them in the context of comprehensive children’s development Can create educational conditions that integrate all communication activities (language, verbal and written). Knowledge of how to use pre-school documentation systems.</p>
<p><b>4. Organizational skills and pedagogical guidance of groups</b></p>	<p>Ability to use various strategies for the planning and realization of pre-school educational programs. Is able to apply knowledge of group learning to support social interaction, asymmetric and reciprocal learning. Respecting group learning while recognizing the individual needs of all children within groups. Able to manage inappropriate behaviour in children. Valuing the needs and contributions of parents/carers in their child’s learning. Recognising and valuing the unique characteristics of preschool institutions.</p>
<p><b>5. Knowledge of developmental and learning needs of children</b></p>	<p>Able to design and develop group activities that differentiate children’s learning needs. Manages group activities that differentiate children’s learning needs and respond to these. Is able to identify and understand developmental characteristics of preschool age children. Recognizes differences in all areas of development in children (emotional, intellectual, social, physical). Differentiates between children’s behavioural and development concerns. Encourages children’s socio-emotional development including co-operation, social skills and pro-social behaviour. Has knowledge of, and can apply, methods for monitoring and stimulating cognitive development. Is able to articulate and encourage ways in which pre-school children learn and develop through play. Encourages children’s personality development. Is able to use good practice to include, and integrate into class, children with special educational needs.</p>
<p><b>6. Knowledge of the system of preschool education</b></p>	<p>Has knowledge of, and ability to use, community resources to support children’s learning and teaching. Understands, and can apply in context, the laws and regulations in relation to preschool education.</p>

	<p>Recognizes and applies the code of ethics for the education profession.</p> <p>Is able to co-operate with regional institutions and other professionals relevant to pre-school learning.</p>
<p><b>7. Ability to use information and communication technologies in education</b></p>	<p>Utilizes ICT and digital media as a source of information for programme planning and implementation.</p> <p>Ability to competently presenting professional achievements using ICT.</p> <p>Has the ability to share knowledge and skills with colleagues through the use of ICT.</p> <p>Is familiar with, and understands, ethical and legal obligations, as well as personal responsibilities in communication and use of digital sources.</p> <p>Has a high level of awareness of the need to use ICT in a sustainable, innovative and efficient way, both in education and in society generally.</p> <p>Ability to use the Internet and social media appropriately for learning in pre-schools.</p>
<p><b>8. Ability to plan own professional development</b></p>	<p>Aware of and understanding of the importance of Continuous Professional Development/ lifelong learning and how to plan professional development to enhance own practice.</p> <p>Ability to self-motivate for own Continuing Professional Development.</p> <p>Supporting the roles of creators, evaluators and practitioners in their practice.</p> <p>Ability to make critical and independent judgment on oneself and the profession of a pre-school teacher.</p> <p>Is open to the application of new knowledge, permanently reflecting on, innovating and improving one's practice.</p> <p>Able to reflect upon, think critically about one's role in the pre-school classroom, and adapt practice appropriately</p>
<p><b>9. Specific competences, knowledge and skills – arts, music, speech, drama, physical and health competence</b></p>	<p>Understanding of how to use arts, music, speech, drama or texts in the classroom to meet learning needs.</p> <p>Ability to utilise skills and knowledge in their own specialist subject areas to enhance pupil learning experiences.</p> <p>Recognising the contribution of physical education to child development, health and wellbeing, and how to integrate physical activity in pre-school contexts.</p> <p>Understanding and recognising the impacts of socio-cultural factors as they relate to health, wellbeing and young children.</p> <p>Ability to use Serbian and/or other languages effectively in the classroom context.</p> <p>Qualified in preventing abuse and neglect – (should that</p>

	<p>be, knowledge of prevention and ways of responding to suspected abuse and neglect in young children).</p> <p>Knowledge of health and safety rules and regulations, as they relate to Early Years learning.</p> <p>Ability to provide first aid within classroom and learning settings.</p>
<b>10. Social Inclusion, difference and diversity</b>	<p>Understands and can explain the importance of equal opportunities within pre-school learning.</p> <p>Sensitive to and shows respect for differences in family structures, cultural origins, ethnicities, beliefs and ways of life.</p> <p>Ability to design, and integrate in the classroom, pedagogic and methodical procedures for groups of children from diverse backgrounds.</p> <p>Creating a supportive learning environment for children, which respects differences and diversity.</p> <p>Respects and engages with, the principles of diversity and multiculturalism in education.</p> <p>Respecting, and understanding of, the individual socio-cultural backgrounds of children, and parents/carers.</p>
<b>11. Transferable/Transversal Skills</b>	<p>Able to read, analyse and integrate academic literature.</p> <p>Ability to communicate in diverse settings to a high standard in relation to written work and documentation, oral presentations and online contexts.</p> <p>Able to apply critical reasoning to practice evidence and research within the field of early childhood studies.</p> <p>Ability to undertake either a final exam or extended piece of work at the end of studies.</p> <p>Possessing high-level skills in group work but also the capability to work independently on projects.</p> <p>Able to plan professional and career engagement within the field of employment.</p> <p>Ability to use ICT, the Internet and social media, in professional, for research and knowledge updating contexts.</p> <p>Understanding of the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion in broader society and professional contexts.</p> <p>Confident in presenting oneself in a professional manner, and as appropriate to circumstances.</p>

Apart from the relevant literature, the legislative framework of the preschool teacher training in Serbia and the insights gained from all the stakeholders, the elaborated list of desirable competences was used as a starting point in creating the harmonization framework leading to harmonization of the curricula of the colleges involved in the project. In other words, in order to decrease the differences between the curricula and harmonize, individual colleges analysed their own curricula and paid special attention to build into



existing syllabi the above listed key competencies. If there was a lack of a course suitable for the development of certain competencies, new courses were created and introduced into the curriculum, while some others were excluded, or two courses were conceived as one. Harmonization framework also involved other elements: name of the study program, professional profile, aim and purpose of the study program, entrance exam, the range of mandatory (total number of points ranging between 130–150 ESPB) and optional courses, (total number of points ranging between 30–50 ESPB, including the final paper) professional practice and final paper.

Each curriculum was analyzed and the syllabi of the existing courses were modified (contents, teaching methods, literature) in such a way to create the above competences of students, future preschool teachers, through learning outcomes. Furthermore, certain deficiencies were identified in the former curricula, resulting in the need to introduce new, either mandatory or optional courses in order to reach the desirable level of harmonization. The main idea was to create such a curriculum for pre-service education of preschool teachers, so that once they graduate they “involve children and stimulate interaction with children and among children; express warmth and care, encourage the development of self-respect, self-confidence and autonomy of children; show respect for children’s perspectives; use giving support, encouragement, asking questions, etc as teaching strategies; cooperate with family and local community; encourage involvement of children of diverse backgrounds, socio-economic status, level of abilities, etc; plan their work according to abilities, needs and interests of children; monitor and evaluate abilities and progress of children using formative approach; behave like leaders and reflexive practitioners... (Vandekerckhove 2013: 41).

### 3. Harmonized and Modernized Curriculum at the Preschool Teacher Training College in Vrsac

In the case of the Preschool Teacher Training College in Vrsac, one of the main outcomes of the project, i.e. harmonized and modernized curriculum for preschool teacher education is characterized by more than 85% of harmonization at qualitative level (regarding competencies permeating the curriculum, i.e. mandatory courses, optional courses and pedagogic practice). All the courses within the new curriculum have been innovated in accordance with the harmonization framework and the adopted lists of generic and subject specific competencies. In order to harmonize as much as possible at qualitative level, apart from revision and innovation of all the syllabi within the curriculum, 4 new mandatory courses were introduced: *Social protection of children in family*, *Word play and dramatization*, *Application of ICT in upbringing-educational work with children* and *Interculturalism in the European context*. In spite of the fact that four new

mandatory courses were introduced in the curriculum, the total number of mandatory courses was decreased, while the number of optional courses was significantly increased. Thus, apart from those already existing, 25 new optional courses were introduced. Thus the total of 50 optional courses are organized in 4 modules:

- Preschool teacher - General module
- Preschool teacher with emphasized competencies for work with toddlers
- Preschool teacher with emphasized competencies for work with socially deprived (Roma) children
- Preschool teacher with emphasized competencies for work with children in English language

Consequently, the curriculum seems to be a modern one, offering students abundance of choices to create their schooling according to their interests, on the one hand, and the requirements of rapidly and constantly changing world. It was conceived in such a way that the students have the possibility to, through selection of appropriate optional courses, gain emphasized competences for certain specific fields of work, as stated above. Apart from mandatory courses, two optional courses are to be chosen by students each semester. If a student, apart from general optional courses, chooses mandatory optional courses designed for a module, it will be stated in the diploma supplement that they have emphasized competences for certain kind of work.

The newly introduced optional courses are given in the Table 2 below.

Table 2 The list of optional courses

General optional courses	Mandatory optional courses for module 1 TODDLER TEACHER, i.e preschool teacher with emphasized competences for work with children at toddler age	Mandatory optional courses for module 2 PEDAGOGIC ASSISTANT, i.e. preschool teacher with emphasized competences for work with socially deprived children	Mandatory optional courses for module 3 ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRESCHOOL TEACHER, i.e. preschool teacher with emphasized competences for work with children in English language
Kindergarten as an open system Psychology of children play Playful activities Psychological aspects of communication Didactic games	Psychology at toddler age Pedagogy at toddler age Music teaching methodology at toddler age Speech development	Inclusion of socially deprived children Corrective pedagogic work Cooperation of preschool institution and families of socially deprived children	English language 3 – 6 (four more English language courses) Foreign language acquisition at early age Children literature in foreign language acquisition

ICT as a didactic means Academic writing	teaching methodology at toddler age PE teaching methodology at toddler age Basic science teaching methodology at toddler age Visual art teaching methodology at toddler age	Teamwork Tolerance Ethics of the profession of preschool teacher Mental health	Integrative approach to various teaching contents in foreign language
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#### 4. Conclusion

In parallel with harmonization and modernization of curricula, crucial activities aiming at the empowerment of the competences and skills of the involved colleges teaching staff. A number of trainings and seminars was organized in order to improve their teaching methodology and soft-skills, in accordance with the harmonized curricula. Furthermore, as significant amount of up-to-date didactic means and equipment was purchased, necessary for proper implementation of the harmonized and modernized curricula. All the actions taken within the project are oriented towards education of a preschool teacher who will be able to face the challenges and address the needs of a modern society. The mere list of the identified main areas preschool teachers should be competent in makes the profession of a preschool teacher complex and demanding, imposing serious challenges on higher education institutions providing their pre-service and in-service education, training and professional development.

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