

# Emotional Competencies of Preschool Teachers as Predictors of Intergenerational Learning in Kindergarten

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**Abstract** – The study investigates the emotional competencies of preschool teachers and intergenerational learning in preschool institutions. In this quantitative empirical research study, which utilizes both descriptive and regression analysis, our primary objective was to investigate how well preschool teachers' emotional competencies predict their ability to facilitate intergenerational learning within Slovenian preschool institutions. The survey and scaling techniques used in this study were conducted online and involved two distinct surveys, each employing a five-point Likert scale known for its reliability. The study included a total of 110 participants who were preschool teachers from the Republic of Slovenia. A standard form of multiple regression analysis was used to determine which of the educators' emotional competencies predict the factors of intergenerational cooperation and learning in the preschool institution. The results of the study through three regression models, indicate the existence of predictions of some emotional competencies of preschool teachers (adaptability and emotionally-based communication) for intergenerational learning in kindergarten.

**Keywords** – Adaptability, challenges of intergenerational interaction, emotional aspect of communication, intergenerational learning, intergenerational practices in kindergarten.

## 1. Introduction

The research started from the premise that the educational process has a deep socio-emotional background and generational characteristics of the participants.

### 1.1. Conceptual or Theoretical Framework

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences [1] and Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence [2] emphasize the importance of emotional and social competencies and respect for the cooperation paradigm. Motivation, self-regulation, emotional competence or special communication skills are integral constructs of Goleman's model of emotional intelligence and indicate the importance of these constructs in learning processes. Similar to Goleman, Cohen [3] indicates that for the realization of personal and professional benefits of a person, an important place is occupied by his knowledge of emotions and their management and the establishment of good interpersonal relationships. Bar-On [4] indicates that the ability to experience and understand emotions and to act adequately by them influences an individual's success in mastering the social environment. Therefore, emotional competencies and support are essential in contact and working with people, in the workplace [5], especially in the educational process, in the professions of teachers and preschool teachers. In their research, Curby *et al.* [6], Van Kan *et al.* [7] and Vignjević Korotaj & Mrnjauš [8] emphasize the significance of teachers' emotional engagement and emotional competence for effective teaching, while studies on kindergarten practices by Lepičnik Vodopivec & Šindić [9] and Veraksa *et al.* [10] reveal some of the benefits of educators' emotional competence in children's development and well-being.

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Research by Chabot & Chabot [11], as well as Lepičnik Vodopivec & Šindić [12], recognize and confirm the presence of emotional competencies of preschool teachers such as adaptation, the emotional component of communication, self-regulation, and emotional-based motivation.

Just as the construct of preschool teachers' emotional competencies occupies an increasingly significant place in the wide spectrum of preschool teachers' competencies [12], Lepičnik Vodopivec & Šindić [13] also observe in contemporary research a tendency to think about preschool teachers' competencies related to intergenerational learning and cooperation. Intergenerational learning is a joint process of exchanging knowledge, experience, perception, understanding, skills, competencies and perception of life, lifestyles, goals and values between people of different ages, in which all actors have the opportunity to achieve personal well-being, which can be realized within the framework of the formal educational process [14], work organizations [15], and beyond [16], as well as in numerous other places where opportunities for interaction are provided - in contact zones [17]. Studies show that the local community benefits from intergenerational learning [18], [19], [20], strengthening community cohesion [21], which can also be reflected in the wider national context [22]. The flow of experience and knowledge between generations also happens spontaneously in numerous social contexts, but an organized approach is often needed. The cooperation between coworkers of different ages is very important [15], [23]. Projects connecting children and the elderly have shown very good results [24], [25], [26], making intergenerational learning in the context of the educational process increasingly being talked. In Slovenia, intergenerational programs involving kindergartens are more recent [27], [28], [29]. In the process of intergenerational learning and cooperation in the preschool institutions, the Slovenian preschool teachers recognized the advantages of social, personal and professional development and improvement of innovative practices in kindergarten [30].

### 1.2. Related Research

In addition to numerous advantages that arise from meeting people of different generations [29], Urick *et al.* [31] recognize that there are challenges in work and cooperation among members of different generations in the workplace, which are reflected in the presence of tensions based on values, behaviour, and identity. Generational differences in experience, knowledge, wisdom, life views, goals and styles, preferences, and competencies, can be the cause of disagreements and conflicts [32], [33], [34].

It is necessary to improve and strengthen the communication skills of experts in the field of intergenerational work [35]. Ličen [27], studying practical knowledge related to more than 50 intergenerational learning projects, observes that some of the most important project strategies are based on narrative methods, and the project topics and outcomes are socio-emotional in the domain of solidarity, communication, dialogue, relationships, emotional intelligence etc. which indicates the importance of different socio-emotional competences of leaders of intergenerational activities. Aday *et al.* [36] identified three factors that facilitators should strive for in order to achieve successful intergenerational contact between the elderly and young people, namely: encouraging conversation (communication), gaining mutual experiences and knowing specifics of the second generation. Sánchez *et al.* [35] observe that the skills essential for the manager of intergenerational programs relate to the organizational and social areas. On the one hand, the leader must have abilities and competencies related to teamwork, observation, contextual analysis, and resource management. On the other hand, they see that the leader should be good at promoting contacts, social relations, interactions and connections.

Partalo *et al.* [13] emphasize the importance of the development of preschool teachers' competencies in intergenerational learning in kindergarten. Mosor, *et al.* [37] point to the importance of professionals and their preparation for intergenerational cooperation and facilitating the interaction of kindergarten children and the elderly, while Dahl Gundersen & Slettebø [24] in their research on the sustainability of intergenerational programs for elders and preschool children, point to the crucial role played by, among other things, cooperation, solidarity, facilitation of the actors involved and the support that participants receive from preschool teachers and caregivers. Based on his research, Hayes [38] finds that professionals' commitment and program adaptability are important factors in creating an intergenerational program and that the instructional orientation of the intergenerational facilitator plays a significant role in fostering communication among participants.

### 1.3. Purpose of the Study

Areas where generations meet, i.e. intergenerational place is a contact zone where meetings, interactions, and activities take place, and special attention is paid to experiencing emotions [27], both pleasant and unpleasant. Noticing the socio-emotional aspect of intergenerational learning, and the importance of emotional competencies for intergenerational learning in the profession of preschool teachers [13], the intention was to investigate whether and which emotional competencies of educators contribute to intergenerational learning in preschool institutions.

## 2. Method and Materials

To explore the emotional background of intergenerational learning in kindergarten more closely, a quantitative non-experimental research approach was adopted.

### 2.1. Research Model

This quantitative empirical research aimed to examine the prediction of the emotional competencies of preschool teachers for intergenerational learning in the Slovenian preschool institution. The research had characteristics of descriptive and regression research. Data collection was done online, using the advantages of online research [39].

### 2.2. Sample

The research sample consists of 110 employees in preschool institutions in Primorska, Slovenia. The sample is convenient and uneven in relation to gender, workplace, and years of service. The sample includes 106 women and 4 men, i.e. 96.36% of the sample are women, and 3.64% are men. Of these, 72% work as preschool teachers, while 28% are preschool teacher assistants. Regarding the years spent in the profession, 22% of respondents spent up to 5 years at their workplace; 35% between 5 and 14 years, 23% between 15 and 24 years; and 20% more than 24 years.

### 2.3. Data Collection Tools

Two self-created instruments with a five-point Likert-type scale prepared in an online version were used in the research. The authors operationalized and adapted the theoretical foundations of the construct of intergenerational learning [16], [35], [40] taking into account the specifics of the kindergarten context and educators' profession. An instrument on the perception of educators on intergenerational learning in the kindergarten was constructed from 42 statements [41] while in the procedure of factor and reliability analysis on the sample of preschool teachers from Slovenia, the number of statements was reduced to 21 [30]. Cronbach's Alpha scale coefficient of 21 statements is  $\alpha = 0.845$ . Factors that challenge intergenerational interaction were extracted using the factor analysis procedure; social (cohesion), professional and personal well-being; and innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten, which at the same time represent the three criterion variables of this study. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of these factors is respectively  $\alpha_1 = 0.861$ ;  $\alpha_2 = 0.797$ ;  $\alpha_3 = 0.830$  [30]. Item-total correlation values are between 0.412 and 0.733.

All of the above indicates a high internal consistency of the instrument.

The second instrument was used for the self-assessment of preschool teachers' emotional competencies. It was created by adapting the Questionnaire for self-assessment of preschool teachers' emotional competence [11], which was supplemented by the operationalization of some of the indicators derived from modern theoretical considerations on emotional intelligence, taking into account the specifics of educational competencies [13], [21], [42]. The instrument contains 30 items classified into four five-point Likert-type subscales that refer to four emotional competencies useful in the educational process (emotional dimension of communication; emotionally based motivation; adaptability; self-regulation [11]. Calculated Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the mentioned subscales are respectively  $\alpha_c=0.874$ ,  $\alpha_m=0.92$ ,  $\alpha_a=0.874$ ,  $\alpha_s=0.86$ . Item-total correlation values are between 0.56 and 0.90, and each subscale explains more than 50% of the variance. Factor analysis for each subscale confirms the tendency of the existence of each scale as a unique factor, which indicates their validity. Research variables are consistent with the subscales through which we collected data (emotional dimension of communication; emotionally based motivation; adaptability; self-regulation) and represent the predictor variables of this study.

### 2.4. Data Collection Process

The gathering of data relevant to the research process was done in November and December 2021. An online survey and scaling technique were applied. Respondents received the invitation to fill out the research instruments in the Google Forms application via e-mail. Data collection was anonymous and voluntary in accordance with ethical considerations.

### 2.5. Data analysis

In the study, the emphasis was on quantitative data analysis. To determine which of the educators' emotional competencies predict the factors of intergenerational cooperation and learning in the preschool institution, a standard form of multiple regression analysis was used, a statistical procedure in which predictors are simultaneously included in the analysis. The predictor variables were the emotional competencies of preschool teachers: adaptability, the emotional component of communication, emotionally based motivation and self-regulation. Criterion variables were the factors of intergenerational learning from the preschool teachers' perspective: challenges of intergenerational cooperation, social (cohesion), professional and personal well-being, and innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten.

The established appropriate correlations between the predictor variables satisfied one of the presumptions for the carrying out of multiple regression analysis [43]. The second assumption related to the necessary sample size [44] was also satisfied. The standard form of multiple regression analysis identified three regression models, which are the backbone of this study. The statistical software IBM SPSS statistics 26 was applied in the aforementioned statistical data processing. Theoretical analysis and synthesis of scientific theories and tangential research were used to determine the theoretical starting point, discussion and conclusion of the study.

### 3. Results

For each criterion variable in the regression analysis procedure, four predictor variables were examined and three regression models were obtained (Tables 1 – 3). Table 1 presents the results of the regression analysis for the criterion variable for the challenges of intergenerational interaction. The results show that there is a statistically significant regression ( $F = 7.682$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). That describes about 6.4% of the variance ( $R^2_{cor.} = 0.064$ ) of the criterion variable. The values of the standardized beta coefficients show that the predictor adaptability ( $\beta = -0.271$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ) has a statistically significant contribution to the explanation of the challenge of intergenerational interaction in the context of intergenerational cooperation of preschool teachers. Respecting the sign of the coefficient, it can be concluded that this predictor contributes to the reduction of difficulties in intergenerational interactions.

Table 1. A regression overview for the criterion variable: Challenges of intergenerational interaction

Criterion Variable	Predictor	$\beta$	t	p	Regression model
The challenge of intergenerational interaction	Adaptability	-0.271	-2.772	0.007	R = 0.271 R <sup>2</sup> =0.073 R <sup>2</sup> <sub>cor.</sub> =0.064 F= 7.682 p = 0.007
	communication	0.100	0.548	0.585	
	selfregulation	0.043	0.293	0.770	
	motivation	0.024	0.162	0.872	

Notes:  $\beta$  – Standardized Coefficients Beta; t – t value; p – Significance; R – Multiple correlations; R<sup>2</sup> – R Square; R<sup>2</sup><sub>cor.</sub> – Adjusted R Square; F – F coefficient.

Table 2 presents the results of the regression analysis for the criterion variable for social (cohesion), professional and personal well-being. The results show that there is a statistically significant regression ( $F = 27.946$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). That describes about 22% of the variance ( $R^2_{cor.} = 0.219$ ) of the criterion variable.

The values of the standardized beta coefficients show that the predictor emotional dimension of communication ( $\beta = 0.477$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) is statistically significant in relation to social (cohesion), and professional and personal well-being achieved through intergenerational cooperation of preschool teachers.

Table 2. Regression overview for criterion variable: Social (cohesion), professional and personal well-being

Criterion Variable	Predictor	$\beta$	t	p	Regression model
social cohesion, professional and personal well-being	communication	0.477	5.286	0.000	R = 0.477 R <sup>2</sup> = 0.277 R <sup>2</sup> <sub>cor.</sub> =0.219 F = 27.946 p = 0.000
	selfregulation	0.113	0.826	0.411	
	motivation	0.084	0.688	0.493	
	adaptability	0.040	0.238	0.813	

Notes:  $\beta$  – Standardized Coefficients Beta; t – t value; p – Significance; R – Multiple correlation; R<sup>2</sup> – R Square; R<sup>2</sup><sub>cor.</sub> – Adjusted R Square; F – F coefficient.

Table 3 presents the results of the regression analysis for the criterion variable of innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten. The results show that there is a statistically significant regression ( $F = 22.368$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). That describes about 18% of the variance ( $R^2_{cor.} = 0.179$ ) of the criterion variable. The values of the standardized beta coefficients show that the predictor adaptability ( $\beta = 0.433$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) is statistically significant in relation to the explanation of innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten in the context of intergenerational cooperation of preschool teachers.

Table 3. A regression overview for the criterion variable: Innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten

Criterion Variable	Predictor	$\beta$	t	p	Regression model
Innovative practices	adaptability	0.433	4.729	0.000	R = 0.433 R <sup>2</sup> = 0.187 R <sup>2</sup> <sub>cor.</sub> =0.179 F = 22.368 p = 0.000
	communication	0.071	0.412	0.681	
	selfregulation	-0.048	-0.351	0.726	
	motivation	0.024	0.176	0.860	

Notes:  $\beta$  – Standardized Coefficients Beta; t – t value; p – Significance; R – Multiple correlations; R<sup>2</sup> – R Square; R<sup>2</sup><sub>cor.</sub> – Adjusted R Square; F – F coefficient.

### 4. Discussion

The results indicate that the emotional background of intergenerational learning is primarily related to adaptability and emotionally-based communication.

#### **4.1. Adaptability in the Service of Intergenerational Interactions**

Numerous studies point to challenges due to the existence of tensions in intergenerational interactions due to differences among members of different generations in social, emotional, work-action, cognitive, and other competencies and the need to find different strategies to alleviate them [10], [17], [40]. The first regression model of this study (Table 1) indicates that the predictor adaptability, which implies the preschool teacher's adaptation to the new situation, children, innovations, and individual needs, and includes flexibility, accessibility, openness, and responsiveness contributes to the reduction of challenges present in intergenerational interactions. Similarly, Sánchez *et al.* [35] note the importance of promoting contacts, social relations, interactions, and connections during intergenerational activities, and Mosor, *et al.* [37] indicate the need to facilitate intergenerational interaction.

#### **4.2. Communication in an Intergenerational Context for Social, Professional, and Personal Well-Being**

The second regression model (Table 2) explains the largest percentage of the variance of the three models mentioned and indicates that the emotional dimension of communication-related to understanding non-verbal signs, understanding feelings, empathizing, compassion, the ability to listen during intergenerational cooperation contributes to social cohesion and the achievement of professional and personal well-being. The essential role of communication and dialogue in relation to intergenerational learning is recognized in the findings of numerous types of research, and the narrative method as an essential strategy [27]. In his study, Hayes [38] points to the importance of an intergenerational facilitator through fostering communication between participants, while Aday *et al.* [36] identified that one of the leading skills of leaders of intergenerational activities is to know how to encourage conversation (communication) between members of different generations.

#### **4.3. Adaptability in the Context of Innovative Practices of Intergenerational Learning in Kindergarten**

The third regression model (Table 3) indicates that the adaptability predictor, which includes flexibility, accessibility, openness, and responsiveness, contributes to the development of innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten and predicts the successful practice of intergenerational learning in kindergarten.

Similarly, Hayes [38] highlights staff commitment and program flexibility as critical components for creating innovative intergenerational program practices, while Ličen *et al.* [29] see as desirable the ability to explore possibilities and flexibility in activities, the development of transformative learning strategies for dealing with changes in oneself and the world around one, while Freire [45] points to the necessity of hope for the future. Dahl Gundersen & Slettebø [24] emphasize the importance of support, cooperation, and responsiveness from preschool teachers and caregivers for elders and preschool children for the sustainability of intergenerational practices of elders and preschool children.

### **5. Conclusion**

The results of regression Overviews 1 and 3 show the importance of the preschool teacher's adaptability for intergenerational learning and cooperation in the kindergarten context (Tables 1 and 3). It was observed that the adaptability of preschool teachers contributes to reducing the challenges of intergenerational interaction and the success of the implementation of innovative practices of intergenerational learning in kindergarten. The finding of regression model 2 indicates the contribution of the emotional dimension of communication to social cohesion, and professional and personal well-being, which is achieved through intergenerational cooperation. Based on the above, it can be concluded that the emotional competencies of preschool teachers contribute to intergenerational learning in kindergarten.

### **6. Recommendations**

Based on the main results of this research, while respecting the knowledge about the possibility of developing emotional competencies and their educability [2], [11], the need for further reflection on the improvement of emotional competencies of adaptability and emotionally based communication as support for intergenerational learning through different forms of education is observed. Also, the next research on this topic could be methodologically designed through the form of a combined research design [46], which, through a qualitative procedure, would achieve better and deeper insight and understanding of the issue, while maintaining a possibility of objectivity and generalization of the data inherent in quantitative research.

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