

ART PORTFOLIOS IN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' INITIAL EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF ACQUIRING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract/Izvleček

The study sought to examine the art portfolios of second-year undergraduate students of Early and Preschool Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb and their reflections on their own artwork. The aim was to examine how students experience, reflect on and interpret their creative work process. By reflecting, students acquire deeper understanding of art expression and perfect the ability to plan and evaluate visual art activities for implementation in their future work with children. The results show that students whose reflections on their own artwork through portfolios are more detailed show greater levels of self-awareness, creativity and pedagogical competence.

Keywords:

reflection, visual art
education, portfolios,
preschool teachers,
professional
competences.

Ključne besede:

refleksija, likovno
izobraževanje, portfelji,
vzgojitelj predšolskih
otrok, strokovne
kompetenc.

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Umetniški portfelji v začetnem izobraževanju vzgojiteljev predšolskih otrok kot sredstvo pridobivanja strokovnih kompetenc in reflektivne prakse

V raziskavi smo preučevali umetniške portfelje študentov drugega letnika dodiplomskega študija zgodnjega in predšolskega izobraževanja na Pedagoški fakulteti v Zagrebu ter njihovo refleksijo o lastnih umetniških delih. Cilj je bil ugotoviti, kako študenti doživljajo, reflektirajo in interpretirajo proces svojega ustvarjalnega dela. Z refleksijo študenti pridobivajo globlje razumevanje likovnega izražanja ter izpopolnjujejo sposobnost načrtovanja in vrednotenja likovnih dejavnosti za izvajanje v prihodnjem delu z otroki. Rezultati kažejo, da študenti, katerih refleksije o lastnih umetniških delih v portfeljih so podrobnejše, izkazujejo višjo raven samozavedanja, ustvarjalnosti in pedagoških kompetenc.

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Introduction

Reflection and self-reflection play key roles in preschool teachers' professional development. Preschool teachers have the opportunity to continuously analyse and improve their pedagogical work via reflective practice, whereby they directly influence the quality of their own educational work with children of early and preschool age. Herzog, Bačlija Sušić and Županić Benić (2018) emphasized that deliberate reflection on the experiences acquired during initial education is key to preschool teachers' professional development, which is often regarded as a starting point in their professional education. However, in order for their professional competence (Visković and Višnjić Jevtić, 2019) to develop in accordance with societal changes and market needs, continuous participation in lifelong professional education is indispensable (Šagud, 2006). Professional competence entails formal permission to perform a task acquired through initial education, and an awareness that professional learning has just begun, which is the result of informal learning (Eraut, 2003). It is the fundamental competence for entering the profession. Preschool teachers' professional competences can be defined as a combination of expert competence acquired through education and their personal qualities (Visković and Višnjić Jevtić, 2019). In the context of implementing art activities with children of early and preschool age, Lindsay (2021) stressed that an enriched curriculum and a quality pedagogical approach to a child depend on the critical reflection and self-reflection of the preschool teacher. According to these authors, reflection is key to understanding and improving pedagogical practice and, with that, professional competences, especially in visual art education. Moreover, preschool teachers' reflection and self-reflection have a regulatory function because these provide the opportunity for them to recognize, analyse and improve their professional work in future educational projects (Šagud, 2006).

Reflection in the context of preschool teachers' professional work in the visual art domain

According to McArdle (2012), Probine (2016) and Richards and Terenni (2022), many preschool teachers feel inadequately prepared for implementing art activities, especially regarding the part of the curriculum that entails visual art. These studies point to the need for greater integration of art education in initial educational programmes for preschool teachers to strengthen their competence and self-confidence in the art domain. Garvis and Riek (2010) also stressed that preschool teachers who had quality art courses during their initial education feel competent to integrate art activities in every-day work with children.

In their research, Day, Webster and Killen (2022) emphasized that integrating reflective practices into preschool teachers' initial education, will provide them the opportunity to become more efficient in educational work, especially in the art field, and to develop personal and professional competences in accordance with societal needs. Furthermore, Denée, Lindsay and Probine (2024) and Županić Benić (2019) found that the level of preschool teachers' self-confidence in implementing art activities ensues directly from previous experiences in art education and the support provided by the institution, which leads to the conclusion that a preschool teacher who initially received quality art education feels competent to integrate art activities when working with children. The importance of reflection in the process of professional preschool teachers' development is underlined in Machost and Stains's study (2023). They emphasised the necessity of preschool teachers' being able to reflect on their experiences to understand the influence of their decisions on the child's development. Since the implementation of art activities in early and preschool education depends on preschool teachers' competences in the art domain, (Bačlija Sušić, Herzog and Županić Benić, 2018), preschool teachers should have diverse understanding of art and experience with various art forms.

Approach to reflection via art portfolios

Art portfolios are used in initial education of preschool teachers to develop their competences and reflective practice from a beginner to an advanced level (Župančić 2020). They are especially useful in art education, where they serve as an instrument for the assessment of art achievement and documentation of student work and progress over time (Doren and Millington 2019; Moon, 2013; Barrett, 2007; Boughton, 2004, acc. to Župančić 2020). *"It is a tool for the teacher's planning, communication, reflection and evaluation."* (Novotná, 2024, p. 171).

Reflection within the portfolios helps students explain the creative process, choice of materials and techniques, and decisions that influenced the final product. Apart from describing technical elements, reflection entails the emotional and conceptual aspects of creation, intrinsic motivation and the challenges students faced in the creative process. Art portfolios can take different forms – from essays, notes, sketches to video journals – as long as they provide deeper insight into one's own art activity. Through portfolios, students develop the ability to articulate the development of an art project, they present their own works of art and develop critical thinking and communication skills through discussion about the works (Bhika, Francis and Miller, 2013).

Students should be required to reflect if they are to become reflective practitioners (Doren and Millington, 2019). Schön (1987) described *reflection in action* as a natural component of art practice, in which decisions are made amid creation. When students are expected to subsequently reflect on their work and notice patterns and trends, they develop strategies for making future decisions “in action” (Schön, 1987, acc. to Doren and Millington, 2019). Therefore, reflection within portfolios should not be solely retrospective but also projective, which would empower students to set goals for future art projects. Art portfolios in the programmes of preschool teacher education provide opportunities for connecting one’s own art expression with pedagogical practice. Portfolios do not serve only to assess achievement, but also motivate introspection, creative development and deeper understanding of pedagogical practice (Zupančič, 2020).

Methodology

Research method

This research was conducted via the mixed methods approach (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018, 2023; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), which integrates quantitative and qualitative methods in data analysis. In this study, the qualitative approach entailed the content analysis of students’ art portfolios and their reflective notes. The quantitative component included data analysis, where percentages were used to present the distribution of full-time and part-time students’ answers. The aim of the research was to examine how students perceive, reflect on and interpret their own creative process, and how this process contributes to their professional development.

With regards to the set aim, the following research questions were asked:

1. Is there a difference in the achievements of full-time and part-time students in the application of visual art techniques and aesthetic choices in the process of making a puppet?
2. Do full-time and part-time students differ in their perceptions of the creative challenge of the puppet-making process?
3. What is the full-time students’ and part-time students’ perception of the correlation between the competences acquired in the process of making a puppet and their future pedagogical work?

4. Are there differences in the implications (the examples of learned skills and experiences) for the planning and development of future projects between regular and part-time students?

Research sample

The study was conducted among second-year undergraduate students (N=144) of Early and Preschool Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb in the academic year 2023/2024. The study involved full-time (N=80) and part-time students (N=64). It was conducted within the course *Visual Art Teaching Methodology 1*, which includes the practical part of teaching visual art. Students were required to make a stage puppet as well as describing and reflecting on their own creative work via art portfolios. This approach provides students with the opportunity to analyse their creative process and skills development in the visual art domain. The participant sample corresponds to the recommendations for qualitative research in educational contexts. It is a purposive sample (Mejovšek, 2008), which included full-time and part-time undergraduate students in their second year of study. This yielded a diversity of experiences and reflection.

Data collection

Data were collected via the analysis of students' portfolios, which encompassed the process of making a stage puppet and reflection in the form of a short essay. In the essay, students reflected on the creative process, challenges they faced, their plans and the connection between experience and practice, including future projects inspired by the work on this visual art task. The portfolios documented making the Javanese puppet (rod puppet), while the reflective notes entailed the thought process about the technical and aesthetic challenges and implications for future pedagogical work.

Data analysis

The method of content analysis was utilised (Mayring, 2022) to systematically examine students' reflections and identify the key patterns. This content analysis consists of two sub-analysis categories (Matijević, Bilić, and Opić, 2016).

The first sub-analysis category entailed content analysis based on the coding of visual data from the portfolios, which were divided as follows: (1) the use of visual art technique and (2) aesthetic choices. At the same time, this sub-analysis entailed textual data, which were grouped according to the defined themes: (3) creative challenge, (4) application of acquired knowledge in future work with children, and (5) inspiration (implications) for future projects.

The second sub-analysis entailed the content category, where the frequency of answers was measured, that is, the level of detail and depth in student answers was assessed to determine the correlation between the quality of their notes and the level of self-awareness, creativity and professional development. Differences between full-time and part-time students were also examined.

Results and discussion

The comparison of full-time and part-time students' achievements in the implementation of visual art techniques and aesthetic choices

Based on the classification of achievements suggested by Marzano (2006), the results presented in Table 1 can be interpreted via three levels of achievement: *satisfactory*, *good* and *excellent*. According to these categories, the analysis included the use of visual art techniques (technical execution) and aesthetic choices (the final puppet's appearance, face painting and costume).

Table1

Category	Full-time students (N=80)	Part-time students (N=64)
The use of visual art technique (puppet's technical execution)		
Satisfactory	13 (16.25%)	11 (17.19%)
Good	16 (20%)	17 (26.56%)
Excellent	54 (67.5%)	36 (56.25%)
Aesthetic choices – final appearance, painting the face, costume		
Satisfactory	13 (16.25%)	15 (23.44%)
Good	19 (23.75%)	13 (20.31%)
Excellent	48 (60%)	36 (56.25%)

Satisfactory: This level meant that a student had fulfilled the basic task requirements and shown minimal understanding of the topic. *Good*: This category included students who had a solid understanding of the content and were able to apply the acquired skills in various contexts. Their knowledge was beyond the basic, but there were still some areas that required additional development. *Excellent*: This level entailed students who exceeded expectations and showed a high level of competence and creativity. Their works were innovative and reflected a deep understanding of the topic, alongside the ability of critical thinking and problem solving (Marzano, 2006).

The results in Table 1 show the comparison of full-time (N=80) and part-time students (N=64) regarding the use of visual art techniques and aesthetic choices. It should be noted that part-time students take only 25% of the undergraduate courses. Full-time students achieved a higher percentage of excellence in visual art techniques (67,5%) and aesthetic choices (60%), in comparison to part-time students, who achieved the same in both categories (56.25%). Part-time students' overall results were lower in comparison to full-time students', which indicates the differences between the two groups. These results show that the limitations in the provision of learning opportunities caused by the decreased number of course lessons, can negatively affect students' creative development. Therefore, it is important to examine strategies for improving the educational outcomes of part-time students, especially in the context of additional support and available resources.

The creative challenge of the puppet making process

This theme encompasses the analysis of students' answers to the following evaluation questions: *"Briefly describe how you felt in the course of the project's implementation?"* and *"Do you feel that the chosen topic was inspiring?"* The answers to these questions provide insight into how students experienced the puppet making process, which was presented through portfolios with detailed descriptions and photographs of all creative phases, from the conceptual sketch to the result – a rod puppet. Analysis of the results indicates that the process presented a significant creative challenge for students, which motivated their innovative and personal growth (Sternberg, 1999). Regarding analysis of the answers, most full-time students reported positive emotions towards the theme itself and stated that the puppet making process was challenging, creative, inspiring, beautiful, fun, curiosity-provoking, imaginative, etc.

For example: *"It was really interesting, and I was motivated and involved in the work. I felt that the chosen theme was extremely inspiring because it allowed an individual approach to creating a character, and it also developed imagination."*

"I felt creative and engaged. The theme was a challenge, but it was also inspiring because it demanded a combination of different materials and skills." These results are in line with the findings of Collins and Amabile's study (1999), which emphasised that positive emotional experiences during creative processes significantly contribute to the development of creativity and innovativeness. However, 17.5% of full-time students provided no answer whatsoever, while 6.25% expressed negative emotions, considering the process of the puppet's creation stressful and demanding. One student said: *"While I was making the puppet, I was under great pressure and did not enjoy it. I simply did not like this task. It was complicated, and it took a lot of time to do it right."* These negative emotions, which some students recalled, correspond to the findings of Runco and Acar's (2012) study, which suggested that the creative process can cause anxiety, particularly when students feel overburdened by a task. Furthermore, a few students described a combination of positive and negative emotions: *"I felt nervous during some parts of the task's implementation because it was stressful and I was afraid I would make a mistake, but in the end, I enjoyed making the puppet. It is a special feeling to finish the puppet and look at it because you know how much time and effort you invested."* Part-time students provided more detailed answers in comparison to full-time students. Although they expressed mostly positive attitudes toward the task, their answers often reflected a mix of positive and negative emotions. For example, one student said: *"This project was a new experience, even though it was a bit stressful. It took a lot of time and effort, but the end result was motivating and interesting."* Similar experiences can be recognised in the following statement: *"The task pushed me into new spheres of creativity, for which I thought I had no competence, but I am very pleased with the final product. During the making, I felt focused, satisfied and encouraged. The theme was extremely inspiring and motivating."* The overlapping emotions of frustration and pleasure can be correlated to the insufficient number of lessons for part-time students; the lack of structure and support impedes the experience of positive emotions tied to creative work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). During most phases of the project, part-time students often found themselves in a situation where they relied exclusively on video instruction, whereas full-time students had access to continuous support from professors in their practical courses. This difference in the level of received support can significantly shape students' emotional experience, which influences their satisfaction and frustration during the

creative process. Feldman (2003) stresses that a lack of adequate support can lead to decreased motivation and increased anxiety, which additionally impedes the development of creativity and negatively influences the overall learning experience. Around 11% of the students did not provide answers to the evaluation questions, while 5% expressed negative emotions towards the task, stating they did not enjoy the process and would not repeat it. These results emphasise the need to provide support for students who face creative challenges because an inappropriate approach or the lack of one can result in negative experiences and decreased motivation for further work (Collins and Amabile 1999; Runco and Acar, 2012).

Correlation between acquired competences and future pedagogical work: students' perceptions of the task's usefulness

Within this theme, the correlation between acquired knowledge and skills for making a puppet and the future preschool teacher profession was analysed. The research focus was placed on the students' answers to this question: *"Do you find this task useful for your future work with children?"* Based on the collected data, it was noted that most full-time students' answers had the formal character of simple agreement, without additional explanation. Only a few students provided elaborated answers, such as: *"I think that children like these puppets, and I can certainly arouse their interest, so this know-how of making a puppet will come in handy."*

However, a point of concern is that as many as 42% of full-time students failed to provide an answer to this question. This result can be explained by the fact that second-year undergraduate students lack practical experience and therefore find it hard to project their own creative process onto future work with children. According to Schön's theory (1983), reflective learning plays a key role in gaining professional competences. Students who do not participate in practical situations have a hard time understanding how theories relate to real problem situations, so they cannot answer the question about how they would benefit from these skills in the future (Schön, 1983). Scientific studies, like the one by Gibbons and Borders (2010), confirm that practical experience is key to developing professional competences, where the importance of reflection and the application of acquired knowledge in real contexts are emphasised. Students without work experience have fewer opportunities to reflect because they lack the chance to analyse their work procedures.

On the other hand, reports from the part-time students differ significantly; only 10% failed to correlate their work on the task with their future profession. A considerable majority of the part-time students provided more in-depth and detailed answers, which can be explained by their work experience because they work alongside study, so they are involved in different institutions and educational activities. For example, one student pointed out, *"I think this is a great activity that would provide children with the opportunity to practice their motor abilities, develop creativity and think outside the box."* A similar opinion was given in the following answer: *"I think it would be difficult to implement this activity with children. However, they could participate in some parts of the creative process, such as colouring the face and hands, making the costume, etc."* Furthermore, *"This activity could be very useful and interesting for children. After making the puppet, children could create their own plays."* These opinions suggest that because of their practical engagement, part-time students can better understand and integrate acquired competences into their pedagogical approach. Studies such as Gibbons and Borders (2010) confirm this hypothesis, suggesting that a higher level of practical experience leads to deeper understanding of theoretical concepts and their application in educational work. The fact that children love playing with objects they have created and that such activities develop their haptic experiences is reported by Iezaki and Novotná (2022).

Implications for future projects

The final part of the analysis examined whether students, based on their new experience of making a puppet, thought about future projects and activities, and what they were inspired to do by the project itself. The analysis entailed answers to the following questions: *"What new ideas come to mind?"* and *"Do you plan on implementing a similar project, and what might this be?"* Full-time students' answers were simple, often without more detailed explanation or interpretation. For example, some of them emphasised the desire to make additional puppets or create a puppet play, as shown in this answer: *"In the course of making the puppet, I had new ideas for similar puppets and making costumes and scenography to perform a complete play."* Others suggested activities such as reading picture-books and using puppets or performing a play with children: *"I would read a picture-book to children and act with the help of puppets or create a play with children and allow them to use puppets to act."* On the other hand, as many as 63% of full-time students provided no answer to these research questions. This data suggests that less-experienced students are often incapable of reflecting on future activities or creating more meaningful projects without previous work with children; that is,

the lack of practical experience limits the possibility of creating new and original pedagogical ideas. This study also shows that the lack of a real context of working with children can inhibit student creativity because these teacher trainees lack sufficient reference points to connect theory and practice. In contrast to full-time students, part-time students provided answers that were more diverse, detailed and mindful. Although 32% of them also failed to answer these questions, the percentage is significantly lower in comparison to full-time students. Based on their responses, students in the sample who have work experience possess a better developed reflective capacity and ability to integrate new skills into their professional roles. This is one of the part-time students' answers: *"Making rag dolls for playing in general. I thought about making another rod puppet, although I would use it only for demonstration with children. However, for now, I would not organise puppet making in the group because of the challenging process. Perhaps once, when I have more experience. I find the children's puppet show using hand puppets very appealing, where two preschool teachers play different characters."* This answer is an example of a more in-depth reflection on the technical and pedagogical challenges as well as an understanding of the puppet making process in various pedagogical contexts, which is a characteristic of professionally experienced individuals. One of the most noticeable differences between full-time and part-time students regards the inclusion of parents and the wider community in pedagogical activities. While none of the full-time students mentioned this facet of cooperation, part-time students pointed out the importance of including parents in creative projects multiple times. This difference points to part-time students' deeper understanding of the importance of cooperation between parents, children and preschool teachers (Visković and Višnjić Jevtić, 2019), which can be correlated to their practical experience and acquired professional competences. The following answers attest to this fact: *"It would be interesting to include parents in the joint work with children, so they also learn something new. I believe that children could develop their skills, enrich their knowledge and experience new emotions throughout the process."* Therefore, student recognition of parental inclusion in preschool activities as important is indispensable for their professional functioning because the primary goal of parent/preschool cooperation is appropriate catering to children's individual and developmental needs and the provision of support for their overall development (NKRPOO, 2015). Besides, part-time students' answers often included concrete and creative suggestions for further projects, which leads to the conclusion that professional experience significantly

contributes to the development of creative pedagogical solutions. For example, one student suggested: *"In my opinion, the complete process of puppet making would probably not be feasible in all preschool groups, but some segments can surely be adjusted to each group, from the youngest to the oldest. For example, papier mâché balloons could be used with children so they paint their faces on them as they wish."* These answers show a higher degree of adjustment and flexibility in pedagogical planning, which is correlated to a deeper understanding of the needs and abilities of children at different ages.

Conclusion

This study confirms the importance of reflection in preschool teachers' professional development, particularly in the context of initial education in the field of visual art. In this study, reflection enabled students to recognise their own creative challenges, analyse technical and aesthetic choices and connect acquired experiences with future pedagogical work. Full-time students achieved higher results in creative tasks – making the rod puppet–while part-time students, who received fewer course lessons, faced greater challenges in the creative process, which points to the need for additional support and resources in initial education. However, with regard to the questions examining the connection between the acquired competences and future pedagogical work and the analysis of students' perceptions of the task's usefulness, it was noted that full-time students gave formal answers, often in the form of simple agreement without further explanation. On the other hand, most part-time students provided more comprehensive and detailed answers, wherefrom it is visible that higher level of practical experience leads to deeper understanding of theoretical concepts and their application in educational work with children. This result is also confirmed by the analysis of implications for future projects, where full-time students' answers were quite simple, without more detailed interpretation, or not provided at all, whereas part-time students provided more diverse, detailed and thought-through answers, with clear ideas and plans for future creative projects. This reflective approach improves creative and professional competences and thus helps future preschool teachers assume a critical stance towards their own work, which is essential for their professional development. The limitations of this research should also be pointed out. Namely, the students in the sample were all attending the same institution, and they had the same professor as their mentor, which can limit the generalisation of results to wider contexts and different pedagogical approaches.

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