HIGHER SCHOOL CURRICULUM AS A STARTING POINT IN ACQUIRING COMPETENCE IN WORKING WITH GIFTED CHILDREN AND PUPILS

Violeta Valjan Vukić
University of Zadar (CROATIA)

Abstract
Caring for gifted children and pupils in institutions of early, pre-school and school education is of exceptional importance for the upbringing and education system of a country as well as the society as a whole. In regards to European and world standards, concerning this issue sufficiently developed consciousness does not exist in Croatian society, and even though the legal framework and a series of accompanying documents regulate the obligation of identifying gifted children and pupils by applying adequate forms of work and a differentiated curriculum, the fact is that in all kindergartens and schools children do not have equal possibilities to be able to satisfy specific upbringing and educational needs. Besides inadequate material and financial conditions in upbringing and education institutions, one of the difficulties in identifying and implementing systematic support to gifted children and pupils is represented by the lack or insufficient expert capacity of educators and teachers in working in such a field of professional activity. It is, therefore, the parents and rare experts who most often take upon themselves the care of satisfying specific upbringing and education needs and realizing the rights of identified individuals, while the potentials of the remaining children and pupils very often remain unrecognized until the end of their schooling. The key persons in the recognition and identification of gifted children and pupils, besides their parents, are educators and teachers who in daily contact through upbringing and education performance have the possibility of detecting potential giftedness. However, they very often feel uninvited to professionally step out in that field with the excuse of lacking in initial knowledge. In order for educators and teachers to be able to give an adequate support to gifted children and pupils, higher school curriculum should offer the possibility of acquiring basic competences in such a field during initial education whereby educators and teachers could offer an adequate support to gifted children and pupils. The present work analyses curricula of higher school institutions in Croatia who educate future educators and teachers at pre-graduate and graduate level.

Keywords: higher school curriculum, gifted children and pupils, teacher and educator competences.

1 INTRODUCTION
In the past decades, there has been no systematic care of gifted children in Croatia. The understanding of this ascertainment can partly be found in the fact that Croatian "is going through a fundamental metamorphosis whereby it is transforming from a totalitarian society based on one party with limited freedom of choice, determination and evaluation into a democratic society based on pluralism whose fundamental feature is to encourage freedom of choice, determination and evaluation" [1]. The mentioned (substantial) changes imply changes in the system of upbringing and education appropriate for a democratic society.

Previšić states that the national curriculum on upbringing and education is the “primary theme of every education policy, school practice, culture, socialization and, of course, scientific pedagogy” and the pedagogically designed curriculum best reflects on the actual education policy of a country as well as on the expertly set methodology and structure of its making” [2].

The National Curriculum Framework in the Republic of Croatia is the basic document that "represents the basic components of pre-school, general compulsory and secondary upbringing education and education, including the upbringing, education and training for children with special educational needs” [3]. It is a development document that allows for decentralization and democratization of the process, and "includes a broader responsibility for changes to educators, teachers, associates and principals, as well as other relevant participants and users of education, parents, children, pupils, local and regional community members, social partners and others [3].
The realization of contemporary approaches to working with gifted students primarily requires compliance with and the implementation of legal and by-law acts that undertake to provide adequate conditions and models of education. The Law on Upbringing and Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools (OG152/14, Art.63) demands for all schools in Croatia to oblige in observing, monitoring and encouraging gifted pupils [4]. It is necessary in schools to organize the process of identifying gifted children in order to organize additional work according to their preferences, capacities and interests where every pupil with high potentials is given the opportunity to develop them. “In the legal regulation, gifted children in Croatia are put at the same level as children with special needs, but, at the same time, care for children with special needs has been developed from pre-school to high school, while organized work with gifted is only in traces” [5].

Miljak states that most reforms in the world were occupied in great extent with the making of documents, legal acts, curricula, school and government administration, and much less with education practice, learning and teaching in classes, and the professional training of teachers who should implement such reforms [6]. In the field of initial teacher education, the past fifteen years have given significant quality and organization changes but there some minor shortcoming that can be eliminated by revising curricula of higher education institutions that educate future educators and teachers are still being noticed. The reason for this lies in the fact that “when drafting new programs, there is no definition of a national standard in the field of professional competence of teachers, i.e. a model of curriculum based on competences” [7].

The competence model has been dominating the education system in the past decade with emphasis on learning results. Learning results are “changes in students that can be precisely expressed as what the student will know, understand, in other words what he/she will be able to show after studying” [8]. Sadler starts from the assumption that each program of study and each course provides the most appropriate place for acquiring cognitive and other higher order skills [9]. In study programs, student educators of preschool children and primary education teachers acquire general and specific competences during their study. The acquisition of these competences is realized through a variety of compulsory and elective courses or modules. However, students preparing for work in kindergartens and schools acquire specific competences for inclusive education mostly through one to two compulsory courses during their studies.

The National Framework Curriculum provides children and pupils with special educational needs and learning conditions in accordance with their abilities and needs. According to the Law on Primary and Secondary Education (2008), “among pupils with special educational needs we include pupils with difficulties of different appearance and degree of damage and gifted pupils” [3]. Furthermore, the same document clearly states that “all groups require adaptation of the educational process, i.e. educational support of different types and levels. A necessary prerequisite for planning a curriculum for working with children with special upbringing and educational needs is the permanent and quality professional qualification of staff” [3]. The mentioned competences are those that student educators and teachers should acquire during initial education at higher education institutions within the program that prepares them for their future vocations.

The basic knowledge on children with special needs (where we also include gifted children and pupils) student educators and teachers acquire within the compulsory course Work with Children with Special Needs. However, here students are minimally acquainted with such a population of children and pupils, not acquiring wider knowledge of their characteristics and particularities in working with them. Competences for working with gifted children are exceptionally important in the education and upbringing work in pre-school institutions and schools, particularly considering the evaluation that 15 to 20 % of the entire population are potentially gifted children, while highly gifted are from 3 to 5%. On the other hand, only a small number of elective courses provide teacher and educator students with the possibility of acquiring the necessary competences in identifying and working with gifted children.

There are six higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia that deal with the education of teacher and educator. The mentioned institutions are equally distributed in all parts of Croatia, from the far east of the country to the south.

Education of preschool children in the Republic of Croatia takes place at two levels, undergraduate and graduate. Undergraduate study lasts 3 years or 6 semesters, and ends with 180 ECTS credits and earning a university bachelor/bachelor's degree in pre-school and pre-school education (univ.bacc.praesc.educ.). The undergraduate study of early and pre-school education (EYE) at five higher education institutions is performed as university education and makes it possible for graduates to pass onto university graduate studies except for the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the
University of Pula which is the only one with an undergraduate professional study of preschool upbringing. The EYE graduate university study program lasts 2 years or 4 semesters and at the end of the course acquire 120 ECTS credits and are awarded with the title of Master/ Master of Early and Pre-school Education (mag.praesc.educ.)

Education of Primary Education Teachers in the Republic of Croatia takes place at Integrated Undergraduate and Graduate University Studies for Teachers that lasts 5 years or 10 semesters. By completing the study, one earns 300 ECTS credits and the title of the Master of Primary Education.

2 METHODOLOGY

Taking into consideration the facts stated in the preceding text, the research has wanted to establish how many study programs at higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia education educators and teachers through initial education enable the acquirement of competences in working with gifted children and pupils. In this sense, undergraduate and graduate programs of early and preschool education were analyzed and integrated university programs for primary education teachers in six higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia. The institutions are as follows: University of Zagreb Teacher’s Faculty, University of Rijeka Faculty of Teacher Education, Faculty for Educational Sciences of J.J. Strossmayer University in Osijek, University of Split Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Teachers and Preschool Teachers Education of the University of Zadar, and the Faculty of Education Sciences University J. Dobrila in Pula.

The paper follows from the assumption that study programs for educators and teachers in the Republic of Croatia do not enable (or do so to a lesser extent) acquiring competences for working with children with special educational needs and do not sufficiently enable future experts to realize the quality inclusion and necessary support for children and students in practice.

3 RESULTS

The EYE pre-graduate study at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka enables students in their second semester to acquire the basic competences for working with children with special needs within the compulsory course Inclusive Upbringing and Education which covers 30 classes of lectures, 15 classes of seminars and 30 classes of practice, whereby students acquire 6 ECTS credits, while students of teaching studies acquire the same course competences in their fourth semester with 45 classes of lectures, 15 classes of seminars and 15 classes of practice, thus acquiring 7 ECTS credits. Students have the possibility of acquiring competences for working with gifted children at their sixth semester of undergraduate study though the elective course Encouraging the Gifted with 30 classes of lectures and 15 classes of practice realizing 3 ECTS credits, while teacher studies offer the possibility of acquiring competences for work with gifted children within the framework of the selective course Upbringing and Education of the Gifted at the eighth semester through 15 classes of lectures and 30 classes of practice.

At the EYE pre-graduate study at the Faculty for Educational Sciences in Osijek, students of the third and fourth semester acquire competences in working with children with special needs within the framework of the compulsory course Pedagogy of Children with Special with 15 classes of lectures 15 classes of seminars in each semester, and 1 class of practice in the third semester whereby they realize a total of 6 ECTS credits. The mentioned courses do not offer the possibility of acquiring sufficient competences for identifying and working with gifted children. However, at the EYE graduate study, at the compulsory course Programs for Working with Children with Special Needs foreseen in the second semester with 30 classes of lectures and 30 classes of practice students are enabled to acquire somewhat more competences for working with gifted children. It is, however, encouraging that according to the program the compulsory course Psychology of Giftedness is realized in the fourth semester where students acquire 4 ECTS points with 30 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars and have the possibility to intensively develop their competences in this field of work.

The integrated study of the Faculty for Educational Sciences in Osijek enables its students to acquire competences for working with children with special needs only at the ninth semester of its program (including gifted children) with 30 classes of lectures and 30 classes of practice, acquiring 4 ECTS points. Therefore, within the mentioned study program only one course partly enables acquiring knowledge on identification and work with gifted children, which is absolutely insufficient for competent action in practice.
The pre-graduate professional study of pre-school education at the University of Pula, Faculty of Education Sciences, offers the possibility of acquiring initial competences for working with gifted children in kindergarten within 15 classes of lectures and the same number of classes of seminars realizing 2 ECTS points. The same course with the same number of ECTS points and classes is offered to the students of teacher studies in Pula.

The pre-graduate study of the University of Split, Faculty of Philosophy, offers students the possibility of acquiring knowledge, skills and competences for working with gifted children at their fourth semester if they choose the elective course Gifted Children which is realized with 30 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars realizing 4 ECTS points. The same course is elective at the graduate study of the Faculty of Philosophy with the same number of lectures and ECTS points. It is interesting and somewhat discouraging that at the integrated university teacher studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Split not one course enables students to acquire knowledge on gifted children and pupils.

The Teacher's Faculty in Zagreb with its pre-graduate and graduate programs of EYE, as well as the integrated university teacher studies also realized in the branches in Čakovec and Petrinja, does not offer any course enabling students in acquiring initial competences for working with gifted children and pupils. At the pre-graduate EYE students listen to the compulsory courses of Inclusive Pedagogy 1 and 2 in their fourth and sixth semester with 15 classes of lectures and 15 classes of practice only partially touching the issue of special upbringing and education needs of gifted children (within one academic unit). The same course takes place within that framework with only some modules at the integrated teacher studies.

Students of the university pre-graduate study of EYE at the Department of Teachers and Preschool Teachers Education of the University of Zadar, acquire during their second year one part of the competences for working with children with special needs within the compulsory course Pedagogy of Children with Special Needs I and II with 30 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars whereby they realize 3 ECTS points. With each course, students acquire only the basic knowledge on the gifted. EYE pre-graduate study students have the possibility to acquire additional competences for working with gifted children within the elective course Work with Gifted Children in Kindergarten with 15 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars whereby they realize 3 ECTS points, and at the EYE graduate study acquire 3 ECTS points at the elective course Programs and Forms with Gifted Children in Kindergarten with 15 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars.

At the same institution, integrated teacher studies program provides students with acquiring competences for working in an inclusive class at the compulsory course Inclusive Upbringing and Education with 30 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars. However, only those who choose in their eighth semester the elective course Work with Gifted Pupils have the possibility of acquiring competences for working with gifted pupils with 15 classes of lectures and 15 classes of seminars realizing 3 ECTS points. However, we can freely say that teacher studies students who do not choose the mentioned course remain without initial competences for working with gifted children.

4 CONCLUSION

Higher education study programs are required to enable all students of teaching and upbringing studies to acquire competences for working with gifted children and students in order to adequately respond to professional challenges in the future, and to meet their specific educational and development needs. From the results presented, it is evident that only a small part of the study programs at single higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia offers, within the framework of initial education, the possibility to acquire competences for identification and work with gifted children and students. Courses aimed at working with gifted children and students are offered mostly as elective courses, and in no case as compulsory.

Changes introduced into pre-school and school curricula, and the requirements placed on educators and teachers do not follow their acquired competences neither within initial education nor within vocational training. The profession of teachers and educators “should be considered as a continuum involving initial education and further vocational training based on the principles of lifelong learning that will encompass formal and informal education” [10].

Given the acquired results, the higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia that are primarily engaged in the initial education of educators and teachers should introduce at least one compulsory course to study programs that directly contributes to the development of competences for
working with gifted children and students. Gifted children and students as well as their parents will thus genuinely realize their right to educational work appropriate to their abilities and interests, and will fulfill the obligations prescribed by the law and the basic documents related to education.

REFERENCES


