Evaluation of teachers' professional competencies from the perspective of future teachers

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Abstract

The teacher holds a responsible social role that entails professional expertise and desirable qualities. In modern education, teachers are expected to possess professional competencies, which represent a symbiosis of certain components. The issue of standardizing teaching competencies is part of the contemporary paradigm of professional development. Considering this, the paper theoretically examines approaches to teacher competencies, while the research part focuses on assessing the importance of competency domains and subdomains defined by the *Regulation on Standards of Competencies for the Teaching Profession*, as evaluated by students, future teachers. The sample consisted of 143 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education in Užice. The scaling technique and a specially developed evaluation scale were used for this research. The research results show that students value the teaching domain, subject, and teaching methodology as the most important area of competencies, ranking it first. The lowest rank is assigned to the domain of supporting students' personal development. Regarding competency subdomains, the highest rank in importance, according to student evaluations, is attributed to possessing the knowledge required for professional work. Conversely, the lowest rank is given to possessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for planning and continuously implementing personal professional development.
Highlighting the positive attitudes of students toward certain competency domains and subdomains, as well as identifying those they perceive as insufficiently important, can serve as an indicator of how to approach the development of competencies through initial education. It can also guide the modification and improvement of study programs aimed at outcomes that support the development of competencies required by modern teachers. This includes determining which content and teaching methods to introduce and apply within the framework of academic instruction and professional practice during their studies.

Key words:

areas of competency; initial teacher education; professional development; teacher competencies.

Introduction

The question of the expertise and desirable qualities of teachers who educate and shape young generations has attracted the attention of theorists and thinkers since ancient times. For instance, in the 1st century CE, Quintilian, in *The Education of the Orator*, emphasizes that "a more educated teacher is a more perfect methodologist" and that "no one can excel in the more demanding aspects of their profession unless they have thoroughly mastered its fundamentals" (Quintilian, 1985, pp. 127). Although more than twenty centuries have passed since these claims by the Roman philosopher, they remain indisputable even today. In modern society, teachers are still expected to be educated, competent, and skilled methodologists, and it is emphasized that the success of teaching depends on their "knowledge, skills, competencies, motivation, and other personal characteristics" (Đigić, 2017, pp. 19).

Modern approaches to the quality of education place emphasis on teacher competencies, viewing them as directly linked to the quality of educational outcomes. Todorović and colleagues highlight findings from numerous studies that show teacher quality has the greatest impact on student achievement (Todorović, Milin, Stanković, 2019). The importance of teacher competence is particularly underscored for primary school teachers, who lay the foundation for the education of every individual. It is no surprise that the literature points out that if a teacher "lacks quality pedagogical knowledge and competencies, they simply cannot successfully meet the challenges of their teaching profession" (Đuranović, Klasnić, Lapat, 2013, pp. 36–37). However, while the importance of teacher competence is undisputed, it is important to note that there is no universal definition or framework for competencies, nor uniform criteria for their classification. One common approach defines competencies as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that enable an individual to act actively and effectively in any given situation or profession (Korać, 2014). Teaching competencies specify what a teacher should know, be able to do, and how to act effectively in situations encountered in modern schools. These competencies are expressed through measurable characteristics and behaviors, which are based on, but not limited to, acquired knowledge (Kostović, 2008; Radulović, Pejatović, Vujisić-Živković, 2010). Definitions of competencies are largely guided by various areas of a teacher's work, with many emphasizing teaching and classroom activities. Competencies involve specific elements, such as subject knowledge, theoretical expertise in an academic field, and the teacher's proficiency in these areas. However, subject knowledge alone "is insufficient in ensuring proficiency as a classroom teacher" (Rijavec et al., 2006, pp. 134). Another key element is knowing how to act, which is often linked to pedagogical, psychological, didactic, and methodological domains (Branković & Popović, 2018; Lipovac & Golijanin Elez, 2017). Jurčić views teaching competencies through two dimensions: pedagogical competencies (personal, analytical, social, communication, emotional, intercultural, developmental skills, and problem-solving abilities), and didactic competencies (curriculum design, organization and management of the educational process, classroom climate shaping, student achievement assessment, and building models of educational partnerships with parents (Jurčić, 2014). An integral approach to teacher competencies also includes knowing how to *be* —competencies necessary for working and living with others in society and assuming an active professional role in the community (Korać, 2014; Tatković & Ćatić, 2010; Vizek Vidović, 2009). Contemporary approaches to defining competency lists emphasize the importance of communication skills, i.e., communication competence, and knowledge of information and

communication technology (ICT), including ICT methods and tools (Caena & Redecker, 2019; Zivlak & Šafranj, 2018; Zlatić & Bjekić, 2015). The importance of ICT competencies is also highlighted in international documents such as the *ICT Competency Framework for Teachers* (UNESCO, 2018) and the *European Framework for Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu)* (Redecker, 2017).

In recent years, international approaches to competency frameworks have focused on defining descriptors of what a teacher should know, understand, and be able to do (Eurydice, 2018). Analyzing international documents on the teaching profession, authors have noted that the Council of Europe recommends promoting competencies that are particularly relevant today, such as working in multilingual and multicultural environments, teaching students from impoverished backgrounds, supporting students with special needs, promoting sustainable development, and teaching in digital environments (Sánchez-Tarazaga & Matarranz, 2023). Developmental and integrative models of competencies are increasingly present in European competency frameworks and in theoretical explanations of the need for such an approach (Hebib & Ovesni, 2019; Vizek Vidović, 2009). However, integrative models of competencies should emerge as a combination of global demands and the specific needs of individual countries. Therefore, the competency framework is considered one of the tools for building quality in education. The standardization of competencies is a trend aimed at professionalization and serves as an effective tool for quality control and establishing internal regulation within the teaching profession (Todorović, Milin, Stanković, 2019). On the other hand, there are beliefs that standardizing teaching competencies reduces teachers' professional autonomy and that measurable indicators cannot easily capture values such as educational outcomes (Radulović, Pejatović, Vujisić-Živković, 2010).

The view that defining a list of competencies for the teaching profession can serve as a foundation for improving policies and practices of professional development, as well as enhancing the quality of educational work, justifies their standardization within a specific context. Additionally, the belief that competencies can be cultivated and developed supports this approach. However, care must be taken to ensure that the status of the teaching profession is considered when defining, implementing, and evaluating competency standards (Todorović, Milin, Stanković, 2019). Their application and evaluation are closely linked to the professional development of teachers, spanning from initial education to continuous professional training and career advancement.

In the Republic of Serbia, the *Rulebook on Standards of Competencies for the Teaching Profession and Their Professional Development* was adopted in 2011. Competencies in this document are defined as "a set of necessary knowledge, skills, and value-based attitudes of teachers" (*Rulebook on Standards of Competencies for the Teaching Profession and Their Professional Development*, 2011, pp. 1). This represents a broader definition of competencies, implying that "a person utilizes a certain ability or skill to perform a task in a way that allows the assessment of their level of achievement" (Branković & Popović, 2018, p. 9). Such a definition includes the developmental aspect of competencies, as teachers acquire competencies during their education but also refine and develop them through practical work. In this document, teachers' professional competencies are categorized into four key domains: 1) *Teaching area, subject, and teaching methodology;* 2) *Teaching and learning;* 3) *Support for student personality development;* 4) *Communication and collaboration*; and within each of these domains, competencies are further divided into five subdomains: 1. *Knowledge*, 2. *Planning*, 3. *Implementation*, 4. *Assessment/Evaluation*, and 5. *Professional development* (*The Rulebook on Standards of Competencies for the Teaching Profession and Their Professional Development*, 2011). From the above, it can be observed that the key competencies of teachers in the Republic of Serbia encompass their academic, cognitive, methodological, didactic, interpersonal, and communicative

abilities. All domains in which key competencies are categorized are essential for the successful performance of the teaching profession, as are the competencies included within them. A review of the Rulebook reveals that most competencies fall under the subdomain of *knowledge*, while the subdomains of *assessment/evaluation* and *professional development* are the least represented. It is also noted that the framework combines *academic* and *generic competencies* (instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic), which "enable flexible adaptation to the demands of diverse high-level professional tasks" (Vizek Vidović, 2009, pp. 34–35). However, there is an insufficient presence of systemic competencies, particularly those that would allow teachers to comprehend the complexity of the systems to which they belong and to contribute through their actions. Analyzing the processes of introducing the standardization of the teaching profession in European and global contexts, it has been observed that its practical implementation sometimes ties motivation for competency development to specific incentives and benefits, such as career advancement, obtaining licenses, and similar rewards (Todorović, Milin, Stanković, 2019).

It is important to foster a positive attitude toward the development of competencies required for the teaching profession during initial teacher education. For this reason, we conducted a study among future teachers at the Faculty of Education, focusing on the value of teacher competencies as defined in the document *Rulebook on Standards of Competencies for the Teaching Profession and Their Professional Development*.

Methods

A positive attitude toward the defined competencies for the teaching profession can serve as a strong motivational framework for their development during initial teacher education. The aim of the research we conducted was to examine how students, as future teachers, assess the value of these competencies. In relation to the study programs they attend, it is assumed that students will have positive assessments of the competence areas and sub-areas defined by the *Rulebook on Standards of Competencies for the Teaching Profession and Their Professional Development*. The study employs a descriptive method to investigate the evaluation of teaching competencies. For the purpose of this paper, we focused on a narrower research goal, specifically examining the value assigned by students to the competency domains (teaching area, subject, and teaching methodology; teaching and learning; support for student personality development; communication and collaboration) and subdomains (possession of knowledge necessary for teaching; skills in planning various activities within professional work; skills in implementing all activities in professional work; knowledge and skills in monitoring, assessing, and evaluating all activities and stakeholders in the educational process; planning and continuously implementing personal professional development) as defined in the aforementioned document.

For the purposes of the research, an assessment scale was constructed, containing content aligned with the defined competency domains, subdomains, and indicators specified in the *Rulebook.* Students evaluated the importance of the given descriptions using a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 – least important, 5 – most important). The reliability of the entire instrument was calculated using the Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.782, indicating an acceptable level of reliability (George & Mallery, 2019).

The sample in the study consisted of 143 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education in Užice. The surveyed students were informed about the purpose of the research, and the survey was conducted anonymously. Descriptive statistics were applied in the data analysis, including the calculation of mean values and ranks.

Results

Pedagogical competencies are interlinked with all areas of teaching, and a pedagogically competent teacher is one who demonstrates a high level of expertise in all aspects of their work, applying their knowledge, skills, abilities, and values to pedagogical practice (Mijatović, 2000; Ljubetić & Kostović Vranješ, 2008). Through initial education, professional development, and daily work in the educational process, teachers' competencies evolve, develop, and improve, making the acquisition of pedagogical competencies a continuous process of progression from pedagogical incompetence to competence. This process also depends on various internal factors, such as age, attitudes, values, and individual expectations (Ljubetić & Kostović Vranješ, 2008). The results of this study will be presented in relation to the assessed importance of domains in which teachers need to possess competencies for professional work, as well as the assessed importance of subdomains of teacher competencies, as evaluated by students, future teachers.

Table 1 presents the average assessment values and rankings that indicate the perceived importance of individual areas within which teacher competencies are defined.

Table 1

Assessment of the importance of competency areas

Competency areas	M	σ	Ranking
Teaching area, subject and teaching methodology	3,300	1,022	I
Teaching and learning	3,182	1,018	II
Communication and collaboration	3,168	1,175	III
Support for student personality development	3,056	1,079	IV

It can be observed that all areas of competency are assessed as important since the mean values are above average. Students evaluate the teaching field, subject, and teaching methodology as the most important competency area, which ranks first. The area of teaching and learning is ranked second, while communication and collaboration is ranked third. Students rated the importance of the area of support for the development of students' personalities the lowest, placing it in the fourth place.

Table 2

Assessment of the importance of competency subareas

Competency subareas	M	σ	Ranking
Possession of knowledge necessary for teaching	4,664	0,795	I

Possessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities for the implementation of all activities in teaching	4,391	1,021	II
Possession of knowledge, skills, and abilities in monitoring, assessing, and evaluating all activities and stakeholders in the educational process	4,322	1,142	III
Possession of knowledge, skills, and abilities in planning various activities in teaching	4,279	1,071	IV
Possession of knowledge, skills, and abilities in planning and continuously implementing personal professional development	4,084	1,275	V

When it comes to the sub-competencies defined by the *Standards of Competence for the Teaching Profession*, students highly value them as important, as evidenced by the mean values. The first rank is occupied by the sub-competency of possessing the knowledge necessary for teaching. The second rank, in terms of importance, is occupied by possessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for implementing all activities in the teaching profession. The third rank includes the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities for monitoring, assessing, and evaluating all activities and participants in the educational process. The fourth rank is assigned to the sub-competency of possessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities for planning various activities in teaching. Lastly, the fifth rank is occupied by the sub-competency of possessing the knowledge and skills for planning and continuously implementing personal professional development.

Discussion

Research findings emphasize the importance of the developmental dimension of competency frameworks for the teaching profession, as well as the significance of fostering a positive attitude among both future and current teachers toward the knowledge, skills, and values that enable individuals to act actively and effectively in their profession (Cochran-Smith, 2021; Ghorbani, Jafari, Sharifian, 2018; Jurčić, 2014; Tatković & Ćatić, 2010). It is also highlighted that competency frameworks reflect the specific context and societal needs (Cochran-Smith, 2021). The results of our research focus on assessing the importance of competency areas for future teachers as defined in the *Regulation on Competency Standards for the Teaching Profession and Their*

Professional Development. The significance of the obtained results reflects the students' perspectives and their evaluation of competency areas, which could raise many questions about the extent to which undergraduate study programs contribute to the development or formation of positive attitudes towards the needs and possibilities for developing competencies in future teachers.

The students surveyed in our research attributed the greatest importance to the area of competence related to teaching subjects, content, and teaching methodologies. The reasoning behind this evaluation can be linked to research indicating the current state of teacher education, where programs are predominantly subject focused at a theoretical level, which may influence students' perceptions of the importance of this area (Đigić, 2017; Stanojević & Janjić, 2013). In a study conducted by Rijavec et al. (2006), respondents, consisting of teachers and recent graduates, rated themselves as most competent in teaching, subject content, and planning. Similar findings are presented by Stranovská and colleagues, who emphasize that the surveyed teachers identified having a strong knowledge of subject content and teaching methodology as the most important aspect of their professional work (Stranovská, Lalinská, & Boboňová, 2018).

The second most highly valued area, according to students' evaluations, is the domain of teaching and learning, which includes knowledge about students' cognitive development, the nature and diversity of learning styles, the formation of scientific concepts, as well as the planning, implementation, and support of the teaching and learning process. Đuranović, Klasnić, Lapat (2013) highlight in their research that during undergraduate teacher education, and even in continuous professional development, insufficient emphasis is placed on pedagogical competency. As a result, teachers often do not feel adequately pedagogically competent in specific teaching situations, especially those that consider the abilities and needs of individual students in the learning process.

The third-ranked area, based on the students' evaluations in our study, is the competency area of communication and collaboration. This includes understanding, planning, and implementing collaboration with parents and other educational stakeholders, as well as knowledge of the forms and content of such collaboration. It also encompasses knowledge of effective communication techniques and the promotion of students' social competencies. Zlatić (2022), in their study on teachers' communicative competence, emphasizes the importance of its development, pointing out the connection between this competency and overall teaching effectiveness. Moreover, they argue that possessing this competency is a prerequisite for fostering students' communication skills. In a study conducted by Zrilić and Marin (2019), surveyed teachers highly rated their competence in forming partnerships with various interest groups.

Students evaluated the competency area *support for student personality development* as the least important. This area includes knowledge and understanding of students' physical, emotional, social, and cultural differences, as well as their psychological, social, and emotional development. It also encompasses knowledge of ways to support students in their socialization and individuality. Additionally, it involves planning and implementing activities that consider students' needs, specificities, interests, diversity, and initiatives. Similar results have been observed in other studies, although the respondents in those studies were teachers rather than students (Parmigiani, Jones, Kunnari, Nicchia, 2022; Stranovská, Lalinská, Boboňová, 2018). Considering the needs of modern society and schools, this competency area must be given greater importance and incorporated into the content of study programs and professional development programs for teachers. These results confirm the assumption from which we started that students generally highly value the defined competence areas from the Rulebook on Teacher Competences.

When it comes to evaluating competency sub-areas, the surveyed students rated *possession of knowledge necessary for professional work* across all mentioned areas as the most important. The knowledge dimension in teaching competencies is a significant element highlighted by many authors (Lipovac, Golijanin Elez, 2017; Radulović, Pejatović, Vujisić Živković, 2010; Vizek Vidović, 2009). It has already been emphasized that teachers are primarily prepared through initial education at a theoretical and subject-oriented level, making the emphasis placed on knowledge a priority. The sub-area of *implementation of all activities in teaching,* which, in addition to knowledge, includes skills and abilities for conducting educational activities, ranked second according to the students' evaluations. The ability to apply knowledge in one's work in alignment with the context, conditions, and demands of specific practices is an essential element. Students encounter this aspect during their initial education through professional practice within real school settings. The third rank is held by the sub-area of *monitoring, assessing, and evaluating all activities and participants in the educational process.* The quality of educational work is shaped by continuous monitoring and evaluation of processes and outcomes. Teacher self-assessment serves as the foundation for developing their competence. The importance of feedback and a reflective approach to one’s work is a crucial prerequisite for achieving competencies in this sub-area. *Knowledge and skills in planning various activities in teaching* occupy the fourth rank in the students' evaluations. Effective planning is essential for the successful implementation of activities. The work of teachers is highly complex, responsible, and nuanced, requiring them to be equipped to identify priorities, place them at the forefront, and thereby ensure quality processes and outcomes in their work. Teachers are expected to be skilled in various types of planning, each with their own purpose and significance. It is evident that students have not sufficiently recognized the importance of this aspect of their work and the need to be well-prepared for it. The sub-area *planning and continuously implementing personal professional development* was rated as the least important by the students. This sub-area includes professional development in all areas of work, applying newly acquired knowledge to improve one’s teaching practice, and planning personal development based on self-evaluation of their work. Contrary to this result, research conducted by Stranovská and colleagues shows that practicing teachers highly value competencies in planning and implementing their own development and career (Stranovská, Lalinská, Boboňová, 2018). It could be expected that there would be differences in the evaluations between students—future teachers—and those already involved in educational work, as students are still in the process of initial education and do not have a realistic view of the demands placed on modern teachers. This points to the necessity of revisiting the learning outcomes of teacher education programs and modifying their content, methods, and approaches to emphasize the importance of lifelong learning. Other studies on teacher competencies in modern schools indicate that teachers strive for continuous development and lifelong learning (Zrilić & Marin, 2019), emphasizing that self-regulation of professional development is a critical requirement for achieving teaching competencies (Beara, Popović, & Jerković, 2019). Observing the assessment of the value of the competence sub-areas by the surveyed students, we can confirm the assumption from which we started that students generally highly value the importance of the competence sub-areas defined by the Rulebook.

Conclusions

The development of competency frameworks for modern teachers must align with the needs of contemporary schools, societal contexts, and the systems in which they operate. The development of competencies cannot be viewed separately from the professional development of

teachers, which encompasses initial education, continuous professional training, and lifelong learning. Approaches that justify the existence of defined teaching competencies can be reconciled with the need for autonomy among teachers in their professional work and development. It is evident that competencies evolve alongside societal changes, making it crucial to identify future needs. The progressive development of competencies represents a key task for both initial teacher education and professional training. During initial education, it is essential to cultivate positive attitudes and motivation among future teachers toward developing their competencies. Numerous studies have highlighted shortcomings in teacher education programs, particularly regarding the development of specific competencies.

Considering the results of our research, positive attitudes toward the competency areas and sub-areas defined by the *Rulebook on Standards of Teacher Competencies and Their Professional Development* in the Republic of Serbia can be identified, though differences exist in the perceived levels of importance. Initial teacher education should aim to foster positive attitudes toward teaching competencies, the need for their improvement, and the recognition of personal and professional development needs. Parmigiani and colleagues emphasize the importance of "future attitudes" of teachers, which are cultivated through education as potential approaches for teacher development during initial education (Parmigiani, Jones, Kunnari, Nicchia, 2022).

As the results of this research indicate that the competency area of *supporting student development* was assessed as the least important, yet still above average by the students, efforts should focus on re-examining study programs and courses that encourage and develop competencies in this area, as well as on approaches to and organization of teaching and professional practice with students. The students surveyed in our research do not sufficiently recognize the importance of continuous professional development and competencies in this sub-area, even though its perceived importance is not quantitatively low. The foundation of every study program should be based on the principles of lifelong learning and the development of student awareness about its necessity. The *Common European Principles for Teacher Competence and Qualifications* emphasize recommendations for the development of key competencies, requiring teachers to engage in continuous professional development and lifelong learning.

The results obtained in this research raise many questions regarding the needs and possibilities of education focused on outcomes and competencies. They highlight the necessity for further research aimed at assessing the mastery of competencies, exploring the possibilities and limitations of their application in practice, and re-examining teacher education programs. Such examinations should focus on how, to what extent, and through which content these programs encourage and develop the competencies of future teachers.

The research presented in this paper yielded certain results, but it is important to mention the circumstances that somewhat limit their objectivity and generalizability. One of these circumstances is the sample, which consists solely of students from a single faculty, despite the sample size not being small. Using descriptive statistics, we obtained values that indicate the quantitative assessment of the importance of competency areas and subareas. This provided an answer to the research question regarding how positive the attitudes of future teachers are toward the competencies that should be encouraged and developed through initial education and professional development. These results serve as a framework for analyzing and modifying the study programs at the Faculty of Education in Užice as part of their preparation for reaccreditation.

We hope that this research will serve as an impetus for further studies and reexamination of all circumstances and conditions related to the initial education of teachers, educational policies,

and the needs imposed by contemporary society and education.

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