Elements of the Transformation of Preschool Curriculum and Educational Practices

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ABSTRACT

The development of a curriculum poses a challenge for theoreticians, practitioners and educational policy makers. The official curriculum of a country represents the guidelines that should serve as the basis on which practices are developed in educational institutions. However, every institution modifies and applies the curriculum differently. The level of a practitioner’s professional development, as well as the culture of the educational institution in question profoundly influence the manner in which the curriculum is evolving in a particular educational institution. For that reason, it is especially important to facilitate access to systematic and high-quality professional development for preschool teachers, so that they are capable of developing the curriculum in line with the challenges of our time and contemporary scientific findings on early childhood education and care. The practice of many preschool teachers in Croatia reflects an outdated understanding of educational work involving children, and the official curriculum does not have much of an impact on that fact. Despite the fact that the practices of individual preschool teachers, even within the same institution, can differ significantly, there are certain shared traditionalisms that represent a burden for practice in Croatian preschools, and that are not easily removed. In order to gradually remove them, i.e., replace them with more contemporary methods of educating children, it is necessary to first become aware of them, as it is precisely the lack of awareness that such traditionalisms exist that causes them to remain a part of the practice.

Keywords: educational process unification, learning, play curriculum, testing children, traditionalisms.

I. INTRODUCTION

The traditionalisms manifested most frequently and on several levels in the practice of Croatian preschools are the result of an outdated understanding of children, the way they learn, and the role of the preschool teacher in this process. The fact that the National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care came into force in 2015 did not lead to significant improvements in practice because the development of the practice quality is a lengthy process that largely depends on the motivation and knowledge of practitioners. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on four such traditionalisms: the educational process unification, the practice of the standardized testing of children, the insufficient understanding of children and disregard for their perspective, and teaching children in a way that separates them from play.

II. ABANDONING THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS UNIFICATION

Bateson (qtd. in Goodson, 2014) discusses three connected types of learning. Primary learning is the one focused on the content the child has to memorize and reproduce. Secondary learning is the invisible “subterranean” aspect of the learning process, i.e., learning to learn. This learning largely depends on the attributes of the environment in which the students must live their lives. Bateson defines tertiary learning as the child’s learning how to rearrange the fragmentary (school) experience, how to overcome the traps of routinized learning and how to make the best of a prescribed curriculum (he calls it a “pre-digested curriculum”). As a counterbalance to that, the author offers an understanding of a curriculum as an ongoing narration of an own curriculum - the one built by the child. Some authors call this the co-construction of a curriculum (Slunjski, 2011), in which special emphasis is given to the creative contribution of the child in opposition to the pre-defined, universally prescribed content.

The existence of the afore-mentioned three types of learning, as Goodson (2014), points out, demonstrates the current crises of curriculum and of educational studies institutions where it is taught. The outdated patterns of curricula and higher education institutions producing new generations of educators are completely unsuitable for the new society of risk, instability and rapid change in which we now live. In a manner of speaking, they are imprisoned in a one-dimensional and unvarying teaching, one that can be reduced to providing universally applicable formulae. And the contemporary practice in schools and preschools most
assuredly is not that. However, as Bauman (2001) emphasizes, the curriculum crisis is not an internal affair that would concern the success or failure of a particular school in implementing the official curriculum. This is a much broader issue of the position, i.e., the relationships of people who take part in the educational process. In view of that fact, the makers of the educational policy and curriculum are searching for answers and solutions in the wrong places. Instead of drafting new curricula (regulations, acts, reform guidelines, etc.), they should question the merit of prescribed (“pre-digested”) curricula, typical for formal educational programs. They should instead focus on developing a curriculum as identity narration, they should change it from the usual learning by memorizing facts to learning life management. Reaching this objective would cause a “tectonic shift” in the tradition of many schools, considering their focus on teaching content in various subject matters. Because, as Null states, “subject matter is one of the most important commonsplaces in curriculum making” (Null, 2015, p. 3). However, the author himself is questioning, and it is necessary to find out, whether the subject matter is in fact a means or an end.

“With its etymological roots tracing back to the notion of running a race, the term curriculum presupposes an end.”

(Null, 2015, p. 4).

Nevertheless, considering the progressive currents in education, as well as great strides made in the educational practice of many schools, curriculum is anything but an end: it is more of a process, a flow, and a sort of a “current”. Within the terminology of preschool practice, the contemporary curriculum can be defined as children and adults living together harmoniously in an institutional context (Slunjski, 2011), and it is precisely that context (i.e., its quality) that encourages learning and children’s development on many levels and in many directions.

The attempt to standardize the content of learning within subject matters by drafting a common national standard is a worthwhile and ambitious goal, but it is debatable whether it can (and even if it should) be achieved, as Porter et al. (2011) state. The justifiability of such attempts can also be sought in the temporal and social context of a particular country, as well as in the age of the students they apply to. The younger the child, the more problematic the unification and standardization of any kind, though it does not facilitate the realization of different, personal potentials of a student in later phases of education either. On the contrary, it impedes, or even completely prevents, the development of many such potentials.

We consider the abandonment of the universal prescription of learning content and educational process unification on any level as the first element of the preschool curriculum and practice transformation. Of course, in order for that to be possible, teachers must be prepared in a completely different way than before, and they must be ready to respond to unpredictable and unplanned situations. In fact, a teacher should be a sort of an “improvisational artist.”

(Kazembe, Lessing, 2015)

III. ABANDONING THE STANDARDIZED TESTING OF CHILDREN

The focus on the universal prescription of learning content and on the educational process unification implies the existence of a tool for observing, evaluating, i.e., measuring the effectiveness of such a process. Using standardized instruments for monitoring and evaluating children’s educational achievements is the basis for deepening the normative practice. In case of preschool, such instruments are used mostly in the context of children’s chronological age, based on the idea that all children in a particular age group should achieve similar results, regardless of their individual and developmental differences. The validity of testing preschool-age children for the purpose of “normalizing” their development has been questioned from the mid-20th century, when it was slowly abandoned in favor of tools for evaluating the process of children’s learning, as Pettersson (2014) writes. In other words, the idea of the universal child, coinciding with the developmental psychology interpretations, gradually gave way to the understanding of a child as an active and competent individual, in line with the interpretations offered by, for example, the sociology of childhood (Corsaro, 2011). Determining the developmental status and the achieved level of knowledge for every child individually would only serve to stimulate the logical continuation of that process. Nevertheless, the outdated model of the traditional “testing” of children and the unification of the process of their learning based on their chronological age as an unparalleled and valuable criterion is still a crucial part in the practice of many preschools.

In contemporary preschool practices, the traditional methods of observing and evaluating children gave way to the method of documenting the learning process, i.e., the creation of pedagogical documentation. The purpose of the traditional observing of children, as Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999, p. 146) emphasize, is to evaluate children’s psychological progress in strict categories and to classify and categorize children according to general norms and developmental levels. In contrast, the purpose of pedagogical documentation is not to evaluate or assess a child, but to observe, listen and understand them, and, based on that, to encourage the child’s learning process. Documentation strives not only to establish what the child says and does, but also to visualize the way in which the child co-constructs their social reality and what it means to them. Thus “constructing documentation” in itself represents an exploratory and contemplative process for which there is no ready-made formula. In fact, it is our “nets” that define what we are going to “catch” (Eisnet, qtd. in Kelly 2009). It is clear that different understandings of observing children are based on different theoretical perspectives: on the one hand, it is understood as a means to evaluate pre-defined objects of the educational process, and on the other hand, as a tool for developing the pedagogical process (Karlsson, qtd. in Pettersson 2014). One of the most important values of pedagogical documentation is the fact that it provides a much “broader picture of a child’s learning and development than standardized tests and checklists” (Hostyn et al., 2018). In this sense, pedagogical documentation could lead to a gradual abandonment of standardized testing of...
children in preschools and even in elementary schools (Krechevsky, Rivard & Burton, 2010; MacDonald, qtd. in Pettersson, 2014). That, however, does not happen independently from the whole process of improving practice, but, more often than not, as its main part or result.

We consider abandoning the standardized testing of children in favor of documenting their activities and learning process as the second element of the preschool curriculum and practice transformation.

IV. FOCUSING ON RESPECTING CHILDREN’S PERSPECTIVE AND ON DEMOCRATIZING AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION’S ENTIRE ATMOSPHERE

Contemporary educational practice is also moving away from understanding and treating children as voiceless subjects in the course of the educational process. In contrast, they are treated as participants who have certain rights and deserve a high level of respect. On the level of curriculum development, that implies respecting their perspective, as well as democratizing the entire practice. Progressive pedagogical approaches especially emphasize “the importance of communication in the teaching encounter, providing students the opportunity to relate and build upon their existing knowledge and experiences in the classroom” (Jaramilo, 2015, p. 170).

In more developed preschool curricula, such as the North Italian Reggio kurikulum (Edwards et al., 1998; Rinaldi, 2006) or the New Zeland Te Whariki (Te Whariki, Ministry of Education, 2017), respecting the ideas, interests and perspectives of children is especially noticeable. What contributed immensely to the development of a high-quality educational practice in those models is the culture of attentive observation and the focus on properly understanding children’s activities, efforts, actions, interactions, etc. In the Reggio Emilia philosophy this is called Listening to children (Edwards et al., 1998; Rinaldi, 2006), while the Te Whariki model uses, with a similar objective in mind, the so-called Learning stories, developed and described by Carr (2001, 2005). Focusing on carefully listening to children and taking their perspectives into account correlates to the development of a curriculum characterized by its humanistic features. However, in addition to that, taking children’s perspectives into account when contemplating learning situations considerably improves the chances that the learning in question will be relevant to them and that children will consider it purposeful. Learning activities that children consider meaningful and purposeful considerably improve their intellectual and emotional engagement, thus considerably improving the perspective of their learning.

This is completely different from the educational process that is overly didactic, i.e., burdened with the idea of teaching children the content that adults find relevant and in a way that many adults think children learn best - by direct instruction.

In a well-developed, humanistic curriculum, teaching children is contextualized, personalized, and subtly harmonized with the children’s growing interests, knowledge, and competence. Naturally, within this type of curriculum development, there is a possibility of certain controversial issues and subjects arising, in which children can express interest, while adults might be less prepared for them at a given moment. The adults’ unwillingness to answer the children’s questions and interests in itself represents a less critical issue than that of their unwillingness to take the children’s real interests into account, to approach them seriously, to talk to children on an equal and respectful footing, and to search for ways of exploring, discovering and learning together with the children. The latter, obviously, is not an issue of the content of learning, but of the institution’s culture and the culture of adult’s communication with children. However, it is also an issue of a teacher’s belief that learning is a lifelong process that relates to them as well as to children, and that many issues do not have a single answer and final truths that could not be repeatedly questioned at any given time. In this questioning, children can be included as well.

We consider focusing on respecting children’s perspective and on democratizing an educational institution’s entire atmosphere as the third element of the preschool curriculum and practice transformation.

The previously emphasized element of curriculum transformation is connected to the requirement of developing good relationships between children and adults.

V. DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM THAT CONNECTS PLAYING AND LEARNING AND DEVELOPING CHILDREN’S REFLECTIVE CAPACITY

Properly understanding the educational potential of children’s play, as well as taking it seriously, sheds a completely new light on curriculum development. This can be achieved, for example, “by the critical analysis of children at play, which includes observing what is happening in play-learning context (behavior, language, actions and interactions, use of tools, signs and symbols), understanding the child as player-learner and reflecting on the quality of provision” (Wood, Atfield, 2011, pp. 118–119). The holistic approach to learning, from which integrated features of the curriculum arise, appears in a perfectly authentic form in children’s symbolic play. In their symbolic play, children gain, in a context that is perfectly logical and natural for them, all the knowledge and skills that they would be taught, within the outdated educational process, in separate activities of initial reading, ciphering, etc. Learning weaved into the context of play develops children’s self-organizing potential and it encourages their initiative, unlike traditional teaching activities that are directly managed by adults. Within the context of play, children encounter different problems and develop their own solutions (Peters, 1998), which often exceed teachers’ expectations, i.e., they exceed the difficulty of the assignment teachers would offer the children based on their initiative, unlike traditional teaching activities that are directly managed by adults. Within the context of play, children encounter different problems and develop their own solutions (Peters, 1998), which often exceed teachers’ expectations, i.e., they exceed the difficulty of the assignment teachers would offer the children based on their chronological age. Furthermore, play has a positive impact on the development of children’s metacognitive capacity. “Learning becomes more efficient if children become consciously aware of the processes that are involved in learning, and how they can gain control over those process
(...), play promotes “meta” skills and competences in cognition, memory, language, communication, and representation” (Wood, Atttfield, 2011, p. 87). Metacognitive capacity includes the skills of self-regulation and self-assessment, as well as following and planning different problem-solving strategies (Veenman, 2006). In self-initiated and self-organized play, children have the opportunity to conduct the self-evaluation of their own actions and achievements, as well as to receive feedback on those achievements from other children, i.e., to develop their own reflectivity. Children in play undertake many of their reflective activities unprompted by the teacher, and it often happens that the teacher does not even notice such activities. However, by taking appropriate actions, the teacher can encourage children’s reflective activities and thus contribute to the development of children’s reflective capacity. For such interventions, it is crucial that the teachers themselves are highly reflective and that they contribute to the development of a reflective environment in their preschool.

We consider focusing on connecting playing and learning and developing children’s reflective capacity as the fourth element of the preschool curriculum and practice transformation.

VI. CONCLUSION

Outdated methods in education cannot be easily discarded, even after an official curriculum that promotes contemporary methods comes into force, as is the case with preschools in Croatia. The practice of every preschool, as well as of every preschool teacher, is different in many points, and it reflects the existing theory and official documents to a higher or a lesser degree. Some traditionalists are especially difficult to discard, and those are the ones that are grounded in the old paradigm of childhood and educational work with children, characterized by its lack of trust in children and their intellectual and other capacities. Continually conducting research of the educational practice can facilitate the recognition and gradual removal of such traditionalisms. The directions of such interventions are called elements of the transformation of the curriculum and educational practices in preschools. Some of the especially prominent elements of such a transformation include abandoning the educational process unification, abandoning the practice of the standardized testing of children, developing the practice of understanding children and respecting their perspective, and teaching children in a way that is connected to play.

CONFICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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