

## PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATION

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### **APPLYING THE COMPETENCY APPROACH TO QUALITY MANAGEMENT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**

**Abstract.** *Early childhood education and care is a policy that aims to improve access to education and ensure the well-being of children by creating an environment for learning, nurturing, socialization, support and cooperation. In this process, the formation of key competences in children, not only academic, but also personal and social, has an essential role, in order to prepare them for life in modern society, in which they can realize themselves successfully. The article examines basic competencies of children and those working with them in the context of quality assurance of early childhood education and care. Interrelationships are made between the application of the competence approach and the improvement of quality. A focused study of parents is presented regarding their satisfaction with the provided educational, health and social services, the importance of key competences for the development of children and the support they provide through cooperation with specialists for high quality services. The findings of the study show a good degree of satisfaction, but insufficient participation of families in the general care for the education, upbringing and socialization of children. Parents attach more importance to the personal qualities that children acquire and develop in kindergarten, compared to academic knowledge.*

**Keywords:** *competence, quality, early childhood education and care.*

Education in Bulgaria is being transformed by implementing new policies that aim to improve the education, upbringing and socialization of young people, including early childhood development. In implementation of the European policies for early childhood education and care and the Recommendation of the Council for high-quality systems of education and care in early childhood (Council

Recommendation, 2018), a national framework for the quality of education and care in early childhood is being introduced in Bulgaria, the implementation of which is pending. In the analytical report to motivate the need to introduce the framework, it is proposed to adopt a common vision, standards and values to optimize management and improve quality. The framework created is based on the five areas proposed by the European Commission – management and funding, access, staff, curriculum and monitoring and evaluation (Analytical Report, 2022).

The idea of quality assurance in early childhood services is not new, but contemporary policies place a focus on quality and recognize the importance of early childhood care in ensuring children's well-being. On the one hand, it is necessary for them to take care of health and nutrition, and on the other hand, they must acquire initial knowledge, skills and competences, which they can then develop at school. Both formal institutions, such as kindergartens and crèches in Bulgaria and the specialists working in them, as well as social and health services and the specialists in these fields are involved in the process. There are monitoring systems for tracking the quality of education and care for children in each of the spheres, but there is no unified concept and full coordination of the actions of individual services. Access to the highest quality early childhood care and education dates back to 1992 as a recommendation of the Council of the European Communities (Urban, 2012), but is now a priority. It is defined as any regulated measure by which education and care is provided for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, which may vary across the European Union (Education and care ...). The authors who study the problem trace the development of policies in a historical aspect, discuss and classify good practices, trends and problems and examine the contribution of education to social progress (Kamerman, 2000), (Kamerman, 2006), (Spiel et al., 2018). They focus on the quality of training of specialists who work with children (Zdanevych et al., 2020), (Kozak, 2019), (Urban, 2012). They pay attention to different competences that children need for life in modern society: linguistic (Meyer, 2013), (Myankova, 2020), social and civic (Doncheva, 2018), digital and mathematical (Meyer, 2013), motor, health and etc., including learning through games to acquire skills (Ogunyemi & Ragpot, 2015). Interrelationships exist between them, as the

formation of a given competence supports the development of another. At the same time, personal qualities such as communicativeness, social belonging, responsibility, motivation, value-semantic orientations, etc. are built, self-knowledge skills and attitudes towards knowledge and one's own activities and actions are acquired, and a reflexive-evaluative worldview is formed.

According to the Common European Language Framework, competence is "...a set of knowledge, skills, attitudes that enable an individual to carry out activities" (Common European Language Framework 2006: 19), what we get as a result of learning (Zimnyaya, 2013), objectively set requirements by the society to the result of the training (Khutorsky, 2003: 415). In other words, competency-based learning is the curriculum developed as a set of specific skills, attitudes and knowledge outcomes that are set for a given age group and that children should achieve and their teachers assess for progress them.

Knowledge, skills and attitudes are the basis of the competence approach, understood as a subjective transformation of the personality to apply the acquired knowledge in different life situations. The focus is on the individual skills, personal development and progress of each child. Applying the competence approach is important both for children who are acquiring skills and developing qualities, and for their teachers, who must also have the knowledge and skills to develop the potential of each child depending on their individual characteristics. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the approach, specialists must apply integrated interaction among themselves and between educational areas, innovative and interactive methods of teaching and learning, ensure practical orientation of knowledge and strive for the effectiveness of their work. Integrating knowledge and turning it into a skill is one of the main aspects of a competency-based approach. Developing skills to provide a real practical perspective to knowledge is another major emphasis. It also provides an opportunity for children's creativity and initiative, as applicable knowledge makes pedagogical situations or other extracurricular activities interesting. Placing children in non-standard situations and applying a project-based approach, games, dramatizations, etc., transforms learning from subject-oriented to competence-oriented learning. All this requires a change in

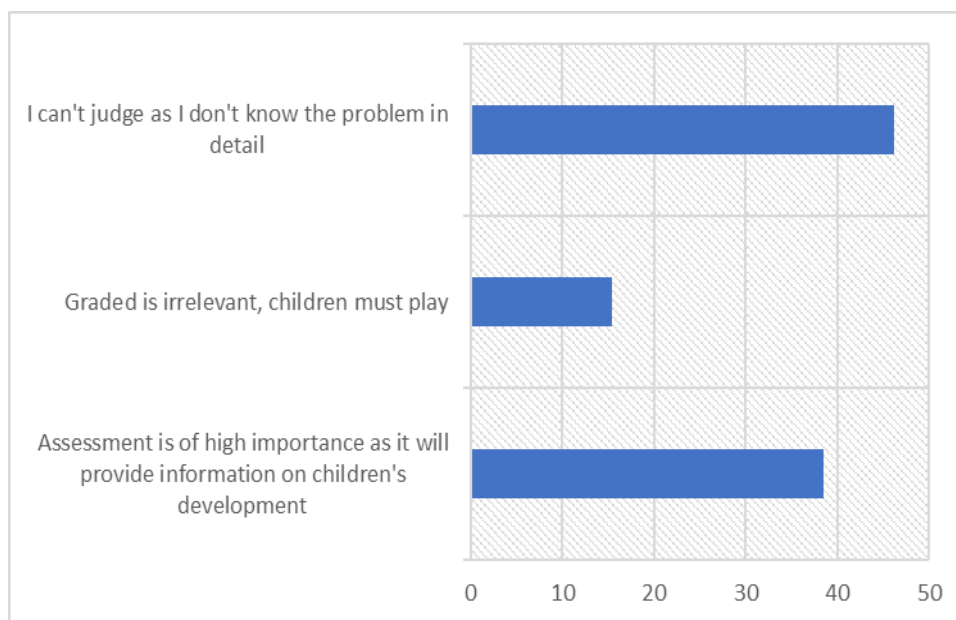
focus from teaching, the active participation of children in practical activities directed by the teacher as a moderator and inspirer of ideas, instead of being only a source of information. The director of the institution has his role in the change process, who with his leadership qualities can skillfully guide and moderate the activities, plan activities for the implementation of the approach based on competences, guide the pedagogical and other specialists and parents in their integrated interaction, to organize the effective tracking of children's progress.

In the context of the creation of a framework for the quality of early childhood education and care and the insufficient communication of the process to the public, incl. parents, a study was conducted of their attitude towards the formation of competences in their children, towards the evaluation of quality, evaluation criteria that are significant for them, in order to provide them with information about the development and progress of their children, etc. Some aspects of the assessment were discussed in a focus group with parents from two kindergartens in Pernik district. Each of the participants was given the opportunity to freely express his opinion, and in some cases the moderator drew attention to specific features of the questions. Parents are asked to justify their answers, i.e. to explain the reasons for the opinion expressed.

Evaluating early childhood education and care is necessary and important for 38.46% of those who participated in the study, who motivated their answer with their awareness of the quality of education and care. Some of them (15.38%) do not consider assessment to be significant, stating that children should play and not acquire academic knowledge. Almost half of the respondents (46.15%) do not know in detail the assessment as a way to measure quality, therefore they cannot give an opinion on its significance. The data show that the process, although discussed with professors from higher schools, experts, principals and teachers, is not sufficiently communicated among the parent community (Diagram 1).

The participants in the focus group shared that the additional forms in which the children participate are more interesting for them than the mandatory pedagogical situations, since they often take place outside the kindergarten classroom, the children have the opportunity to learn about the surrounding world

in its natural environment, to create and experiment. The parents chose the kindergarten precisely because of the activities of interest that are held and the professionalism of the specialists working with the children. They are satisfied with the activities of the teachers, but also with the support provided by the nurse and other specialists in the kindergarten.

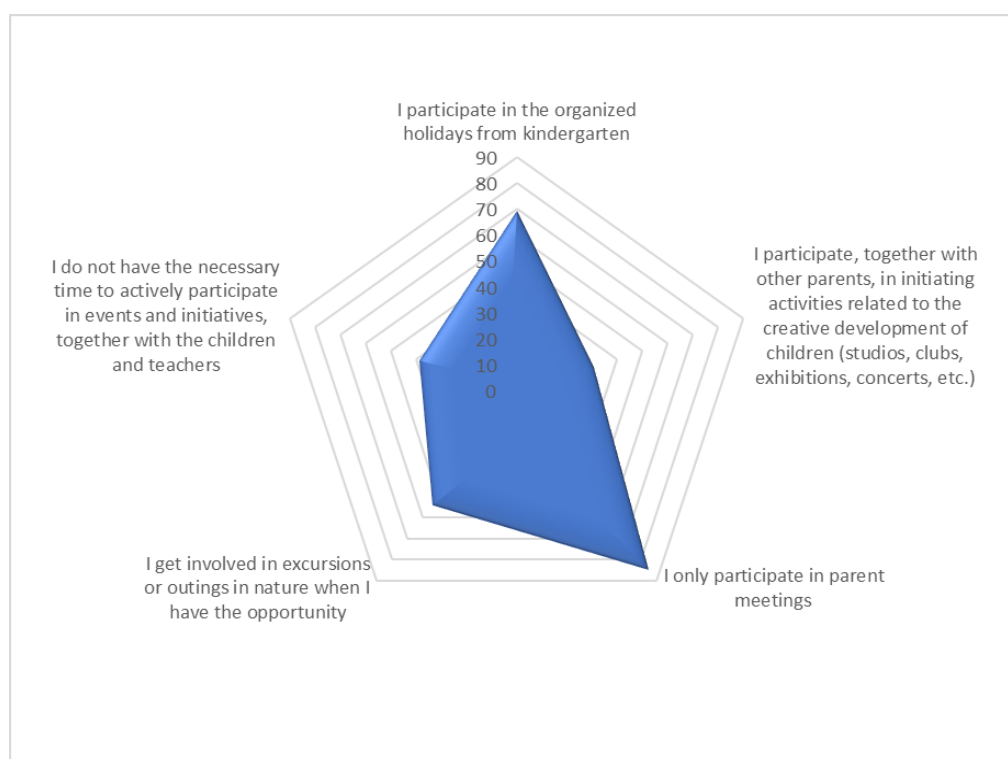


**Diagram 1. Distribution of parents' opinions on the need and importance of early childhood education and care assessment**

Health talks are held, children's health status is monitored, they are taught a healthy lifestyle and protection of their own health, hygiene habits are formed. At the same time, the children receive support for their personal development from the resource teacher, the speech therapist and the psychologist. In the development of children's knowledge and skills, other specialists, outside the kindergarten, whose activities the parents approve of - librarians, museum workers, social workers, artists, etc. - are also involved. In this way, good conditions are created for integrated interaction between different specialists from different sectors, organized by the director of the kindergarten for the complex development of children.

When tracking the activity of parents in activities and the life of the kindergarten, it is found that the largest share of 84.62% of them participate only in parent meetings. This is not enough for the integrated care of children and the shared

responsibility for their development. More than half of the participants in the focus group (69.23% of them) take part in the organized holidays from the kindergarten, in excursions or outings in nature when they have the opportunity (53.85%), and about a third of them (30.77%) themselves initiate activities related to children's creative development (studios, clubs, exhibitions, concerts, etc.). A small part of parents (38.46%) state that they do not have time for active participation in events and initiatives, together with children and teachers (Diagram 2). The activity of parents in the interaction with specialists to ensure training and quality care for children is a problem of the educational system in Bulgaria, which can be solved at the institutional level with the active assistance of the director and specialists working with children.



**Diagram 2. Distribution of parents' answers about their activity in interacting with the kindergarten**

In the course of the discussion, by using the Mentimeter electronic platform, a survey was conducted in which parents categorize by importance predetermined competences that children need to form. Table 1 presents the results of the survey among parents.

Table 1

**Distribution of parents' opinions regarding the importance of key competences for children**

<i>Competencies</i>	<i>Significantly</i>	<i>I have no opinion</i>	<i>Insignificant</i>
Language competences	61,54	0	38,46
Digital competences	38,46	23,08	38,46
Mathematical competences	46,15	30,77	23,08
Environmental awareness skills	61,54	7,69	30,77
Civic and social competences	46,15	38,46	15,39
Skills for carrying out constructive and visual activities	69,23	7,69	23,08
Motor skills	76,92	0	23,08
Healthy lifestyle skills	84,62	7,69	7,69
Musical performance skills and music listening skills	61,54	15,39	23,08
Communication competences	76,92	0	23,08
Ability to work in team	69,23	7,69	23,08
Skills to control feelings and emotions	100	0	0
Self-control and responsibility skills	100	0	0
Critical thinking and problem solving skills	69,23	15,39	15,38
Initiative and self-initiative skills	61,54	23,08	15,38
Learning skills	76,92	0	23,08

For more than half of the parents, all competences are significant, except for digital and mathematical competences, where the answers are distributed between importance, non-importance and lack of opinion, with a slight preponderance of importance for mathematical knowledge and skills. Respondents know the competencies that are important for children, which is clear in the course of the focus group conversation, giving priority to social and personal, evident from the survey. All parents rated the children's skills to control their feelings and emotions and self-control and responsibility as the most important. These are skills that are difficult for some parents to form in the family environment and they clearly rely on specialists in this direction, which explains the answers. Among the other important skills for the respondents, indicated by about 70% and more than 70% of them, are the skills for carrying out constructive and visual activities, for a healthy lifestyle,

for working in a team, for critical thinking and solving problems, motor skills and communication skills. These data once again confirm that the complex development of children and their formation as healthy, emotionally stable, responsible and independent individuals, creative and related to art is essential for parents, before the development of knowledge related to certain educational area.

The conducted research leads to certain conclusions and recommendations.

Given that assessment as a way of monitoring the quality of early childhood education and care is not a fully familiar process for parents, based on the positive responses given in the survey, it can be determined that it has its role both for them, as well as in the management process. Assessment and self-assessment as monitoring processes need to be explained to parents to ensure their adequate and active participation.

Parents appreciate the importance of the competence approach for complex and integrated development of their children and know the key competences that must be formed in children. However, its application is carried out more effectively in activities of interest than in compulsory forms of education. These facts stem both from the respondents giving more importance to children's social and personal skills, and from the more effective interaction during interest activities they stated in the focus group. A recommendation can be made in pedagogical situations to use more interactive teaching methods and to make classes more practical, with children experimenting and exploring the world through action, in order to create the same interest in formal learning as in extracurricular activities.

Competences are known by parents and they, although some of them do not think that children should develop academic competences, recognize the importance of all proposed competences. For the respondents, the skills for a healthy lifestyle and raising children in a healthy environment, developing their motor abilities, their inclusion and developing communication skills, along with responsibility, initiative, self-control and emotional intelligence, are more important. Perhaps parents should appreciate that academic competences go hand in hand with soft skills, as the latter are formed both in the mandatory forms when conducting pedagogical situations in educational areas, as well as in activities based on interests and in the overall



upbringing, education and socialization of children during their stay in kindergarten. For this purpose, a more effective cooperation between the kindergarten and the parent community is necessary, for which the principal has a key coordinating role.

Applying the competency-based approach to quality management of early childhood education and care is of high importance in supporting the productivity of skills formation, as it is multidimensional and multi-layered, integrates knowledge and prepares children for school and future well-being.

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