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## The Concept of "Good and Quality Kindergarten Teacher" : Comparative Points of View of First-year University Students Versus Graduating Students

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## **The Concept of "Good/Quality Kindergarten Teacher": Comparative Points of View of First-year University Students Versus Graduating Students**

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### **Introduction**

For several decades now we have been witnessing fundamental changes in society's relationships, as well as the specific expectations and responsibilities bestowed on educational institutions the world over. Fortunately, this is happening mostly on the basis of "approaching the modern human as a multifaceted, complex and autonomous figure, taking the initiative and the responsibility for their own development (Rasheva-Merdzhanova 2012: 14). In the past, pupils were seen as passive receptors of knowledge and influence, while nowadays the focus is on the active role of the pupil in the process of interaction and communication. Paradigms oriented towards personal training are, logically, unlocking new expectations from pedagogues which, consequently, lead towards the need for building new competencies in both future and active teachers. Although the perception of a good teacher includes a core of definite and, so to speak, eternal connotations, the influence of the societal phase of development and especially the dynamic way of modern life is unavoidable. Osadın & Hanna (2015) aptly state that "the 21<sup>st</sup>-century generation must learn how to deal effectively in a world where information travels near the speed of light, facts can be found within seconds, and vast communities form every day on the Internet. No longer are reading, writing, and arithmetic enough to succeed in the world and in

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a career". On the other hand, it is logical that the role of teachers, considered to be "second parents", is continuously expanding, mainly because of the fact that outside the home, these adults are the ones responsible for teaching the kids good manners, while broadening their intellectual capacity at the same time (Osad'an & Burrage, 2013: 498).

The question of what constitutes effective teaching has been researched for decades. According to Hollins (2011: 395), "teaching is a complex and multidimensional process that requires deep knowledge and understanding in a wide range of areas and the ability to synthesize, integrate, and apply this knowledge in different situations, under varying conditions, and with a wide diversity of groups and individuals. In quality teaching, this knowledge is applied in ways that provide equitable access and opportunities that build upon and extend what learners already know in facilitating the ability to acquire".

As Wang et al (2011: 336) claim, although it is popularly believed that quality teaching is a major factor in affecting student performance, and that teacher education should be responsible for developing quality teachers, there appears to be a lack of conceptual clarity about what constitutes quality teaching and how particular notions of quality teaching are related to specific teacher learning opportunities. It is generally assumed that quality teaching plays a major, if not the most important, role in shaping students' academic performances (Wang et al 2011: 331). In their study, Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) examined the measurable impact that teachers have on student achievement and concluded that as far as this connection could be measured through research, there definitely is such a connection.

The effect of the level of teachers' professional skills, as well as their personal qualities, on the quality of the educational process has been discussed in several studies. Wang et al (2011: 331) claim that "quality teaching from a cognitive resource perspective is related to the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions teachers bring into the profession". Quality teaching is linked to one's competence as demonstrated on academic and professional tests, and such competence is presumably one of the central predictors for how effective a teacher becomes. Quality teaching is as

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well associated with the credentials one holds for teaching. This notion surfaces especially during discussions of whether all students have been taught by teachers who hold licenses in the fields that they are teaching.

Bearing in mind the importance of interactions during the initial seven years of a child's life, as well as the wide gamut of qualification requirements for preschool pedagogues throughout the world (see Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman 2010), the understanding of the essence of the concept of "a good children's teacher" becomes much more interesting and worthy of qualitative analysis. Obviously, outlining the characteristics of a "good children's teacher" is invariably tied to the issue of the quality of preschool education as a whole. La Paro et al (2012) claim that the study of *quality* in early childhood education is increasingly relevant because research has continued to demonstrate consistent associations between various aspects of classroom quality and improved social and academic outcomes for young children. According to La Paro et al (2012), some researchers have conceptualized early childhood education quality in terms of global quality with two primary components – "structural" and "process" quality. Examples of indicators of structural quality include classroom materials, curriculum, teacher education, and teacher-child ratio. These indicators are often the regulated aspects of classrooms and programs. Indicators of process quality focus on the more dynamic aspects of early childhood education, including human interactions occurring in the classrooms, such as teacher-child and peer-to-peer interactions. Structural quality and process quality, each a component of global quality, provide unique and essential information to the understanding of early childhood classrooms. La Paro et al 2012 summarize that the quality continues to be an amorphous term with varying definitions within early childhood education. La Paro et al 2012 also draw the attention to the fact that characteristics of teachers and the relationships between teachers and children have been related to quality in the literature. The field continues to move toward examining the central role of the teacher in classroom quality, and individual teacher characteristics are increasingly being studied as possible predictors of classroom effectiveness. La Paro et al 2012 underline as well that findings from re-

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cent studies focused on teacher-child interactions suggest that these relationships play a critical role in children's development.

For the purpose of specifying the concept of the quality of preschool education, this publication presents part of the results of a wider study aimed at researching the notion of the "good/quality kindergarten teacher" held by students preparing to become preschool teachers in the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Bulgaria. Specifically, the publication aims to note some of the most important differences in the relevant viewpoints of first-year students in comparison to the opinion of graduating students.

The publication has the following three main goals:

- To describe the author's methodology for this research.
- To present the results of the research in graph and table formats, focusing on the differences of the viewpoints between first-year and graduating students.
- To outline some directions for future analysis of these results, as well as to suggest ideas for application of the methodology used.

More in-depth analyses of the presented results will be the focus of a series of future publications on the subject.

### **Organization and methodology of the research**

The research was carried out on the opinions of seventy two (72) students of the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", enrolled in the "Primary and Preschool Education" specialty, which is a 4-year Bachelor's degree program, awarding graduates with the qualifications necessary for working as preschool teachers (with children aged 2–7 years old) or primary school teachers (with children aged 7–11 years old). Half of the participating students (36) were approached at the beginning of their university education; the other half (36) participated during the middle of their last year. The main method

used for the research is the analysis of the students' individual written essays on the subject "My idea of a good/quality kindergarten teacher". For the first-year students, assessment on the quality of the essays formed 50% of their overall assessment for the "Introduction to the Specialty" class, while the graduating students' essays formed part of their assessment on the "Current Pedagogical Practice" class, which is part of their seventh semester curriculum. In other words, the students were motivated to do their best in writing the essays. The first-year students' essays were collected during the month of October 2013, while the graduating year essays were collected during the month of January 2015. All of the students provided informed consent for the use of their essays in analysis; however, in order to avoid bias, the students were not informed of the specifics of the research procedure. The participating first-year students and graduating students are not the same people; however, all of the students were educated using the same curriculum, which was not altered during their entire time in the university. Thus, the results could be relatively reliably used towards interpretations related to research hypotheses concerning the acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes of students during the time of their university education by interpretation of the difference between the relatively more general idea of the essence of the "good/quality kindergarten teacher" in first-year students, compared to the presumably more specific and more "professional" understanding of the graduating students. Although it should be clear that the research presented here does not aim for representativeness, it should nevertheless outline some important tendencies in defining the field of the issues under research.

The collected essays were subjected to qualitative analysis aimed at the distribution of the contained opinions regarding the essence of the notion of "good/quality kindergarten teacher" into an unlimited number of semantic categories, provisionally divided into two main groups:

- General personal qualities: mainly qualities, but also some skills, attitudes, etc. which are mainly inherent qualities of the person as a whole (see Table 1);
- Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. (see Table 2).

In parallel to the qualitative analysis, the quantity of repeating categories was determined, while adhering to the rule that each separate category would be accounted for only once for each essay, even in such rare cases when the category is mentioned multiple times or the same skill, quality, etc. is described in different wording. The analysis was performed by the author; all included qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. were defined as separate categories concurrently with the essays' assessment and on the basis of the opinions contained therein. The author has not added any additional categories and has tried to the best of her ability to objectively combine similar semantic fields under one category. In other words, the categories shown in Table 1 and Table 2 do not include all possible qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. that make up the notion of a "good children's teacher", but rather represent their gamut in the way it was defined in the essays of the participating students. The selection of categories is open to expansion with new ones in the future.

**Table 1. General personal qualities**

Responsible	Consistent	Advisor
Attentive	Highly intelligent	Purposeful
Kind, smiling, cheerful, friendly	Dependable	Up with the times
With broad general knowledge, erudite	Honest	Convincing
Flexible	Creative, imaginative	A good public speaker
A friend and confidant	Confident	Observant
Caring	With a large heart	Presentable and well-dressed
Just	Balanced and calm	Radiant
Optimist; positive	A good person	Impartial
Selfless	Conscientious	Encouraging
With a sense of humour	Tender	Incentivizing
Interesting	Modest	Well-meaning
Patient	Astute	Discerning
With high moral values	Principled	Active
Communicative, sociable	Strong in spirit	Approachable
A hero	Self-critical	Tolerant
Meticulous, striving for perfection	Self-respecting	Is able to self-assess adequately
Organized	Enduring	Young
Courageous	Open-minded	Discreet; tactful
Loves children	A free thinker	Knows how to forgive

**Table 2. Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc.**

A factor in the child's development; a major influence in children's lives	Uses modern information and computer technologies
Proud of his/her profession	Instils critical thinking in children
Has won children's love	Explains in a fun way
Familiar with each child's potential	Interacts instead of simply influencing
Experienced, good child psychologist	Knows how to stimulate activity in the children
Has a solid professional theoretical basis	Manager of the children's group (management skills)
Has a good rhythm of teaching	Knows how to predispose towards sharing
Loves his/her job; has a positive attitude towards his/her work	Never displays any physical aggression
Has a university degree in preschool education	Uses various techniques and methods
Keeps children under supervision/control	Does not play "favourites" and allows no prejudice
Plans ahead adequately	Displays shrewdness when needed
Creates a welcoming material environment for children	Seeks collaboration with parents
Explains things in terms understandable by children	Displays intercultural competence in pedagogy
Progressive, innovative	Works well with colleagues and staff
A guide and mentor	Distributes his/her time equally among the children
An inspiration (inspires children towards knowledge)	Charismatic
Leads the child forward, towards development	Artistic
Develops the child's inquisitiveness	Makes good use of non-verbal communication
Develops the child's creativeness	Always explains why
Follows appropriate individual approaches	Has musical skills
Continuously improves and self-improves his/her professional qualifications	Has fine art skills
Hands out punishment, but in a just way	Physically active, has physical culture
Controls his/her negative emotions	Uses illustrative methods and tools
A role-model	Focuses on insight and understanding instead of remembrance only; develops children's thinking
Title	Sets realistic goals
Calling	Entertainer
Uses games and play in his/her methodology	Presents children with several different viewpoints on a specific issue
Creates a positive emotional environment	Strikes a balance between development of personal qualities and skills related to modern technology
Keeps a little piece of his/her childhood	Ensures feedback
Educates in manners as well as knowledge	Discerns each child's talent(s)
Feels joy for the children's achievements	Is efficient in practicing his/her profession
Knows how to behave and speak with the children; has the correct approach towards children	Is open to learning from children
Earns the children's respect	Provides clear and precise instructions
Is like a parent	Ensures empirical experience acquisition
Supportive, ready to help the children	Ensures learning through emotional experience
Establishes discipline	Organizes pedagogical interaction in accordance with the applicable regulations
Understands the children, is empathetic	Does not raise his/her voice
Stern, only when required	
Stern, but fair	



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After defining 136 categories on the basis of the students' essays (see 60 General personal qualities in Table 1 and 76 Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. in Table 2), the results were processed using Microsoft Excel 2010; the aim was to show the predominant categories in each group, as well as some percentage comparisons. Additional statistical analysis was performed using SPSS 19 to establish some key differences between the opinions of each group of students.

This publication will not go into detail regarding the differences in the essence of ideas such as personal qualities, skills, attitudes, etc., but will use the aforementioned provisional grouping to facilitate the display of the results. It is, however, important to note the difficulty in provisionally grouping the categories into general personal qualities and specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. It was especially difficult to process the second group, which is comprised of more varied notions (professional qualities, skills, relationships, attitudes, comparisons, etc.). On the other hand, some of the categories assigned to the second group (e.g. artistic; does not raise his/her voice; progressive, innovative, etc.) could essentially be defined as general personal qualities; however, due to the context of their usage in the essays, it was considered that they relate mostly to qualities or skills that are displayed during the practice of the teacher's profession, and were therefore included in the specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. group.

### **Research results**

The main results of the research are presented in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 and suggest a wide array of analyses and comments, which will be the focus of a series of future publications on the subject by the author. In order to display the results more clearly, Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 present a hierarchical list of the most frequently-mentioned categories (the ones that are mentioned in at least 3 separate essays from each group of students). Tables 7 and 8 are focused on the statistically-important percentage differences of mentions of each category by graduate students as compared to first-year ones.

In general, looking at Fig. 1 and Fig. 2, as well as all included tables with results, it is worthy of note that first-year students are more actively concerned with notions that apply to the general personal qualities group, as opposed to graduating students, who predominantly tend toward more specific pedagogical stipulations. This makes complete sense, bearing in mind the specialized education in their professional field which graduating students have received during their time in the university.

From Fig. 1 and Table 3, it is evident that, with regard to general personal qualities, in the eyes of first-year students a "good children's teacher" is someone who is patient; loves children; kind, smiling, friendly; a friend and confidant; with broad general knowledge; a good person; responsible; balanced and calm; creative, imaginative; discerning; selfless; with a sense of humour; attentive; optimist; incentivizing; etc. Comparing the results of Table 3 with those in Table 4, it can be summarized that, for graduating students, the larger part of the qualities mentioned is repeated, with some of them having a very close percentage correlation: loves children; with broad general knowledge; etc.

From Fig. 2 and Table 4 we can conclude that, with regard to specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc., the first-year students view a "good children's teacher" as a person who understands the children, is empathetic; improves his/her qualifications; loves his/her job; follows appropriate individual approaches; is a role-model; supportive, ready to help the children; is a factor in the child's development; explains in a fun way; etc. Once again there is a similarity to the opinions of graduating students, but the percentage correlations are different and deserve a deeper analysis. Also, it is interesting that graduating students add mentions of a wide array of specialized skills, most of them not mentioned by first-year students - always explains why; has fine art skills; has skills in the field of physical education; uses illustrative methods and tools; develops children's thinking; focuses on insight; sets realistic goals; discusses issues from several viewpoints; balance personal qualities - modern technology skills; ensures feedback; discerns each child's talent(s); is open to learning from children; provides clear and precise instructions; ensures empirical experience acquisition; organizes pedagogical interaction as per regulations;

Figure 1: Mentions of general personal qualities (in percentages)

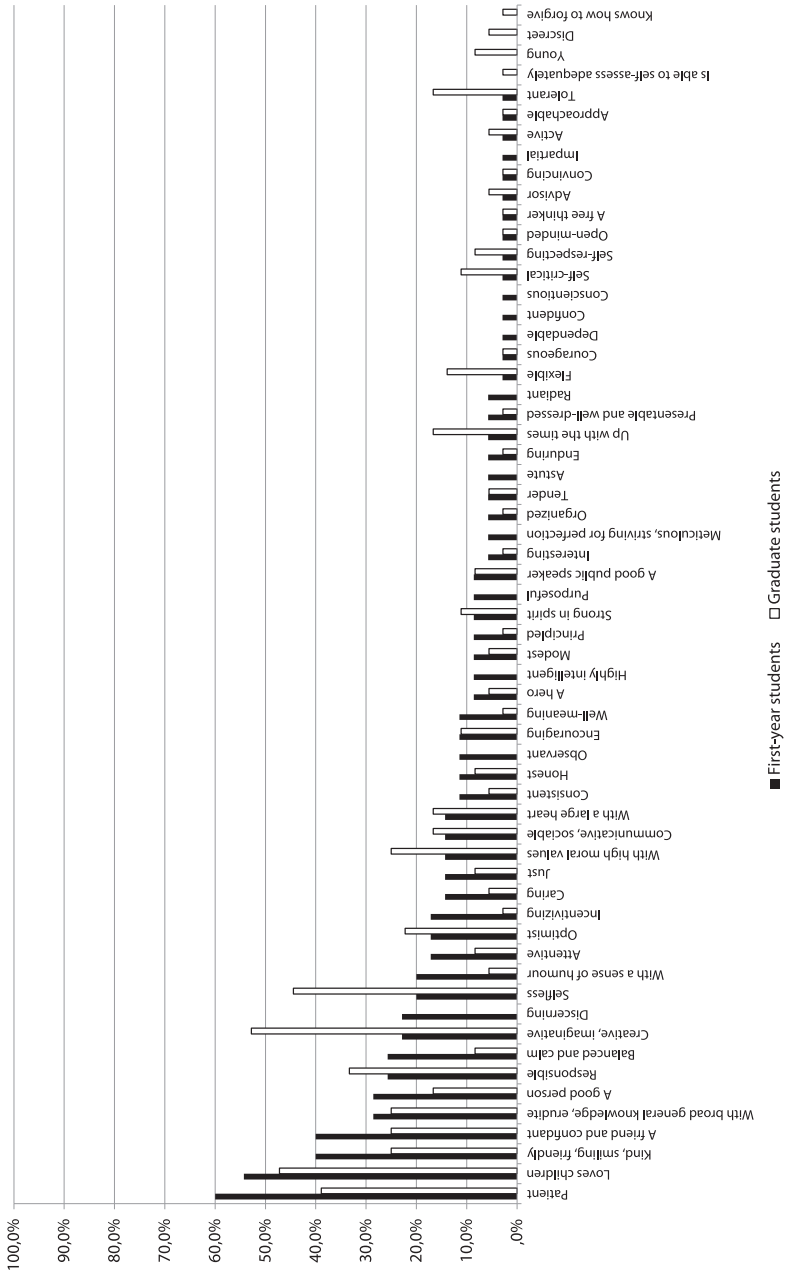
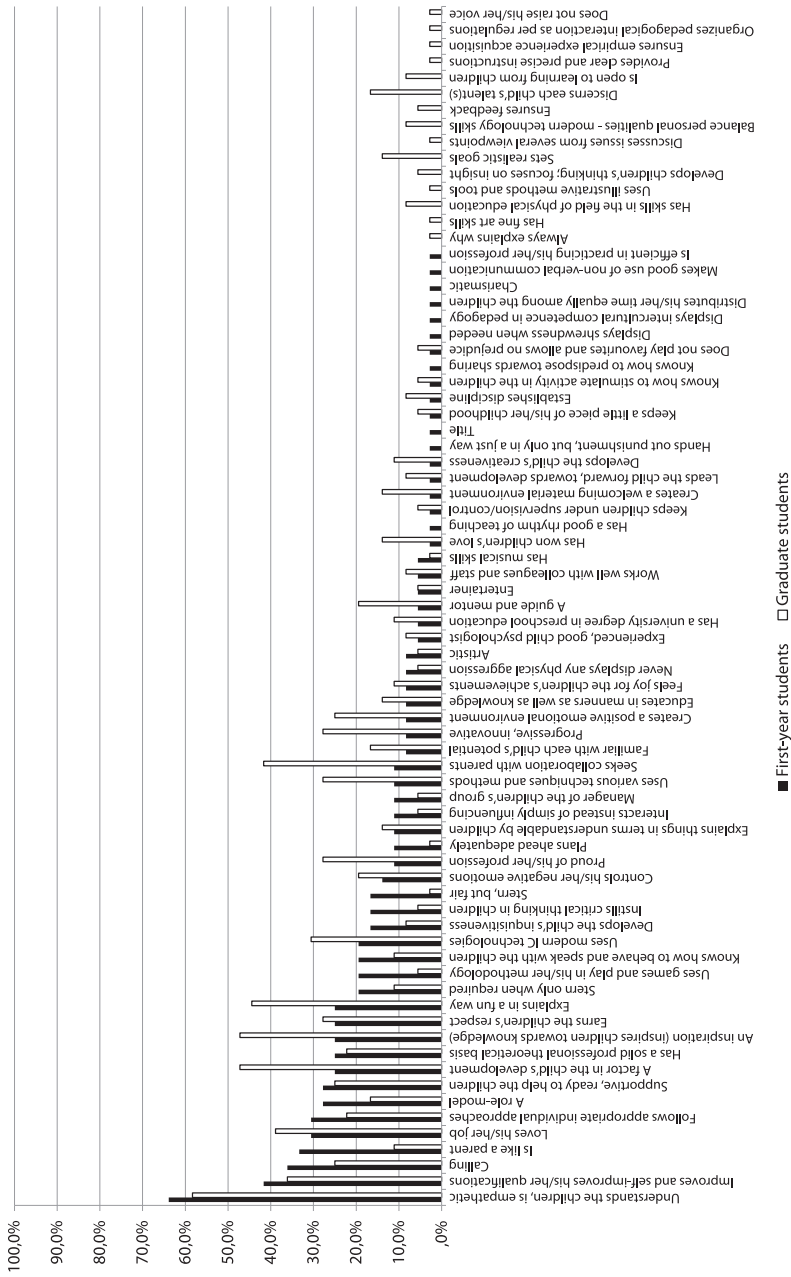


Figure 2: Mentions of specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. (in percentages)



**Table 3. The most common general personal qualities that first-year university students associate with the concept of “good/quality kindergarten teacher”**

Patient	60.0%
Loves children	54.3%
Kind, smiling, friendly	40.0%
A friend and confidant	40.0%
With broad general knowledge, erudite	28.6%
A good person	28.6%
Responsible	25.7%
Balanced and calm	25.7%
Creative, imaginative	22.9%
Discerning	22.9%
Selfless	20.0%
With a sense of humour	20.0%
Attentive	17.1%
Optimist	17.1%
Incentivizing	17.1%
Caring	14.3%
Just	14.3%
With high moral values	14.3%
Communicative, sociable	14.3%
With a large heart	14.3%
Consistent	11.4%
Honest	11.4%
Observant	11.4%
Encouraging	11.4%
Well-meaning	11.4%
A hero	8.6%
Highly intelligent	8.6%
Modest	8.6%
Principled	8.6%
Strong in spirit	8.6%
Purposeful	8.6%
A good public speaker	8.6%

**Table 4. The most common general personal qualities that graduating university students associate with the concept of “good/quality kindergarten teacher”**

Creative, imaginative	52.8%
Loves children	47.2%
Selfless	44.4%
Patient	38.9%
Responsible	33.3%
Kind, smiling, friendly	25.0%
A friend and confidant	25.0%
With broad general knowledge, erudite	25.0%
With high moral values	25.0%
Optimist	22.2%
A good person	16.7%
Communicative, sociable	16.7%
With a large heart	16.7%
Up with the times	16.7%
Tolerant	16.7%
Flexible	13.9%
Encouraging	11.1%
Strong in spirit	11.1%
Self-critical	11.1%
Balanced and calm	8.3%
Attentive	8.3%
Just	8.3%
Honest	8.3%
A good public speaker	8.3%
Self-respecting	8.3%
Young	8.3%

**Table 5. The most common professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. that first-year university students associate with the concept of "good/quality kindergarten teacher"**

Understands the children, is empathetic	63.9%
Improves and self-improves his/her qualifications	41.7%
Calling	36.1%
Is like a parent	33.3%
Loves his/her job	30.6%
Follows appropriate individual approaches	30.6%
A role-model	27.8%
Supportive, ready to help the children	27.8%
A factor in the child's development	25.0%
Has a solid professional theoretical basis	25.0%
An inspiration (inspires children towards knowledge)	25.0%
Earns the children's respect	25.0%
Explains in a fun way	25.0%
Stern only when required	19.4%
Uses games and play in his/her methodology	19.4%
Knows how to behave and speak with the children	19.4%
Uses modern IC technologies	19.4%
Develops the child's inquisitiveness	16.7%
Instills critical thinking in children	16.7%
Stern, but fair	16.7%
Controls his/her negative emotions	13.9%
Proud of his/her profession	11.1%
Plans ahead adequately	11.1%
Explains things in terms understandable by children	11.1%
Interacts instead of simply influencing	11.1%
Manager of the children's group	11.1%
Uses various techniques and methods	11.1%
Seeks collaboration with parents	11.1%
Familiar with each child's potential	8.3%
Progressive, innovative	8.3%
Creates a positive emotional environment	8.3%
Educates in manners as well as knowledge	8.3%
Feels joy for the children's achievements	8.3%
Never displays any physical aggression	8.3%
Artistic	8.3%

**Table 6. The most common professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. that graduating university students associate with the concept of “good/quality kindergarten teacher”**

Understands the children, is empathetic	58.3%
A factor in the child's development	47.2%
An inspiration (inspires children towards knowledge)	47.2%
Explains in a fun way	44.4%
Seeks collaboration with parents	41.7%
Loves his/her job	38.9%
Improves and self-improves his/her qualifications	36.1%
Uses modern IC technologies	30.6%
Earns the children's respect	27.8%
Proud of his/her profession	27.8%
Uses various techniques and methods	27.8%
Progressive, innovative	27.8%
Calling	25.0%
Supportive, ready to help the children	25.0%
Creates a positive emotional environment	25.0%
Follows appropriate individual approaches	22.2%
Has a solid professional theoretical basis	22.2%
Controls his/her negative emotions	19.4%
A guide and mentor	19.4%
A role-model	16.7%
Familiar with each child's potential	16.7%
Discerns each child's talent(s)	16.7%
Explains things in terms understandable by children	13.9%
Educates in manners as well as knowledge	13.9%
Has won children's love	13.9%
Creates a welcoming material environment	13.9%
Sets realistic goals	13.9%
Is like a parent	11.1%
Stern only when required	11.1%
Knows how to behave and speak with the children	11.1%
Feels joy for the children's achievements	11.1%
Has a university degree in preschool education	11.1%
Develops the child's creativeness	11.1%
Develops the child's inquisitiveness	8.3%
Experienced, good child psychologist	8.3%
Works well with colleagues and staff	8.3%
Leads the child forward, towards development	8.3%

Establishes discipline	8.3%
Has skills in the field of physical education	8.3%
Balance personal qualities - modern technology skills	8.3%
Is open to learning from children	8.3%

does not raise his/her voice. The analysis of all these specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. mentioned here could yield very useful information on the adequacy of study plans, curriculums, etc.

When specifying the modern functions of a teacher, Rasheva-Merdzhanova (2012) pays special attention to the role of the teacher as a partner, advisor, entertainer, mentor, role model, friend, artist, and diplomat – all of which were characteristics mentioned in the students' essays as being of vital importance for the teacher's profession in today's world. It is noteworthy that, in some form or other, the students' essays touch upon Stronge, Ward and Grant's (2011: 340) "Teacher Effectiveness Dimensions", which have been defined by conducting a review of a large number of publications connected with the topic of teachers' effectiveness, among which Instructional delivery focused on instructional differentiation, instructional clarity, instructional complexity; use of technology; feedback; classroom management, etc., as well as some personal qualities like caring, positive relationships with students; fairness and respect; enthusiasm, etc. All of them evidence a proper orientation of students, even the first-year ones, with regard to the essence of quality education, including preschool education.

**Table 7. General personal qualities: statistically significant differences in graduating students compared to first-year students**

	Year of study		t	p
	First-year students	Graduating students		
Creative, imaginative	22.9%	52.8%	2.74	0.008
Selfless	20.0%	44.4%	2.29	0.025
Tolerant	2.9%	16.7%	2.02	0.047



**Table 8: Specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc.: statistically significant differences in graduating students compared to first-year students**

	Year of study		t	p
	First-year students	Graduating students		
A factor in the child's development	25.0%	47.2%	2.02	0.047
An inspiration (inspires children towards knowledge)	25.0%	47.2%	2.02	0.047
Seeks collaboration with parents	11.1%	41.7%	3.14	0.003
Progressive, innovative	8.3%	27.8%	2.22	0.030
Sets realistic goals	0%	13.9%	2.41	0.019
Discerns each child's talent(s)	0%	16.7%	2.68	0.009

From Table 7 and Table 8 it is obvious that, regarding general personal qualities (Table 7), students ending their university studies reassert with even more conviction the importance of *creativity*, *selflessness*, and *tolerance*, while from the specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc., graduating students quite categorically value the teacher's role as *a factor* and *an inspiration in the child's development*. Also, graduating students categorically define the importance of *innovativeness of the kindergarten teacher, who sets realistic goals and aims at discerning each child's talent(s), always seeking collaboration with parents*.

Special attention needs to be focused on the fact that approximately one-third of participating students, both first-year (36.1%) and graduating ones (25%) regard the profession of children's teacher as a calling. This is understandable since traditional social attitudes in Bulgaria are similar, even as far back as Zhekova (1976: 31), who connects "the teacher's calling most of all with his/her relationship with the children" – the person who heeds the calling "loves children, treats them with attention and patience; is pleased to associate and work with children and pupils". Also, in direct connection with the calling, Zhekova highlights "communication

qualities of the person, their ability to communicate in different ways – using speech, movements, facial expressions, mimicry; their ability to easily and clearly convey thoughts to others”, with the addition of elementary “pedagogical observation” – a selective attitude toward pedagogical facts and events, an interest in them, ability to understand them, to explain and feel them. All of those aspects are touched upon in one way or another by the participating students in their essays. In today’s fast-paced and transient way of life, future teachers are searching for a rationalization of their life by devoting themselves to the children’s teacher profession, by finding their calling in it. As Stamatov and Minchev (2003: 59) claim, “answering the calling awards inner peace... the realization that one has been called gives meaning to existence; ...the calling... offers completeness to one’s being”. It is remarkable that almost all of the students who consider the children’s teacher profession as a calling also share the fact that they have personally discovered that calling within themselves and it is the reason they are studying this particular specialty. It also makes sense that first-year students are the ones who mostly connect the teaching profession with a calling (36.1%), while similar declarations in graduating students are lower by one-third (25%). This is probably due to the students being acquainted with a wider scope of professional skills during their time in university; skills that are necessary for them. They have also understood the specifics of their profession better, which may have led them to conclude that, while important, the calling by itself is not enough to make one a “good/quality kindergarten teacher”. On the opposite side is the appreciation of the teacher’s profession. Even though 11.1% of first-year students and 27.8% of graduate students declare that they are proud of their profession, the children’s teacher profession itself is not socially appreciated as much as it deserves to be in the context of the modern world. Unfortunately, the direction of this tendency is negative, even as far back as Zhekova (1976: 22), who claims that “society’s opinion of the teacher’s profession at the moment is not enviable. All of the studies and polls done in relation to professional orientation toward teaching highlight society’s lack of appreciation, the profession’s lack of prestige and the frequent negative assessment of teachers and their

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work. The profession's social-psychological status is way below that from 40–50 years ago". Today, another 40 years after those remarks, teachers' status in society is unfortunately unchanged; it could also be claimed that it has slipped even lower.

While the difference of concepts between first-year students and graduating students as to what makes a "good/quality kindergarten teacher" can be examined through the information present in their essays, valuable conclusions can also be drawn from the apparent lack of mention of certain skills, qualities, etc. in the essays, particularly in those of the graduating students. The sample used for this publication's research is quite small, therefore the lack of an important aspect cannot be taken as categorical evidence, but nevertheless the two aspects discussed below could form the basis of a more serious discussion and also serve as a demonstration of how similar research can be used to enhance study plans and/or curriculums of different classes, to help enhance the quality of future kindergarten teachers.

Thus, a matter for some serious analysis is the fact that none of the participating students (not even the ones with special educational needs: in total 4 out of 72, one visually-impaired and three hard-of-hearing) have pointed out in any way the specific skills that teachers must have with relation to integrating children with special educational needs. After researching the study plans and curriculums, a possible reason for this fact may be that none of the students have any mandatory modules related to the specifics of inclusive preschool education; there is only an elective module on "Integration of children with problems (social, emotional, health)" which is non-mandatory and was not attended by any of the participating students. The lack of mandatory tuition on these kind of issues in the academic preparation had been noted even before the start of this research; as of the 2014/2015 academic year, along with the aforementioned elective module, students' tuition on this issue is at least partially covered by the newly-introduced mandatory module on "Special pedagogy", whose study plan contains a section dedicated to inclusive education.

Another absence from the researched categories which deserves attention is an understanding of the importance of the children's teacher's

intercultural competence. Only a single student (interestingly enough, a first-year foreign student) touched upon the "Displays intercultural competence in pedagogy" category. This categorically shows that even though these issues are covered in the study curriculum in elective modules such as "Playing and intercultural competence", the students still understand intercultural education as separate and partially-applicable, related to individual pupils, not as a pedagogical method in education which is valid for all. This corresponds to the conclusions of Rueda & Stillman (2012), according to whom, during the last several decades, teacher education's central challenge has been to prepare teachers for the rising heterogeneity and the changing demographics of the classroom, connected to the need to focus on cultural and linguistic issues. They claim that a common response to this challenge has been the compartmentalization of university-based teacher education programs into different specializations. Rueda & Stillman 2012 called for teacher educators to integrate these principles and practices into teacher education programs – rather than treating them as supplements to the existing curriculum. Rather, they have argued for an approach that engages all teachers and specialists in "teaching culturally" – no matter the background, setting, or students – as a way to reduce some of the barriers that have typically hindered collaboration across specializations and as a way to best serve the students who have traditionally fared less well in the education system. This approach requires that we see culture differently than has been the case in the past, and that we rethink the type of preparation needed to accomplish this. All the aforementioned is connected with the more general disadvantage, claimed by Kostrub et al 2013; Osadan & Hanna 2015, etc. – the opinion that didactic teaching at universities (especially in the courses of teaching) is still very often based on repeated reproduction (retransmission). The necessity of updating and restructuring the academic curriculums related to teachers' preparation throughout the world is highlighted by Hollins (2011), who accurately focuses on the fact that over the past two decades there has been a great deal of focus on reform in teacher preparation aimed at improving learning outcomes for student's construct, and creating new knowledge. Hollins 2011 addresses

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some of the challenges regarding what prospective teachers need to learn, and how they should learn it in their teacher education programs. She first of all proposes a set of knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that are essential in order for prospective teachers to develop quality teaching.

Finally, once again in order to define the perspective for future analyses in the area of the issues highlighted in this publication, an interesting parallel can be drawn with the information in the article by Krachunov (2015), who comments on the results of a discussion he had with 2<sup>nd</sup> grade pupils on the subject “What does it mean to be a good teacher?”, which was provoked by the poem titled “My [female] teacher”, by Bulgarian poet Leda Mileva. From the discussion, it becomes obvious that the perception of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade pupils (who are close to the age of preschoolers) corresponds to a large degree with the personal and professional qualities mentioned by the students. According to the children, the teacher must be kind, resourceful, patient; they must be not only a teacher, but also a friend, someone who pupils can trust; someone who motivates and encourages them; someone active, adaptable; someone who “seeks the key to the treasury of knowledge that must be the pupil’s head”. “The art of teaching and educating is the art of awakening curiosity in young souls... Teachers must make the lesson and the class more interesting. A good teacher motivates, inspires, can satisfy children’s interest and thirst for knowledge, can make it so that pupils work harder to achieve better results.” It is very positive that children’s views on good teachers correspond with those of the future teachers themselves – this creates more possibilities that the two of them will one day engage in cultivating and affirming pedagogical interaction that will provide satisfaction for both sides.

Some fields for future analyses have been marked, but some additional perspectives can be mentioned in relation to research already underway by the author. For example, the analysis of the differences of opinion on the “good/quality kindergarten teacher” between male and female students, as well as between Bulgarian and foreign students of the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University

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"St. Kliment Ohridski" would both be interesting. Useful research could also be conducted on the specifics of the viewpoints of students with special educational needs, as well as some in-depth comparative analyses on the opinions of the students from this publication's research as compared to similar students from universities in other countries. On the other hand, the 136 categories presented in this publication are being used by the author as the basis for creating a questionnaire, to be used as a tool for objective and detailed assessment of the quality of the work of in-service kindergarten teachers. A series of upcoming publications by the author will present and detail these aspects.

### **Conclusion**

The personality and the professional skills of teachers undoubtedly form the basis for quality education; this is especially true for preschool pedagogues.

The profile of the ideal children's teacher, as defined by students, highlights the need for filling in some blanks in study plans and curriculums; however, it also demonstrates a modern viewpoint on the personal qualities and professional skills of the preschool pedagogue that is in line with modern educational tendencies worldwide. This can be taken as a positive assessment of the preparation of kindergarten teachers in the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski".

As mentioned at the beginning, new expectations of teachers lead to the need for building new skills, but we must not forget that, as Racheva-Merdzhanova (2012: 18) claims, "restructuring the outlook and requirements for people and education" should unfailingly lead to a qualitative transformation of "the list of key competences of the modern teacher, so that the teacher's professional shape is pedagogically adequate"; teachers shouldn't be constantly given new responsibilities on top of the old ones, which often lessens the quality of the teacher's interaction with children. Therefore, although we support the idea for the

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need for a wide basis formed by the knowledge, skills, competences and qualifications of kindergarten teachers, we do not condone taking things to extremes, and we are in partial agreement with the opinion of Rasheva-Merdzhanova (2012), that “the evolution of the profession should be followed by a change in the competence priorities”, not just cause additional responsibility to be heaped upon the teacher, which could at some point prevent the teacher from focusing on his/her basic functions. It is positive that the presented research does not demonstrate such inclinations in the concept of a “good/quality kindergarten teacher”, as defined by the future primary and preschool teachers themselves.

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**Abstract:**

For the purpose of specifying the concept of the quality of preschool education, this publication presents part of the results of a wider study aimed at researching the notion of the “good/quality kindergarten teacher”. 72 students preparing to become preschool teachers in the Faculty of Primary and Preschool Education of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” in Bulgaria took part in this research. The main method used for research is analysis of the students’ individual written essays on the subject “My idea of a good/quality kindergarten teacher”. The collected essays were subjected to qualitative analysis aimed at the distribution of the contained opinions regarding the essence of the notion of “good/quality kindergarten teacher” into an unlimited number of semantic categories, provisionally divided into two main groups: 1) general personal qualities, skills, attitudes, etc.; and 2) specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc. This paper presents the distributions of 136 categories, defined following the analysis of the data. Since half of the participating students (36) were approached at the beginning of their university education and the other half (36) participated during the middle of their last year, the publication specifically marks some of the most important differences in the relevant viewpoints of first-year students in comparison to the opinion of graduating students.

**Keywords:** good teacher; quality kindergarten teacher; quality in preschool education; personal qualities; specialized professional qualities, skills, attitudes, etc.

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