

ASSERTIVENESS OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS AND PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

Radmila MILOVANOVIĆ, Ph.D.
Ivana ĆIRKOVIĆ MILADINOVIĆ, Ph.D.
Biljana STOJANOVIĆ, Ph.D.
University of Kragujevac
Faculty of Education in Jagodina
ivanajag@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract. *Assertiveness represents the aspect of social competencies related to indicators of socially-adapted and self-reliable behaviour. Given the importance of social competencies in the context of developing professional competencies of teachers and preschool teachers and the realization that assertiveness is a particularly important aspect of social competencies, this research was aimed at examining the level of assertiveness of prospective teachers and preschool teachers at the beginning and during university studies. The total sample consisted of 699 subjects (254 candidates for the study groups for teachers and preschool teachers at the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac and 445 first, second and third year students of the same faculty). The degree of assertiveness was measured by the Scale for the Assessment of Assertiveness (A Scale) by Tovilović and associates. The results show that there is a significant difference in the degree of assertiveness between the candidates and students, in favour of the students ($F=8.209$; $p> 0.001$). It was also determined that the degree of assertiveness significantly increases in parallel with the year of study. Despite the fact that this increase is encouraging, given that it indicates a rise in the level of assertiveness over the course of the studies, the percentage of candidates and students, prospective teachers and preschool teachers, with low and extremely low assertiveness is troubling and indicates the necessity for planned activity aimed at developing assertiveness during studies at this faculty.*

Keywords: *assertiveness, classroom management, professional development of teachers and preschool teachers.*

1. Introduction

Presently, a concept of professional competencies of teachers is adopted in different reference frames, according to which the contemporary teacher should possess an entire range of competencies, many of which belong to the category of social competencies. There is no role of the teacher in the teaching process that is not directly related to social competencies (Korać, 2012). Given that educational work is viewed as a form of social interaction and that management of educational groups and classrooms is viewed as an aspect of the teacher's role in which his professional competencies are best reflected in, the authors of this paper believe that assertiveness represents a significant component of professional competencies of preschool teachers and teachers.

In the context of social competencies, the construct of assertiveness is viewed as a manifestation of social and emotional intelligence or as social behaviour that contributes to an adequate adaptation of an individual in social interactions, maintaining socially desirable relationships and emotional well-being of participants in a social interaction (Sarkova et al., 2013).

Assertiveness (the term itself comes from an English verb *to assert*, meaning *to declare, claim, defend* and adjective *assertive* meaning *persistent, self-conscious, self-reliable*) represents a unique capability of self-reliable self-expression in a social interaction (Vagos & Pereira, 2010). It is most commonly described in the context of two opposite forms of social behaviour – submissive and aggressive (Van Dyk & Evans, 2008). Assertiveness, as the middle road, includes the expression of thoughts, feelings and beliefs in a direct, honest and adequate manner, while taking into account the rights of other people, and it involves specific categories of social reactions, such as the ability to say “no”, the ability to make demands and ask for favours, begin and end conversations (Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). An assertive message in an interaction is a form of self-expression without domination, humiliation or any other type of endangering or injuring the feelings or rights of another individual. Assertive people respect themselves as much as they respect other people, they have control over their emotions, they do not look for or avoid conflicts and they handle conflicts well, they do not hesitate to express their opinions or disapprovals, they have a developed sense of responsibility, a more developed social network and good relationships with others, they develop a higher degree of responsibility even in difficult situations, they allow others to feel good as well and share the experience of victory, they know how to cope with stress (Shiina et al., 2005).

Previous studies indicate the existence of a high correlation between assertiveness and self-respect (Mirjanić & Milas, 2009). In literature, self-

respect is seen as a reflection of the type and quality of relationships that an individual has with others (Bishop, 2006). In the context of social competencies, high self-respect reduces the possibility for failure in social relationships and maladjusted behaviour and increases the possibility of desirable, adaptive and useful forms of behaviour. Research has also reported a high negative correlation between assertiveness and social anxiety. Authors emphasize the fear of being evaluated negatively by others as the essence of social anxiety (Hollander & Simeon, 2006). The results of many studies indicate that there is an anxiety component in the lack of assertiveness and confirm the positive effect of assertiveness on self-respect as well as on the reduction of social anxiety and improvement of social functioning (Lin et al., 2008). Assertiveness was, in fact, first studied in the domain of anxiety and depressive disorders.

In recent years, the concept of classroom management has been a recurring topic in domestic literature. The concept of classroom management refers to the management of social situations in the classroom, management of student behaviour and organization of the group's work, with an aim to create a positive learning climate. Each educational group or school class is a special social structure with its own norms, atmosphere and group dynamics. The concept of classroom management is established as a concept that connects the teacher's personality and his professional conduct, which is based on necessary competencies, directed at fulfilling all of his professional roles and the achievement of educational goals, with the processes that take place inside a group of students, that the teachers is working with, and with the outcomes of these processes (Djigić and Stojiljković 2011).

In order to effectively manage a classroom it is necessary for teachers to be persistent in their efforts, to react to inappropriate student behaviour in an adequate manner which includes a sense of security, ability to control and a desire to solve the problem (Edwards, 2005). Given that assertiveness includes a sense of security in social interactions, resolute rejection of unjustified requests, adequate opposition, clear expression of ideas, independent decision-making with respect for others, openness and honesty towards others, an ability to listen to, understand and praise others, the authors of this paper believe that assertive behaviour is one of the most desirable forms of behaviour in the context of professional competencies of preschool teachers and teachers. Some other effects of assertive behaviour that need to be brought to mind are: equality in relationships, reduction of fear in emotionally charged situations, openness in resolving conflicts, maintaining self-respect and dignity of others in social interactions. The evidence that assertive individuals manage to cope with stress in a more successful way should also not be ignored, given that it is well-known that stress represents an integral part of educational work (Zavertnik et al., 2010),

that assertive behaviour is learned and that preschool and early school age education is pivotal for the development of assertiveness (Milenković, Hadži–Pešić, 2006). In this respect, timely encouragement of appropriate forms of assertive behaviour will affect the development of the children's social skills and self-respect as well as their skills of coping with stress (Tavakoli et al., 2009).

Assertiveness is an important quality in the context of professional competencies of preschool teachers and teachers given the fact that it facilitates the creation of interpersonal relationships based on clearly defined boundaries, open communication, persistence and consistency, which are all necessary in educational work. The professional development of preschool teachers and teachers is a continuous process and it is clear that professional competencies cannot be discussed independently of their education and programs of their professional development (Locke & Sadler, 2007). Education programs for prominent teachers and preschool teachers should be designed in such a manner that they ensure the development of defined competencies. Research shows that, in our country, education of teachers is subject-driven and that it is dominated by the acquisition of theoretical knowledge (Vilotijević and Vilotijević, 2014) with the development of methodical competencies and social skills being neglected. Proceeding from what was stated above, the assessment of the level of assertiveness of prominent preschool teachers and teachers at the beginning and during their studies may be a relevant undertaking, given that hardly anyone has addressed this issue thus far. This study, as well as those that are similar to it, can indicate the direction that should be taken when making changes to the curriculum of pedagogical university studies, in order to promote and support the potentials of prominent preschool teachers and teachers.

2. Method

Sample. The sample consisted of 699 subjects (254 candidates for the study groups for teachers and preschool teachers at the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac, in the entrance exam in 2015 and 445 first, second and third year students of the same faculty). The average age of candidates was 18.11, of first-year students it was 19.9, of second-year students 20.2 and of third-year students 21.8 years of age. Female students were represented in a higher percentage than male students (85.82% of female students and 14.7% of male students). The structure of the sample with respect to the status and year of study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of the sample with regard to the status and year of study

<i>Status and year of study</i>	<i>f</i>
Candidates	254
First-year students	147
Second-year students	144
Third-year students	154
Σ	699

Instrument. Assertiveness was assessed by using the *Scale for the Assessment of Assertiveness (A Scale)* by Tovilović and associates, which was constructed from items that, according to the authors, describe reactions and behaviours typical for the (non-)expression of assertiveness. Respondent are instructed to use a five-point Likert scale to provide an answer in accordance with their reactions in social situations that require assertiveness, ranging from permanent absence of such reactions or behaviours (never), to their permanent presence (always). From a total of 27 items of the A scale, 13 items are positively directed (directed towards assertiveness) while 14 items are negatively directed (Tovilović et al., 2009). Positively directed items consist of indicators of assertive behaviour (“When it is necessary I can provide clear and fair criticism to another person”, “Without imposing my own will I can openly make it clear to other people what it is that I want and what I do not want”). Negatively directed items consist of indicators of non-assertive behaviour that point to socially inhibited, passive social behaviour (e.g. “I give in to others more than I would like to”, “I would rather remain silent than enter a conflict with another person”, “It is hard for me to openly say NO”). The reliability of the A scale is high (Cronbach’s Alpha =0.960). The representativeness of the scale expressed by normalized KMO is 0.926 which places it in a group of scales with a high level of representativeness. Scale validity examinations are in favour of good concurrent and construct validity of the A scale.

Analysis procedures. Data analysis included methods of descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, standard deviation) as well as methods of analytical statistics for the assessment of the significance of differences. In order to examine the significance of differences between three groups of data single factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used. In order to examine the significance of differences between the means obtained in our research in relation to the normative sample the *t-test for independent samples* was used.

3. Results

Descriptive indicators of the level of assertiveness in the entire sample and in groups are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive indicators of the level of assertiveness in the entire sample in relation to groups and in the normative sample

	<i>N</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
CANDIDATES	254	83.44	9.98.	18	101
FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS	147	84.32	10.12	35	101
SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS	144	86.27	11.91	59	101
THIRD-YEAR STUDENTS	154	89.03	12.54	57	101
ENTIRE SAMPLE	699	86.24	11..16	18	101
NORMATIVE SAMPLE	727	95.25	15.34	45	133

The obtained average values in the group of candidates are lesser than the average values achieved by students from all examined groups. The obtained average values in the entire sample are significantly lesser ($t = -4.782$; $p = 0.000$) in relation to the normative sample of the assertiveness scale that was applied (Biro et al., 2009). The obtained average values in all four examined groups are also significantly lesser than the average values of the normative sample ($t = -4.866$; $p = 0.000$; $t = -4.182$; $p = 0.000$; $t = -4.071$; $p = 0.000$; $t = -4.091$; $p = 0.000$).

By further comparing the scores obtained in the entire sample and the scale norms, a classification of candidates into appropriate assertiveness categories was performed, according to the instructions provided with the scale (Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of scores according to assertiveness categories in the entire sample

	<i>f</i>	<i>%</i>
EXTREMELY LOW ASSERTIVENESS	58	8.28
LOW ASSERTIVENESS	148	21.13
AVERAGE ASSERTIVENESS	313	44.64
HIGH ASSERTIVENESS	147	21.16
EXTREMELY HIGH ASSERTIVENESS	33	4.79
Σ	699	100

In the entire sample the highest percentage (44.64%) belongs to the category of average assertiveness. Almost an identical percentage of respondents achieved scores that placed them in categories of low (21.13%) and high assertiveness (21.16%). Results which placed them in a category of extremely low assertiveness were achieved by 56 respondents (8.28%) and for the category of extremely high assertiveness by 33 respondents (4.79%).

The classification of individual scores into appropriate assertiveness categories by groups was performed in the same manner (Table 3).

Table 4. Distribution of scores according to assertiveness categories by groups

	CANDIDATES		FIRST YEAR STUDENTS		SECOND YEAR STUDENTS		THIRD YEAR STUDENTS		Σ
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
EXTREMELY LOW	21	8.26	15	10.20	13	9.02	9	5.84	58 8.29
LOW A.	82	32.28	28	19.04	22	15.27	16	10.38	148 21.17
AVERAGE ASSERTIVENESS	120	47.24	63	42.85	50	34.72	80	51.94	313 44.77
HIGH A.	27	10.62	34	23.12	51	35.41	35	22.72	147 21.03
EXTREMELY HIGH	4	1.57	7	4.76	8	5.55	14	9.09	33 4.72
Σ	254	100	147	100	144	100	154	100	699 100

The highest percentage, according to the achieved scores, belongs to the category of average assertiveness in all groups. In other assertiveness categories the examined groups differ. In the category of low assertiveness first place belongs to the group of candidates, followed by first and second-year students and, in the end, third-year students. The reverse is true in the category of high assertiveness – first place (the highest percentage) belongs to third-year students, followed by second and first-year students, and in the end the candidates.

Table 5 shows the distribution of scores achieved by candidates and students in two categories – *assertive* (obtained by adding the number of respondents from the average assertiveness, high and extremely high assertiveness categories) and *non-assertive* (obtained by adding the number of respondents from the low and extremely low assertiveness categories).

Table 5. Distribution of scores in the categories – assertive and non-assertive – in groups of candidates and students

	CANDIDATES		1ST YEAR STUDENTS		2ND YEAR STUDENTS		3RD YEAR STUDENTS		Σ
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	
NON-ASSERTIVE	103	40.55	43	29.25	35	24.30	25	16.23	206 29.47
ASSERTIVE	151	59.44	104	70.74	109	75.69	129	83.76	493 70.52
Σ	254	100	147	100	144	100	154	100	699 100

The percentage of non-assertive subjects obviously decreases with the year of study, starting from 40.55% of candidates and ending with 16.23% of third-year students. On the other hand, the percentage of assertive subjects increases, starting from 59.44% of candidates and ending with 83.76 % of third-year students.

In order to determine whether there are significant differences between the examined groups a single factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied. Table 6 shows the values of the applied test.

Table 6. Significance of differences between examined groups

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1065.684	2	532.842	8.209	.000
Within Groups	37127.871	572	64.909		
Total	38193.555	574			

The analysis shows that there are highly significant differences (F=8.209; p> 0.001) between groups. However, this does not yet imply that it is evident between which groups this statistically significant difference occurs. Subsequent statistical tests, the results of which are shown in Table 7, determine the pairs between which the significant difference occurs.

Table 7. Results of subsequent tests (Post Hoc Tests)

(I) Group of subjects	(J) Group of subjects	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
I group	Second group	-2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6126	-1.0132
	Third group	-2.58764*	.88502	.010	-4.6673	-1.0231

	Fourth group	-2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6126	-1.0132
II group	First group	2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6451	-1.0131
	Third group	-2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6226	-1.0311
	Fourth group	-2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6126	-1.0132
III group	First group	2.58764*	.78502	.001	-4.5126	-1.0231
	Second group	-2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6226	-1.0231
	Fourth group	-2.82785*	.76379	.001	-4.6126	-1.0132
IV group	First group	-2.72765*	.76379	.001	-4.6326	-1.0230
	Second group	-2.72785*	.76379	.001	-4.5326	-1.0131
	Third group	-2.81765*	.76379	.001	-4.5226	-1.0321

The mean difference is significant at the 0.01 level.

According to the results of subsequent tests it was found that there is a statistically significant difference between a group of candidates for the faculty of pedagogical sciences and its students ($p=.001$), in favour of the students. It has also been determined that there is a highly significant difference between the candidates and students of all examined years of study, in favour of the students. The research also showed highly significant differences between first and second year and senior students ($p=.001$). First-year students have achieved significantly lower scores than second and third year students and second-year students have achieved significantly lower scores than third-year students.

4. Discussion

The results of this research, whose aim it was to examine the assertiveness of prominent teachers and preschool teachers at the beginning and during their studies, have shown that the level of assertiveness that candidates possess when they enter university studies is troubling given that the percentage of candidates who are classified into categories of extremely low and low assertiveness is, in total, greater than the number of candidates classified into the average assertiveness category. If we add to this the fact that a small percentage of candidates is recognized as belonging to the categories of high and extremely high assertiveness and that the average assertiveness values obtained by all examined groups are significantly lower than those obtained by the normative sample, this concern becomes quite justified. However, the fact that the level of assertiveness of students increases with the years of study and that candidates significantly differ from students, in favour of students, which is clearly shown by the distribution of

results obtained by prominent teachers and preschool teachers – first, second and third year students, is encouraging. In these groups, a much higher percentage was recorded, in total, in the categories of high and extremely high assertiveness, and a much lesser number in the categories of extremely low and low assertiveness. If the percentage of achievements in the categories of average, high and extremely high assertiveness is summed up, it becomes evident that 55.89% of our students are assertive at the beginning of their studies, while 73.47% of the first, second and third year students are assertive at these levels. By comparing the results of this research with results of available foreign studies it can be seen that 62.5% of foreign students are assertive at the beginning of their studies while 67.2% of them are assertive in their third year (Eskin, 2003; Ibrahim, 2011). According to the results of this research, our students are assertive in a smaller percentage at the beginning of their studies than their foreign colleagues, but they are assertive in a larger percentage during their studies.

The level of assertiveness of prominent teachers and preschool teachers at the beginning of their studies differs from the level of assertiveness of their older colleagues – students of the first, second and third year. The obtained differences in achievement between candidates and students are statistically significant. Candidates for the Faculty of Education have achieved scores that are significantly lower than those of their colleagues – students of the first, second and third year. The progress in the assertiveness of prominent preschool teachers and teachers is considered significant since assertiveness is very important for both professions (Lawton & Stewart, 2005). It is important that preschool teachers and teachers develop assertiveness skills in order to ensure safe and efficient cooperation and communication for their own students (Unal, 2012). By expressing their feelings, attitudes and demands honestly, clearly and directly, without anxiety or intimidation, they can strengthen the confidence of children and provide a good basis for constructive communication that leads towards the realization of goals. Given that both of these groups are expected to manage and become leaders, assertiveness will allow them to appear as motivators, in order for those that they work with to also be able to freely express their feelings and attitudes. Their position also implies empowering people that they work with towards improving their personal autonomy (Watanabe, 2010).

The obtained results are consistent with the results of other studies that show that young people become more assertive during their academic education (Deltsidou, 2008). This can be explained through the connection of assertiveness and self-respect. High assertiveness scores are continually related to high self-respect scores (Alinčić, 2013). Students who have already completed one, two or more years of study certainly have more self-respect

than beginners, especially candidates in the entrance exam. An explanation can be sought in the process of education itself. Researchers have found a positive correlation between the level of assertiveness and assertiveness training conducted during their education (McCabe & Timmins, 2005). The results of this research can also, at least partly, be explained by the contents of study programs at our university (students learn communication skills in several study subjects). This also points to the conclusion that assertiveness trainings should become a component of all programs of education of future professionals whose jobs are based on communication.

The obtained results, at least those related to the candidates, can also be viewed in light of the connection between assertiveness and anxiety that has been confirmed in many studies (Calkins et al., 2009). Assertiveness was first studied in the domain of anxiety disorders. High scores on assertiveness scales are associated with low scores on social anxiety scales (Tovilović, 2005). It has been shown that greater assertiveness leads to a significant reduction in social anxiety and that low assertiveness may have importance as a predictor of the development of anxiety disorders (Košutić et al., 2012). Since the assessment of assertiveness of the candidates was conducted during the entrance exam, it is conceivable that the test-situation related anxiety has influenced the results on the applied scale by lowering them. On the other hand, it is possible that this situation was particularly convenient for the assessment of real assertiveness, given that assertive individuals possess stronger mechanisms of coping with stress and reducing anxiety (Ito et al., 2008). In any case, it is necessary to follow the candidates and students that have been classified, according to their achievements, into categories of low and extremely low assertiveness, during their university studies, given the mentioned association that exists between anxiety and self-respect and given the experiences of teachers with a number of students of these study programs who have, during the course of their studies, shown visible anxiety in situations when they needed to appear before their group or in class during practical teaching. Anxiety, insecurity and a lack of assertiveness can be a serious impediment for working in the pedagogical profession that demands group management and cooperation with parents and other subjects in educational work.

5. Conclusion

The starting point of the paper is a theoretical definition of assertiveness as a significant component of social competencies. Given that assertiveness implies a feeling of security in social interactions, without aggressiveness, that it is connected to self-respect and the absence of social anxiety, assertive behaviour is one of the most desirable forms of behaviours in the context of professional competencies of preschool teachers and

teachers. In addition to this, knowledge about the real potential of students is very important in the process of education, in order to deliberately foster their strengths and work towards the timely correction of deficiencies. By assessing the assertiveness of candidates and comparing it to the assertiveness of students, prominent preschool teachers and teachers, results were obtained that allow us to infer that students of both directions are more assertive than their colleagues at the beginning of university studies, and that they are becoming more assertive as they progress in their studies. Despite these indicators being encouraging, because they suggest a rise in assertiveness during the course of the studies, the percentage of candidates and students, prominent preschool teachers and teachers with low and extremely low assertiveness is worrying and requires further monitoring. Since research has unequivocally confirmed that assertiveness can be significantly improved through practice and that this in effect reduces anxiety in social contexts, the authors of this paper consider that it is of the utmost importance for the development of professional competencies of prominent preschool teachers and teachers to be familiar with their real characteristics at the beginning of their studies and to systematically work on improving them during the course of their studies through a system of practical exercises, supervision and mentoring.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the issue of factors that are associated with an increase in students' assertiveness levels during their studies, remains an open one and represents a challenge for future research which could deal, for example, with assessing the extent to which the contents of study programs contribute to the development of the students' assertiveness during their studies or the contribution of self-reliability, which is a consequence of the advancement in studies.

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