DOI: 10.2478/jtes-2021-0013

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*Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability,*
*vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 5–17, 2021*

# Opinion of Pre-service Preschool Teachers on Responsiveness: A Comparative Study of Latvian and Polish Students in the Aspect of Sustainable Education

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Abstract

The contradictions of modern human development are related to educational space, which is characterized by globalization and technology-driven changes; therefore, the social dimension of teacher education emphasizes the humane character of education – respectful communication, participation, empathy, flexibility, and the ability to change so that a teacher would be able to ensure an emotionally safe and supervised learning environment.

The aim of the article is to analyze and compare the opinions of students, pre-service preschool teachers, about teacher's responsiveness in Latvian and Polish institutions of higher education. The research methodology includes the theoretical method – analysis of academic literature – and the empirical method – a survey of 307 Latvian and Polish full-time and part-time students in the period of 2020–2021. The survey was conducted online. Data processing was performed using the SPSS program. The results show that, in general, the understanding of prospective preschool teachers about the importance of teacher responsiveness in pedagogical activities and the need to undertake responsibility and leadership in regulating children's reactions is positive. However, several differences have been identified between the opinions of Latvian and Polish students.

*Key words*: pre-service preschool teachers, responsibility, sustainable teacher education

## Introduction

The earth has changed dramatically, and human influence on the earth's ecosystem has created a new geological era – the Anthropocene –, in which the multidimensional conceptualization of sustainability is particularly relevant in the natural, cultural, political,

and social dimensions (UNESCO, 2010). However, in our perception of the world, we have underestimated human kinship with nature and the importance of the species (Salīte et al., 2020). The causes of Anthropocene problems can be found in the perspective of anthropocentrism without a natural (biological) basis, ignoring the fact that the formation of human species is also related to the formation of basic units of the species, and it cannot be arbitrarily removed from history. Changing the relationship between the human and nature also changes the quality of sustainability (Salīte et al., 2020).

Nowadays, the contradictions of human development are also related to the educational space, which is characterized by changes brought about by globalization and technological development, increasing volatility and complexity; therefore, education plays an important part in the processes related to the sustainability of the planet. It is also increasingly important to develop human social skills – respectful communication, participation, empathy, openness to different views and cultures, conflict resolution, flexibility, and the ability to change (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia, 2021).

The reorientation of education towards sustainability is particularly important in teacher education, as teachers are entrusted with the care of young people – the next link in the evolution chain of human consciousness, and it is up to the teachers whether this evolution will be inclusive (UNESCO, 2005; Grabovska & Grabovskis, 2009). This task of teacher education is closely related to efforts to help prospective teachers acquire the wisdom of sustainable and inclusive life (Salīte et al., 2009).

The essence of sustainable higher education is to ensure individual's ability to adapt to the changing environment, to prepare them for professional activity in information society, and to provide an opportunity for everyone to develop themselves creatively and change their standard life experience (Grabovska, 2006).

The re-orientation of students towards the goal of sustainability should also be implemented in the education of prospective preschool teachers as a key strategy (UNESCO, 2014) to promote the solution of sustainability-related problems in the education of preschool children (Elliot, 2016; Salīte et al., 2021).

In this regard, our study highlights the importance of the responsiveness of prospective preschool teachers in providing supportive responses, as well as assuming responsibility and leadership in the regulation of children's emotions in pedagogical activity.

The aim of the article is to analyze and compare the opinions of students, pre-service preschool teachers, about responsiveness in Latvian and Polish institutions of higher education.

## Theoretical Background

The training of prospective preschool teachers at the institutions of higher education is related to the need to develop diverse competencies in pedagogical practice so that the teacher can provide an emotionally safe and supervised learning environment, paying special attention to the specifics of preschool teachers' work, which involves developing children's skills at an early stage of life (OECD, 2019).

Therefore, the development of social and emotional preparedness of pre-school teachers in the process of studies is very important, with a particular focus on the development of students' social and emotional skills and raising their awareness of the importance of teacher's responsiveness in promoting children's development.

Due to changes brought about by globalization and technological development, scientific research has paid special attention to the fact that the system of education is vulnerable to external threats (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

According to Ling (2017, p. 562), "teacher education is an iterative and complex process that needs to look backwards, forwards, inside-out and outside-in to respond to the evolving needs of a world that is moving, blurring and shifting". In this regard, Carrillo and Flores (2020) emphasize that in unprecedented times, teacher education is an iterative rather than a linear process characterized by complexity or super-complexity, and it is difficult to learn from the past when the present is so dynamic and the future uncertain.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of teacher education, especially the aspects concerning practical experience within preschool teacher training programs that develop teacher's professional identity (Velle et al., 2020) and promote the development of teachers' emotional competencies related to the formation of their emotional responsiveness (Lang et al., 2020).

Research on the specifics of the work of preschool teachers substantiates the findings that the teacher needs to ensure an emotionally safe and supervised environment in the process of learning, in which children's social-emotional learning takes place (Denham et al., 2012). Teachers' social and emotional abilities, including responsiveness as a teacher's reaction to children's negative emotions, are very important in preschool pedagogical activity (Buettner et al., 2016; Sarah et al., 2017), because they significantly affect children's overall and emotional development and lead to far-reaching consequences for children's behavioral problems later in life (Fabes et al., 2002); inappropriate reaction of adults, including punishing the child and minimizing the importance of child's emotions, affects the development of children's emotional competence (Lang et al., 2017).

Studies on the formation of teacher's responsiveness are based on the findings of attachment theory as a theory of social-emotional development. It underpins the relationship between a teacher and a child, without which the teachers cannot hope for good results in their work, and which is a biologically based evolutionary need for the child or, more broadly, of any human being; it is a search for intimacy with someone who can protect. Without this ability, the human being would not be able to survive (Bowlby, 1969/1982; 1988).

Attachment theory has become the dominant theory for understanding the early social development of a child and the basis for empirical research on the formation of the relationship between the teacher and the child (Thompson, 2003). Research in this area highlights the social dimension of sustainability and a deeper biopsychosocial understanding of teacher's activity.

Scientific research has shown that in the relationship between children and adults, attachment is related to the ability of adults to read child's signals accurately in order to respond and demonstrate acceptance and emotional warmth, offering help to the child, regulating the child's behavior, and introducing restrictions if needed (Pianta, 1999).

Child's interaction with the adult as a cultural being is equally important (Lorenz, 1977), because responsiveness is the social basis for communication throughout the whole life of an individual. The child's sensitive response to the adult means that their signals are understood, and their intentions are acknowledged. This in turn leads to a strong identification with the adult, accepting their values and culture (Grossman & Grossman, 2021).

In their study of attachment between the teacher and children, the researchers Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2004) found that attachment-based factors are very important for child's social, emotional and academic adjustment. For example, the teacher's notions of emotional closeness are a unique contribution to the child's emotional responsiveness; the feelings of closeness to the teacher contribute to the child's sense of well-being and academic development. Clearly, teachers bring their own experience of childhood attachment to the classroom, and it affects the teacher's interaction with children (Kesner, 1997).

The teacher's ability to recognize, use and manage child's emotions is regarded as the teacher's ability to provide a psychologically safe environment (Morris et al., 2013). It has also been argued that teachers' responsiveness is an indicator of the quality of childcare, which is related to teacher's ability to use supportive strategies in regulating children's emotions (Denham et al., 2012; Thomason & La Paro, 2013; Buettner et al., 2016).

Several studies have also identified factors that influence the preschool teacher's ability to respond appropriately to child's negative emotions and complex mutual relationships, such as depression (Jeon et al., 2014; Sandilos et al., 2015), stress (Zinsser et al., 2013), emotional exhaustion, the knowledge and application of stress management strategies in dealing with diverse pedagogical situations, teacher's special education (Sarah et al., 2017; Jeon et al., 2016), etc.

The above mentioned studies of emotional responsiveness were mostly focused on issues concerning children's behavior management, with less emphasis on teacher training and strategies aimed at maintaining their social and emotional health (Lang et al., 2020). Some studies have focused on the improvement of teachers' social and emotional skills and the acquisition of stress management strategies in the process of preschool teacher education (Harvey et al., 2016; Poulou et al., 2018; Jennings et al., 2020, Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020). Researchers have also highlighted the issues concerning teachers' social-emotional learning in the sustainable teacher training process (Fereira et al., 2020; Suleimanova & Ivanova, 2018; Fedosejeva et al., 2018).

In the context of our study, it is important that several US researchers (Jeon, Hur, & Buettner, 2016) have developed a methodology for studying the responsiveness of preschool teachers. However, the opinion of pre-service preschool teachers about teacher's responsiveness has not been sufficiently studied so far (Jurgena et al., 2020); therefore, we focus on the research of this issue.

The pedagogical activity of the institutions of higher education and their academic staff creates an educational environment in which future specialists can develop their readiness for professional activity, and this readiness comprises a set of qualities which is the result of accumulated positive experience and successful internal potential for pedagogical activity, as well as the state of resources for purposeful activity (Baltušīte, 2012). Therefore, it is very important to study students' opinions in order to identify the attitudes of pre-service preschool teachers to the role of teacher's responsiveness in pedagogical activity.

## Methodology

The study is based on the theoretical method – the analysis of scientific literature – and the empirical method – a survey of students.

In order to identify the opinions of pre-service preschool teachers about teacher's responsiveness in situations that have caused negative emotions in a child, we continue our previous study that involved students from the Latvian institutions of higher education (Jurgena et al., 2020). Expanding the circle of respondents, students from Poland were included in this study, and a comparative analysis was performed.

The study used a questionnaire to examine the responsiveness of preschool teachers elaborated by L. Jeon, E. Hur, and C. Buettner (Jeon et al., 2016). The questionnaire includes seven different situations causing children's negative emotions with potential responses according to a 7-point scale (1 – very unlikely, 7 – very likely). Our research methodology has been tested (Jurgena et al., 2020). Respondents' answers were coded according to five strategies of teacher's responsiveness: punitive reactions (PR), expressive encouragement (EE), emotion-focused reactions (EFR), problem-focused reactions (PFR) and minimization reactions (MR).

The survey was conducted in the period from 2020 to 2021. The questionnaire was made on the Internet using the Google disc, and students answered the questions online. The participants of the survey were first-year students, future preschool teachers, of the University of Latvia, Latvia (LV) and the University of Wroclaw, Poland (PL). The total number of the respondents was 307: LV – 164 (53 %) and PL – 143 (47 %). Among the respondents, 100 (33 %) were full-time students, and 207 (67 %) – part-time students. 99 % of the respondents were women. The age of the students involved in the survey ranged from 18 to 30 years.

The reliability (inter-item consistency) of the questionnaire according to Cronbach alpha coefficient was .86, indicating good coherence of the questionnaire.

The data analysis was performed using SPSS 17.0 program. The data analysis used descriptive statistics – mean (M), standard deviation (SD), median (Mdn). By means of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, it was determined that the data did not correspond to the normal distribution; therefore, the non-parametric analysis method Mann-Whitney U test was used in the statistical processing of the data.

## Research Results

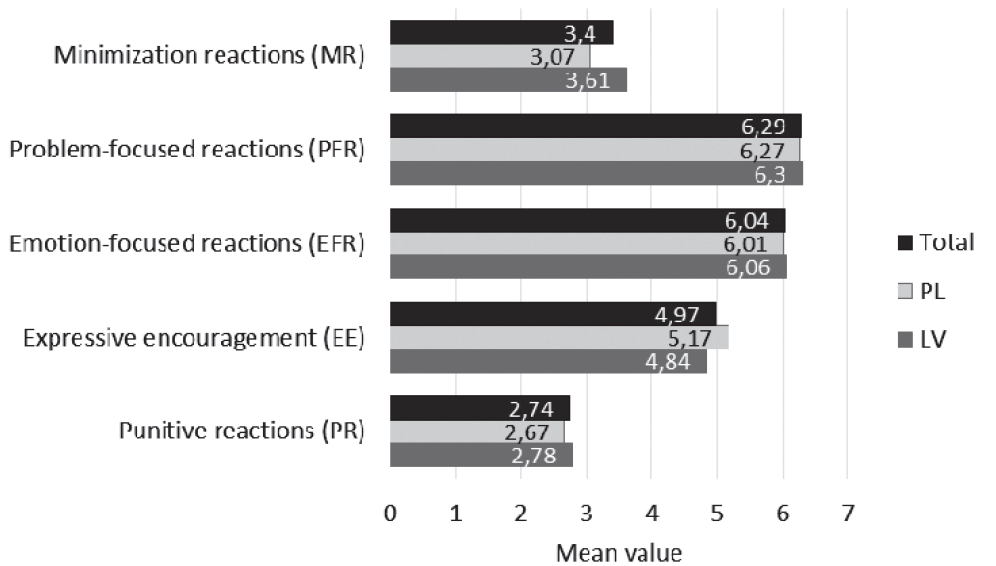
The results of the study provide a first insight into the comparison of the views of Latvian and Polish pre-service preschool teachers on teachers' responsiveness. The comparative study was carried out taking into account the cultural and socio-cultural background, regarding which Switala (2015) indicated in his study on values that the history of Latvia and Poland and the similarity of their experience over the centuries could be important factors in explaining the results of the study, because these factors could also have an impact on each educator's experience and the way they think; they could underpin their consciousness, thinking and the way of doing things (Switala, 2015).

Examining the sets of items included in the survey according to the types of teacher's response strategies, it can be concluded that, despite some significant differences, the opinions of the respondents from both counties are quite similar (Fig. 1). The figure shows that students have a good understanding of emotion-focused and problem-focused

response strategies (EFR and PFR), where most respondents have chosen the response *very likely*. The students are willing to use strategies based on expressive encouragement (EE) to a lesser extent. Minimization reactions (MR), which reflect the degree to which teachers try to reduce the severity of a situation, the importance of a child's problem or the sharpness of their response, have received moderately high ratings. The fact that several students have also chosen to use a strategy that involves punishing a child (PR) is probably related to their insufficient learning experience as 1st year students. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to compare the opinions of students from both countries, and the results show that there are no statistically significant differences, except for the MR strategy, which reflects the degree to which the teacher tries to downplay the importance of child's problem ($p = .001$; there is a significant difference with a significant level of 0.05). However, such a difference may be incidental due to the small number of respondents.

**Figure 1**

*Mean Values of Students' Responses According to the Types of Teacher's Responsiveness Strategies*




It follows from Figure 1 that 1st year students express an understanding of the importance of teacher's responsiveness and humane action strategies in the work of an educator in response to child's negative emotions in a preschool educational institution, which corresponds to the basic principles of pedagogy. These research results could reveal the future teachers' view on how to accomplish teacher's mission in the context of sustainability, implementing pedagogical collaboration which inspires and opens opportunities for child's participation and the advancement of a positive experience (Fedosejeva et al., 2018; Suleimenova & Ivanova, 2018).

Next, a more detailed comparison of the answers of Latvian and Polish students was made, examining separate items. The Mann-Whitney U test shows that, in general, there are no significant differences between the two samples. Nevertheless, in some

situations, the differences in the behavior of students from both countries are significant (Table 1). According to the mean values (M) and medians (Mdn) of the responses, Latvian students are less likely to believe that a child who is angry about something should be sent to another room to calm down, while Polish students support this strategy more ($M_{LV}$ = 1.76, $M_{PL}$ = 3.96). Latvian students support the idea of reassuring an angry child by advising them not to worry about their problem, while Polish students do not consider this kind of reassurance to be an appropriate course of action ($M_{LV}$ = 5.07, $M_{PL}$ = 1.61). Opinions also differ as to whether it is necessary to make a child apologize if he/she hits another child for the first time. On average, more Latvian pre-service teachers tend to believe that a child should apologize ($M_{LV}$ = 5.98, $M_{PL}$ = 3.82). According to the previous study (Jurgena et al., 2020), Latvian pre-service preschool teachers do not regard the demand to apologize as a punishment.

**Table 1**

*The Most Significant Differences Between the Responses of Latvian and Polish Students*

| No | Item | LV (n = 164) | | | PL (n = 143) | | | Mann-Whitney U |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | M | SD | Mdn | M | SD | Mdn | |
| 1 | If a child became angry, I would send him/her to another room to calm down. | 1.76 | 1.26 | 1.00 | 3.88 | 1.85 | 4.00 | 4021.5 |
| 2 | I would tell the child not to worry about missing the event. | 5.07 | 1.80 | 5.00 | 1.55 | 1.01 | 1.00 | 1870.5 |
| 3 | If a child hit another child, I would make the guilty child apologize for that. | 5.98 | 1.49 | 7.00 | 4.07 | 2.07 | 4.00 | 4844.0 |

There are significant differences with a significant level of 0.05; $p < .001$.

The reasons behind these differences could be related to the experience of future educators in understanding the application of adult responsiveness strategies in the family or at school (Kesner, 1994, 1997; Lorenz, 1977; Grossman & Grossman, 2021). This indicates the need for further research in the area. It should be noted that the deviation in answers of both Latvian and Polish students is relatively large (SD = 1.01 - 2.07).

To examine more closely how students' opinions are affected by their life and work experience, the answers of full-time and part-time students were compared. Table 2 summarizes the responses that most clearly demonstrate the differences in the choice of teacher's actions. It appears that the part-time students focus more on the emotional state of the child and finding the most appropriate action to calm the child. At the same time, the part-time students have a more definite attitude towards such manifestations of children's negative emotions as fighting (Items 7 and 8).

**Table 2**

*Comparison of the Answers of Full-Time and Part-Time Students*

| No | Item | Full-time (n = 100) | | | Part-time (n = 207) | | | Mann-Whitney U |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | M | SD | Mdn | M | SD | Mdn | |
| 1* | If a child became angry, I would send him/her to another room to calm down. | 3.88 | 1.84 | 4.00 | 2.26 | 1.71 | 1.00 | 5233.5 |
| 2* | I would tell the child not to worry about missing the event. | 1.65 | 1.06 | 1.00 | 4.33 | 2.20 | 5.00 | 3562.0 |
| 3** | Comfort the child and do something fun with him/her. | 5.59 | 1.37 | 6.00 | 6.43 | 0.91 | 7.00 | 6903.0 |
| 4** | Tell the child that it is OK to cry. | 5.43 | 1.49 | 6.00 | 4.53 | 1.97 | 5.00 | 7750.0 |
| 5* | Tell the child that it is OK to cry when you feel bad. | 5.11 | 1.81 | 5.00 | 4.06 | 1.96 | 4.00 | 7189.0 |
| 6* | Comfort the child and suggest some activity that would attract his/her attention. | 5.90 | 1.17 | 6.00 | 6.45 | 0.88 | 7.00 | 7326.0 |
| 7* | Tell the child that he/she should not fight. | 3.91 | 1.81 | 4.00 | 4.77 | 1.92 | 5.00 | 7604.0 |
| 8* | Would make the guilty child apologize to the victim for hitting him/her. | 3.68 | 2.08 | 4.00 | 5.59 | 1.79 | 6.00 | 4976.0 |

There are significant differences with a significant level of 0.05: * $p < .001$; ** $p = .001$.

These results imply that the understanding of prospective preschool teachers, as well as the perception of their response to children's negative behavior, is formed in self-experience. As most part-time students already work at preschool educational institutions and conduct classes, developing children's social and emotional skills, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired and evaluated in their life activity have become personally significant values for them (Jurgena et al., 2020).

Evaluating the answers of Latvian and Polish respondents in general, it can be concluded that 1st year students demonstrate an understanding of the importance of teacher's responsiveness and humane action strategies in pedagogical work in response to a child's negative emotions in a preschool setting, which corresponds to the key principles of pedagogy and the knowledge acquired in the first year of studies. The students' responses show that they would not use punishment as a way to reduce the child's negative emotions but would encourage the child to express his/her feelings openly and try to make the child forget the particular accident or problem as soon as possible. At the same time, the students appreciate teacher's involvement in solving the problem, helping the child to figure out himself/herself what the best course of action would be, thus advancing their skills.

## Discussion

Regarding the responsiveness of prospective preschool teachers, the study provides additional arguments for the discussion why in today's educational space, characterized by globalization and technological transformations that change human-nature relationships and the quality of sustainability, it is important to raise the awareness of prospective preschool teachers about the role of teacher's responsiveness in pedagogical activity and the need to undertake responsibility and leadership in regulating child's emotions.

The study has revealed the opinions of pre-service preschool teachers about the understanding of responsiveness and the possibility of using supportive strategies in the regulation of children's emotions, which corresponds to the conclusions in scientific literature (Denham et al., 2012; Buettner et al., 2016).

The research clearly shows that the students are focused on the implementation of teacher's mission in the context of collaboration, which corresponds to the aspect of sustainability in pedagogical science, and this finding is also emphasized in other studies (Fedosejeva et al., 2018).

## The Limitations of the Study

As the empirical study concerns the analysis of the opinions of 1st year students from some universities in Latvia (University of Latvia) and Poland (Wroclaw University), the authors do not attempt to evaluate and interpret it in a broader context.

The study reveals the opinions of first-year students, pre-service preschool teachers, on the strategies for expressing teacher responsiveness, and it can be used as a basis for further research on the implementation of various teacher training approaches in university practice.

The results of the study show that further interdisciplinary research should be carried out in family and university pedagogy to identify and substantiate the interrelationships between the teacher's experience and the formation of responsibility.

## Conclusions

The results of the study show that the understanding of teacher's responsiveness as well as the perception of future preschool teachers of what they as teachers could do in response to children's emotional behavior could stem from family experience and self-experience in their life activity.

This finding in the study actualizes the idea formulated in Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology that the internalization and externalization of human cognitive processse take place with the help of involved means (tools) as a purposeful interaction of the subject with the object. The development of personality is an interaction of two relatively autonomous, but inextricably linked development plans – the natural (biological) and the socio-dialectical ones (Vygostky, 1981).

The students' responses show that they mostly understand the importance of regulating emotions in establishing an active contact between a child and an attachment person so that the child could obtain information about how he/she should feel and behave.

Prospective teachers in Latvia and Poland equally appreciate the importance of teacher's responsiveness and humane action strategies in response to negative emotions of a child in a preschool educational institution.

The current study provides a new perspective and an opportunity to explore teacher training in the aspect of sustainability from a broader perspective as the interaction of different processes, which would be a holistic view on the development of complex phenomena and their interactions based on the idea of transcendental phenomenonology which seeks the framework for the presence of a human being and other beings in the interaction of "I" and "we". Based on the analysis of the transcendental sphere of phenomenology, further research can reveal and justify the idea that self-understanding is possible only through the level of "we" in the lifeworld (Huserls, 2002).

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