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Comparison of Subjects and Methods of Assessing Knowledge at Universities in Poland and Italy Based on the Preschool and Early School Education Program at the University of Rzeszów and the Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples

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Abstract

This article compares early childhood education teacher training systems in Poland and Italy, based on the University of Rzeszów and Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples. The aim is to examine whether specific solutions used at the Italian university could be introduced into the Polish programme and among Polish students. The research addressed students' opinions on mandatory and optional courses and preferred methods of knowledge assessment. The study employed a diagnostic survey method using an interview questionnaire. The results of the survey show students' preference for facultative subjects over mandatory subjects, and projects and multimedia presentations as favoured types of knowledge assessment. The findings indicate a need for improvement and further reflection on the preschool and primary education study programme.

Keywords: early education students, curriculum, comparison, Poland, Italy

Introduction

Within the framework of the Bologna Process, the European Union has achieved significant milestones in its efforts to harmonize higher education systems across member states. One of the key instruments of this unification is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which facilitates the transfer of academic credits and enables the comparison of students' acquired knowledge and skills across different institutions and countries.

The studies of preschool and early school education share a common structure at both universities, more specifically a five-year duration and the division of courses into lectures, laboratory classes, and workshops. Additionally, in both

programmes, students are required to complete a total of 600 hours of mandatory school practice. Lastly, many courses appear in both the Polish and Italian curricula, reflecting shared educational foundations despite contextual differences.

Table 1. Representative examples of courses taught during a five-year degree program in preschool and primary school education in Poland and Italy

Examples of courses included in both Polish and Italian curricula:	General Pedagogy, General Psychology, Methodology of Scientific Research, Didactics, Sociology, History of Pedagogy, Methodology of Physical Education, Technology in Schools, Mathematics, Art Education, Music Education, Environmental Studies, English Language, Polish/Italian Language (mother tongue)
Examples of courses specific to the Polish curriculum	Philosophy, Cross-Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Interpersonal Communication, Physical Education, Self-Image Formation, Developmental Psychology, Clinical Psychology, Social Psychology, Educational Psychology
Examples of courses specific to the Italian curriculum	Children's Literature, Geography, Elements of Chemistry and Physics, Child Neuropsychiatry

Table 2. Comparison of study schedules at the University of Rzeszów and Suor Orsola Benincasa University in Naples. Preschool and primary school education[a]

	University of Rzeszów	University Suor Orsola Benincasa
Entrance exam	**No**	**Yes**[b]
Number of subjects to complete PL – *separately counted lectures and workshops / discussion groups / seminars* IT – *separately counted lectures and laboratories / workshops*	**117**	**53–54**[c]
Number of subjects in the form of lectures or lectures with discussion elements	**53**[d]	**30–31**
Number of subjects in the form of workshops / discussion groups / seminars / laboratories	**64**[e]	**22–23**
Maximum number of ECTS/CEF credits for the course	**26**[f]	**12**[g]
Minimum number of ECTS/CEF credits for the course	**1**[h]	**1**[i]
Facultative subjects	**No**	**Yes**[j]
Duration of lectures and workshops/discussion groups/seminars/laboratories	**1,5–2,3h**	**2–3h**[k]

[a] Source: created by the author based on the study schedule for the preschool and primary school education program published on the University of Rzeszów website and the study schedule for the primary education program (*Scienze della formazione primaria*) on the UNISOB website.

[b] Entrance exam consists of: linguistic and logical comprehension, literature, history, geography and math.

[c] Depending on the number of facultative subjects passed.

[d] 15h x 46, 30h x 7.

[e] 15h x 26, 30h x 26, 45h x 8, 60h x 2, 120h x 1, 180h x 1.

[f] English language – 6 semesters.

[g] Italian language and grammar – 2 semesters; Italian literature – 2 semesters; Elements of natural sciences – 2 semesters).

[h] Cultural Anthropology – 1 semester, workshop; Intercultural Education – 1 semester, lecture; Preschool and Early School Education System – 1 semester, lecture.

[i] 12 subjects – laboratories and workshops with corresponding lectures.

[j] The requirement to earn 8 ECTS credits from elective courses in the third year.

[k] Classes usually last 2 hours with a break in the middle. However, some subjects (especially laboratories) last 3 hours but end after about 5 weeks. After that, during the semester, students have time to work on projects and can consult any questions (online or in person) with the lecturer.

The overview of subjects taught in both programs and displayed in Table 1 shows that the Polish curriculum includes a much broader specification of psychology-related courses, which are not present in the Italian programme. For instance, following the introductory course in General Psychology, Polish students attend separate courses in Developmental, Clinical, Social, and Educational Psychology. These distinctions reflect the greater diversification of subject areas in Poland. Other major differences between the Polish and Italian study programmes are summarised in Table 2.

As can be found in Table 2, Polish students complete nearly twice as many courses as their Italian counterparts. Consequently, the average number of ECTS credits per course is lower in Poland. One argument in favour of the Polish system is that a considerable proportion of courses are conducted in the form of workshops, seminars, and discussion groups, which place greater emphasis on students' active participation in the learning process.

Methodology

According to Jerzy Apanowicz, research may focus on socio-economic, educational, cultural, and other activities. That includes entities (individuals), objects, phenomena, and processes that shape the organizations, structures, motivations, personalities, knowledge, attitudes, and experiences of particular individuals and social groups (Apanowicz, 2005, p. 72). Another definition indicates that the term "subject of research" refers not only to objects and material entities in the literal sense but also to phenomena and events that these entities experience or influence. Such research subjects may include, for example, employees, medical professionals, primary and secondary school teachers, institutional staff, the phenomenon of unemployment, the process of education with its conditions and outcomes, as well as students' interests, aspirations, social attitudes, work methods, and social conflicts (Maszke, 2008, p. 91).

In the research presented in this article, the subject has been defined as: the professional preparation of preschool and early childhood education teachers in Poland and Italy.

In order to pursue this research, it was also necessary to determine its purpose. According to Maszke (2008, p. 28), the aim of scientific inquiry is to provide verifiable knowledge that enables the description, understanding, and explanation of phenomena and processes relevant to the researcher, as well as the prediction of their consequences.

The primary objective of the presented study was to collect information on and identify potentially beneficial changes in the process of preparing teachers in Poland resulting from the comparison with the Italian system.

This in turn leads to the practical objective of the study, which was to formulate a proposal for modifications to the curriculum of preschool and early childhood education.

According to Łobocki (2009, p. 107), research problems are questions to which we seek answers through scientific research. The author also emphasises what does not constitute a research problem. It is not every question posed by a person, nor a question to which an obvious or direct answer is expected (Łobocki, 2009, p. 107). Another definition highlights that research problems should be important from the point of view of theory development and/or relevant to practice. Furthermore, they must be correctly formulated, realistic, and, in most empirical sciences, verifiable (Klepacki, 2009, p. 41).

The main (general) research problem was formulated as follows: What components (elements) of teacher education in Italy have the potential to improve the quality of teacher preparation in preschool and early childhood education in Poland?

Based on the general research problem, specific research questions were identified:

1. What are students' opinions about the groups (modules) of core and optional subjects?
2. What are the preferred methods of course completion among students of preschool and early childhood education?

The research method applied to this study was a diagnostic survey. A. Maszke (2008, p. 172) states that it is a way of gathering knowledge about phenomena, events, or processes occurring in the social environment that are of interest to the researcher, based on surveying the opinions and views of people selected through specific criteria.

The technique being used in this research was the interview. Janusz Sztumski defines it as a guided conversation involving at least two individuals: the interviewer and the respondent. However, it is not a casual conversation, but such a conversation through which the researcher wants to obtain from the respondent the data specified by the research objective (Sztumski, 2010, p. 176).

Based on the degree of standardisation, the interview can be classified as either standardised or non-standardised (Maszke, 2008, p. 222). In this study, the first type, also called a questionnaire-based interview, was employed. This type is characterised by the interviewer adhering to a predetermined list of questions that are identical for all respondents and predominantly closed-ended.

To conduct the research, it was necessary to design an appropriate research instrument. An electronic interview questionnaire was developed using the Google Forms platform. The full title of the tool was *Interview Questionnaire for Polish Students of Preschool and Early School Education Concerning the Introduction of Solutions Adapted from the Italian Education System in Master's Degree Studies in Primary Education*. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to students in October 2024.

A total of 55 participants (53 women and 2 men) studying preschool and early school education at the University of Rzeszów responded anonymously to the questions. The students represented the following years of study:

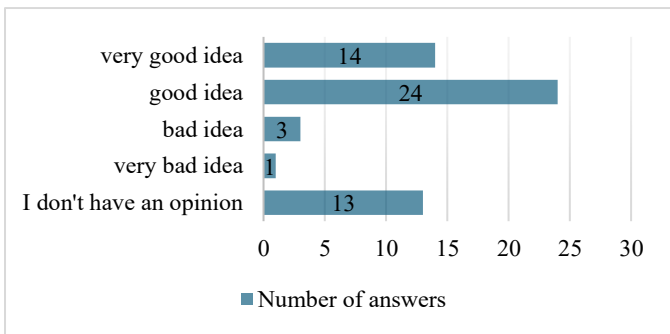
a) second – 7 respondents;
b) third – 10 respondents;
c) fourth – 13 respondents;
d) fifth – 25 respondents.

Analysis of the results

As mentioned in the previous section, two specific questions were formulated for this study: what are students' opinions about the groups (modules) of core and optional subjects, and what are the preferred methods of course completion among students of preschool and primary school education. The questionnaire items were designed to address these research questions and to provide data that would enable their detailed analysis.

1. What are students' opinions about the groups (modules) of core and optional subjects?

Polish students of preschool and primary school education, as future teachers, are required to acquire a broad range of knowledge and skills before beginning professional work with children. The idea of dividing courses into core and facultative subjects occasionally appears in academic conversations among students, often in response to the extensive and sometimes overwhelming number of courses included in the study programme. However, contrary to Italian universities, this system has not yet been implemented as a standard practice in Poland, where the curriculum remains fully predefined and mandatory.

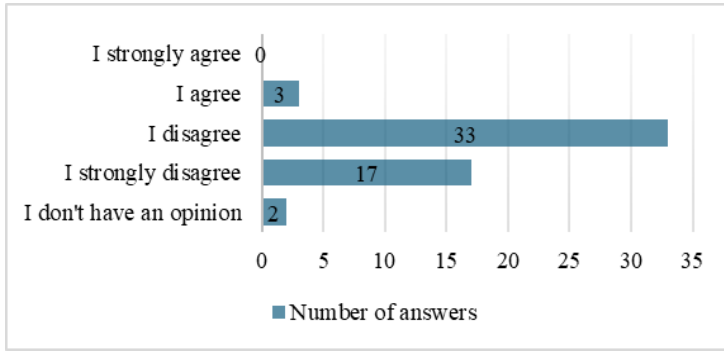


Graph 1. Response to the statement: The introduction of core and facultative subjects is...

An analysis of the responses presented in Graph 1 reveals a high level of consensus among students (38 out of 55) regarding their positive attitude towards a division into core and facultative subjects.

The subjects identified by students as the most essential included Fundamentals of Psychology for Teachers, Fundamentals of Preschool and Early School Pedagogy, courses on Supporting the Development of Children in Preschool and Early School Age, and Methodology of Various Types of Education.

Conversely, among the subjects considered less essential – and therefore more suitable as optional – respondents most frequently indicated: Theoretical Foundations of Pedagogical Activities, Culture of Language, Organisation of Preschool and School Work, and Psychological and Pedagogical Foundations of Foreign Language Teaching.



Graph 2. Response to statement: I consider all subjects taught in the preschool and primary school education program to be useful in the perspective of my future career

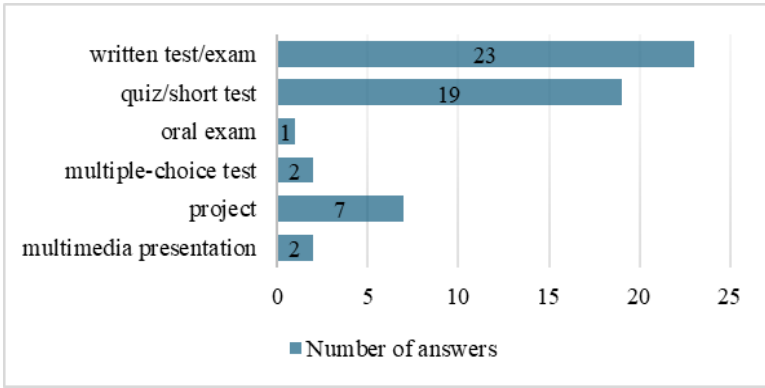
The perceived need for such a division of subjects may stem from the students' belief that the study programme is excessively extensive and demanding. Moreover, respondents indicated the presence of courses they considered of limited relevance to their future professional careers (see Graph 2).

2. What are the preferred methods of course completion among students of preschool and early childhood education?

Written examinations and short tests constitute one of the most common forms of knowledge assessment in Poland, beginning as early as the first stages of education. Oral examinations, by contrast, are considerably less frequent. Consequently, Polish students usually tend to feel more comfortable with written rather than oral forms of evaluation throughout the entirety of their educational path.

The situation appears to be quite the opposite among Italian students. From primary school onwards, they are encouraged to engage actively in classroom discussions and oral presentations. As a result, many Italian students report feeling more confident during oral examinations at university, while expressing greater anxiety about written assessments[l].

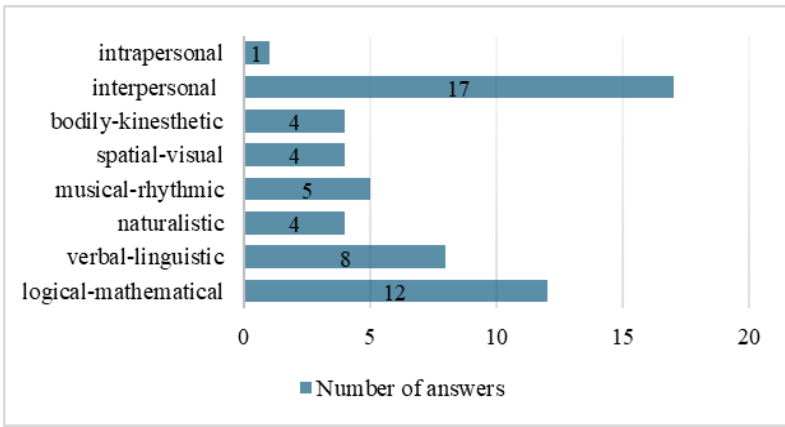
[l] Based on informal conversations with Italian students in Naples and an interview with an early education student at Suor Orsola Benincasa University.



Graph 3. Answer to the question: Which method of assessing the knowledge acquired during classes has been used the most during your studies so far?

As shown in Graph 3, the most common forms of assessment used in university lectures-written examinations/tests and quizzes/short tests – largely correspond to the assessment methods that students encountered during earlier stages of their education. Therefore, by the time they begin their university studies, students can be expected to be well accustomed to written examinations and short test. However, the preferences and self-reported abilities declared by the respondents suggest a more complex situation.

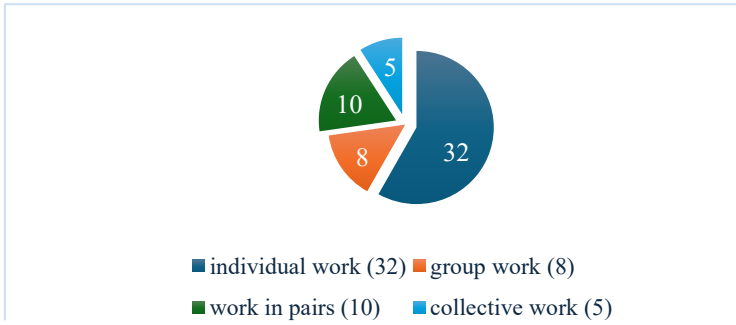
As shown in Graph 4, when asked about their dominant types of intelligence (according to Gardner, 2009), many preschool and early childhood education students identified strong behavioural and interpersonal communication skills. Additionally, their responses indicated predispositions and talents related to logical--mathematical and linguistic intelligence.



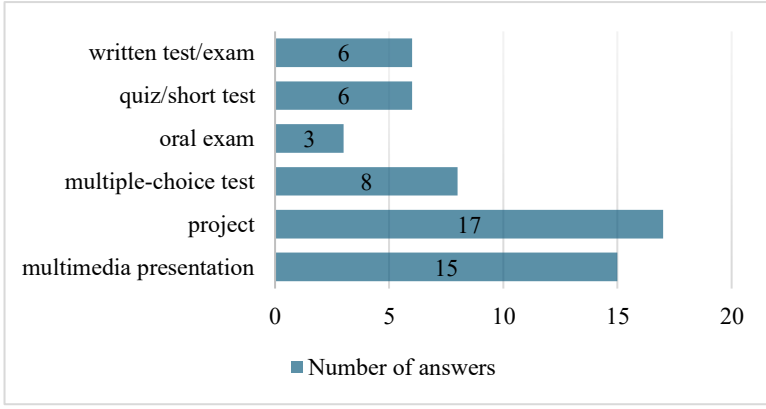
Graph 4. Answer to the question: Based on your own knowledge and experience, what is your dominant type of intelligence (according to Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences)?

However, these predispositions and the students' preferred ways of testing knowledge do not align with the current structure of their university studies. Students who display a preference for working with others and a learning-by-doing approach should not be assessed solely on the basis of theoretical knowledge they have memorised. Instead, they should be given opportunities to demonstrate their abilities through more interactive and collaborative forms of assessment, such as group projects.

In contrast, the responses to the question concerning students' usual mode of work show that individual and independent tasks remain the most common form of learning. As illustrated in Graph 5, there is a clear dominance of individual work which corresponds with the prevalence of written test and quizzes – tools designed to evaluate individual achievement. Nevertheless, the modern labour market increasingly values soft skills such as problem solving, teamwork, empathy, and communication – competences that are difficult to develop in isolation.



Graph 5. Answer to the question: What is the most popular form of testing acquired knowledge during your studies?



Graph 6. Answer to the question: Which method of testing knowledge is the easiest for you – which one do you feel most confident about?

The research indicates that students with diverse dominant intelligences feel most confident when assessed through multimedia presentations, project work, and, to a lesser extent, multiple-choice tests (see Graph 6). However, these forms of verifying knowledge did not rank highly among the methods of verifying knowledge used currently at university. The discrepancy suggests a misalignment between students' strengths and the actual assessment practices applied in their programmes.

Conclusion

This study has identified several areas in the training of future teachers that could benefit from improvement. The survey results revealed that students generally prefer having facultative courses rather than a fully mandatory curriculum. Furthermore, project-based assessment and multimedia presentations emerged as the most favoured forms of knowledge evaluation. Within the context of current preschool and primary school education programmes at Polish universities, these findings suggest that there remains considerable potential for enhancing flexibility and innovation in the Polish higher education system.

Taking into account the cultural and systemic differences between the two countries, the study concludes that certain elements of the Italian model of teacher education could be reasonably adapted and implemented in Polish preschool and primary school studies to improve the overall quality and relevance of teacher preparation.

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