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Teacher competence as a basis for teacher education – Views of Serbian teachers and teacher educators

Around the world reforms in teacher education have been oriented towards making the preparation of teachers more functional for development of competencies they need in practice. At the same time, much criticism has been voiced about such reforms jeopardising the fundamental humanist traditions in teaching, based on beliefs about non-instrumental values of education. In this study we examine teachers' perceptions of importance of competencies and explore their implications for teacher education. The study has been designed to ensure that voices of teachers and teacher educators are heard in identification of areas of expertise that make up a competent teacher. We conducted a principal component analysis of the response of 370 teachers and teacher educators in Serbia to a questionnaire about the importance of a number of aspects of teacher competence. We identified four components underlying teachers' perceptions of competencies relating to 1) values and child-rearing; 2) understanding of the education system and contribution to its development; 3) subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum; and 4) self-evaluation and professional development. Teachers perceived all but the second area of competence as very important, with the fourth scale perceived as of the highest importance. Implications of each area of competence for teacher education are discussed and conclusions are drawn for the development of teacher education curricula.

Introduction

The initial preparation of teachers in Serbia and other Western Balkan countries has been critiqued in two recent studies conducted in this region (Rajović & Radulović, 2007; Zgaga, 2006). Two major inadequacies have been identified: a) teacher preparation is predominantly, if not exclusively, focused on knowledge in a subject area, and b) even there, education lacks an emphasis on 'practical experiences in relation to theoretical contents, topics and competencies' (Zgaga, 2006, p. 27). The latter study reported that most respondents from teacher education institutions believed it was time for a comprehensive reform of their curricula, with a view toward enhancing the national education systems and improving their compatibility with European and international trends (p. 12).

Internationally, reforms in teacher education face the challenges of the decentralisation and 'marketisation' of education systems, as well as issues of quality and accountability that relate to these processes (Gilroy, 2005; Zuzovsky & Libman 2006; Moon, 2007). Many of the concerns expressed in the region's studies about the adequacy of current teacher preparation are, in fact, shared by many countries that have been implementing similar reforms of teacher education during the last twenty years. These concerns include issues of balance between the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary for teachers. According to Moon (2007), they also include the tension between concern for the status of teachers or the academic status of teacher education on the one hand, and pressures to integrate training into classroom practices on the other. The latter comes from the ministries, schools and sometimes parents, whereas teacher educators are concerned about the status of teacher education given the 'very different expectations of the academic world', namely that

teachers be strong in research and have a solid theoretical basis for their work (p.9). However, despite the ongoing debates about the balance between theory and practice in curriculum design, the integration of practical training does not have to be at odds with the professional status, as this is not the case with other professions such as medicine and law (*Ibid.*). In both previously-mentioned studies from the region, it has been suggested that a solution may lie in orientating teacher education towards the development of key competencies in subject and educational matters with provisions made for practical experiences (Rajović & Radulović, 2007, p. 431-432; Zgaga, 2006, p. 27). Similar changes have been implemented elsewhere and have proven to be highly problematic. However, different governments have adopted different approaches to tackling the adjustment. In some countries (for example, Canada and England), new regulatory frameworks were introduced with minimal consultation with practitioners, while in others (such as the Netherlands) a consensus-building approach was adopted rather than a regulatory one (Moon, 2007). Taking into account Serbia's aspiration for European integration and the prospects of teacher education convergence in Europe (Sayer, 2006), the experiences of other countries represent a source for learning about the advantages and disadvantages of this proposed line of change. Later, we will describe how we used the lists of competencies adopted in Scotland and the Netherlands as the basis for the development of the instrument for this study, as we believe in the essential importance of teachers' involvement in the process of competence definition.

In this paper we first explore the factors that prompted actors in teacher education to consider competencies as bases for teacher education in the given context, which are to be taken into account when change is considered (Fullan, 1993). Next, we discuss the much-debated concept of teaching as a set of competencies, and adopt a broad definition of a competence as inclusive of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities, and beliefs and values. We then present the procedure and findings of the empirical study conducted with 370 teachers and teacher educators in Serbia. The study informs us about their views regarding the areas of expertise necessary for teaching professionals, as well as those regarding the competencies each of the areas should contain.

Background

As in many other places, the question of competencies as a basis for teacher education in Serbia has been prompted by questions about teacher quality in light of new student demands, the changed nature of the knowledge needed by teachers, and the balance between accountability and professional autonomy (Wubbels, 1995; Cowen, 2002; Day, 2002). We outline below some of the issues involved with each of the questions, which are also shared by teachers, teacher educators and education policy makers elsewhere (Moon, 2007).

Growing demands, lower status

Across the world, community expectations for teacher quality appear to be rising at the same time as the status of teachers is falling (Moon, 2007). This seems to be the case for the teachers in Serbia as well.

According to Kovács-Cerović (1999), in the former Yugoslavia after World War II, quality public education was an important social goal of the new state. Teaching was regarded as a profession with strong normative and even authoritarian connotations (Closs, 1995) and teachers enjoyed reputable status and awards for the services they rendered. There existed a general sense of trust in teachers and an image of the education system as successful. However, this image was a result of the outstanding individuals operating within the system, and none of these features were ever institutionalised (Kovács-Cerović, 1999).

The situation changed drastically over the course of the 1990s with a decline in the quality of education, and, in many places, lowered criteria for entry into the profession due to teacher shortages. Some indication of the decreased social and material status of teachers is evident in the drop in the proportion of the gross national product allocated for teachers' salaries, as well as brain drain and negative selection for the profession (Ministry of Education and Sports of the Republic of Serbia, 2001). Leclercq (1996) found that the general perception of under-performance in the education system, linked to the teaching profession's loss of prestige, has had an even bigger effect (than salaries) on teachers' morale and motivation—and has ultimately lowered the quality of teachers' performance.

Most parents no longer unequivocally trust governments, schools or teachers. For teachers as professionals, a distinction is increasingly made between the concept of rendering service to the government (their main employers) and that of rendering service to students and parents ('the real clients' of the education system) (Wubbels, 1995). It is not uncommon for teachers to face competing challenges as they strive to meet the expectations of these two kinds of clients (p. 245).

In the post-Yugoslav context, governments tend to see education primarily as an arena for building and preserving national identities. While many parents endorse this idea as well, they are also naturally concerned about their children's preparation for adulthood and the world of work. Trust in teachers' ability to deliver around these two essential goals of education has been seriously undermined. The changing world of work entails the need to impart 'new' knowledge and skills, as well as the values and attitudes that the majority of the practicing teaching force has never had a chance to acquire (Closs, 1995). To a large extent, this is due to the fact that teacher education has traditionally been unduly disconnected from the lower-level educational institutions that comprise its labour market. Gilroy (2005) foresees that schools as the marketplace for teachers will have more and more say in the recruitment and training of teachers. Studies of teacher education in the region invariably suggest that it is deficient in its capacity to prepare future teachers for the practice of teaching (Closs, 1995; Rajović & Radulović, 2007; Zgaga, 2006; Vizek Vidović, 2005).

Knowledge base for teachers

Teachers need to possess a body of knowledge and be able to apply that knowledge to a variety of situations within their professional setting. This body of knowledge involves knowledge of subject matter and pedagogy, including pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987), as well as a philosophical, historical and sociological framework for educational ideas (Cowen, 2002). The assumption that teachers need a strong knowledge base has always been and today remains present in the region, as in many other places (see for example Van Horebeek, 1992; Wubbels, 1992). Since the 1970s, higher schools for teacher preparation have been undergoing the process of 'upgrading' to the university sector, which is seen as more adequate for the lengthy education in academic disciplines that underpins the teaching profession.

As a rule, the education of classroom teachers in Serbia (who teach 6-11 year olds in lower grades of primary school) presently includes: academic knowledge in a subject area, pedagogical content knowledge for individual subjects, pedagogy, developmental psychology, the sociology of education, and general subjects such as philosophy, economy and sociology. The preparation of subject teachers (teaching 11-17 year olds in upper primary and secondary school) varies significantly across faculties. At some faculties teaching sciences that are school subjects, students can choose from the outset a department of teacher education, while at others students have the possibility of selecting a teacher education track—or a set of compulsory or optional teacher-track courses—later in the course of their study. Both subject-specific and pedagogical content are approached from their internal academic disciplines rather than with an emphasis on their educational value. Many of the institutions that educate subject teachers do not require teaching practice, and when they do, the practice is based on

informal arrangements with volunteer schools without a clear curriculum or organised mentoring (Kovács-Cerović, 2006, p. 505-507).

This sort of teacher preparation has mainly been criticised for its view of professional practice as applied formal knowledge, which fails to recognise the formative influence of practice in the use and creation of knowledge (Harris, 1997). Many studies of teachers reveal that their professional activity involves encountering specific situations that do not occur as defined problems (Schön, 1983). Defining the problem is, in fact, one of the most difficult tasks of professional activity and, therefore, is not a matter of the straightforward application of theoretical knowledge (Verloop, Driel & Meijer, 2001). We now know that teachers' knowledge is inseparable from their beliefs, personal values and attitudes (Day, 2002; Fives & Buehl, 2008), despite the fact that it is difficult to grasp the workings of such intuitive elements of teacher cognition and decision-making. Today, many authors contend that teacher education should provide some kind of exchange between theory and professional expertise (Verloop *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, recent theories argue that 'realistic' teacher education starts with student-teachers' experiences rather than with the theories to be found in literature (Korthagen, 2001). The concept of the teacher as a sole source of knowledge and information is apparently outdated. Although subject and pedagogical knowledge about themes and problems, also referred to as academic knowledge (Rajović & Radulović, 2007), continues to represent an important part of a teacher's professional portfolio, it is by no means sufficient for good teaching. The missing element of teacher education in the region is the knowledge of how to identify and deal with problems in a concrete setting—a combination of cognitive and practical knowledge, skills, experiences and strategies, and also emotions, values, motivation and attitudes, referred to as competencies (p. 419).

Accountability and autonomy

In socialist Yugoslavia, education, like all other social and economic activity, was governed by so-called 'self-management'—a specific mechanism of self-regulation that allowed for a large degree of professional autonomy and made workers responsible for determining the policy of an institution (Georgeoff, 1982). It also meant that professional accountability was to be achieved by means of self-regulation and, in Harris' words, 'that only fellow professionals could make judgments upon others' (1997). In practice, however, it meant the self-regulation of individuals rather than regulation by professional groups. Teachers were seen as autonomous professionals whose performance was primarily tied to classroom tasks. Yet individual autonomy was significantly constrained by centrally prescribed curricula and by the use of *the* textbook. In practice, teachers by and large applied the same 'chalk and talk' style routines (Closs, 1995).

Increasingly, the work of teachers everywhere is observed critically by the public (Zuzovsky & Libman, 2006). In many countries, reforms are directed at the decentralisation of decision-making and at an increase in schools' accountability. Questions have been raised about the possible role of governments in quality control, suggesting almost universal practices of setting 'standards' or 'benchmarks', including determining what characteristics quality teachers should possess (Cowen, 2002; Harris, 1997; Zuzovsky & Libman 2006; Storey 2006). Education professionals in the Western Balkans share the view that teaching should be a 'regulated profession' (Zgaga, 2003, p 10). The question is who should be in control of such regulation. It is not uncommon for governments to be substantially involved in control over entry into the profession, through procedures of licensure or the accreditation of teacher education institutions. In Serbia, a commission charged with the development of teacher standards has recently been formed by a state agency for the development of education (the Ministry of Education and Sports of the Republic of Serbia, 2008). At the same time, higher education institutions in the country, including those for educating teachers, are in the process of implementing the changes brought about by the Bologna process, so that traditionally content-driven curricula are now to be based on student learning outcomes and competencies to be defined in

consultation with future employers. In the case of teacher education programmes, employers are to be found primarily in schools.

In many countries, government-set 'standards', conceived of as 'what teachers should know and be able to do' (Zuzovsky & Libman 2006, p 37) have largely affected state-mandated programmes of teacher preparation, leading them to focus on the 'competencies' teachers need in practice. However, the way governments have attempted to 'regulate' the issue of teacher quality has provoked a good deal of controversy in many places (Day, 2002; Elbaz, 1992; Zuzovsky & Libman 2006; Lasky, 2005; O'Connor, 2008). Campaigns for more governmental control over curricula, assessments and teacher standards have been criticised for bringing about the practice of 'teaching to the test', and for jeopardising teachers' professional autonomy and opportunities to exercise discretionary judgment, as well as for endangering the moral and social values essential to teachers' identities (Day, 2002, p.683). To avoid these sorts of pitfalls of external standard-setting, it is paramount that professional groups set the requirements for group membership and be the primary source of the standards defined as professional competencies (Wubbels, 1995). This is especially true given the number of studies that conclude that reforms incongruent with teachers' perceptions of their professional identity are likely to fail (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt 2000; Day, 2002; Lasky, 2005; Verloop *et al.*, 2001).

In conclusion, the idea of competence as a basis for teacher education curricula—in Serbia and elsewhere—has been prompted by the challenge of meeting the new demands of students as education clients, by the insufficiency of academic knowledge alone as a knowledge base for teachers, and by moves to increase teacher accountability. The suggestion that competencies should form the basis for the standards of the teaching profession and those of teacher preparation (Rajović & Radulović, 2007, Zgaga 2006) is conveniently in time and in tune with Bologna-led curricular reforms at teacher education institutions and the establishment of the national commission for teacher standards in Serbia. The international debate about the competence and standards movement seems to suggest that consultation with the teaching profession is critical to a meaningful definition of teacher competencies (Beijaard *et al.*, 2000; Day, 2002; Lasky, 2005). This is why, in the present study, we involved teachers and teacher educators in an examination of perceptions of teacher competencies.

Even those who criticise the development of standards support the value of a frame of reference for the improvement of teacher education and professional development practices (Koster *et al.*, 2005; Zuzovsky & Libman, 2006). For example, Zuzovsky and Libman (2006) explain that they question the value of standards, not as guidelines, but as controlling devices (p. 48). Koster *et al.* (2005) make it clear that their 'professional profile' is meant to support teacher and institute development, rather than being directed towards the creation of an assessment system (p. 160). Similarly, the present study was designed to serve as a frame of reference for setting the aims of teacher education curricula. At the same time, it can serve as a system for orienting teachers towards commonly-set standards that reflect the values of their cultural and political setting, while still allowing them personal choice under these standards (van Huizen *et al.*, 2005).

The concept of competence

In order to identify an appropriate direction of change in teacher education, one must start by considering what makes up teacher expertise and what is the nature of good teaching. These are seemingly simple and universal questions. Yet, it has proven to be intensely challenging to formulate satisfactory answers to guide teacher preparation policies and programmes. Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) suggest that answers to these questions should be sought in the practices of educational research and inquiry. Extensive research on the problem has offered a variety of views and theories.

Here, we will consider more closely one possibility suggested in the given context—the concept of teaching competence and its implications for teacher preparation. We use the term ‘competence’ as more general than ‘competency’ except when we refer to the particular competencies comprise teacher competence.

The understanding of the concept of a competence in the literature has undergone significant changes since its introduction into discussions of teaching ‘expertise’. Originating from behavioural psychology, the concept of teaching competencies as a set of ‘discrete’, ‘theory-free’, practical skills spread within many countries beginning in the late 1960s. The idea was that observable events in teachers’ performance in practice could serve as a basis for defining them as ‘competent’ teachers. Accordingly, adequate teacher preparation had to be effective in shaping future teachers’ performance in their daily teaching (described in van Huizen *et al.*, 2005). The belief underlying this paradigm was that teaching expertise could best be mastered by applying a range of methods or class management techniques learned from experienced teachers. In some countries, this brought the concept of teacher *education* closer to that of *training* focused on the development of skills relevant for teaching. This paradigm of competence-based teacher education weakened the university influence on teacher education and encouraged the establishment of partnerships with schools as important providers of such ‘practical’ teacher preparation. In England, for example, as much as 80% of teacher training is based in schools (Stephens *et al.*, 2004).

It has been much debated whether this idea of competence can form a valid basis for curriculum development in higher education in general (Barnett, 1994) and teacher education in particular (Korthagen, 2004). Barnett argued that competencies conceived as observable behaviours in professional contexts are inadequate guidelines for curriculum-building for two main reasons. In his opinion, higher education is not only (or at all) a matter of developing competencies for a particular occupation; in addition, the idea of competencies as predictable behaviours presupposes predictable situations in the world of work, if their development is to be a valid object of higher education.

The first argument perhaps has less pertinence to teacher education, which universally exists for the purpose of educating teachers for their particular occupation. Moreover, in most countries, teacher preparation aims to educate for teaching in a particular national education system. What other than the requirements of the teaching occupation could guide the education of teachers? Admittedly, competencies identified by practitioners should not be the only determinant of what is worthwhile in teacher education. This is why, in our study, teacher educators (alongside teachers) represent another important source for validating our frame of reference for teacher education. Yet, teaching practice is the core element of such education. This view is shared by most teacher educators in the Western Balkans, according to Zgaga (2003b): 49,3% find the employability of their graduates ‘important’ and 36,2% find it ‘very important’. Only 14,5% think it is not important. However, only a quarter of the institutions reported that they have cooperated with teachers’ professional associations or other stakeholders in the process of restructuring their curricula (p. 19).

Barnett’s second argument is much more pertinent to the question of the development of competencies as a valid change in direction for teacher education: ‘Today’s competencies are not tomorrow’s’ he says (Barnett, 1994, p 73). Competent professionals will be able to form a view of their own profession and its changing relationship with society’s demands. This means teacher education must equip future professionals with much more than an ability to use particular teaching techniques. It requires more knowledge and a deeper understanding of the historical, political and economic context for a particular education system—comprehension that might not necessarily manifest itself in an observable, immediately assessable way. Many have rightly criticised the focus on teacher competencies understood as behaviours for privileging those instrumental aspects of teaching that can be subjected to tests of immediate use and applicability (Cowen, 2002). This focus has thus underestimated the aims and values underlying teaching, leaving little room for one to

personally interpret one's role as a teacher or the specific demands and conditions of a given situation (van Huizen *et al.*, 2005). In stronger attacks, competence-based teacher education has been criticized as 'technicist' and as ultimately leading to teachers' deprofessionalisation and deskilling (Harris, 1997). As we share the view that to attain theoretical and contextual knowledge continues to be an essential skill and activity within the teaching profession, in our instrument, we formulated many of our statements about competence as 'knowledge' and 'understanding' items. We understand 'knowledge' to include both formal theories and teachers' practical knowledge, as well as the way in which these two components interact with each other and are interpreted and developed with the help of the other (see also Verloop *et al.*, 2001).

Moreover, we adhere to a humanist view of teaching as an ethical, normative profession presupposing that something of value is to be taught and concerned with improving people (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Carr, 1993b; Day, 2002; Elbaz, 1992; O'Connor, 2008). As such, the profession is bound to encounter problems that are not and cannot be resolved in value-neutral, technical terms. Carr argues that 'moral conclusions are only contestable in ethical terms and as such they involve profound reflection on those diverse and competing conceptions of what is worthwhile that have been entertained by human beings' (Carr, 1993a, p. 20-21). He suggests that we need to explore the relationship between the practical or technical and the ethical or moral as we think about the nature of professional knowledge and conduct. Day (2002) purports that this humanist tradition of viewing education as being of intrinsic value and having 'core moral purposes' is central to teachers' motivation, commitment and effectiveness. He argues that this tradition, which is fundamental to teacher identity, is being challenged by the new results-driven technical culture of teaching focused on classroom management, subject knowledge and pupil test results (p. 682- 684). The results of an empirical study conducted with teachers suggest that an erosion of teachers' ethical sensibilities is occurring in Europe (Klaassen, 2002). While teachers by and large see child-rearing and morals-focused tasks as an important part of their job, they are wary of moral issues that can arise in their classes because they have difficulty dealing with moral dilemmas or conducting moral discussions with their students and colleagues or with parents (Klaassen, 2002, p. 155-156). This is why we included a great number of items dealing with moral issues and commitment to values.

Critics of competencies have also argued that a good teacher cannot be described in terms of isolated abilities, since such fragmentation disregards aspects of teachers' personality that play a crucial part in effective teaching—such as teachers' professional identity and their beliefs about the mission of teaching (Combs, Blume, Newman & Wass, 1974; Korthagen 2004). For example, Combs *et al.* suggest that 'teachers who feel their profession has dignity and integrity can behave with dignity and integrity themselves' (Combs *et al.*, 1974, p 25). Moreover, teachers' knowledge and personal beliefs are seen as inseparable (Day, 2002; Fives & Buehl, 2008), although beliefs refer to personal values, attitudes, and ideologies (Verloop *et al.*, 2001). Like Fives and Buehl (2008), we take the term 'belief' to refer to an 'individual's judgement of the truth or falsity of a proposition' (p. 2). A number of items in the instrument refer to precisely these aspects of teachers' identities.

In conclusion, we adopted a broad view of the competent teacher and a concept of competence as inclusive of knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities, and teachers' beliefs and moral values. A similarly broad understanding of teacher competence is visible in a few other recent competence frameworks (Koster *et al.*, 2005; Tigelaar *et al.*, 2005). They adopt a concept of competence as 'an integrated set of personal characteristics, knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed for effective performance in various teaching contexts' (Stoof, Martens & van Merriënboer, 2002; Tigelaar *et al.*, 2005). Defined in this way, competencies represent a potential for behaviour, and not the behaviour itself (Korthagen, 2004; Koster *et al.*, 2005). Our instrument includes few statements about personal qualities. We share the belief in the importance of personal qualities in any attempt to formulate a complete image of a good teacher. However, in contrast with competencies, qualities 'come from the

inside' and correspond with deeper levels of change (Korthagen, 2004, p. 86). Therefore, they are commonly discussed in light of their relevance to selection procedures, rather than to curricula aim-setting and design (Combs *et al.*, 1974; Stoof *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, personal qualities are implied by teachers' knowledge, skills, values and beliefs. For example, an 'ability to establish and maintain positive human relations with pupils, parents and colleagues' requires, besides familiarity with strategies of effective communication, an eagerness to involve oneself with others and a respect and desire for positive human relations. A teacher who is successful in this way will have the interpersonal skills necessary for such an endeavor and will believe that they are worthwhile to develop in their pupils as well. This is why we adopted the definition of competence that incorporates the notion of an 'integrated set' or 'combination' of knowledge, skills, values and beliefs.

Method

This study followed the methodology of the European *Tuning* project (Gonzales, & Wagenaar, 2005), in which competencies were evaluated by staff and students at post-secondary institutions and employers. In the area of teacher education, this means that competencies are to be defined in consultation with teacher educators, student-teachers and school practitioners (primarily teachers and head teachers). In this way, the main actors are given an opportunity to assist in shaping a frame of reference for professional competency and are therefore more likely to make use of it (Koster *et al.*, 2005; Fives & Buehl, 2008; Zgaga, 2006, p 39). As mentioned the study, its findings could be used to inform teacher education curriculum development and as a self-orientation tool for teachers.

Instrument

Data were gathered via an anonymous questionnaire. In an introductory section, participants were acquainted with the aims of the study and asked to participate by filling out the questionnaire. The introductory question was formulated as follows: '*After initial teacher education a teacher should demonstrate:*' and this was followed by a list of statements about different aspects of teacher competence (see Appendix A).

Originally, a list of 51 statements about aspects of competence was adapted from the list used in the European *Tuning* project and similar lists from Scotland and the Netherlands. The *Tuning* questionnaire for academics lists 15 subject-specific competencies in education studies and 15 subject-specific competencies in teacher education. Based on the theoretical notions of the teaching profession that were presented in the theoretical framework for this paper, these include the knowledge, abilities and attitudes relevant for dealing with values and contexts in education, as well as for subject teaching and learning (Gonzales & Wagenaar, 2003, p. 285-286). In the European *Tuning* project, subject-related competencies had been identified following discussions about the state of the profession, conducted in particular fields of study by teams of experts in the related areas who came from different European countries. Such broadly-defined competencies commonly agreed upon at the European level were used as the starting point for the development of the instrument. In addition, examples of lists of teacher competencies in individual countries were considered with a view toward making the items more concrete and clearer to practitioners.

In the Netherlands, an effort has been made to involve teachers to a substantial extent in the standard-setting exercise based on a set of competencies relevant for interpersonal communication, social and moral values, teaching subjects and methods, and organisational abilities. This framework also distinguishes between four different contexts in which teachers play these roles: with students, with colleagues, within their environment and with themselves (Storey, 2006). The Scottish framework of competencies proved particularly relevant, as it addresses the same themes that were identified as problematic in the context of education in the Western Balkans (Zgaga, 2006, p. 17). 48

competencies from the Scottish list pertain to four areas of competence: subject matter and content of teaching; classroom competencies (organisation, teaching, learning and assessment); school and the education system; and values and attributes related to professionalism (The Scottish Office, 1998).

Our using the different lists covering similar areas of competence permitted us to consider a variety of formulations in an attempt to compile the selection of items that would best reflect the local context at play. The final list of competence statements represents a combination of formulations from these sources. Special care has been taken to strike the right balance between making the wording concrete enough to avoid ambiguity and yet keeping the formulations broad enough to avoid making the list too detailed and too prescriptive (Korthagen, 2001). For example, the original suggestion of an item formulated as 'Understanding and implementation of principles of decentralisation' was deemed too general; it was reformulated first to 'Readiness to participate in school development planning using self-evaluation instruments', and then to 'Readiness to participate in school development planning' without specifying how this is to be pursued.

The respondents were able to give their opinions on the importance of each statement by indicating on a four-point scale how important they found it (1-not important, 4-very important). They also had the option of adding competencies that they found important which were not offered. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to provide some general data about themselves (type of position, location and level of the institution they teach at, sex, age, experience and participation in professional development programmes). Verloop *et al.* (2001) suggest that certain common perceptions of competence are shared by all teachers, while some may be shared by large groups of teachers—for instance, all those teaching at a particular level (with pupils of a particular age group). We also wanted to explore possible differences in the perceptions of younger and less experienced teachers, since they graduated recently from presumably updated teacher education programmes (Zgaga, 2006). Since the feminisation of the teaching profession is said to affect its status (Basten, 1997), we also wanted to explore any aspects of competence that might be evaluated differently by women than by men.

Sets of questionnaires were sent to all the institutions along with an accompanying letter addressed to the head teacher or department head which asked for the questionnaire to be distributed among staff members. Responses were usually sent from the institutions in the stamped envelopes that had been provided. Some teachers returned questionnaires directly to the researchers by post or email.

Participants

1250 copies of the questionnaire were sent to kindergartens, primary and secondary schools and post-secondary institutions at which teachers are educated in Serbia. In selecting the institutions, we took care to cover all of the 26 administrative regions in Serbia and to proportionally include participants from different levels of education, parts of the country (Vojvodina and Central Serbia), urban and rural settings, classroom and subject teachers in primary schools, and vocational and academic-subject teachers in secondary schools.

In total, we received 370 responses: 74 from kindergartens, 112 from primary schools, 131 from secondary schools and 53 from higher education institutions. The response rate was roughly 30% of the total sample. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that the number of responses received from different levels of educational institutions differed significantly from the representation of teachers at these levels in the actual population of Serbia¹, $\chi^2(3, n=332) = 73, p=.00$. Notably, teachers from primary schools were underrepresented in the sample, while pre-primary and secondary teachers were somewhat overrepresented (see Table 2.1). The results were analysed separately for different levels of education.

¹ According to the 2005 statistics of the National Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Serbia

Table 2.1. Number of respondents (n) compared to population (N) by level of institution and by sex

Level of institution	n		% of women	
	n	N ^a	n	N
preprimary	74	9 306	100%	
primary	112	46 900	90.1%	70.2%
secondary	131	27 298	76.2%	62.0%
tertiary	53	10 987	51.1%	
Total	370	94 491	81.6%	

^aNational statistics from 2006.

Among the participants from primary schools, 42 (38%) were classroom teachers and 46 (41%) were subject teachers. Fifty-one (39%) secondary school respondents taught in schools with an academic curriculum (*gimnazije*) and 64 (49%) in schools with a vocational curriculum. Other respondents were school head teachers (9), pedagogues (17) and psychologists (14). The participants from post-secondary education institutions included 23 (43%) professors and 21 (40%) assistants, 6 students only and 3 respondents who did not specify their positions.

A total of 271 (81.6%) respondents were women. The percentage of women amounts to 100% of the participants from kindergartens, 90.1% of those from primary schools and 76.2% of those from secondary schools. Among the respondents from post-secondary institutions, women comprised 51.1%. Compared to the actual proportion of women teachers within the different levels of education, their representation in the sample from primary and secondary education institutions is significantly different: $\chi^2(1, n=223) = 27, p=.00$, with women being overrepresented.

The questionnaires came from all parts of the country, with a somewhat higher rate of response from the northern autonomous province of Vojvodina (which made up 33% of the sample), but without a significant difference between this proportion and the region's representation in Serbia's overall teacher population: $\chi^2(1, n=362) = 3.8, p=.05$.

The average age of the respondents was 41 years ($SD = 9.7$), with the youngest being 23 and the oldest 64 years old. The respondents had, on average, 15 years of teaching experience ($SD = 9.9$), with a range from less than 1 to 40 years. Although the country's teaching population is known to be aging, it is not possible to say how representative the sample is in this regard, as data about teachers' age and experience is not included in the national statistics.

Analyses

The data were processed using the statistical programme SPSS, version 14. We ran factor analysis to establish the principal components underlying the competencies. A multivariate analysis of covariance was used to explore how participants' sex, the grade level they teach, and their years of experience relate to the way they evaluate the different aspects of competence.

The data were established to be fit for principal component analyses after we ran the initial correlation matrix (with a few coefficients of .3 and above) and tests of sampling adequacy (the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .915) and sphericity (Bartlett's Test revealed a significance of .000). The data were first subjected to exploratory factor analysis with a view toward determining the number of factors to be extracted. Because the Kaiser-Guttman criterion of extracting factors with eigenvalues greater than one revealed more factors than we deemed conceptually meaningful, we also inspected the screen plot to determine the number of factors to be retained. Having decided to extract four factors, we conducted a principal component analysis for the four-factor solution, followed by an

oblimin rotation in order to aid in the interpretation of factors. We chose non-orthogonal rotation under the assumption that factors were likely to be related.

Forty out of 51 items had pattern coefficients above ± 0.40 . In three cases, items loaded above ± 0.40 on more than one factor. Fourteen items were removed on the bases of factor loads above ± 0.40 and no loads on more than one factor. Items related to the four components were then used as a basis for constructing four scales. Thus, four scales resulted in a total of 37 items. The reliability coefficients of the four scales and correlations between the scales were computed, as well as the mean scores for the four scales and individual items. The reliability coefficients proved satisfactory (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.70) for all four scales (see Table 2.2). The correlations between scales ranged from 0.45 to 0.57. A paired samples t-test was used to evaluate the significance of the differences between the scale means.

In interpreting responses about the scales and individual statements, we characterized those that received an average value equal to or higher than 3.5 points as *very important*, between 3 and 3.5 points as *important*, and less than 3 points as *of less importance*.

The data were analysed using a multivariate analysis of covariance to examine the relationships between scale scores and respondents' sex, the level at which they teach, and their years of experience. Preliminary checks were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions about sample size, normality, linearity, outliers, homogeneity of variances, homogeneity of regression slopes and reliable measurement of the covariate, or multicollinearity. Because of the strong positive correlation between age and experience ($r=0.88$), only experience was used as a covariate in the analyses. As no significant interaction effects were found between the variables, we could safely interpret the main effects of each of the three variables (different levels of education, sex, and experience) on the scores on the four scales used as dependent variables. Where significant differences between groups were identified on the combined dependent variables (Wilks' Lambda $< .05$), results for dependent variables were considered separately using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .013. Where a particular fixed variable or covariate had a significant effect on a separate dependant variable, post hoc tests were conducted to establish where the differences were.

Findings and discussion

The response rate of around 30% can be considered satisfactory given that practitioners in Serbia are not accustomed to being asked to participate in such research. Many of the respondents expressed satisfaction about the opportunity to assist in formulating teacher competencies, finding this effort important and useful. A vast majority of the participants in this study seemed to favour the assumption that teacher education should be based on competencies teachers need in practice (some explicitly stated so in the space provided for comments). For some participants, the very experience of filling out the questionnaire seems to have represented an important opportunity for professional reflection. Here are some of the comments: 'This was an opportunity to conjure up some of the competencies I have not thought about and have not been developing'; 'The list includes all important competencies and it is imperative that those being prepared for this profession acquire them through education'; 'Reform is much needed and I hope this research will help'; and the like. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution. It is possible that those of the opposing opinion did not fill out the questionnaire at all. It is not unusual that those educators willing to participate in research are the 'reform-minded' ones. Some indication of this factor can, perhaps, be found in the proportion of the sample that has participated in professional development programmes: 74% of all respondents have participated in at least one programme, and many have participated in as many as twenty or more.

As a result of the analyses of the principal components underlying the items, the following four factors have been established as distinct areas of teacher expertise: 1) values and child-rearing, 2) an understanding of the system of education and contributions to its development, 3) subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum, and 4) self-evaluation and professional development. Four scales have been constructed, each containing the items relevant to it. In Table 2.2, the mean scores for the four scales are presented in total and sorted by the levels of education at which the respondents work. The table also shows the reliability of each scale expressed in Cronbach's alpha, the number of items, and a sample item that loaded highly on that scale.

The first striking finding about the means for the four scales is that the respondents evaluated the competencies concerning one's understanding of the education system and contribution to its development as lower in importance (at the threshold between *important* and *less important*) than the other three areas of expertise, which have all been evaluated as *very important* (see Table 2.2). There are statistical differences between all pairs of scale means except between the first and the third scale. The eta-squared statistics show an effect size ranging from -0.09 for scale 3 (M=3.57, SD =0.32) compared to scale 4 (M=3.63, SD =0.34) to -0.58 for scale 2 (M=3.04, SD =0.48) compared to scale 4 (M=3.63, SD =0.34).

Table 2.2. Scales, reliabilities, number of items, sample items and mean scale scores by level of institution

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of items	Sample item	Mean scores				
				pre-primary	primary	secondary	higher	Total average
1 values and child rearing	0.88	13	Commitment to racial equality by means of personal example, through curricular and other activities	3.61	3.65	3.55	3.35	3.56
2 contribution to education system development	0.85	9	Readiness to participate in public debates on educational topics by following and participating in the work of relevant bodies	3.04	3.13	3	2.89	3.04
3 subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum	0.77	10	Ability to develop linguistic and numeric literacy of pupils	3.48	3.66	3.57	3.5	3.57
4 self-evaluation and professional development	0.72	5	Ability to critically reflect on and evaluate one's own educational impact	3.58	3.7	3.62	3.6	3.63

The multivariate analysis of covariance showed that experience, level of education and sex all have significant effects on the participants' evaluation of the four scales (see Table 2.3). The results sorted by the level of education at which the participants work can be seen in Table 2. Statistical significance has been reached for the first scale. All the respondents from pre-primary institutions are

women, but the effect of sex is that women at all other levels rated all four scales higher than men, the difference being significant for the fourth scale. The effect of experience is significant for the third scale, which more experienced teachers rated higher than did less experienced ones, but the differences are small. To illustrate, the mean score for this scale by teachers with more than 28 years of experience is 3.70, while for those with less than 2 years of experience, it is 3.43. Below, we discuss the results for each of the four scales not only in terms of the mean scale scores, but also referring to individual items that make up the scales.

Table 2.3. Results of multivariate analysis of covariance: sex, level of education and experience

source	F	df	sig.	partial eta squared
experience	3.82	4	0.005	0.05
level	2.83	12	0.001	0.04
sex	4.16	4	0.003	0.05
level*sex	1.07	8	0.386	0.01

Values and child rearing

The statements pertaining to the values and child-rearing scale received an average rating of *very important*, with small differences in ratings by respondents from different levels of education. Nevertheless, the difference between the responses by higher education affiliates and all other respondents is statistically significant. Unsurprisingly, the ‘upbringing’ aspects of education, and competencies that relate to children’s well-being, are rated higher at the lower levels of education.

On the one hand, this can be seen as confirmation of the disconnect between practitioners’ sense of ‘real’ needs in school practices and teacher educators’ academic approach to the questions that matter in education. However, it is also possible that respondents misinterpreted the question of competencies a teacher needs to acquire after their initial study, construing it as the question of the competencies someone teaching at their level needs to have.

In this scale, the statements referring to the teacher’s role as a moral agent received the highest score; they also received the second highest rating on the whole list after the competence referring to subject knowledge. Their rating was particularly high among respondents from primary and secondary schools. Clearly, these respondents adhere to the view of teaching as a normative profession. This confirms our assumption about the necessity of integrating social and moral purposes in the definition of competence, and it suggests that teacher formation needs to raise awareness about the profession’s normative connotations and prepare one to deal with the value-driven aspect of the job. The high evaluation of teachers’ moral role also indicates that the narrow view of competence as technical performance is likely to face opposition in Serbia, as it did elsewhere (Carr, 1993a, Day, 2002). Rajović and Radulović (2007) have reported that teachers in Serbia did not have sufficient ethical education as part of their initial preparation (p. 16). Zgaga (2006) and Vizek Vidović (2005) have suggested that new teacher education programmes need a greater emphasis on knowledge about and skills in child-rearing. The large number and high rating of items in the ‘values and child-rearing’ scale of the instrument developed in this study reinforce this need.

Other statements in the first scale that refer to teachers’ commitment to racial and gender equality, environment and health protection were judged as *very important* by all respondents but those from higher education institutions. Teachers’ ability and readiness to build pupils’ awareness of their rights and obligations as participants in a democracy were deemed *very important* only at the primary level (the score being at the threshold). The importance of the competencies referring to special educational

needs (e.g. ‘an ability to recognise and adequately respond to pupils with learning difficulties’) was judged inversely proportionally to the level of education, with a lower rating among higher-level respondents.

Contribution to education system development

The elements of competencies in the second scale concern teachers’ understanding of the national framework for the development of the education system, as well as their capacity and readiness to participate in its improvement, and their cooperation with the local community and the like. The low rating of statements in this scale was often followed by comments on the present state of the national framework as lacking a meaningful strategic direction of development. Many participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of continuity in education reforms and the general marginalisation of education as a policy area in need of greater attention.

A common explanation for this finding would be that ‘old habits die hard’. Used to their role as classroom professionals operating between children and subjects, teachers do not immediately recognise their role in contributing to systemic developments. Although much dissatisfaction has been expressed about the present state of the nation’s education system, the responsibility for ‘fixing’ it is seen as being in the hands of an external authority—notably the government—instead of being an integral part of the teaching profession. This is not surprising given that there are few opportunities to study education policy at higher education institutions (Kovács-Cerović, 2006). No faculty of educational sciences exists in Serbia, and there is practically no way to gain a specialisation or a masters or doctoral degree in such fields as education policy, education economics, comparative education, etc. Yet, there seems to exist among educators an interest in pursuing masters and doctoral degrees in such areas, or in conducting research in cooperation with university staff (p 517). Any substantial change in the direction of the proclaimed decentralisation of decision-making processes in education critically depends on building teachers’ awareness and competence in precisely this domain (Fullan, 1993).

Subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum

As could be expected, amongst the competencies in the third scale, the participants assigned high importance to the knowledge and practical skills involved with subject matter and pedagogy. In this scale, the competencies evaluated by respondents at all levels as *very important* include as highest-rating: ‘sound knowledge in a subject or a group of subjects’; ‘an ability to design, prepare and implement lessons in a way that provides continuity and progression in learning’; ‘grasp of practical aspects/skills involved with a subject or a group of subjects’ and the like.

Among the statements related to the curriculum, those concerning its implementation were rated higher (*very important* in kindergartens and primary schools) than those referring to its evaluation and adaptation. For obvious reasons, competencies pertaining to knowledge and curriculum are less important to respondents from pre-primary institutions that are primarily concerned with care.

Experience also had a statistically significant effect on this scale. An inspection of the scale means for different levels of experience showed that teachers with more experience found this scale’s items more important. At the same time, these are older teachers who were educated in a tradition that highly valued subject disciplines and pedagogy (Kovács-Cerović, 2006).

Generally speaking, the long-standing valuation of subject knowledge and pedagogic skills involved with teaching remains dominant in the responses in this scale. This could be interpreted as underlining participants’ commitment to the view of adequate teacher preparation as *education* rather than *training*, implying that future teachers should continue to receive solid scholarly ‘foundations’. At the same time, it is noteworthy that respondents opted for a few formulations of competencies that

involve practical skills and abilities which involve behavioural as well as cognitive skills. Similar perceptions were reinforced by the competencies that respondents added to the offered list as being of particular importance. They include founding one's work on contemporary theories of teaching and learning, the diversification of teaching methods, and yet also 'ability and readiness to fight the false pedagogic modernism'.

Arguably, the existing programme of teacher preparation only partly accommodates the development of competencies related to knowledge and skills for particular subject matter. Subject instruction is dominant in the education of both classroom and subject teachers (Kovács-Cerović, 2006). Considerable time is also dedicated to pedagogical content knowledge in most programmes. However, it is strictly tied to the specific teaching subject rather than invoked as part of education science, leaving little room for cooperation among teachers of different subjects in contributing to general educational aims (p. 517). The statements that received the lowest rating in this scale refer to precisely those areas that are not covered or are insufficiently covered by the present pre-service preparation of teachers, such as use of information technologies in teaching and learning (*Ibid.*, p. 507)

One way of interpreting the rating of competencies in this scale is that the respondents themselves were educated in the tradition based on the German concept of 'Didaktik' as a body of theories that teachers use to implement the school programme, as opposed to the notion of 'curriculum' in the Anglo-Saxon tradition (Westbury, 1998). The latter entails a notion of curriculum based on statements of educational aims and content, and often also emphasizes methods by which teachers are to achieve those aims. It also implies the existence of an authoritative agency that sets the aims and ensures their implementation. In the case of 'Didaktik', the state's programme-making consists of an authoritative selection of traditions that must be embedded in teachers' work and thinking (p. 47-48). The neo-humanist concept of education as 'building' or 'upbringing' and the related concept of 'Didaktik', which assumes a high degree of professional autonomy for teachers are inherent in the teacher education system in Serbia. At the same time, many of the education reform movements put forth an interest in building accountability into the system and setting standards of 'professionalism'. In this context, the distinction between the concepts of 'Didaktik' and 'curriculum' and the potential tensions or complementary points between them merit closer consideration in research on teacher education.

Self-evaluation and professional development

The statements in the fourth scale were evaluated as the most important ones at all levels. They include teachers' ability to critically reflect upon their educational impact and value system, as well as a readiness to take the initiative and take responsibility for their professional development. They also encompass statements referring to building positive human relationships and to dedication to the profession and children. The perceived importance of statements referring to the evaluation of one's educational impact increased with the respondents' level—which is again, perhaps, indicative of the degree to which educators at higher levels value academic achievement above the 'upbringing' dimensions of education process. The only statistically significant difference in this scale was between men and women, with the latter rating it higher.

Most of the items added by the respondents suggest aspects of teacher competence which could be added to this scale. They include qualities such as 'an ability of empathy', 'healthy personality', 'an ability to fight for the esteem of the teaching profession', 'awareness of the profession's importance and responsibility' and other similar suggestions. The list includes only some aspects of personality pertinent to self-criticism and professional identity, on the assumption that people can be helped to develop these over the course of teacher preparation. Korthagen also mentions the importance of personal qualities such as creativity, trust and courage (Korthagen, 2004). An attempt to create a comprehensive account of a 'good' teacher would undoubtedly need to include these and

other personal qualities. The importance of personal attributes for teaching merits further investigation, especially with regard to its implications for the development of teacher education.

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the importance of teacher competencies as a basis for teacher education in Serbia, where competence-based reforms are being considered. For this purpose, we used a questionnaire consisting of 51 statements that examined teachers' perceptions about the importance of competencies. The responses of 370 teachers and teacher educators from Serbia were collected. A principle component analysis of the responses revealed four underlying factors related to the following areas of teachers' work: 1) values and child rearing; 2) understanding of the education system and contribution to its development; 3) subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum; and 4) self-evaluation and professional development. The first product of the study therefore was an instrument that reliably measured teachers' perceptions in each of the four domains.

At the same time, the findings inform us about the views of teachers and teacher educators in Serbia regarding the importance of a number of aspects of teacher competence related to these four areas of teacher expertise. Generally speaking, the respondents welcome the competence base for teacher education and an opportunity to participate in the definition of teacher competencies. However, bias is possible in that more conservative educators might have not responded to the study. In addition, some caution is needed in the interpretation of our results about the differences between levels of education, because our sample is not completely representative of the Serbian population of teachers and teacher educators.

The lowest-rated scale relates to teacher participation in the development of the national system of education, involving aspects of competence that cover precisely the areas that are not included in the present education of teachers. The perceived low importance of such competencies has been linked to the problematic state of present national strategies and the marginalisation of education as a policy area, but also to the inherent low level of participation in system improvement. Building teachers' competencies in this domain is of critical importance for re-establishing the high status of teaching profession.

The highest-rated scale is the one concerned with teacher identities and professional development. With regard to the further study of teacher education, this dimension deserves particular attention in light of the question raised earlier—in which aspects of teacher selves, and in what ways, can people realistically be helped to develop over the course of teacher preparation?

Judging by the overall rating of the individual statements, those valued highest concerned: teachers' expertise in the subject (knowledge and practical skills), their ability to serve as a role model to students, their commitment to the profession and children, their capacity to maintain positive relationships with all actors concerned, and their responsibility for their own professional development.

Respondents from the higher levels of education seemed to value academic achievement above the 'upbringing' dimensions of the education process, such as children's personal and social development. We have interpreted this as the product of the long-established disconnect between schools and teacher education programmes predominantly based on subject disciplines. For future research, the idea of building partnerships with schools and teacher education providers should be further considered as a way of diminishing this gap, as well as a way of helping student-teachers develop practical skills.

In our study, we understood the concept of ‘competence’ as inclusive of teachers’ knowledge base, skills, values and beliefs. However, just a glance at present teacher preparation standards reveals that the existing programmes seem to satisfy only this first element of competence—and that only partly. Some of the respondents specified that the knowledge base for teacher education should be grounded in modern theories of teaching and learning. The results of our study send a clear message regarding the development of teacher education curricula in Serbia: it needs to build in elements that will be conducive to teacher competence in increasing their contributions to system improvement and better preparing them to deal with ethical issues. It also needs to seek to integrate educational and practical aspects of subject knowledge, and develop personal attributes relevant for teachers.

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