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### Teacher Competence as a Basis for Teacher Education

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## **Teacher Competence as a Basis for Teacher Education: Comparing Views of Teachers and Teacher Educators in Five Western Balkan Countries**

Orientation of teacher preparation toward the development of competence has recently been suggested as a worthwhile direction of change in teacher education in the Western Balkan countries. In this study, 2,354 teachers, teacher educators, and student teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia responded to a questionnaire about the importance of four groups of teacher competencies: (1) self-evaluation and professional development; (2) subject knowledge, pedagogy, and curriculum; (3) understanding of the system of education and contribution to its development; and (4) values and child rearing. We compare the responses about the importance of these four groups across the five countries. The results are discussed with regard to their implications for reforms in teacher education policies and programs in contexts of decentralizing education systems.

### **Introduction**

Researchers examining teacher education in the Western Balkan countries (i.e., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) have argued for the development of alternatives to the overly theoretical and discipline-focused preparation of teachers (Vizek Vidović 2005; Zgaga 2006; Rajović & Radulović 2007). However, moves to reform teacher education toward competence development have proved problematic in many places. For instance, in the European context (e.g., Denmark, England, Netherlands, Portugal, and Scotland) some scholars have raised concerns that the focus on competence undermines the traditional keystones of teachers' professionalism, such as their moral and social purposes and discretionary decision making (Day et al. 2007). The situation is further complicated because in teacher education the "evidential" knowledge that is useful for practice is seen to be derived from scientific disciplines (Carr 1999), though educators' decisions are value-laden and linked to wider social purposes, economy, human development, and well-being (Carr 1999).

At the same time, the Western Balkan countries are engaged to various degrees in decentralizing their education systems (Radó 2010). Certain forms of decentralization increase the autonomy of schools,<sup>1</sup> which in turn may lead to increased professional decision-making authority for teachers,

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on decentralization (e.g., Bray 2003) distinguishes different types of decentralization that allow varying degrees of autonomy to schools and teachers. One important initial distinction is between functional and territorial decentralization. The former refers to the dispersal of control over particular activities, such as when a ministry of education delegates some of its functions to parallel bodies (for instance, to operate examination system). The latter refers to a downward distribution of control among the geographic tiers of government and is commonly understood to include three forms:

- (1) Deconcentration is the process through which a central authority establishes field units staffing them with its own officers.
- (2) Delegation implies a stronger degree of decision making at the local level, but powers basically still rest with central authority which has chosen to "lend" them to the local one.
- (3) Devolution is the most extreme form of decentralization in which powers are formally held by local bodies, which do not need to seek higher-level approval for their actions.

both at the subject-specific and more general levels of educational design (Slegers & Wesselingh 1995). In such contexts decentralization implies the need for an extended competence base for teaching professionals, as teachers are not only entrusted to implement a scientifically grounded pedagogy, but also to reflect on socio-cultural purposes of education and schooling (Lauglo 1995; Carr 1999). Moreover, such reflection need not focus only on implicit social and cultural frameworks. Rather, it should involve analyzing and changing particular institutional arrangements and working conditions, especially those that might obstruct the implementation of their aims (Liston & Zeichner 1990).

Based on observations of their counterparts' experiences in other countries, teachers seek to avoid the undermining of their professional status (Beijaard et al. 2000; Day 2002) by participating in the determination of the competencies that will guide teacher education. We can learn more about this process from comparative analyses of Western Balkan countries, given their commonly inherited traditions and similar reform moves in teacher education tied to European integration and the Bologna processes<sup>2</sup>. Relevant here is a study of teacher perspectives on competence conducted in Serbia (Pantić & Wubbels 2010). The authors found that teachers' perceptions of the importance of competence in "system understanding and development" was significantly lower than their perception of the importance of other sets of competencies identified: (1) "self-evaluation and professional development"; (2) "subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum"; and (3) "values and child rearing." The competence in "system understanding and development" involved broader understanding of the context and system of education and teachers' willingness to engage in educational development beyond their subjects and classroom pedagogies. For example, this area of competence included items such as "readiness to participate in public debates on educational topics," "ability to participate in projects in field of education," and "understanding national priorities in education" (see complete list of items in Appendix A).

Serbian teachers explained that their lower perception of the importance of competence in system understanding and development stemmed from the problematic state of national education strategies and marginalization of education as a policy area.<sup>3</sup> However, one might question this explanation given that competence in system understanding and development has traditionally been neglected in teacher education in the region, and that the level of participation of teachers in system improvement in centralized education systems historically has been low (Archer 1989; Lauglo 1995). Building awareness and competence to make contributions to education system development seems essential for teachers to become genuine agents of change (Fullan 1993b). The question remains whether under different circumstances teachers from Serbia would perceive having competence in the area of "system understanding and development" to be more important.

Péter Radó (2001) describes the educational transition in Central-Eastern Europe in the context of political, ideological, and cultural "alignments" of new elites in the post-communist period. According to Radó, some of the most important aspects of the transition involve processes of democratization, market-oriented economic changes, re-stratification of societies, redefinition of role of the state, and increased diversity of values. He argues that due to the complex nature of educational transition in the region decentralization should not be regarded in a narrow, technical sense—as a mere change of "location" of decision making—but rather as the "extent to which central governmental responsibility is shared with other actors at lower levels" (Radó 2001, 64).

International literature on decentralization in education points to difficulties with imprecise use of the term "decentralization," which can mean different things in different institutional, political, and cultural contexts (e.g., see Bray 2003; Mukundan & Bray 2004). For example, Slavko Gaber (2000)

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<sup>2</sup> The Bologna Process is a European initiative based on cooperation between ministries and higher education institutions in 46 countries. It seeks to create the European Higher Education Area, which will enhance comparability of degrees and quality assurance processes, as well as mobility of students and staff. All countries in this study are signatories of the Bologna Declaration (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, comprehensive reforms of the education system that were launched after the fall of the regime in October 2000 came to a halt with the change of government in 2004 (Fund for an Open Society – Serbia 2006).

suggested that discussions on decentralization cannot be productive if conducted in the same manner in small and big countries, or in countries with fragmented education systems like Bosnia and Herzegovina.

### *Similarities and differences in national contexts in the Western Balkans*

Our study examines perceptions of teachers, teacher educators, and student teachers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. One reason for choosing these countries for a cross-national study was the linguistic similarities among them. We assumed that this similarity would contribute to linguistic and conceptual equivalence in the statements of competence, which would make a common interpretation of the questions by all participants more probable (Kohn 1989; Wubbels 1993). Another reason is that in each of these countries government officials—as well as teachers and teacher educators—stress the importance of reforming teacher education (Zgaga 2006) and have indicated an interest in evidence about teachers' perception of competence (Council of Europe 2010).

Moreover, these countries share many similarities in their political past and inherited centralized systems of education, as well as similar reform efforts to decentralize their systems of education and implement the Bologna process at their higher education institutions. The countries studied here inherited systems of education from Yugoslavia, which had different subsystems covering different levels of education. Non-compulsory pre-primary education used to serve mainly as a nursing and care provision for pre-school children. Primary education was obligatory for children from age six and a half or seven to sixteen. It used to be implemented through two educational cycles: grades 1 to 4 (organized around classes in which all subject areas were taught by the same teacher) and grades 5 to 8 (organized around subjects taught by different subject teachers). Secondary education was provided through four-year general secondary education in *gymnasia* (secondary schools teaching general academic curricula and enabling entry into university education), four-year vocational schools (with vocational curricula, but in the university track), and three-year vocational schools (in the employment track). Higher education was carried out in two types of higher education institutions: universities (organized around faculties) and colleges providing vocational higher education.

Teachers for these various levels and types of education were prepared at different institutions. Pre-school teachers attended vocational colleges for pre-school teachers. Primary school teachers (teaching grades 1-4) completed higher education at special colleges for classroom teachers. Primary school subject teachers (teaching grades 5-8) and secondary teachers were taught at university faculties or vocational colleges in disciplines that are equivalent to school subjects.

In socialist Yugoslavia, education was planned and governed within the federal republics, which became the countries studied here. Each republic's government was responsible for general organization of the education system (maintenance of the network of schools, content of the curricula, textbooks, teachers' recruitment, payment, training, etc.). Teachers were seen as autonomous professionals whose performance was primarily tied to classroom tasks. Individual autonomy was significantly constrained, however, by centrally prescribed curricula and by the use of centrally approved and produced textbooks. In practice, teachers by and large applied the same "chalk and talk" style routines (Closs 1995). Teacher preparation, including the training of subject teachers, was very similar across higher education institutions. Furthermore, teachers were strongly attached to their academic discipline and pedagogic mission rather than to schools, parents, or communities (Georgeoff 1982). This orientation was probably due to the pre-service teacher education that focused heavily on disciplinary knowledge, rather than on building teachers' skills and competences.

In recent years, the country-successors of the former Yugoslav republics have changed their systems of education in similar ways: expanding compulsory education to 9 years, reforming primary and secondary curricula, modernizing teaching and learning, liberalizing the textbook market, and so on (OECD, 2003). The reforms of higher education are linked to the Bologna process that is being implemented in European higher education institutions, including those preparing teachers. Such reforms imply a changed relationship between higher education and the labor market. Competence-

based curricula came to be propagated as a way of ensuring better preparation of graduates (including teachers) for employment. However, more attention has been focused on how to structure curricula for accreditation by education authorities rather than on changing the goals and content of teaching and learning processes. In addition, teacher education has been left on the margins of the reform discussions (Zgaga 2003a). The preparation of primary class teachers (teaching grades 1-4) and school subject teachers (teaching grades 5-8 and in secondary schools) is still separated from each other in all countries under study; only the colleges for class teachers have been transformed into university faculties.

Despite these similarities and common problems in relation to reforms, the countries vary in size, demography, and cultural and religious homogeneity (see OECD 2003) as well as in more recent educational reform experiences. For example, not all countries were equally affected by the conflicts of the 1990s, some have moved more quickly in economic transition and European integration, and some have had more continuity in implementing reforms in education, including decentralization.

In post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) the context for decentralization was set by the Peace Accords,<sup>4</sup> establishing two entities with separate systems of education with different degrees of decentralization. In one, the Federation of B&H, the authority over educational policy and legislation and content has been decentralized to the level of canton (10 administrative units between the central entity and the municipalities), while in the other, Republika Srpska, such power is centralized within the entity government (UNESCO 1996, 1997).<sup>5</sup>

In Croatia the central Ministry of Science, Education, and Sport retains overall responsibility for all levels of education. It serves as the main policymaking body with financial responsibilities for all education, but local governments have taken responsibility for part of the material costs for schools (Batarello et al. 2009).

In Macedonia the decentralization process gained real momentum with the new structures of financing put in place following the Ohrid Agreement,<sup>6</sup> representing “a unique attempt to defuse ethnic tension through a far-reaching decentralization of all major social functions” (Herczyński et al. 2009, 105). In education this attempt includes delegation of some powers, including oversight of the budget for teacher salaries, from central government to the local governments (Herczyński et al. 2009).

Montenegro has retained a highly centralized structure, which has different implications since Montenegro is a small country (OECD 2003). Most responsibilities are concentrated at the level of the central authority of its Ministry of Education, with the strongest focus of decentralization effort given to administrative reform.

In Serbia, the decentralization process was tied to an attempt to empower school development planning and to transform inspectorates into advisory units located in 26 offices around the country (OECD 2003). However, apart from the maintenance of pre-primary and primary schools, most responsibilities remain in the hands of the central authorities, with some control over pre-school education and teacher development delegated to the education authorities of the autonomous province of Vojvodina.

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4 The present constitution of the country has as its origin in Annex IV of the Dayton Agreement, which ended the war in B&H (see OHR 1996).

5 In the mentioned regional project, the data were collected and analyzed for the sub-national units of B&H (RS and Federation B&H) and no significant differences were found. The participants in the project from all parts of B&H expressed the wish to present the data for the whole B&H, as is the case for the other countries.

6 Macedonia escaped the armed conflict that destroyed many other former Yugoslav republics, but it experienced its own ethnic strife and limited civil war in 2001, which ended with the signing of the Ohrid Agreement (Framework Agreement 2001).

Despite the apparent variety in the levels of power concentration at different points in the educational administration hierarchy, it could be argued that the successor systems remain centralized in relation to the degree of authority the local governments exercise. Attempts to increase local participation in decision making in education involve transfer of responsibilities to the level of schools (i.e., principals, teachers, and community members) rather than to the municipalities. Nevertheless, substantial control of curriculum and evaluation remains with a central authority, regardless of whether it is located at the national level or in more local units of government. The most substantial changes in the scope of school authorities have involved the liberalization of textbook markets in the region and the increased involvement of parents and community members in selecting school boards and principals.

However, school staff may not have the necessary capacities to function effectively, even in the current context of relatively limited authority, to select textbooks, adapt instructional strategies, participate in self-evaluation and institutional development, and cooperate with parents and communities (e.g., see Mukundan & Bray 2004). Moreover, as noted above, at least for Serbia, it seems that the previous system did not encourage teachers to perceive those competencies (associated with “system understanding and development”) as important for the profession of teaching (Pantić & Wubbels 2010). Comparing teachers’ own perceptions of the importance of competencies across the countries can show us to what extent decentralization—defined here as the “extent to which central governmental responsibility is shared with other actors at lower levels” (Radó 2001, 64)—corresponds to the extent to which central governments relocated authority in education to the local governments. Such evidence can provide important information for the policy makers in the region. International research on similar reforms and their impact on teachers around the world points to the central importance of incentives and support for teachers to change attitudes and habits and develop competencies that could help them use the emerging opportunities to participate in determining the direction of schooling (e.g., see Mukundan & Bray 2004).

### *Conceptualizing teacher competence*

Competence is one of the most contested concepts in the literature on teachers and teacher education, having provoked much debate since it first appeared in the late 1960s (Zuzovsky & Libman 2006). Here we use the term “competence” in a more general way than “competency,” except when we refer to the particular competencies that comprise teacher competence.

Drawing on behavioral psychology, the concept of competence was first conceived as a set of “discrete,” “theory free,” practical skills (Harris 1997). Thus, a “competent” teacher could be identified based on observable events in the teachers’ performance, and teacher preparation would need to focus on novice teachers’ learning competences such as classroom management and teaching methods (see van Huizen et al. 2005). While the idea of teachers acquiring practical skills has been widely embraced (e.g., see Valli & Rennert-Ariev 2002), some have criticized this approach for reducing teachers to “technicians” and ultimately “deprofessionalizing” and “deskilling” them (e.g., Ginsburg & Spatig 1988; Harris 1997). Critics argued that behaviorist, competence-based notions of teaching and teacher education neglected other important aspects of teacher expertise, namely knowledge and understanding, values and moral sensibilities, and professional identity.

***Knowledge and understanding:*** Barnett (1994) suggests that competencies, defined as predictable behaviors, imply predictable situations in practice and are inappropriate for the teaching profession. Professionals should be able to form a perspective of their profession and its changing relations with society’s demands. Thus, teacher competence should incorporate knowledge and understanding, which extend beyond teachers’ being skilled in the use particular techniques. Understood in this way, competence does not imply less, but even more knowledge and deeper understanding of historical, political, and economic matters of a particular education system, understandings that might not necessarily be manifested in an observable, immediately assessable way.

**Values and moral sensibilities:** Some have criticized a focus on teacher behavioral competencies for underestimating the aims and values that underlie teaching and leaving little room for individual interpretation of the teacher's role (Elbaz 1992; Day 2002; O'Connor 2008). From this perspective, teaching is an ethical, normative profession focused on developing valued knowledge, skills, etc., with the goal of improving people's lives (Carr 1993b; Arthur et al. 2005). As such, teachers are bound to encounter problems that are not susceptible to resolution in value-neutral, technical terms. For instance, Carr (1993a, 20-21) argues that "moral conclusions are only contestable in ethical terms and as such they involve profound reflection on those diverse and competing conceptions of what is worthwhile." He suggests that there is a need to explore the relationship between the practical or technical and the ethical or moral in our thinking about the nature of teachers' professional knowledge and conduct.

**Beliefs and professional identity:** Critics of the behaviorist competence approach to teaching and teacher education have also argued that a good teacher cannot be described in terms of isolated abilities, because such fragmentation disregards integrative aspects that play a crucial part in effective teaching, such as professional identity and beliefs about the mission of teaching (Korthagen 2004). For example, Combs et al. (1974, 25) suggest that "teachers who feel their profession entails dignity and integrity [may] behave with dignity and integrity themselves." Moreover, teachers' knowledge and personal beliefs are seen as inseparable (Day 2002; Fives and Buehl 2008), although beliefs refer to personal values, attitudes, and ideologies (Verloop et al. 2001).

Thus, we conceptualize teacher competence as including knowledge and understanding, a sense of how to deal with values and moral issues, beliefs and identity, and behavioral skills. That is, teacher competence is defined as "an integrated set of personal characteristics, knowledge, skills and attitudes that are needed for effective performance in various teaching contexts" (Tigelaar et al. 2005, 255). In contrast to a behaviorist approach, our conceptualization of teacher competence focuses on the potential for behavior, and not the behavior itself (see also Korthagen 2004; Koster et al. 2005).

## Method

The study uses data collected in a regional project, *Tuning Teacher Education in the Western Balkans* (Pantić 2008). The *Tuning* project (Gonzales & Wagenaar 2005) was developed to advise practitioners, employers, and higher education instructors about the competencies needed—that is, viewed to be important—by students for their future employment as teachers, with the goal of integrating these competencies into the aims of higher education. The participants from five teacher education institutions in the five countries sought to evaluate their teacher education programs against the perceptions of teachers about the competencies needed for effective professional practice.

### *Instrument*

To examine perspectives on teacher competencies we used a questionnaire developed in a pilot study of 370 teachers and teacher educators in Serbia (Pantić & Wubbels 2010). The questionnaire included a total of 39 statements, which—using factor analysis—had been found to comprise four sets of teacher competencies: (1) self-evaluation and professional development; (2) subject knowledge, pedagogy, and curriculum; (3) values and child-rearing; and (4) understanding of the system of education and contribution to its development. The pilot study instrument, in turn, was based on the questionnaire from the European Tuning Project (Gonzales & Wagenaar 2003), and similar lists from Scotland (The Scottish Office 1998) and the Netherlands (Storey 2006). The items were then adapted to the Western Balkan context, with input from the regional group of education specialists participating in the (Western Balkans) *Tuning* Project (Pantić 2008).

The items consist of statements of competence, including the aspects of knowledge, skills, values, and personal dispositions (for example, "Commitment to racial equality by means of personal example, through curricular and other activities"; "Ability to use a spectrum of teaching strategies in

accordance with subject, theme and individual pupils” (for a complete list of items, see Appendix A). Respondents were asked to indicate how important they perceived it to be for teachers to possess the competence referenced in each item, using a five-point scale (1 equals not important at all, 5 equals extremely important).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, respondents were asked to provide the following data about themselves: country of heritage, location and level of institution at which they teach, current position, gender, age, years of experience, level of formal education, and the perceived relevance of their formal education to their work as teachers.

### *Sampling and data collection procedures*

We sent 3,770 questionnaires to kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, and tertiary institutions (at which teachers are educated) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. In selecting institutions, we were careful to cover—and have a proportional representation of participants—from different levels of education, units, different levels of government (e.g., county in Croatia, entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, autonomous province in Serbia), and urban and rural settings. Data from national statistics of the respective countries were used to calculate the number of copies to be sent to institutions at different levels of education, so that the samples constituted 1.5% of the population at each educational level in each country. Letters accompanying the questionnaires were addressed to heads of institutions asking them and their staff to fill out the questionnaires. At the tertiary level, heads of relevant departments were asked to distribute the questionnaires to teacher educators and to student teachers who were in the final year of their studies and, therefore, more likely to have experienced some teaching practice.

### *Participants*

Of the 3,770 questionnaires distributed, we received 2,354 responses, making the overall response rate 62%. The response rates by countries range from 37% in Serbia to 100% in Macedonia and Montenegro, where networks of school contact persons were used to distribute the questionnaire and get back each and every response. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test indicated that the number of responses received from the different levels of educational institutions differed significantly from the representation of teachers from these levels in the actual population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia, while proportions were retained in Macedonia and Montenegro. The discrepancies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia are due to higher response rates from pre-primary level and a lower response from secondary and higher educational level institutions. In Serbia the response was higher from secondary and lower from the tertiary level institutions (see Table 3.1).

Among the participants from primary schools, 268 (25%) were class teachers (teaching 7- to 11-year-old pupils in the first four years of primary education), and 678 (64%) were subject teachers (teaching 11- to 15-year-old pupils in the last four years of primary education). Among secondary school respondents, 140 (27%) taught in schools with an academic curriculum (*gymnasia*) and 331 (65%) taught in secondary schools with vocational curriculum. Some respondents had other responsibilities in addition to teaching; 27 were head teachers, and 87 performed specialized functions such as being a school psychologist. Of the tertiary-level teacher educators responding, 72 (51%) were professors and 69 (49%) were teaching assistants. We also obtained responses from 366 student teachers, representing more than 15% of the total sample, but did not include them in the analyses presented here because of missing data on many of the background variables. This and other information about the respondents (sex, age, length of teaching experience, previous formal education, and the perceptions of the usefulness of their education to the work as a teacher) is presented in Table 3.2.

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<sup>7</sup> The respondents could also add competencies that they viewed as important but that were not covered in the questionnaire.



Table 3.1: Number of respondents per country by level of institution

Country	Level of Institution				Df	$\chi^2$	sig.	Student Teachers	Total Sample
	pre-primary	primary	secondary	higher					
Bosnia & Herzegovina	25	306	114	53	3, n=498	13.21	p=.004	81	579
% within country									
population	4.1	54.9	26.3	14.6					
sample	4.3	52.8	19.7	9.2				14	
Croatia	160	286	135	24	3, n=605	140.49	p=.000	24	629
% within country									
population	12.2	46.6	37.5	3.8					
sample	25.4	45.5	21.5	3.8				3.8	
Macedonia	32	210	87	34	3, n=363	1.12	p=.773	55	418
% within country									
population	8.6	56	23.9	11.5					
sample	7.7	50.2	20.8	8.1				13.2	
Montenegro	17	70	39	12	3, n=138	0.78	p=.855	0	138
% within country									
population	10.6	54.4	25.9	9.1					
sample	12.3	50.7	28.3	8.7				0	
Serbia	36	185	135	16	3, n= 372	22,04	p=.000	206	578
% within country									
population	9.9	49.6	28.9	11.6					
sample	6.2	32.0	23.4	2.8				35.6	
Total	270	1057	510	139	3, n=1976	110.96	p=.000	366	2,342
% in total sample									
population	9.08	52.3	28.5	10.1					
sample	11.5	45.1	21.8	5.9				15.6	

Table 3.2: Characteristics of respondents by country (sex, age, experience, previous formal education, satisfaction with previous education)

Country	Sex (% of men)	Average age (SD)	Average years of experience (SD)	Previous formal education (% of non-university)	Satisfaction with previous education (% of useful)
BiH	28.2	39.27 (11.27)	13.96 (11.44)	38.9	69.4
Croatia	11.6	41.45 (10.23)	16.25 (10.54)	43.2	66.9
Macedonia	24.3	40.41 (9.72)	14.17 (9.96)	22.4	75.4
Montenegro	22.1	41.08 (9.7)	15.49 (10.05)	27.5	80.09
Serbia	24.3	41.90 (9.87)	15.39 (10.35)	22.4	75.4

### Data analysis

A principal component analysis was conducted for the four-factor solution. By and large, the four scales identified in the pilot study in Serbia were confirmed. Reliability coefficients of the four scales and correlations between scales were computed for each country and for the combined sample, as well as the scales' mean scores. All reliability coefficients were satisfactory (see Table 3.3) with most Cronbach's alphas being higher than .80 and similar patterns across the four scales in all countries. The same is true for the inter-scale correlation coefficients.

The data were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance to examine relationships of (transformed) scale scores<sup>8</sup> with respondents' country and level of the education system at which they teach, while controlling for respondents' gender, years of experience,<sup>9</sup> and level of satisfaction with (i.e., perceived relevance of) their initial teacher education. Additional post-hoc tests (i.e., Sheffe) were performed to establish what the differences were.

## Results

The findings presented in Table 3.4 show that, despite a significant effect of country, teachers' and teacher educators' perceptions of competencies were generally similar across the five Western Balkan countries. Although all differences were small (partial eta squared < .029), significant differences that were found are discussed below.

There were significant main effects of the level of educational institution and of the country variable, as well as a significant interaction effect between these two variables. When the results for the four groups of competencies were considered separately (univariate panel in Table 3.4), the differences between the levels of institution reached statistical significance only for the second group of competencies (subject knowledge, pedagogy, and curriculum). The differences between countries reached statistical significance for the first (self-evaluation and professional development), the second

<sup>8</sup> Because of skewed distributions, scale means of the four factors were transformed (as recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell 2007), such that the new factor score equals  $1/(K - \text{factor score})$ , where K represents a constant (in this case 6) from which each score is subtracted so that the smallest score is 1.

<sup>9</sup> Because of the strong positive correlation between age and experience (.88), only the variable "years of teaching experience" was used in the analyses as a covariate.

(subject knowledge, pedagogy, and curriculum), and the third (contribution to education system development) groups of competencies. The interaction effect between the level of education and country variables reached statistical significance for the competencies relating to self-evaluation and professional development (the first group) and the competencies relating to contribution to education system development (the third group).

Table 3.3: Reliabilities, number of items, sample items and mean scale scores by level of institution and country

Scale	Cronbach's Alpha	# of Items	Sample Item	Mean Scores				
				pre-primary	primary	secondary	higher	Total average
1								
Self-evaluation and professional development	0.89	12	Ability to critically reflect on and evaluate one's own educational impact	4.52	4.55	4.51	4.48	4.53
Bosnia	0.91			4.52	4.55	4.47	4.47	4.52
Croatia	0.87			4.51	4.53	4.42	4.52	4.50
Macedonia	0.89			4.62	4.64	4.62	4.45	4.61
Montenegro	0.85			4.40	4.55	4.37	4.62	4.48
Serbia	0.87			4.55	4.49	4.61	4.43	4.54
2								
Subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum	0.82	10	Ability to develop linguistic and numeric literacy of pupils	4.42	4.60	4.53	4.54	4.55
Bosnia	0.85			4.42	4.57	4.48	4.51	4.54
Croatia	0.80			4.36	4.61	4.49	4.54	4.51
Macedonia	0.84			4.65	4.64	4.62	4.51	4.63
Montenegro	0.81			4.30	4.57	4.44	4.68	4.51
Serbia	0.77			4.55	4.59	4.59	4.63	4.59
3								
Contribution to education system development	0.89	11	Readiness to participate in public debates on educational topics by following and participating in the work of relevant bodies	4.03	4.08	4.04	3.90	4.05
Bosnia	0.91			4.11	4.16	4.00	3.90	4.09
Croatia	0.87			4.01	4.04	3.95	3.96	4.01
Macedonia	0.88			4.31	4.26	4.23	3.87	4.22
Montenegro	0.87			3.94	3.88	4.01	4.14	3.95
Serbia	0.87			3.87	3.91	4.03	3.67	3.94
4								
Values and child rearing	0.76	6	Commitment to racial equality by means of personal example, through curricular and other activities	4.63	4.59	4.51	4.42	4.56
Bosnia	0.81			4.76	4.63	4.46	4.53	4.59
Croatia	0.77			4.62	4.61	4.46	4.33	4.57
Macedonia	0.75			4.63	4.58	4.58	4.31	4.56
Montenegro	0.65			4.41	4.58	4.50	4.32	4.51
Serbia	0.74			4.66	4.51	4.55	4.48	4.54

For three sets of competencies (“self evaluation and professional development,” “subject knowledge, pedagogy, and curriculum,” and “values and child rearing”) the mean scores of perceived importance were approximately 4.5 (on a scale of 1 equals “not important at all” and 5 equals “extremely important”), while the means for “contribution of to education system development” were

a little lower (approximately 4.0). Although all groups of respondents in the five countries rated the four sets of competencies as relatively important, the third set of competencies (“contribution to the education system development”) was consistently evaluated as being at a somewhat lower level. Moreover, a univariate analysis of variance showed that the mean scores of this scale were also significantly smaller than those of the other scales for all countries ( $F=456.1, p<.01$ ; also see means in Table 3.3).

The competencies in this group include, for example, items relating to understanding of the national priorities, laws, and authorities in education; conducting research in education; and participation in school development planning (see Appendix A). The most lowly evaluated items within this group across the levels of education and across the countries were “readiness to participate in public debates on educational topics by following and participating in the work of relevant bodies,” “readiness for cooperation with the local community in organising curricular activities,” and “readiness to contribute to building pupils’ awareness of the need of participation in a democracy.” These items seem to have a common trait of not being as directly concerned with the teachers’ daily routines. It is interesting that the item referring to the preparation of pupils for participation in a democracy is also perceived as belonging to the domain of contribution to the system development rather than, for instance, as an essential feature of values and child-rearing aspect of teacher expertise. This perspective can probably be attributed to the fact that this competence is “new” in a repertoire of in-service teacher education programs and has not yet been integrated into the goals of initial teacher education. Democracy building underlies major directions of reform strategies that are yet to be internalized by teachers as inextricable parts of their professional expertise. It is also possible that in the region democracy is still seen as imposed from outside rather than an authentic development. Moreover, at least for some subject specialist teachers, this may be something viewed as a part of social studies content only.

Table 3.4: Analyses of covariance for four aspects of teacher competence

Variable	Univariate									
	Multivariate		Self-evaluation and professional development		Subject knowledge, pedagogy and curriculum		Contribution to education system development		Values and child rearing	
	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>	F	Eta <sup>2</sup>
Country <sup>a</sup>	4.49**	0.013	3.46**	0.01	4.30**	0.012	6.07**	0.017	1.85	0.005
Level of institution <sup>b</sup>	4.36**	0.012	0.78	0.002	7.07**	0.015	0.35	0.001	2.57	0.006
C×LoI <sup>c</sup>	2.03**	0.017	2.70**	0.023	1.42	0.012	3.45**	0.029	1.79	0.015
Covariate <sup>d</sup>										
Sex	11.40**	0.032	19.78**	0.014	20.46**	0.015	0.05	0	11.85**	0.008
Experience	0.46	0.001	0.47	0	1	0.001	0.01	0	0.02	0
Satisfaction	4.42**	0.013	10.52**	0.008	12.44**	0.009	3.32	0.002	12.48**	0.001
Non-university vs. University	0.51	0.001	0.07	0	0.02	0	0.02	0	0.74	0.001

Note. <sup>a</sup> Multivariate  $df= 16, 4219$  ; univariate  $df= 4, 1348$ . <sup>b</sup> Multivariate  $df= 12, 3654$ ; univariate  $df= 3, 1348$ . <sup>c</sup> Multivariate  $df= 48, 5322$ ; univariate  $df= 12, 1348$ . <sup>d</sup> Multivariate  $df= 4, 1381$ ; univariate  $df= 1, 1348$ . \*\* $p<.01$

Years of experience in education had no effect on teachers’ perceptions of the competence in any of the countries, although novice teachers had graduated from the programs which had been changed by the

Bologna process toward being “competence-driven” (Zgaga 2006). The finding that the perceptions of novice teachers are no different from those of their more experienced colleagues, who had been educated in a tradition that highly valued discipline-based theoretical knowledge, corroborates the earlier mentioned view that the recent changes of study programs are relatively superficial (Zgaga 2003a).

### *Cross-national similarities and differences*

Based on the multivariate analysis of covariance, we can observe some cross-national and cross-group similarities and differences. Post-hoc analyses show that scores for Macedonia differ significantly from the other countries for all three factors. For example, the system understanding and development factor is evaluated more highly by respondents from Macedonia. In addition, significant interaction effects found between country and level of education suggest that the differences in perceptions of participants from different levels of education are not the same in all countries. However, the differences are small. For example, the biggest difference between Macedonians, who on average valued the importance of the items of the third scale as higher than the respondents from all other countries, was found at the level of pre-primary education. Here inter-country differences ranged from 0.46 (Macedonia-Croatia) to 0.83 (Macedonia-Serbia) on the 5-point scale. However, we must be cautious regarding the interpretation of differences between levels of education and countries because the subsamples of respondents from the different levels in the different countries are not equally representative.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the participants from Macedonia in other studies (Zgaga 2006) expressed a higher level of satisfaction with both their in-service and initial education than the participants from all other countries participating in this study. Moreover, the highest percentage of teachers from Macedonia who had attended more than ten in-service training events in the course of the preceding year (Zgaga 2006) could possibly be interpreted as Macedonian teachers’ being more sensitized to various issues related to teachers’ competence, perhaps resulting in their perceiving these competencies as being of higher importance than did teachers in other countries. The high participation rate of Macedonians in this study also is in line with this interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

The findings indicate that a set of competencies related to “system understanding and development” is perceived by teachers across the region as less important compared to other aspects of teacher competence. According to Melvin Kohn (1989), where cross-national similarities are established, we should look for “structural constants” that can explain the similarities.<sup>10</sup> The lower importance of competencies relevant for system development in all countries likely stems from the common inheritance from the former Yugoslavia of centralized systems, in which teachers’ professional autonomy was limited to classroom-level decisions.<sup>11</sup> However, it seems that even teachers’ autonomy related to classroom practices was limited by centrally prescribed curricula and textbooks (Closs 1995).

That Macedonian teachers accorded somewhat greater importance to this set of competencies, compared to the other countries in the region, may result from the more extensive educational

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10 Kohn (1989) argued that cross-national research is valuable and even indispensable for establishing generality of findings and the validity of interpretations derived from single-nation studies. His hypothesis is that where similarities in cross-national studies are found, “structural constants”—identities in the economic and social structures of schooling—should be identified that enable generalization at the policy level. Where differences are found, those aspects of structural, social, and cultural contexts should be identified that can explain these differences (see also Poppleton 1992).

11 Future inquiries in countries with long-term historically decentralized and centralized systems of education (e.g., see Cole and John 2001) or in those that have only recently moved to decentralization (e.g., see Mukundan & Bray 2004) should assess whether this perception can be generalized even beyond the region, perhaps forming part of an internationally common perception of a “competent” teacher.

decentralization and related teacher development activity in this country. According to Jan Hercziński and colleagues (2009, 143), Macedonia's education decentralization reform should be seen as "a major success" and "one of the most advanced countries in South Eastern Europe." The municipalities have asserted their power in the education sector, for example, by changing their administrative structure, establishing special units responsible for education, or adopting local education strategies, including long-term visions of their school systems (Hercziński et al. 2009). Macedonia engaged in two phases of implementation, each involving the production of guidebooks, organization of training programs, and provision of technical support to local governments. In the second phase responsibilities for teacher salaries are to be decentralized (Hercziński et al. 2009).

However, identifying "structural constants" without consideration of the underlying motives and context could be misleading. If we take a historical perspective on the structural features of the system of education in post-war Yugoslavia, the picture becomes less clear-cut. In 1950, the Yugoslav National Assembly passed a bill on "workers' self-management," which was (particularly after 1953) translated into a push for educational decentralization and increased autonomy for both the federation's six republics and the educational authorities in districts and towns within these entities (Sobe 2007). On the face of it, the central authority was retained only for "passing basic legislation" (Roucek 1957), while the republics were responsible for most education policies including those relating to teachers, curricula, and textbooks. At the time comparative research in the United States erroneously regarded this push for decentralization in Yugoslavia as pragmatic moves of "modernization" in the U.S.-style Western democracy (Sobe 2007). Decentralization in Yugoslavia was labeled a "truer" form of communism than that of the Soviet Union, where strong political centralism "had strayed from Marx's call for the withering away of the state," and was seen to have achieved "not only internal unity but greater efficiency to centralized government" (Sobe 2007, 48-49). However, with the advantage of hindsight, we understand the inaccuracies of this historic account of Yugoslavia's education decentralization, which likely occurred because scholars did not fully consider the history of political struggle and ideological motivation behind processes of decentralization (see Archer 1989; Slegers and Wesselingh 1995; Crossley 2002).

Radó (2001) rightly remarks that it would be misleading in the context of complexity of educational transition in the region to focus on the narrow, technical meaning of decentralization as relocation of authority to lower levels. Our findings show that teachers' perceptions of their roles in contribution to system developments are not greatly different (relative to other aspects of competence) in different countries in the Western Balkans, despite the differences at which authorities are concentrated. This corroborates Radó's distinction between the view of decentralization as "extent to which central governmental responsibility is shared with other actors at lower levels" and the question at which level the responsibilities are formally located. For example, the legal responsibility over school development planning—which has in Serbia, for example, been relocated to schools—does not seem to be reflected in the teachers' perceived importance of this competence, and we can assume that it is not reflected in teachers' actual practice, either. This gap between decentralized responsibility and actual involvement of actors at lower levels probably has two major sources.

First, educational decentralization in the Western Balkan countries can be characterized as fragmented (Radó 2010). Different educational reforms happen as part of structural transformations in other sectors rather than as components of a coherent reform strategy developed within the education sector. For example, decentralization of the governance of education is connected to overall changes in public administration, transformation of the textbook publishing system is driven by the liberalization of the entire publishing business, the new systems of financing education are part of treasury reforms, etc. As a result, some decisions (in most countries, maintenance of schools and in-service teacher training) are transferred to regional or local levels, while others (in most countries, curriculum and teacher salaries) are kept at the central level.

A usual problem with such fragmented decentralization is the discrepancy between the location of financial and that of other decisions. In the countries studied here, for example, in-service teacher training was usually transferred to the local authorities, yet without the resources and the authority to allocate funds for teacher training activities. The lack of control over financial resources can empty

the real authority of certain levels and re-route the decision-making to informal channels (Radó 2001). In addition, because of limited social cohesion and heightened ethnic tensions, different levels of government are unable to govern effectively, which makes a decentralization politically risky (Radó 2001, 68).

Secondly, capacity building of relevant actors may be less extensive and integrated due to such fragmentation. For instance, as is the case internationally (Lauglo 1995; Slegers & Wesselingh 1995; Radó 2001; Zeichner 2006), decentralization reforms in the Western Balkans' imply increased authority—and, thus, a greater need for capacity—for teachers (Zgaga 2003a). However, teachers have not received extensive capacity building for their new roles in the selection of textbooks, participation in school or curriculum development, or cooperation with parents and the community. Pre-service teacher preparation remains primarily, if not exclusively, concerned with subject matter content and, to varying degrees, with pedagogy and psychology, approached from disciplinary “foundations” rather than in terms of educational value. International and regional experiences with introducing teacher competencies as basis of teacher education can provide valuable lessons for curriculum designers in the Western Balkans. The efforts to articulate a “knowledge base” for teaching are ongoing, and “teacher competence” is not the only vision of how the teacher education programmes could be strengthened (Zeichner 2006). International research has begun to identify the characteristics of effective teacher education programs such as clear and consistent visions of teaching and learning that guide the program, strong integration between instruction about teaching and practice, building professional development partnerships with schools, and cooperation with practitioners to constantly revise curriculum and instruction (Schulman 2000; Zeichner 2006).

The experience of countries in the region that underwent similar transition processes points to an even bigger role of in-service teacher training in the periods of thorough change (Radó 2001). In-service professional development programs in the countries concerned have not been organized to help teachers build the capacities (and commitments) they need to take on their new or extended roles under education decentralization. In-service professional development programs often deal with the subject matter, or they promote the “new” topics of interactive teaching and learning, inclusive approaches in education, education for citizenship, and the like. The problem is that these programs are usually designed as one-off seminars left for individual teachers to pursue based on their interest, and in accordance with their perceived roles. Innovation is thus left to chance and individual enthusiasm rather than systematically encouraged and supported. Suggestions from similar studies point to the critical importance of taking decentralization and teacher education seriously, coming from the region (e.g., see Zgaga 2003a), other countries in transition (e.g., see Radó 2001) and internationally (e.g., see Zeichner 2006). In other words, building teacher competencies requires investment of society as a whole if one is serious about increasing teachers' roles in decentralized educational design.

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