

Veronika Bačová¹

Department of Primary and Preprimary Education

Technical University of Liberec, Czechia

Primljen: 4. 6. 2025.

Prihvaćen: 15. 08. 2025.

UDC: 373.211.24

DOI:10.19090/ps.2025.2.229-245

Pregledni naučni rad

CORE COMPETENCE OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS

Abstract

This theoretical study explores the evolving landscape of professional competencies required of preschool teachers in contemporary early childhood education. Drawing on a systematic review of 37 peer-reviewed scholarly sources retrieved from the Scopus and Web of Science databases, the study examines three key domains: (1) essential professional competencies for high-quality preschool education, (2) the role and significance of interdisciplinary collaboration with specialists, and (3) strategies for supporting inclusion, cultural diversity, and sustainability in pedagogical practice. The analysis reveals that high-quality preschool teaching increasingly depends on emotional and relational competence, reflective adaptability, interdisciplinary communication, and ethical engagement with diversity and sustainability. Teachers are expected to function not only as educators but also as emotional anchors, cultural mediators, and collaborative partners in multidisciplinary teams. Emotional support, inclusive pedagogy, and sustainability education emerge as interconnected dimensions of professional identity. The findings suggest that effective early childhood educators are those who integrate pedagogical knowledge with social-emotional intelligence and intercultural sensitivity. The study also emphasizes the need for systematic professional development that fosters reflective practice, interdisciplinary readiness, and resilience in teachers. A limitation of this study is its reliance on international literature without in-depth analysis of national and local contexts. Overall, the study contributes to a broader conceptualization of preschool teacher professionalism—one that is relational, collaborative, and values-driven - and offers implications for teacher education, policy, and future research.

Keywords: preschool teacher; professional competencies; interdisciplinary collaboration; preschool education; emotional support

¹ veronika.bacova@tul.cz

Introduction

The competencies of preschool teachers represent a fundamental pillar of high-quality early childhood education. This profession requires not only professional expertise but also well-developed personal and social skills that enable the effective support of a child's holistic development. Teaching competencies are dynamic and continuously evolving in response to emerging challenges such as the inclusion of children with special educational needs, increasing cultural diversity, and the growing demand for interdisciplinary collaboration. A key aspect of the teacher's role is the ability to create a safe and stimulating environment that fosters children's emotional, cognitive, and social growth, while also facilitating effective communication and cooperation with parents and other professionals (Gibbs, 1995).

Historically, the role of the teacher was often viewed primarily as that of a transmitter of knowledge. Contemporary approaches, however, emphasize the active role of the teacher as a facilitator of learning who encourages autonomy, curiosity, and individual development in children (Wood & Bennett, 2000). This shift entails new demands on educators—not only in terms of pedagogy, but also in their capacity for empathy, relationship-building with children and families, and effective collaboration with specialists in special education, psychology, and healthcare (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). The breadth and complexity of these competencies underscore the need for preschool teachers to be experts not only in educational methodologies, but also in providing emotional support and functioning as active partners within multidisciplinary teams that address the diverse needs of each child.

Competence and importance for education

Competencies in education represent a key concept that defines the set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for effective teaching and fostering the development of students. The notion of competencies began to gain prominence in educational discourse in the second half of the 20th century, becoming the foundation for various pedagogical approaches and reforms (Hart, 1998). In the context of teaching, competencies encompass professional expertise as well as personal and social skills that teachers need to effectively contribute to the development of children and create an optimal educational environment.

The definition of competencies in education extends beyond theoretical subject knowledge. It includes the ability to transfer knowledge to students, tailor teaching to meet individual needs, and ensure that instruction is not only effective but also promotes the development of cognitive, emotional, and social skills in children (Creswell, 2013). Teacher competencies are often structured into several key domains, including pedagogical expertise, organizational abilities, communication skills, and the capacity to work with diverse students and their families.

The importance of teacher competencies in education cannot be understated, as teacher quality is one of the primary factors influencing the success of the educational process. Studies show that teachers with well-developed competencies are able to create environments that support effective learning, provide emotional support, and foster both cognitive and social development in children (Silverman, Hong & Trepanier-Street, 2010). Competent teachers are not only capable of adapting their teaching strategies to the individual needs of students but are also able to actively collaborate with other professionals, which is particularly crucial when working with children who have specific educational needs.

The significance of competencies in education is also highlighted in the context of modern challenges, such as inclusion, diversity, and globalization. Teachers must be prepared to work with diverse groups of children, where cultural differences and varying social contexts are respected. To do this, teachers need to develop not only their professional competencies but also their intercultural and social skills, enabling them to create inclusive and supportive environments for all children (Hart, 1998).

The Development of the concept of competence in preschool teachers

Over the past few decades, the concept of competencies in preschool teachers has undergone significant development. Historically, teacher competencies were primarily understood within the context of traditional pedagogical skills, such as the ability to transfer knowledge and manage children's behavior. This approach, rooted in behavioral theories from the early 20th century, emphasized that teachers must primarily master technical skills necessary for classroom management and instruction. Teachers were viewed as experts whose main role was to deliver knowledge through strictly structured lesson plans (Gibbs, 1995).

In the 1960s and 1970s, this model gradually began to shift in response to changes in educational theory and practice. With the advent of humanistic and constructivist approaches, the focus moved away from merely transmitting factual knowledge toward fostering the development of children's individual abilities and potential. Teachers came to be seen as facilitators of learning, tasked with encouraging active engagement in the educational process and nurturing children's social and emotional skills. This shift away from traditional pedagogical roles led to the demand for new competencies, such as empathy, the ability to sensitively respond to children's needs, and effective communication with parents and other professionals (Wood & Bennett, 2000).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of competencies evolved further, particularly in relation to the growing emphasis on inclusion and diversity in education. Research indicated that teachers must not only be able to work with diverse groups of children but also collaborate effectively with professionals from various fields to provide comprehensive support for children

with special needs. Teacher competencies expanded to include the ability to work in interdisciplinary teams and develop flexible approaches tailored to the individual needs of each child (NAEYC, 2009). This development led to the creation of new standards for teacher education that incorporate not only pedagogical skills but also emotional intelligence, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability to changing conditions.

The contemporary understanding of preschool teacher competencies is thus far broader and more complex than in the past. Today, teachers are viewed as key actors in the educational process who not only impart knowledge but also contribute to the holistic development of children's personalities, supporting their social and emotional growth. In addition to traditional pedagogical skills, teachers must possess competencies that enable them to work effectively in inclusive and multicultural environments, while collaborating with experts from other fields, which is essential for ensuring the quality of preschool education (Lesloe et al., 2016).

Professional development and support for teachers

Professional support and continuous development of teachers are critical factors contributing to ensuring the high quality of education. Preschool teachers must continually adapt to new challenges, pedagogical approaches, and the evolving needs of children, making their professional development indispensable. Professional support encompasses both formal education and informal processes that help teachers acquire new knowledge and skills, reflect on their practice, and improve teaching effectiveness (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Formal teacher education, including courses, training sessions, and seminars, serves as one of the primary means by which teachers expand their expertise. This type of support focuses on specific pedagogical techniques, new instructional methods, and areas that reflect the current demands of the educational environment. One of the main benefits of formal education is the systematic improvement of competencies essential for working with preschool children, such as inclusion, supporting children with various special needs, and developing emotional and social intelligence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

In addition to formal education, informal professional development plays a vital role. This type of support involves the mutual exchange of experiences among colleagues, mentoring, and feedback. Teachers have the opportunity to develop their skills through collaboration with other teachers or experts. Peer support and reflective practice enable teachers to better understand children's needs and effectively address the challenges they encounter in their daily work. Informal professional development fosters teacher creativity and enhances their motivation for continuous improvement (Arnsby et al., 2023).

Teacher professional development is not limited to acquiring technical skills. An essential

aspect is also emotional support and attention to teachers' mental well-being.

Research shows that teachers who have access to emotional support and opportunities for reflecting on their emotional experiences are better able to manage stressful situations, positively impacting both their personal well-being and the quality of their work with children (Gu & Day, 2011). Therefore, professional development also includes aspects of mental hygiene and resilience-building, which are crucial for a long and successful career.

Thus, ensuring professional support and development for preschool teachers is essential for improving the quality of the educational process and supporting teachers in their daily work. A combination of formal educational programs, informal support, and emotional care creates a comprehensive system that enables teachers to grow both professionally and personally.

Aim

The aim of this theoretical study is to analyze and synthesize the key professional competencies of preschool teachers that contribute to the quality and effectiveness of early childhood education. Drawing on current academic research and scholarly literature focused on pedagogical practice in preschool settings, the study seeks to understand how specific competencies influence both the quality of educational processes and the holistic development of young children.

Given the broad scope of the topic, the theoretical inquiry is further directed by three specific research questions, which delineate the main areas of focus:

1. What professional competencies are considered essential for high-quality preschool education according to current research?
2. What is the significance of interdisciplinary collaboration with specialists (e.g., psychologists, speech therapists, healthcare professionals) for child development in early childhood education?
3. How do preschool teachers support inclusion, cultural diversity, and sustainable values within their pedagogical practice?

An additional objective of the study is to explore the role of preschool teachers within interdisciplinary approaches to early education. In today's educational landscape, teachers are expected to possess not only pedagogical expertise but also the ability to engage effectively in collaborative work with professionals from other fields. This study thus aims to provide a theoretical overview of how such collaboration can enhance inclusive practices and comprehensive child development, and what competencies are required for teachers to successfully participate in interdisciplinary educational models.

Methods

This study is grounded in a qualitative research approach, selected for its capacity to explore the complex nature of professional competencies among preschool teachers, particularly in the context of emotional support and interdisciplinary collaboration. Qualitative methodology enables the examination of meaning-making processes and patterns in pedagogical practice and offers in-depth insight into how these competencies are developed and applied in real educational settings (Creswell, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The primary method of data collection was a systematic literature review, conducted using two prominent scientific databases - Scopus and Web of Science. The search covered the period from 2000 to 2025. Only peer-reviewed scientific articles and scholarly book chapters were included, with relevance to early childhood education, teacher competencies, professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and emotional support.

The search strategy employed a combination of keywords such as *early childhood teacher competencies*, *professional identity in preschool education*, *emotional support*, *inclusive pedagogy*, *reflective practice*, and *interprofessional collaboration in ECEC*. After excluding irrelevant records and duplicates, a total of 37 scholarly sources were selected for in-depth analysis; these are in the table in the results chapter.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began with open coding, identifying recurring semantic patterns across the literature. This stage generated 56 initial codes, which were subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories based on conceptual proximity. For instance, codes such as *teacher as secure base*, *emotional scaffolding*, and *trust building* were consolidated under “Emotional Support” theme, while *joint planning*, *collaboration with therapists*, and *shared responsibility* were included under “Interdisciplinary Collaboration.”

Additional themes identified included Reflective and Didactic Competencies (e.g., *adaptive teaching*, *differentiation*, *observation-based assessment*) and Digital and Sustainability Competencies (e.g., *digital tools in preschool*, *environmental education*, *education for sustainability*). Each theme was analysed in terms of its frequency, relevance to pedagogical practice, and interconnection with other thematic categories.

The analysis was conducted using an interpretative framework, emphasizing not only the occurrence of themes but also the contextual meaning in which they were framed within the studies. Findings were continuously compared with methodological and review literature (e.g., Hart, 1998; Bowen, 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for data triangulation and greater validity of interpretation. This methodological approach proved effective in capturing the dynamics of teachers' professional growth, the nature of collaboration with professionals such as

therapists, special educators, and psychologists, and the broader systemic factors influencing the quality of early childhood education.

Results

The analysis of 37 sources confirms that the discourse on professional competencies of preschool teachers has, over the past decade, shifted from a technical-instructional understanding toward a holistic and relational conception of teacher professionalism. The findings have been structured in response to three key research questions: (1) Which professional competencies are considered essential for high-quality early childhood education? (2) What is the role of interdisciplinary collaboration in supporting child development? (3) How do teachers promote inclusion, cultural diversity, and sustainability in their pedagogical practice?

Author(s)	Year	Title	Focus
Saksri Suebsing et al.	2025	Learning Management Development Model for Early Childhood Teachers	Teaching management model for preschool teachers in Thailand
Collin Shepley et al.	2025	Toward Developing and Validating a Measure to Appraise Progress Monitoring Ability	Validation of a tool for formative assessment in preschool
Joke Torbeyns et al.	2024	Preschool Teachers' Mathematical Questions during Shared Picture Book Reading	Teachers' mathematical competencies during shared book reading
Yuejiu Wang et al.	2024	Creating Conditions for Chinese Kindergarten Teachers' Professional Development	Development of teachers' professional skills in play-based environments
Nicole Larsen et al.	2025	Kindergarten Teachers' Facilitation of Social and Emotional Learning	Competencies in social-emotional learning
Sarah N. Lang et al.	2025	Implementation of the VLS Momentum Project	Supporting teaching practice in preschool education
Chuanmei Dong	2025	'Young Children Nowadays Are Very Smart in ICT'	Teachers' perceptions and use of ICT in China
Simone Dunekacke et al.	2024	Teaching Quality in Kindergarten: Professional Development	Adaptive teaching in mathematics
Marija Karacic et al.	2025	Importance of Children's Play: The Croatian Experience	Play-related competencies of future teachers
Farhana Borg et al.	2025	Principals' Views and Actions on Sustainability	Leadership and sustainability in preschool
Marwan Hamid & Misnar Misnar	2025	Scientific Literacy in Early Childhood Special Education	STEAM and special education
Eva Mikuska et al.	2025	Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Practices	Knowledge and skills of ECEC graduates
Sarah Years in the Classroom	2025	Association Between Teaching Experience	Relationship between teaching experience and self-assessed competencies
Hien T. Nguyen et al.	2023	Management of Preschool Teacher's Professional Competence in the 4.0 Revolution	Competency development in the digital era
Ning Yulin & Solomon D. Danso	2025	Pedagogical Readiness for Digital Innovation	Teachers' readiness for digital innovation
Ollonen, B. et al.	2025	Teacher Motivational Scaffolding and Preschoolers'	Motivational strategies and digital literacy

		Motivational Triggers in the Context of Playful Learning of Multiliteracy and Digital Skills.	
Olli Merjovaara et al.	2024	Early childhood pre-service teachers' attitudes towards digital technologies and their relation to digital competence.	Attitudes and digital competencies (TPACK)
Marina Diković & Monika Terlević	2025	Digital Competence in Initial Teacher Education	Current state of digital competence in Croatian preschool teachers
Christine Michel & Laëtitia Pierrot	2024	Model-Based Methods to Diagnose Teachers' Digital Maturity	Model of teachers' digital maturity
Melinda Plumb & Karlheinz Kautz	2016	Barriers to IT Integration in ECEC Organisations	Barriers to IT integration in preschool education
Abry, T. et al.	2015	Preschool and kindergarten teachers' beliefs about early school competencies	Teachers' beliefs in early school competencies and their impact on kindergarten transition
Alisauskiene, S. et al.	2023	Interprofessional collaboration in early childhood education and care	Collaboration between teachers and specialists in preschool
Dean, A. et al.	2019	Defining competencies for the early childhood workforce	Competency model for teachers of children under 3
Farró, M. A. & Melief, P.	2022	What competencies should early childhood educators possess for the future?	Future-oriented teacher competencies
Guo, Y. et al.	2010	Relations among preschool teachers' self-efficacy, classroom quality...	Teacher self-efficacy and teaching quality
Movahedazarhouligh, S. et al.	2023	STEM integrated curriculums in early childhood	STEM approaches in preschool education
Hong, S. B. & Shaffer, L.	2015	Inter-professional collaboration	Collaboration between teachers and therapists
Kadji-Beltrán, C.	2024	Enhancing sustainability teaching competence...	Environmental sustainability and pedagogical skills
NAEYC	2021	Professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators	Professional standards and inclusive practices
Poulou, M. S. & Akgün, S.	2018	Teachers' self-efficacy in classroom management...	Teacher self-efficacy and emotional competence
Public Agenda & Spencer Foundation	2015	Teacher collaboration in perspective	Importance of teacher-specialist collaboration
Silverman, K. et al.	2010	Collaboration of Teacher Education and Child Disability Health Care	Transdisciplinary approach to inclusion
Tilbe, T. J. & Xiaosong, G.	2024	Teacher-related factors associated with teacher-child interaction quality in preschool education.	Factors affecting the quality of teacher-child interactions
Wood, E. & Bennett, N.	2000	Changing theories, changing practice	Professional learning in early education

Table of Sources

Essential Professional Competencies for Preschool Teachers

The most frequently identified areas of professional competence include: emotional and relational competence, reflective and adaptive capacity, didactic and planning skills, communicative proficiency, and digital and environmental literacy. Contemporary literature underscores that high-quality pedagogy is not solely a matter of instructional skill, but rather of

the teacher's ability to integrate knowledge with emotional intelligence and responsiveness to the child's holistic needs.

A foundational pillar of early childhood teaching is the teacher's emotional competence and capacity for building secure relationships. Scholars such as Guo et al. (2010), Farró & Melief (2022), Larsen et al. (2025), and Tilbe & Xiaosong (2024) stress that the ability to provide emotional support—creating a safe, trust-based, and emotionally nurturing environment—is central to the child's well-being, motivation, and capacity to learn. In this context, the teacher functions as a “secure base,” akin to a parental attachment figure, enabling children to explore their environment with confidence (Bowlby, as cited in Larsen et al., 2025).

Equally significant is the teacher's reflective and adaptive competence. High-quality early childhood educators are distinguished not only by their mastery of curriculum content, but by their ability to continuously reflect on and adapt their pedagogical strategies in response to the individual needs, interests, and developmental trajectories of children. Studies by Wood & Bennett (2000) and Braun & Clarke (2006) emphasize the importance of reflective practice as a core component of professional growth. Simone Dunekacke et al. (2024) elaborate on the concept of “adaptive teaching,” which entails differentiated instruction based on ongoing observation and responsiveness to diversity within the classroom.

In the context of 21st-century education, increasing attention is also paid to digital competencies. Studies by Dong (2025), Ollonen et al. (2025), and Merjovaara et al. (2024) demonstrate that digital tools are only pedagogically meaningful when integrated reflectively and with a clear understanding of their developmental appropriateness. Teachers need to not only possess technical skills but also the pedagogical judgment to determine when, how, and why to employ digital media in early childhood education.

The Role of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

A consistently emphasized theme across the reviewed literature is the crucial role of interdisciplinary collaboration as an integral component of high-quality early childhood education. Collaboration between preschool teachers and other professionals—such as psychologists, speech therapists, healthcare providers, social workers, and special educators—is not only essential for supporting children with special educational needs, but also serves as a key mechanism for enhancing the overall inclusivity, quality, and complexity of the educational process (Silverman et al., 2010; Alisauskiene et al., 2023).

Given the increasing diversity in preschool classrooms, the rising prevalence of developmental disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorders, language delays, emotional and behavioral difficulties), and the growing emphasis on early intervention, interdisciplinary

collaboration is now viewed as a fundamental framework for supporting the child's development. Within this model, the teacher becomes part of a broader team of professionals responsible for shared planning, coordinated support strategies, and ongoing reflection on the child's developmental trajectory. Research by Hong & Shaffer (2015) and Convertini (2020) demonstrates that such collaboration leads to earlier identification of developmental risks, more targeted support, and more coherent, child-centered educational responses that are aligned with the child's bio-psycho-social needs.

However, interdisciplinary work is not solely a matter of organizational structure (e.g., availability of in-house specialists); it requires a set of specific transdisciplinary competencies on the part of teachers. These include the ability to engage in open, dialogic communication, demonstrate mutual respect between professions, reflect on one's own limitations, and show a willingness to learn from others. Dean et al. (2019), in their review study, highlight the importance of "professional cross-over"—the ability to understand the basic language and conceptual frameworks of other disciplines, share responsibility, and approach child development from multiple perspectives.

Successful collaboration also demands time, trust, and coordination, all of which are often limited by practical constraints such as staff shortages, institutional barriers, or the heavy administrative workload faced by early childhood educators. Nonetheless, studies such as those by Public Agenda & Spencer Foundation (2015) show that when collaboration is effectively structured, it brings not only benefits for the child but also greater professional confidence and motivation among teachers, who feel less isolated when facing complex pedagogical challenges.

Recent studies have also highlighted the value of collaboration with STEM professionals in enriching the early childhood curriculum through inquiry-based and exploratory learning. Research by Movahedazarhouli et al. (2023) and Impedovo & Smyrniou (2017) illustrates how such partnerships introduce new pedagogical perspectives and foster cognitive flexibility, questioning, problem-solving, and systemic thinking in young children. These forms of interdisciplinary collaboration are not limited to children with developmental needs; rather, they represent a pedagogical enrichment that benefits all learners.

Moreover, working with specialists allows teachers to gain deeper insight into the social determinants of learning, such as family dynamics, health status, language barriers, and cultural differences. Teachers who actively draw on the expertise of allied professionals are better equipped to respond to complex needs, including mental health support, identity formation, and the management of transitions between home and school (Alisauskiene et al., 2023; NAEYC, 2021).

In light of the growing complexity of early childhood classrooms, it is clear that the teacher cannot act as an isolated expert. Instead, the teacher should function as a facilitator of

collaboration and a communication bridge between the child, their family, and a network of professionals. Interdisciplinary collaboration is not only becoming embedded in professional standards but is increasingly seen as a pathway to greater inclusion, quality, and equity in early childhood education.

Supporting Inclusion, Diversity, and Sustainability

The third thematic area identified in the analyzed literature focuses on preschool teachers' ability to create inclusive, culturally responsive, and sustainability-oriented educational environments. This domain is increasingly recognized as a transversal professional competence that permeates all aspects of early childhood education and requires not only technical expertise but also deep personal and ethical engagement from the teacher.

In the area of inclusion, research emphasizes that teachers must be able to work consciously and proactively with differences among children—whether linguistic, cultural, ethnic, religious, gender-based, or socio-economic. According to NAEYC (2021), inclusive practice entails more than physical integration; it involves ensuring that every child is meaningfully engaged, accepted, and actively participating in all aspects of early learning. This requires teachers to differentiate instruction, challenge implicit bias, and build authentic, reciprocal relationships with each child and their family.

Highlight that truly inclusive education begins with a deep understanding of children's social and cultural contexts, including family values, parenting styles, language backgrounds, and attitudes toward education. Teachers who are sensitive to these contexts are better equipped to design educational experiences that resonate with children, affirm their identities, and promote a sense of belonging. Central to this work is the teacher's intercultural and communication competence, which enables respectful dialogue with families and positions the teacher as a cultural mediator within the school community.

Inclusion is thus reframed in current literature not as “support for the disadvantaged,” but as a fundamental philosophy of education that views diversity as a baseline and a strength. Teachers act as architects of classroom environments where their daily language, materials, attitudes, and interactions convey a consistent message: every child has the right to be seen, heard, and valued.

Closely linked to inclusion is the theme of sustainability and ecological literacy, which is gaining prominence in early childhood education discourse. As Kadji-Beltrán (2024) argues, sustainability should not be approached as a stand-alone topic but rather as an ethical and pedagogical orientation—a lens through which all aspects of preschool education can be filtered. Competent early childhood educators foster children's understanding of environmental

interdependence, incorporate sustainable practices into daily routines (e.g., recycling, water conservation, gardening), and cultivate a sense of responsibility toward living systems.

Examples from countries such as Finland, Sweden, and the Netherlands illustrate that integrating environmental education into the curriculum not only raises ecological awareness, but also promotes children's autonomy, decision-making, cooperation, and critical thinking (Olsson et al., 2016). In particular, Kadji-Beltrán (2024) demonstrates that student teachers involved in experiential sustainability initiatives such as *living labs* develop a deeper understanding of ecological interconnectedness and are more likely to embed sustainability values in their future pedagogical practice.

Importantly, studies indicate that sustainability-oriented teaching does not provoke fear or helplessness in children; rather, it strengthens their sense of competence, agency, and hope. Teachers assume the role of facilitators of values education, not by prescribing beliefs, but by creating space for open dialogue, posing ethical questions, and guiding children in the process of developing their own informed stances on issues such as climate, justice, and equality.

The relationship between inclusion, cultural responsiveness, and sustainability is increasingly viewed as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Teachers who foster children's respect for one another simultaneously nurture their respect for the environment and future generations. Thus, education for democracy, social justice, and ecological stewardship becomes a core dimension of contemporary teacher identity in early childhood education.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the professional profile of the early childhood educator is increasingly being conceptualized as multidimensional, ethically grounded, and relationship-oriented, surpassing the traditional understanding of the teacher as an instructional expert.

This evolution reflects broader pedagogical and societal trends toward more humanistic, child-centered, and ecologically responsible approaches to education. However, such an expanded view of professionalism also raises critical questions. For example: *To what extent can this complex and idealized profile be realistically achieved within the everyday constraints of preschools—particularly where resources, time, and institutional support are limited?*

The identification of emotional and relational competencies as central to teaching practice is consistent with a growing body of research on attachment and early development (Larsen et al., 2025; Ahnert, 2021). The teacher is not merely a facilitator of learning but serves as a secure relational base, offering emotional safety, authentic presence, and consistent affective support. However, this invites further reflection: *Is emotional labor sufficiently acknowledged, valued, and supported within institutional frameworks?* Emotional competence remains difficult to quantify and is often overlooked in teacher assessments, despite its profound impact on child development.

Therefore, emotional and relational skills must be explicitly cultivated and embedded in teacher education and ongoing professional development.

The findings also confirm the critical importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. As the developmental needs of children become more complex, collaboration with professionals such as psychologists, therapists, and health workers is increasingly essential. Yet this collaboration is not merely logistical—it requires a culture of openness, mutual trust, and shared responsibility. As highlighted by Alisauskiene et al. (2023) and Convertini (2020), effective collaboration depends not only on structural support (e.g., time, clearly defined roles) but also on interpersonal competencies, such as dialogue, negotiation, and professional empathy. *Thus, teacher training programs must foster not only the “what” of collaboration, but also the “how.”*

In terms of inclusion and cultural responsiveness, the study reinforces the expectation that preschool teachers act as cultural mediators, capable of understanding and responding to the multifaceted identities of children and their families. This requires going beyond surface-level diversity to engage with the deeper dimensions of cultural identity, systemic inequality, and unconscious bias. However, such competencies are often underdeveloped in teacher education, despite their clear relevance for educational equity and classroom quality (NAEYC, 2021).

A particularly novel contribution of this study is the attention to sustainability as a core professional competence. While environmental education is widely acknowledged as urgent, it remains underrepresented in preschool pedagogy or reduced to isolated, symbolic activities. As Kadji-Beltrán (2024) demonstrates, sustainability becomes genuinely transformative when internalized as a pedagogical and ethical orientation, rather than simply a theme. Teachers who experience sustainability as part of their professional identity—through immersive experiences such as “living labs”—are more likely to integrate it into daily routines and foster environmentally literate and socially conscious children.

It is important to acknowledge a key methodological limitation of this study: the analysis is based primarily on peer-reviewed academic literature from global databases (Scopus and Web of Science), most of which originates from high-income educational systems. The study does not examine the historical, institutional, or cultural contexts of the individual countries from which these sources are drawn. As such, any generalization or application of findings to specific national contexts (e.g., the Czech Republic) must be approached with caution, taking into account local curricula, educational traditions, and policy frameworks.

Ultimately, this study invites a broader rethinking of teacher professionalism in early childhood education. Rather than focusing exclusively on the question “what should teachers be able to do?”, we must also ask: *In what kind of system, under what values and with what support structures can such competencies be cultivated?* Teacher professionalism does not develop in

isolation but emerges through dialogue between the individual, the institution, and the broader sociopolitical context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that the professional competencies of preschool teachers, as represented in recent academic literature, are understood as a multifaceted set of skills, dispositions, and values that go far beyond traditional teaching and planning. Today, the preschool teacher is increasingly viewed not only as an instructional expert but also as a relational actor, cultural mediator, and ethical guide. This study highlights that key areas of competence include the ability to establish emotionally safe relationships with children, collaborate within interdisciplinary teams, respond sensitively to social and cultural diversity, and support children in understanding principles of sustainability and social responsibility.

The findings confirm that emotional and relational competencies form the core of high-quality early childhood education. A teacher who is emotionally present, authentic, and stable provides the foundation for healthy child development, secure attachment, and effective learning. This dimension must be systematically supported, both in initial teacher education and throughout the professional life of educators, through supervision, mentoring, and peer support.

Another important conclusion concerns the growing role of interdisciplinary collaboration. In light of the increasing complexity of children's needs, teachers must be able to cooperate with other professionals - such as psychologists, therapists, speech-language pathologists, and healthcare providers - and contribute to the creation of individualized support strategies for children and families. This kind of collaboration is not automatic; it requires the development of transdisciplinary skills, including open communication, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Teacher preparation should address these areas and provide opportunities for students and practicing educators to engage in real, cross-sector collaboration.

The third key area concerns inclusion, cultural sensitivity, and sustainability. In today's world, education cannot ignore the diverse lived experiences of children and families - including differences in language, religion, family structure, and environmental challenges. The teacher becomes a bearer of democratic values, educating not only for academic achievement but also for responsibility, mutual respect, and care—for people and for the planet. These values should be treated as an integral part of professional identity, not as supplementary goals.

It is important to acknowledge a methodological limitation of this study. The analysis is based primarily on international scholarly sources indexed in Scopus and Web of Science and does not explore the historical, institutional, or cultural contexts of the countries from which the literature is drawn. Therefore, any application of the findings to specific national settings—such

as the Czech Republic—should be undertaken with caution and awareness of local curricula, legal frameworks, and pedagogical traditions.

The findings of this study offer concrete implications for educational practice, teacher preparation, and policy. Initial teacher education must systematically incorporate emotional literacy, self-reflection, intercultural competence, and environmental education into its programs. At the same time, this broadened vision of professionalism must be accompanied by adequate support - in terms of time, institutional structure, and emotional resources. Teachers cannot fulfill their complex roles without space for their own growth, peer collaboration, and recognition of their work.

Future research should further explore how these competencies are constructed in practice, how they are experienced by teachers, what barriers hinder their development, and what conditions support them. It will be especially important to connect focused studies on specific dimensions of competence with a holistic understanding of professional identity as a dynamic, relational, and evolving process.

In summary, the quality of early childhood education is inseparably linked to the quality of the teacher - not only in technical terms but in their human, relational, and ethical wholeness. Supporting teachers at this level appears to be a key pathway toward building resilient, equitable, and sustainable educational systems for the future.

KOMPETENCIJE VASPITAČA U PREDŠKOLSKIM USTANOVAMA

Apstrakt

Ova teorijska studija istražuje promenljivi pejzaž profesionalnih kompetencija koje se zahtevaju od vaspitača u savremenom predškolskom obrazovanju. Na osnovu sistematskog pregleda 37 recenziranih naučnih radova preuzetih iz baza podataka Scopus i Web of Science, studija analizira tri ključne oblasti: (1) osnovne profesionalne kompetencije neophodne za kvalitetno predškolsko obrazovanje, (2) ulogu i značaj interdisciplinarne saradnje sa stručnjacima i (3) strategije za podršku inkluziji, kulturnoj raznolikosti i održivosti u pedagoškoj praksi. Analiza pokazuje da kvalitetno predškolsko obrazovanje sve više zavisi od emocionalne i relacione kompetencije, reflektivne prilagodljivosti, interdisciplinarne komunikacije i etičkog pristupa raznolikosti i održivosti. Od vaspitača se očekuje da deluju ne samo kao edukatori, već i kao emocionalni oslonci, kulturni medijatori i saradnici u multidisciplinarnim timovima. Emocionalna podrška, inkluzivna pedagogija i obrazovanje za održivost pojavljuju se kao međusobno povezane dimenzije profesionalnog identiteta. Nalazi sugerišu da su efektivni vaspitači oni koji integrišu pedagoško znanje sa socio-emocionalnom

inteligencijom i interkulturalnom senzitivnošću. Studija takođe naglašava potrebu za sistematskim stručnim usavršavanjem koje podstiče reflektivnu praksu, interdisciplinarnu spremnost i otpornost kod vaspitača. Ograničenje ove studije jeste oslanjanje na međunarodnu literaturu bez dublje analize nacionalnih i lokalnih konteksta. U celini, studija doprinosi širem sagledavanju profesionalizma vaspitača – kao relacije, saradničke i vrednosno utemeljene prakse – i nudi implikacije za obrazovanje vaspitača, obrazovne politike i buduća istraživanja.

Ključne reči: vaspitač; profesionalne kompetencije; interdisciplinarna saradnja; predškolsko obrazovanje; emocionalna podrška

References

- Alisauskiene, S., Kairienė, D., Bahdanovich Hanssen, N., & Harju-Luukkainen, H. (2023). Interprofessional collaboration in early childhood education and care. In *Interprofessional and family-professional collaboration for inclusive early childhood education and care*. Berlin: Springer
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27-40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Convertini, J. (2020). An interdisciplinary approach to investigate preschool children's scientific activities. *Research in Science Education*, 51, 171 – 186. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11165-020-09957-3>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. California: SAGE Publications.
- Dean, A., LeMoine, S., & Tout, K. (2019). *Defining competencies for the early childhood workforce: A literature review and conceptual framework*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- Dunekacke, S., Jenßen, L., & Blömeke, S. (2024). *Teaching quality in kindergarten: Professional development and adaptive learning support enhances mathematical competency*. *ZDM – Mathematics Education*, 56(5), 923–935. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11858-024-01566-y>
- Farró, M. A., & Melief, P. (2022). What competencies should early childhood educators possess for the future? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 30(2), 157–172.
- Gibbs, G. (1995). *Competency-Based Education: A Practical Guide*. Boston: Allyn Bacon.
- Guo, Y., Piasta, S. B., Justice, L. M., & Kaderavek, J. N. (2010). Relations among preschool

- teachers' self-efficacy, classroom quality, and children's language and literacy gains. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(4), 1094–1103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.12.010>
- Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a literature review: Releasing the social science research imagination*. California: SAGE Publications.
- Hong, S. B., & Shaffer, L. (2015). Inter-professional collaboration: Early childhood educators and medical therapists working within a collaboration. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 3(1), 135-142. <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v3i1.623>
- Kadji-Beltrán, C. (2024). Enhancing sustainability teaching competence in preschool teacher education using living labs. *Sustainability*, 16(7), 2781. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16072781>
- Movahedazarhouli, S., Kermani, H., & Aldemir, J. (2023). STEM integrated curriculums in early childhood education: An exploration of teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices. *International Journal of Modern Education Studies*, 7(1), 106–127. <https://doi.org/10.51383/ijonmes.2022.266>
- NAEYC. (2021). *Professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators*. Washington: NAEYC.
- Ollonen, B., Kangas, M. (2025). Teacher Motivational Scaffolding and Preschoolers' Motivational Triggers in the Context of Playful Learning of Multiliteracy and Digital Skills. *Early Childhood Educ J* 53, 1079–1093. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01664-2>
- Poulou, M. S., & Akgün, S. (2018). Teachers' self-efficacy in classroom management and emotional competence in teaching: A comparative study. *Educational Psychology*, 38(3), 287-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2017.1346926>
- Public Agenda & Spencer Foundation. (2015). *Teacher collaboration in perspective: A guide to research*. New York: Public Agenda.
- Silverman, K., Hong, S. & Trepanier-Street, M. (2010). Collaboration of Teacher Education and Child Disability Health Care: Transdisciplinary Approach to Inclusive Practice for Early Childhood Pre-Service Teachers. *Early Childhood Educ. J.* 37, 461– 468. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-010-0373-5>
- Tilbe, T. J., & Xiaosong, G. (2024). Teacher-related factors associated with teacher– child interaction quality in preschool education. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, 18(9), article 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-024- 00134-x>
- Wood, E., & Bennett, N. (2000). *Changing theories, changing practice: Exploring early childhood teachers' professional learning*. London, UK: Routledge.