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Original research paper

## **TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD RIGHTS EDUCATION: KNOWING, APPLYING, BELIEVING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study deals with child rights education (CRE) and content related competencies emerging from CRE framework that teachers need in order to ensure rights of the child within the education system. The goal of the research was to describe to what extent primary school teachers demonstrate CRE knowledge, skills of applying that knowledge in school context and the attitudes that support CRE. The survey included 930 teachers, using a questionnaire that examined their CRE knowledge, knowledge application/skills, and their attitudes/values about CRE. The results of the survey revealed that, among teachers, there is an insufficient level of knowledge and skills that are crucial to ensure respect and exercise of the rights of the child within the education system, and that they exhibit attitudes that point to misunderstanding of the meaning and significance behind certain child rights and the Convention as whole.

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#### **Key words:**

child rights education, teachers' competencies, knowledge, skills, attitudes

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

### *Portraying CRE: Definition, Goals, and Implementation*

Defining the concept of *child rights education* (CRE) has been the focus of research of many authors, as well as agencies and organisations dealing with human and child rights issues at the global level. The first difficulty that must be overcome when trying to define said concept pertains to its relationship with human rights education (HRE). A group of authors recognise CRE as part of a wider HRE framework (Alderson, 1999; Bennet & Hart, 2001), given that the rights of the child are part of the human rights *corpus juris*. In this context, the principles that deal with the goals of HRE contained in article 2 (paragraph 1) of the UN Declaration (2011), should be applied in the same format to CRE: "... providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights." This argument sounds quite justified, especially when taking into account the wider meaning of HRE, which encompasses education for democratic citizenship (education for playing an active part in democratic life and exercise rights and responsibilities in society), as well as education for mutual understanding (developing self-respect, respect for others and intercultural cooperation), based on internationally agreed human rights standards aimed at building a universal culture of human rights (OSCE/ODIHR, 2009). Although the education for democratic citizenship and HRE are closely inter-related and mutually supportive in terms of goals and practices (Council of Europe, 2010) they differ in focus and scope, because education for democratic citizenship focuses on the child's citizen role in the community, while HRE focuses on the broader spectrum of human rights, and fundamental freedoms/liberties in every aspect of people's lives (Gollob, Krapf & Weidinger, 2010: 9).

However, certain authors believe that child rights education should be distinguished from HRE because HRE refers to the rights enjoyed by adults, whereas children do not enjoy them to the same extent and in the same manner as adults (especially when it comes to civil/political rights). Also, should CRE be reduced to HRE, it would mean that children learn about rights in the context of adult rights without establishing a correlation between those rights and their personal life and experience, i.e., as if children were not intrinsically motivated to learn about them (Krappmann, 2006). Many authors, therefore, argue that CRE should be treated as a separate entity that is in correlation with the child's experience, within which children are encouraged to actively participate in the process of protection and exercise of their rights in the role of right holders (Brantefors & Quennerstedt, 2016; Jerome, 2016; Krappmann, 2006).

Another difficulty posed by CRE has to do with its implementation: Should CRE be conducted primarily through educational policy and its subsequent implementation, or should CRE occur as a bottom-up culture shift? (Jerome, 2016). According to some studies, the values underlying CRE, such as involvement of students in different aspects of school life, as well as in the process of learning and teaching, respect for and cooperation between different actors of the educational process and inclusiveness of the learning environment, are the key factors that make the school successful (Pešikan, 2020; Rowe, 2003). This is precisely why CRE cannot be imposed from the outside, but must come from the school culture that sends clear message to both teachers and students “what kind of people we want to be” (Bruner, 1996: 118), thus influencing their value system and shaping their identities.

Regardless of whether the child rights education is seen through the prism of a wider framework of human rights education or as an entity that is separate from general human rights, most authors agree that the concept of child rights education goes beyond *awareness-raising* and *learning about provisions and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC* (The United Nations, 1989) and that it encompasses other aspects as well. They argue that child rights education should take place in a *stimulating and free atmosphere* and environment, with respect for the four basic principles of the CRC (Lundy, 2012), thereby stressing the importance of the very process of not just learning about child rights, but also “living the child rights”. This approach underlines the importance of a *holistic* understanding of the meaning and scope of human rights, as well as of systemic implications of incorporating human rights education in all levels of education (Potvin & Benny, 2013). In searching for an answer to the question of what the purpose of child rights education is, certain authors have pointed out the importance of empowering children and adults to *acquire competencies* that will help them to progressively realise all child rights by learning about them (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012), that is to take action to defend human rights and prevent violation thereof (Gerber, 2008). This adds new elements to child rights education, suggesting that child rights education must involve *action*, i.e., that by learning about child rights, children and adults are empowered to bring about change in their immediate environment and the world at large to ensure the full realisation of the rights of all children. When speaking about the goals of child rights education, certain authors (Brantefors & Quennerstedt, 2016) point out involvement (to develop self-esteem and interactional capacity), agency (to develop capacity for action in one’s own life), awareness (to develop awareness about the rights, and ability to protect and enjoy them), citizenship (to prepare for participatory democratic citizenship), respect for rights (to develop good social relations and good behaviour) and social change (to develop capacity to change social structures: increase social justice and equity). Bajaj (2012) emphasises social change as one of the goals and recognises three distinct CRE forms according to their priorities: education for global citizenship, that influences new global political order, education for coexistence, that

leads to healing and reconciliation and education for transformative action, that sees CRE as a powerful tool for inclusion and social justice.

If we were to sum up the goals of child rights education as seen by different authors, we may conclude that those goals encompass three interrelated dimensions: a) learning **about** child rights which refers to the contents of learning/teaching, i.e. the curriculum that should be firmly based on familiarising with CRC provisions and the approach based on the rights of the child, b) learning **through** child rights, which refers to the condition/requirement to conduct the process of learning about child rights in a stimulating, non-discriminating, safe and participatory environment, that is in the environment based on the practical aspect of respect for child rights in all circumstances, and c) learning **for** child rights, which stresses the purpose of child rights education, that is to empower children and adults to apply their knowledge and bring about changes aimed at achieving respect for and realisation of all child and human rights in their wider environment (Gollob, Krapf & Weidinger, 2010; UNICEF, 2014).

### *The Role of Teachers in Promoting CRE*

Nearly every research in the field of education points to teachers as the key factor for the quality of the educational process, educational outcomes and student motivation (OECD, 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Villegas-Reimers & Reimers, 2000). Teachers are largely responsible for the implementation of educational policy and the policy in the area of protection and realisation of child rights (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012), given that their values and political beliefs greatly impact the interpretation of those policies (Leenders, Veugelers & De Kat, 2008). In this context, teachers may also be perceived as an obstacle to CRE implementation, but also as important advocates and promoters of CRE. CRE points out that education is a right, challenging the ingrained understanding of education as child's need that should be met (UNICEF, 2014). Also, CRE challenges the traditional adults-children power relations and the understanding of the fundamental role of adults in child's development, given that it brings into focus, not only the protection of children, but also their emancipation and autonomy (David, 2002). On the other hand, teachers may act as promoters of CRE, having the potential to cooperate with and transform the education system, as well as by being competent, enthusiastic and by using participatory methods to create an environment conducive to CRE (Bajaj, 2012; Tibbits, 2005). The multiple roles of the teacher go beyond traditional image of teacher as leader, organizer and evaluator of the teaching process. Teachers are also perceived as motivators, regulators of social relations in the classroom and partners in affective interaction (Ivić, Pešikan & Antić, 2001). As motivators, teachers serve as models who encourage students to learn, while as regulators of social relations they enable students to learn in safe

and stimulating environment that promotes justice, non-violence, participation and prosocial values, thus contributing to learning **through** and **for** child rights.

This leads us to the definition of the concept of teachers' competencies, i.e. to the question of whether those competencies can be defined through observable and measurable behaviours exhibited by teachers in their professional role (Pantić & Wubbels, 2010), through their understanding of the historical, political and economic context of a particular educational system that is not necessarily tangible (Barnett, 1994), or through values, i.e. the ethical and social dimension, given that teachers are required to act as reflective and autonomous practitioners, who critically evaluate and improve their practices and make various decisions independently, taking into account the ethical standards of their profession (Elliott, 1991/2001). Most authors agree that the definition of competencies should be broader than a checklist of observable and measurable skills, adopting a wider notion of competencies, consisting of knowledge/understanding, skills, potential/abilities, as well as beliefs and moral values. This means that teachers' professional competencies make up a dynamic combination of knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as attitudes and values held onto by teachers when performing their professional activities (Gonzales & Wagenaar, 2008). When the aforementioned is applied to the area of the rights of the child, a competent teacher should demonstrate: a) knowledge about the principles on which the Convention is based and the rights guaranteed to the child within education, b) beliefs and values that support the realisation of child rights in education, and c) skills that enable the realisation (implementation) of principles and rights arising from the Convention in their educational practice.

Research into teachers' competencies needed to ensure child rights in education were mostly focused on competencies in a particular area, e.g., competencies for inclusion (Mofkebaieva et al., 2013), or competencies in the area of protection from neglect and abuse (Pourrajab *et al.*, 2014). Some models that take broader perspective on competencies which citizens require to participate effectively in a culture of democracy and include values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding (Council of Europe, 2016), have not been researched in relation to teachers and their professional role in the promotion and realization of CRE. Meanwhile, research that dealt with a wider spectre of teachers' competencies needed to ensure child rights in education have yielded conflicting results: some studies show that teachers possess basic knowledge of child rights (Aroa & Thakur, 2015; Shahid, 2009); that they exhibit positive attitudes and that they use child rights as the basis for their teaching practices (Shahid, 2009), while other studies suggest that teachers have limited knowledge of child rights, while expressing an interest to learn more about this topic, both during their initial professional training and their professional development (Ozmen, Kaymak Ozmen & Yalcin, 2010). Most of these results are based on research participants' self-evaluation and it is, therefore, impossible to determine to what extent and whether the teachers truly possess the

necessary skills and knowledge, or this is just the matter of their belief. With this study, we tried to examine the teachers' knowledge of various areas of child rights education and do they apply that knowledge when dealing with practical, everyday situations in the context of education.

The goal of the research was to describe to what extent primary school teachers in our study demonstrate the content related competencies emerging from CRE framework competencies needed to ensure child rights in the education system.

The task of the research was to determine the level of knowledge and capacity to apply that knowledge demonstrated by teachers in the areas of a) non-discrimination, b) protection of children from violence, abuse and neglect, c) respect for the principle of the child's best interests, d) the child's right to take part in decision-making (participation), civil and political rights of the child, and e) child rights education, as well as to examine teachers' attitudes/values when it comes to these categories of rights.

## ■ METHOD

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of 930 grade and subject teachers working in elementary schools in 20 towns/municipalities in Serbia. The sample was convenient, with the quotas of teachers of particular subjects proportionate to their approximate share in the general teacher population, and it included grade teachers (40%) and subject teachers of all subjects taught in primary education (60%). Most research participants were female (80%).

The majority of participants have received university degree (88.6%). When it comes to the length of service, teachers with 10–25 years of service accounted for most research participants (51%), whereas teachers with less than 10 years of service and those with over 25 years of service were equally represented in the sample (25% and 24%, respectively). Among participants 33.5% reported that they have attended seminars related to CRE, while 60.6% have not chosen seminars addressing the topic of CRE as part of their professional development.

### *Instruments*

A teacher's questionnaire<sup>1</sup> was prepared for the purpose of the research. The competency model used to design the questionnaire was based on the Convention<sup>2</sup>. The *first step* in building the competency model was to determine the competence domains. A comprehensive list of the rights of the child stipulated by the Convention was reduced to the rights that are directly related to the education system and its responsibilities to ensure respect for child rights. These included a) the right to non-discrimination (article 2), b) the best interest of the child (article 3), c) participation (article 12) and other civil/political rights (articles 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17), d) the right to protection from abuse and neglect (article 19), and e) the child's right to learn about and know his/her rights (articles 4, 29 and 42). The *second step* included the identification of teachers' personal responsibilities regarding the respect for, protection, and realisation of child rights within each domain defined in the first step. The *third step* included the development of competency indicators, grouped into three competency components—knowledge, attitudes and skills arising directly from the provisions of the Convention.

Prior to data collection stage, *cognitive interviews* with 12 teachers were conducted, with the aim of understanding the way in which research participants perceived and interpreted items, and identifying potential problems that may arise in the process of data collection (Drennan, 2003; Knafl *et al.*, 2007). Based on the interviews, the specific items were clarified, ensuring in that way content validity of the questionnaire.

The final version of the teacher's questionnaire consisted of the introductory part (demographic data) and three parts aimed at determining the level of knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding child rights education. The CRE Knowledge scale included 22 items related to the knowledge on CRE in the form of multiple-choice test. Similarly, the CRE Skills scale consisted of 12 questions/problem situations where the research participants were asked to apply their knowledge of different areas of child rights, in the form of multiple-choice test. Attitudes exhibited by the teachers regarding child rights education and the group of rights pertaining to it were examined by 25 items using a Likert-type 5-point scale (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree). The scale proven to be highly reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .81$ ).

<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire is available from the authors upon request.

<sup>2</sup> For more information concerning the model see <http://ucpd.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/child-rights-education-of-teachers-in-serbia-the-framework.pdf>

### *Data Collection*

The data collection was conducted by means of pen and paper survey in 17 school districts from March to April 2019. Participants received a plain language statement that informed them that participation was voluntary, and that their consent was implied by the return of the completed questionnaire. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire honestly, and a researcher was present to clarify any questions. The questionnaire took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete.

### *Data Analysis*

Since the main aim of the study was portraying teachers' competencies for CRE, we have used descriptive statistics. An independent sample *t*-test used to determine if there were any significant differences in CRE knowledge, skills and attitudes between teachers who have university degree (4 years + 1 year) and teachers who have college degree (3 years) university and college degree teachers, as well as between teachers attending and not attending professional development activities related to CRE.

## **OVERVIEW AND INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS**

The level of teachers' knowledge of the areas that are relevant to child rights was determined using CRE Knowledge scale. The questions concerning the right to non-discrimination dealt with the knowledge of this particular right, recognising discrimination in various situations, understanding of certain discrimination-related concepts (stereotypes and hate speech), and the knowledge of preventive measures aimed at preventing discrimination in school. When it comes to the child's best interests, teachers were expected to be familiar both with the contents of said principle and the connection between that right and other rights stipulated by the Convention. The questions that concerned participatory, civil rights, were aimed at examining teachers' understanding of those rights and their ability to distinguish between different levels of participation, as well as their knowledge of situations and decisions where a teacher is obliged to include children in the decision-making process. When it comes to the right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect, in addition to being familiar with this particular right, the teachers were also expected to be familiar with the procedures of responding to suspected violence or violence that had already occurred (depending on the level of violence), as well as the measures and activities aimed at protecting the child from violence. The questions concerning child rights education examined the teachers' knowledge and understanding of

provisions and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and how familiar they were with their responsibility to ensure the realisation thereof.

Research participants could score between 0 and 28 points; however, the highest score recorded was 21. A significant percentage of research participants (41.4%) failed to score above 7 points, whereas as many as 95.5% of teachers scored below the assumed arithmetic mean of 14 points, suggesting limited knowledge of teachers across all domains of CRE (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of the CRE Knowledge Scale

(Sub)Scale	M	SD	Min	Max Achieved	Max Theoretical
Right to non-discrimination	1.9	1.2	0	5.5	6
The child's best interests	.9	.9	0	3	3
Participatory, civil rights	2.4	1.7	0	7.5	8
Right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect	.7	.9	0	3.5	4
Child rights education	1.4	2.3	0	6	7
Total scale	8.2	3.5	0	21	28

CRE Skills Scale consisted of problem situations where the research participants were asked to apply their knowledge of different areas of child rights to a specific situation, or to recognise the instances of violation of certain child rights in the context of education. The findings show that 72% of teachers failed to score higher than the expected arithmetic mean of 12 points (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics of the CRE Skills Scale

(Sub)Scale	M	SD	Min	Max Achieved	Max Theoretical
Right to non-discrimination	2.2	1.2	0	4	4
The child's best interests	1.9	1.4	0	4	4
Participatory, civil rights	3.8	2.9	0	12	12
Right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect	2.3	1.3	0	4	4
Total scale	10.1	4.6	0	22	24

Research participants struggled most to apply the principle of participation to the context of education and to recognise the violation of various civil and political rights of the child (participatory rights), such as: freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to privacy and the right of assembly ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ,  $Max = 12$ ). They applied, with partial success, the right to protection from violence ( $M = 2.3$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ;  $Max = 4$ ), non-discrimination ( $M = 2.2$   $SD = 1.2$ ;  $Max = 4$ ), and they were somewhat less successful in applying the principle of the best interest of the child ( $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ;  $Max = 4$ ).

Teachers' skills concerning child rights education were additionally examined via two questions that reflected the teachers' experience of incorporating child rights-related topics in curricular and extracurricular activities. Less than a half of the teachers (42%) said they incorporated certain child rights-related topics in their curricular or extracurricular activities (47%). Only a quarter of them cited specific examples that indicated any methodical and meaningful inclusion of child rights education-related topics in classes or extracurricular activities.

In contrast to CRE knowledge and skills scores, the scores on the CRE Attitudes scale tend to cluster in the higher part of the scale. Namely, 78.6% of the teachers are achieving a score higher than 75, which is the theoretical arithmetic mean, indicating positive attitudes of teachers towards CRE (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Descriptive statistics of the CRE Attitudes Scale

(Sub)Scale	M	SD
Right to non-discrimination	3.2	.7
The child's best interests	3.6	.6
Participatory, civil rights	3.0	.7
Right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect	3.9	.8
Child rights education	3.5	.7
Total scale	3.3	.5

Note. *The scale range is 1 to 5.*

Results of the Pearson correlation indicated that there was a significant positive association between scores on scales measuring knowledge, skills, and attitudes of teachers toward Child Rights ranging from .367 to .419 (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Pearson correlation coefficients between scores on CRE Knowledge, skills, and attitudes scale (N = 930)

	1	2	3
CRE knowledge scale score			
CRE skills scale score	.419**		
CRE attitudes scale score	.367**	.402**	

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

When it comes to differences in knowledge, skills, and attitudes with regard to the level of education and previous professional training in the area of child rights education, the research revealed a statistically significant difference in the results achieved by teachers on knowledge and skills tests vis-à-vis their education. Teachers with a university degree achieved significantly higher results in the knowledge test ( $t(899) = -2.95, p < .01$ ), as well as the skills test ( $t(899) = -1.99, p < .05$ ) in these areas, compared with teachers with a college degree. When it comes to attitudes, the only difference observed concerned the child's right to protection from violence, abuse and neglect ( $t(854) = -2.45, p < .05$ ). Teachers with a university degree tend to express a negative attitude about corporal punishment more often, and they believe that violence cannot be justified and are more willing to include children in the process of planning and implementation of measures aimed at protecting them from violence.

When it comes to teachers' professional development, the research found that teachers who had attended seminars on child rights achieved significantly higher scores in the test that examined their knowledge of participation and civil/political rights ( $t(874) = 2.08, p < .05$ ) and child rights education ( $t(874) = 1.98, p < .05$ ), whereas the teachers who had never attended such seminars achieved higher scores in the area of protection from discrimination ( $t(874) = -2.09, p < .05$ ). Said difference was also observed in the scores achieved in the test of skills; teachers who had never attended seminars on child rights achieved higher scores on the skills test on protection from discrimination than their colleagues who had attended seminars on child rights education ( $t(874) = -3.60, p < .01$ ).

## ■ DISCUSSION

The findings of the research indicate that teachers in Serbia have insufficient knowledge necessary to respect and allow for the exercise of child rights as well as to implement the inclusion of child rights education into the educational process. Most teachers are not familiar with various rights of the child, fail to recognize situations in which these rights are violated in the educational context or recognise procedures for handling such situations or preventive actions undertaken to avoid violation of certain rights. These conclusions contradict other findings obtained through various research according to which teachers have both the knowledge and skills relative to child rights education (Aroa & Thakur, 2015; Shahid, 2009). This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that in other research, teachers themselves assessed their knowledge by means of assessment scales, thereby allowing for the possibility that there was a tendency to overestimate both the knowledge and skills they possessed.

Insufficient knowledge about child rights and inability to apply that knowledge are accompanied by attitudes which point to a lack of understanding of the meaning and significance of individual child rights as well as the Convention as a whole. Non-recognition of discrimination in the educational context and measures to be taken in a situation constituting discrimination is accompanied by attitudes which often (implicitly) support the system of inequality and justify discrimination (even some forms of violence). A small number of teachers support affirmative action measures, while others believe that such measures are undesirable as they create inequality among children. Simultaneously, a significant number of teachers believe that differences between people cause intolerance and discrimination. These attitudes may be an explanation for poor results teachers achieved in the knowledge and skill test pertaining to the right to non-discrimination. Also, they could potentially explain the results obtained in other research indicating that teachers: a) do not understand and cannot recognize mechanisms which support and maintain oppression in educational system/school context, b) lack motivation to promote social cohesion and inclusion in the school context as they fail to see the point of doing so in a school “where discrimination does not exist and where all children are treated equally” and c) deny personal responsibility in tackling the problem of oppressive practices in schools (Pantić *et al.*, 2010). Negation of one’s own professional responsibility is product of highly centralized educational system that diminishes teachers’ professional autonomy and their professional status trying to limit their decision-making scope (Pešikan & Ivić, 2021). Centralisation reduces the role of the teacher to being mere implementers of educational policies rather than as reflective practitioners, creators of their own practice and agents of change. In addition, teachers lack the competences needed for taking more proactive roles in the process of education.

Teachers' attitudes regarding child's right to protection against violence, abuse and neglect reveal a certain degree of "awareness" in terms of corporal punishment and (un)justification of violence. Most teachers have a negative attitude towards corporal punishment of children in the family, the majority of them believe that there is no justification for violence and that children must participate in the planning of preventive activities of violence protection. These findings are consistent with other research showing that there has been an increase in the number of adults who oppose corporal punishment of children, which is explained by the launch of numerous campaigns and programs promoting alternatives to corporal punishment as a means of discipline over the years (Council of Europe, 2008; 2009; UNICEF, 2017).

Considering that one of the important goals of CRE is acquisition of the competencies required to realize an action which would in turn, incite social change and empowerment of children and youth, the data indicating that only a small number of teachers understand the right to participation. Teachers fail to recognise situations in which they are *obliged* to involve children in the decision-making process and they also lack the ability to distinguish between genuine participation and the so-called quasi-participation (Hart, 1992). Teachers have not achieved significantly better results when it comes to implementation of participation principle in the educational context. Only a small number of them recognize instances of violation of the child's right to free expression of opinion, right to privacy, i.e., the right to protection from arbitrary and unlawful interference with the privacy of the child, as well as the child's right to protection of personality and dignity and child's right to timely, adequate and complete information. These results are not surprising since the idea of child participation is not in line with the dominant regimes of truth (Foucault, 1977), i.e., what is considered a normal and desirable power dynamics between an adult and a child, so that the implementation of this principle and a group of participatory rights in education is significantly hampered. Since the realization of participation largely depends on attitudes towards the nature of the child, his/her competencies, the relationship between children and adults and understanding of the role of adults in children's development process, it is interesting to analyse teachers' attitudes regarding participatory rights. The teachers who participated in the research seem to perceive children as an incompetent, immature individuals who cannot participate in decision-making processes together with adults even if it is organized in an age-appropriate manner and whose opinions cannot have the same weight as opinions of adults. In their view, a child has to "deserve" the right to participate by developing a sense of responsibility and achieving independence. Subsequently, he/she may be granted the opportunity to participate in a decision-making process.

The principle of the best interests of the child is very closely linked to participation, as the Convention guarantees children the opportunity to take part in determining their best interests (Freeman, 2007). The results of this research indicate that teachers do not understand the principle of best interest, as well as that a great number of them is not familiar with the rules and decisions which require the procedure of determining the best interest of the child to be implemented. The analysis of attitudes pertaining to this issue reveals that a substantial number of teachers believe that adults are the ones who have the ability to assess what is in children's best interest (better than children themselves) and that children should not even be given the opportunity to state their best interest. This way, teachers disregard the two basic principles laid down in the Convention, thus calling into question the exercise of a wide range of child rights in the education system. Several studies which involved teachers have revealed that even though teachers find children competent to determine their best interests, they still deny them the opportunity to participate in establishing their best interests. Therefore, the attitude about children's competencies does not seem to have any effect on the possibility of their participation. In this case, other factors are at play, such as the concern of adults for the welfare of children and the desire to protect them from possible adverse consequences of certain choices they make (Vranješević, 2012). Research findings indicating that teachers are least guided by the best interests of the child when making decisions (Vranješević, 2014) are in line with the results of other research showing that teachers, when asked about the competencies they consider important for children's participation, fail to mention the child's ability to assess their own interest, or mention it in the context of the reasons for denying the right to participation (Vranješević, 2012).

Although child rights education is not defined in the Convention under any separate article, (it is determined by the provisions of several articles of the Convention – 4, 29 and 42), states are obliged to integrate learning about the provisions and principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and a rights-based approach into curricula of both formal and non-formal education of all children and at all levels of education. However, the results of the research, indicate that teachers lack the sufficient theoretical knowledge required to integrate child rights education into the teaching process. Findings concerning teachers' knowledge about the Convention's importance within the legal system, the nature and principles of the rights of the child and duty bearers responsible for enforcing the provisions of the Convention which form the basis of the *rights-based approach*, as an integral part of child rights education, are not optimistic. Judging by the fact that a small number of teachers offer examples of an essential and meaningful inclusion of the child rights education into the curricular and extracurricular activities, it could be deduced that child rights education is insufficiently implemented in our schools. Although almost all teachers believe that children should learn about their rights in school systematically and at all ages, only a small number of them allow children to learn about their rights

through curricular and extracurricular activities (despite a positive legal framework allowing, even binding them to do so). If we look at the data on very low scores on the knowledge and skill/knowledge application test, and the stereotypes and misconceptions that teachers demonstrate about numerous fields of child rights, the reasons behind this situation become rather obvious.

The conclusion that the teachers with university degrees demonstrate better knowledge/knowledge application in the field of child rights education than the teachers with college degrees, is in line with the findings of other research indicating that initial education and professional development of teachers is key to fostering their competencies in the field of child rights (Lansdown 1999: 200) and that the lack of professional development is one of the chief obstacles to the effective implementation of HRE and CRE (Gerber, 2008: 328). This is also supported by the fact that teachers who have received training in the field of child rights show better knowledge of the field of participation and civil rights, as well as child rights education than those who did not attend seminars. Nevertheless, during the research, it was also found that teachers who did not attend seminars on child rights were more successful in passing the knowledge and skill (knowledge application) test in the field of the right to non-discrimination. One possible explanation is that the area of the right to protection against discrimination is a topic of other professional development programs (anti-bias education, respect for diversity, interculturality, justice in education, etc.), i.e., it is not always perceived by the participants as part of child rights education. Also, there is a possibility that the programs they attended did not really put discrimination in the context of exercising the rights of the child, i.e., they did not have an integrated *rights-based approach*, but rather addressed the topic of discrimination separately from the general concept of human and child rights. This is not uncommon practice when dealing with this particular topic but also with other issues (e.g., inclusion and violence). On the other hand, participation, civil rights and child rights education are topics almost exclusively addressed in seminars which are closely related to child's rights, so that a higher level of knowledge and skills is demonstrated by teachers who attended these particular seminars.

## ■ CONCLUSION

Provided that CRE is not reduced to a set of politically neutral ideas and international standards which need to be implemented (a role occupied by teachers), and its reformative and transformative potential is taken into account, then teachers are faced with a rather complex task. First and foremost, they should reconsider their implicit theories about the nature of the child, power relations within the educational process as well as their professional role in encouraging children's development. This requires the teacher to understand the learning process as an active inquiry focused on co-construction of experience and knowledge (versus the mere knowledge elicitation), in which new relationships are created and the roles of children and adults are expanded. Adults use the power they have to create a learning context in which both the child and the adult have an active role in the creation of shared meanings and the co-construction of knowledge (Rogoff, 2003) and in which the roles of the adult and child are intertwined (Rogoff, 1990).

Besides the knowledge about child rights and the capacity to apply that knowledge in the educational context teachers need to have consistent value system which unconditionally supports the concept of child rights, by promoting child-centred education and participatory methodology in creating a safe and stimulating environment for learning and development. Children need to be provided with the opportunity to develop their action potential through cooperation with others, as they are seen as active and competent experts on their own experiences, who should participate in decision-making processes which concern them (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Gerber, 2008). They need to learn not just **about**, but also **through** and **for** child rights, developing capacities to act as agents of change. The objectives of CRE should be children emancipation, the development of competencies relevant for growing up in a democratic civil society, a critical attitude towards reality and the capacity to change established practices and relationships. To that end, it is important to change attitudes towards children's participation and competencies. Competencies are developed and encouraged through participation, and if children are not given the opportunity to participate and perfect the competencies they are expected to have as adults, how will this developmental discontinuity be bridged (Vranješević, 2012)?

The situation becomes even more complicated if we take into account the fact that in order to achieve the complex goals of CRE it is not enough to have competent teachers, i.e. teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills (both cognitive and practical), as well as attitudes/values supportive of the goals of child rights education. In order for teachers to be able to function as competent professionals, a competent educational system must acknowledge the importance of said competencies, contribute to their further development and improvement

and enable their implementation. In other words, in order for changes to occur, in addition to *restructuring* (improving knowledge, skills and attitudes which support children rights education), *reculturation* (transformation of the education system) must take place to support these improved competencies (Fullan, 2016) and provide a safe, stimulating, non-discriminatory and participatory environment in which all children will be able to develop their potential to the fullest.

The findings of this research should contribute to the review of the existing and creation of new educational policies concerning both the professional qualifications of teachers and the change of curriculum which should be based on the objectives of CRE and a methodology which is consistent with the basic principles of the Convention. The curriculum should teach not only **about** the rights but also **for** the rights and **through** the rights. This means that the curriculum should promote democratic teaching methods, respect for children's competencies, visibility of children's perspectives, cooperative learning and peer support, as well as experiential learning. Also, the curriculum must enable critical analysis of the power structure and inequalities in society, as well as strengthen activism and emancipatory attitudes in order for children to develop competencies for social change (Brantefors & Quennerstedt, 2016).

These findings could provide guidance for the decision makers within the education system, as well as education policy makers in: a) adequately (re)defining the requirements for teacher competencies, b) improving their professional development system and c) striving to establish systemic solutions for child rights education of all stakeholders in the education system. This is in line with Fullan's understanding of restructuring, according to which, in order to create a system that respects teachers' autonomy and encourages the idea of teachers as reflective practitioners who constantly redefine and improve their practice, the successful implementation of innovative practice is of outmost importance (Fullan, 2016). Therefore, it is equally important to focus on the initial education of teachers. Hence, the faculties which educate teaching staff should review and redefine their existing programs in order to prepare teachers for their professional role by developing appropriate competencies during their initial education. At an individual level, for teachers, the findings could be a guideline in planning their own professional growth and development.

Since this research did not envisage any interviews with teachers to gain insight into the structure and quality of their practice concerning integration of child rights education into the school curriculum, subsequent research could include the collection and analysis of said practices, thereby providing for a better insight into teacher's understanding of the meaning and purpose of child rights education, as well as the level of importance attached to it in the education system. Additionally, examples of good practice collected during the research could be used as an incentive

for other teachers to improve and build their practice on the principles of respect for child rights.

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