

Enhancing Future Teachers' Professional Competencies Through Children's Rights Education

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Abstract – The paper presents research on the hypothesis that by deepening their understanding of children's rights, future specialists with a pedagogical focus will significantly improve their abilities in a practical environment. The aims of the study such as the rights of the child and its place in the current educational system in Bulgaria are presented. Students from different pedagogical specialties are objects of the study. Questions from a two-part survey are described where the first part contains questions concerning the students' awareness of children's rights and the second part focuses on the acquired and expanded knowledge as well as its practical application. The analysis of the results shows that knowledge about children's rights is a crucial part of the professional competencies of specialists with a pedagogical focus and has a positive influence on their abilities to teach children in a practical environment. Acquaintance with the present research would be extremely beneficial for anyone wishing to improve their practical skills in working with children.

Keywords – Children's rights, education, pedagogue, professional competences.

1. Introduction

The role of the teachers is expanding and requires more and more effort. It is expected for them to implement a wide variety of methods, tools, and approaches to adapt to the needs of the students.

Teachers should also have the necessary competencies and skills not only for creating a positive classroom environment but also to be able to collaborate with other parties inside and outside the school, aiming to provide support to the students.

The methods of education are undergoing a transformation. It is often spoken about the skills, competencies, and competence approach. A review of normative documents [1], [2] defines the main objective in pedagogical activity, the improvement of the quality of the educational process by creating a positive attitude of students towards it, encouraging them to master key competencies, creative abilities, and skills they need for successful implementation in modern society. The teachers can ensure the whole formation of a child's personality only if they have solid theoretical and practical preparation.

The present publication was provoked by the needs of the students with a pedagogical orientation to obtain knowledge about the rights of the child, necessary as an invariable part of their professional competencies to practically apply in the education of the children.

Why is it essential for future educators to have professional competencies regarding the rights of the undergraduate? Children's rights education (CRE) has several main goals. In achieving them, schoolwork can be much more effective and enjoyable for all parties involved. These goals, in short, are: children's rights ensure that every undergraduate can achieve their full potential.

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Despite this, they aim to protect children from violence and bullying. Last but not least, rights encourage mutual respect between people - you cannot expect your rights to be respected if you violate other people's rights.

CRE shows children that they are rights bearers and bearers of responsibility for rights at the same time and afterwards, for their behavior as well. This helps children and adults to work together, providing them with a safe environment, support for participation, and the opportunity to develop citizenship. To achieve these goals, CRE relies heavily on the approach of teachers. It should allow students to participate in making decisions that directly affect them. When they make the school a place where interaction between children and adults is equal and when they empower their students, teachers enable them to develop as productive citizens who can contribute to a positive change. It is up to teachers to create opportunities for dialogue, learning through experience, asserting a position, and understanding the other side.

2. Layout

There are so many questions concerning the teachers' professional competencies. Some of them are the following: What abilities and knowledge are the professionals working with children required to have? What are the exact benefits of recognizing the children's rights for their quality future occupation?

In terms of children's rights, education in Bulgarian schools provides an opportunity for the children to be responsible, to use their rights and freedom, to be sensitive towards manifestations of intolerance and injustice, as well as to recognize the methods for dealing with such behavior.

2.1. *Children's Rights Education and Educational System*

Every democratic country based on the rule of law puts the education of human rights and children's rights in one of the first places. During the past few decades, the term "child rights education" has been increasingly used, and the reason for this comes from the need to affirm this value in civil society. In harmony with the dynamically ongoing processes is the statement of the vice-president for democracy and demography in the EU, Dubravka Šuica, upon accepting a new comprehensive EU strategy for the

rights of the child. She clearly states, "With this strategy, we renew our commitment to establishing healthier, sustainable, and equal societies for all, where every child is included, protected, and has opportunities. The politics of today and tomorrow are conducted for and with our children. In this way, we strengthen our democracies" [3], [4].

A noticeable contribution to increasing the familiarity with children's rights in Bulgaria belongs to international and non-governmental organizations that spread child rights education in the education system.

It is a fact that this topic is expanding more and more in the legal framework, in scientific spheres and forums, and the groups of experienced specialists who study and provide their projects on topics related to the rights of the child are increasing.

In the modern Bulgarian education system topics related to child rights are not studied as a separate subject in the initial stage of the educational process instead, they are "scattered" in different disciplines. Ordinance No. 13 of the Ministry of Education in Bulgaria dated 21.09.2016 on civic, health, environmental, and intercultural education is essentially the state educational standard, according to which civic education is aimed at forming civic consciousness and civic virtues and is related to knowledge about the structure of the democratic society, about the rights and obligations of the citizen and with skills and readiness for responsible civil behavior. Civic education can also be recognized as an independent educational direction when an innovative or author's program system provides for this in the relevant educational institution. One of the purposes of civic education is establishing a personality that understands and protects common human values, the values of democracy and human rights, participate in civic, political, and social life in a responsible, constructive, and effective way for individuals and for society [5].

2.2. *Description of the Approach*

In 2017/18 over 30 students from the club "Young Teacher/Social Pedagogue" were working on the "Together for the Rights of the Child" project along with specialists from New Bulgarian University and University of Ruse.

As a result of the project, a program for familiarizing with the rights of the child has been created, which was presented to students in primary school.

The same program is the basis for the preparation of a curriculum in the discipline "Child's Rights" for Bachelor's degree students, specialty social pedagogy, primary school pedagogy with a foreign language, and preschool and primary school pedagogy. This program aims to create conditions for building professional competencies in future teachers regarding their practical work with children.

The proposed topics in the discipline "Children's Rights" are intended to provide didactic conditions for future teachers to understand the essentials of the discipline, but also to receive the necessary preparation for organizing a development program or project. The use of interactive means is a special emphasis. This way, the quality of education on children's rights is improved, active thinking is provoked among students, and their creative abilities for searching and finding unconventional decisions are developed.

The major objective is to make the students, future specialists in the pedagogical and socio-pedagogical sphere, realize the importance of the child's upbringing in rights under the pedagogical guidance of qualified specialists. Their implementation is directly related to preparing them for a dignified life in a free society, in a spirit of understanding, peace and tolerance, creating a safe environment for children. This preparation is indicated as an obligation in education [6], [7], [8].

2.3. Methodology of the Experiment

At the beginning of the 2022/2023 academic year, a survey was conducted among the second-year students of the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" studying the discipline "Child's Rights". 68 full-time and part-time students from the majors Social Pedagogy, Primary School Pedagogy with a Foreign Language, and Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy participated in the survey. A special survey conducted in two parts was used. In the first part, which takes place in the first lectures of the discipline, information is sought regarding the students' theoretical knowledge related to children's rights. The point of the second part is to present feedback on the acquired skills for practical application of the obtained knowledge.

To answer the questions, the students must work with children, introduce them to the types of rights and the responsible institutions, and observe the compliance of the rules and the practical application of the rules. Students work in real-life situations with undergraduates and answer questions at the end of the course regarding the difficulties in their direct work, information about the applied methods and materials on the subject, and their opinion about the level of awareness of children about their rights.

To receive feedback from the students and for the study, different types of questions are included in the survey described in Table 1. They belong to one of the following five types:

Single Best answer – Best answer questions have multiple options, but unlike traditional multiple-choice questions, incorrect answers are plausible or partially true. However, the correct answer is the "best" answer to the question. Students have to use knowledge and higher-level thinking skills to identify the correct answer rather than relying on general culture.

Dichotomous Questions (Yes/No Questions) – These questions do not require one of two possible answers from the respondents. These types of questions were utilized in the survey to filter students according to their previous knowledge of child rights.

Multi-select/multiple-choice questions – Multiple-choice questions provide answer options from which students can choose. These questions are effective because they allow respondents to scan the answers and select the most appropriate options. An option is provided for other responses not listed and allows students to write a personalized response.

Open-ended questions – those are feedback questions regarding the students' specific knowledge. Here they have to write their answer about the subject area - child rights.

Demographic questions – they are included in our survey to determine the age of the children who are aware of the rights of the students.

Table 1. The questions within the questionnaire and their type

No	Question	Question type
Part 1		
Q1	Do you think children have rights or only duties? Choose the correct answer.	Single Best answer
Q2	Do you understand the concept of children having rights?? Choose: NO or YES. If you choose YES, type your answer!	Dichotomous Question with Open End
Q3	Are you familiar with your rights? Choose: NO or YES.	Dichotomous Question
Q4	What do you think they are?	Open End Question
Q5	Have you heard of the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Choose: NO or YES.	Dichotomous Question
Q6	Where have you heard of Convention on the Rights of the Child from? a) School b) Family c) Media d) Friends e) Type your answer if it is not mentioned	Multi-select Multiple-choice question
Q7	List 3 rights?	Open End Question
Q8	Do you learn about children's rights at school? Choose: NO or YES. If you choose YES, write down the lesson you have talked about rights!	Dichotomous Question with Open End
Q9	In case of violated rights, who can you turn to? Choose: a) Family b) School c) Institution – write down which one!	Multi-select Multiple-choice question
Q10	Who can protect your rights? a) Family b) School c) Institution – write down which one!	Multi-select Multiple-choice question
Part 2		
Q11	Do you know what it means a child to have rights? Choose: NO or YES. If you choose YES, type your answer!	Dichotomous Question with Open End
Q12	Do you know your rights? Choose: NO or YES.	Dichotomous Question
Q13	What do you think they are?	Open End Question
Q14	List 3 rights?	Open End Question
Q15	What rights do you have in the family?	Open End Question
Q16	What responsibilities do you have in the family?	Open End Question
Q17	What rights do you have at school?	Open End Question
Q18	What responsibilities do you have at school?	Open End Question
Q19	If you are a victim of violence or bullying, is this a violation of your rights? Choose: NO or YES!	Dichotomous Question
Q20	Would you inform if you were a victim of violence? Choose: NO or YES!	Dichotomous Question
Q21	Who would you inform? a) Parent; b) Teacher; c) Educational counsellor or psychologist; d) Classmate; e) Friend; f) Other, write down!	Multi-select Multiple-choice question
Q22	The survey was conducted with a child from the following target group: a) 1 group: from 3-4 grade b) 2 group: from 5-7 grade c) 3 group: from 8-11 grade	Demographic question

2.4. Analysis of the Results

At the very beginning, the students were asked about the degree of knowledge of the rights from the material studied at school (Q1 – Q4).

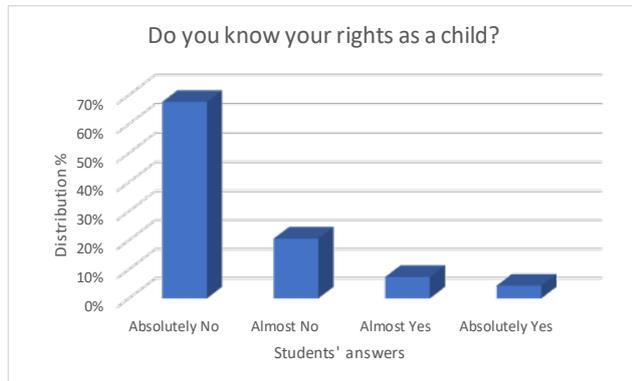


Figure 1. Summary of students' answers about their rights awareness

The results are surprising since most students believe they are not familiar with their rights as children. This can be seen in the graph in Figure 1. The summary answers "Absolutely No" and "Almost No" represent 90% of the students' answers, and only 10% answered positively.

The results of another question about the rights written in the Constitution (Q5 and Q6) fully correspond with the answers given in the beginning questions. The difficulty for the students turned out to be the open end question in which three rights have to be listed (Q7). The following rights were written: Right to vote, right to free vote, right to choose, right to express opinion, and right to educate. As it is known, the first three cannot be counted in the written rights regulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Only a few students (five answered questions) answered correctly, indicating one right instead of the required number of three.

In question Q9 about turning to an institution in case of violated rights, the results are aimed at judicial institutions, such as the court, police, and Department of Justice. Surprisingly, very few of the respondents choose family and school, two of the institutions with which children are in permanent contact. An additional question has been added to this one, which aims to establish the reason for choosing an institution that protects their rights. The results are presented in Figure 2. The highest percentage is for the police (52%), followed by the Department of Justice (36%), and equally for family and friends (6%).

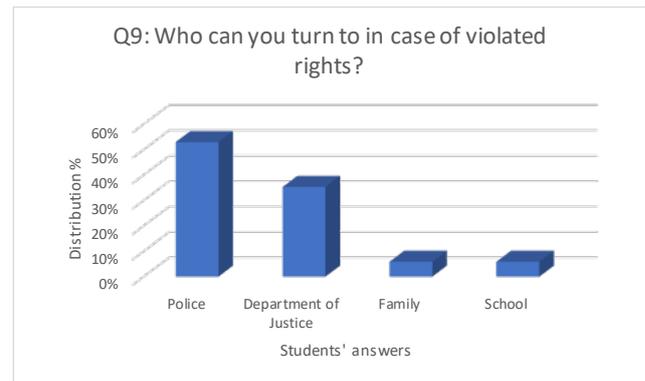


Figure 2. Summary of students' answers of Q9

To provide more adequate information to the children, students aim to utilize various information tools. It is of great importance for all tutors the right choice of the methods of education. In recent years, there have been more and more discussions and information about interactive learning methods, which are preferable due to their ability to help children absorb the learning material more quickly and easily. Through interactive methods, knowledge is more voluminous and permanent, as they include active dialogue and game situations in which children are involved.

Students say that to familiarize children with their rights, they most often use the game since they can observe equality and greater activity from the participants. Another way of stimulating creative thinking is to include fairy-tale characters, with the help of which children engage and develop their imagination.

In the process of educating children about their rights, students use different types of dialogues, crossword puzzles, demonstrations, didactic games, reading a literary work - fairy tale, poem, watching videos, etc.

The aim is for the children to understand the meaning and application of their rights, regulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as to be informed where they can receive help in case of violated rights. For this reason, students use supporting materials, such as colored sheets/cards, pencils or felt-tip pens, posters, balls, top hats, occupation sheets, the game - Right Runner, etc.

These diverse methods and materials depend on the age difference of the children, the material and technical base, and the choice of activities. The stated goal is for the knowledge to be permanent and related to a system with already acquired skills.

The methods and materials used are diverse and depend on the age characteristics of the children, the material and technical base, and the choice of activities but the stated goal is that the knowledge be permanent and be connected in a system with already mastered ones.

In the second part of the survey, the point of the questions is to establish the result of the student's practical task related to informing children of their rights. Children are asked summary questions (Q11 – Q14).

In questions Q15 and Q18, to establish the difference between rights and obligations, the children were asked to specify rights and obligations in the family and at school.

It is observed that the undergraduates manage to distinguish and specify their rights depending on the environment they live in. 92% of them state that in the family rights have to be respected, developed, and protected, and their duties are to actively participate in family activities, to be disciplined, and to respect the other members of the family. On the other hand, the results at school are different. Children list rights concerning freedom of expression, non-discrimination, right to accessible information, right to protection, and a fundamental duty to respect others.

At the end of the practical task, the question of awareness of an institution in case of violation of the child's rights was asked again. The results are shown in Figure 3 and are the following: 45% will inform a parent first; 23% a pedagogical counselor or psychologist; 13% teacher; 19% - an institution, such as the police and the child protection department.

We assumed that the students' answers to Q9 and the children's answers to Q21 were both related or that there was no significant effect of the conducted education and the developed students' professional skills for working with children and familiarizing them with their rights. We applied student's t-test for independent-samples to test the hypothesis [9].

The results of the statistical study are presented in Figure 4.

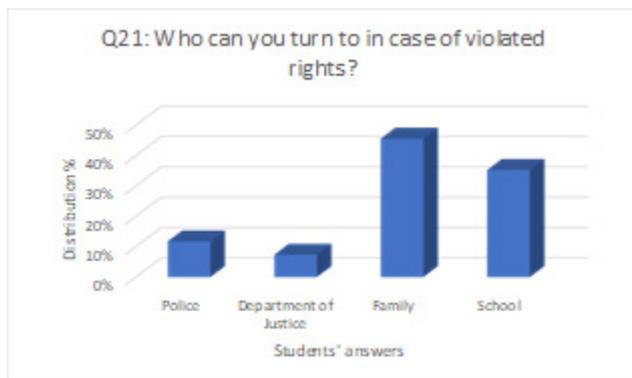


Figure 3. Summary of students' answers of Q21

t-Test: Two-Sample Assuming Equal Variances		
	Variable 1	Variable 2
Mean	17	17
Variance	249,3333	156,6667
Pooled Variance	203	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	6	
t Stat	0	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0,5	
t Critical one-tail	1,94318	
P(T<=t) two-tail	1	
t Critical two-tail	2,446912	

Figure 4. Statistical study results

The value of $p=1$ indicates that there is no statistically significant evidence that there is something in common in the students' responses before receiving the training and throughout the process of training on the used method. Consequently, there is a reasonable explanation to reject the hypothesis. Despite the lack of personal knowledge about their rights, students have also acquired skills to share what they have learned in their practical work with children.

2.5. Future Work and Development

This approach provides for students, future teachers, and social pedagogues opportunities for raising confident children who feel calm enough to express their opinions in the classroom and respectively hear the other side's opinion, as well as a learning environment in which everyone participates and learns more. Feeling responsible for one's own experience can give students much more significance in what they are learning. While discussing their experiences and discovering the connection between their rights and responsibilities, children manage to independently distinguish the main goals of child rights education and decide if they want to spend their time in a place surrounded by these goals. Confidence in their rights and those of their classmates will ensure children a way to talk and work together, and ultimately learn more qualitatively.

The education system aims to raise individuals with an opportunity to develop skills for applying knowledge in practice. Through the obtained knowledge about rights, children will be able to manage and control their behavior, think creatively, work, and create.

3. Conclusion

The present study aims to identify and analyze the knowledge and skills of students with a pedagogical profile on the rights of the child and their practical application. Their direct work with children presents them answers to questions about the violated rights of the child; institutions involved in children's rights; the difference between rights and obligations, etc., as well as information on methods used in teaching a child his rights.

The described approach provides detailed information for assessing the advantages and disadvantages of educating young people on the formed training competencies. The research provides an opportunity for a broad analysis of educational effectiveness in the Bulgarian education system.

Because of this discipline, students expand their knowledge about the main international and national normative documents related to the rights of the child. What is more, the respect for the rights of the child is improved, and a sense of self-respect and respect for others - a sense of human dignity are developed.

Students state that they use traditional as well as interactive methods and tools directly related to the acquisition of specific knowledge. Apart from this, they also emphasize methods and means striving to motivate, encourage, and increase interest in the topic of children's rights.

The practical application of the theoretical material contributes to understanding. Acquainting children with their rights through examples helps to master them easier and more qualitatively.

By introducing a problematic debate when examining the specifics of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, we aim to develop students' personal and professional qualities: establishment of basic skills in active listening and communication; ability to listen to a child with different points of view; fundamental rights advocacy; formation of critical thinking by searching for information of practical importance; skills for interaction and cooperation with children; mastery and application of specific approaches, methods and forms for promoting children's rights.

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