

Change in the Kindergarten Educational Practice and Curriculum as a Process of Continuous Evolution – Croatian Experiences

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Abstract

Many kindergartens find it difficult to abandon the traditional understanding of children and childhood and that of traditional organisation of educational process. The quality of educational practice in kindergartens usually does not change in spite of the modern orientation of the official curriculum, because it is largely dominated by 'personal concepts' of the teachers employed in the kindergarten. Over the past fifteen years two main approaches to the change in the kindergarten educational practice and curriculum have been observed in the Republic of Croatia. One was initiated by the official educational policy and based on the idea of the creation of an official document which was expected to modernise the kindergarten pedagogical practice and curriculum (the so called 'top-down approach'). This approach has proven to be inefficient since it does not take into consideration the complexities and dynamics of educational practice. The second approach was the 'top-down' approach and its goal was to take into consideration the systematic and other characteristics of educational practice. Qualitative changes in a certain number of kindergartens in various Croatian towns have been implemented through the *participatory-action research*. This paper presents the basic characteristics of the process of change in the kindergarten educational practice and curriculum with an emphasis on the discussions, i.e. critical reflexions, lead by kindergarten teachers which enable them to better understand the children and the entire educational practice and curriculum. The practice of discussing various viewpoints on educational practice is considered to be the cornerstone of the professional development of kindergarten teachers and an efficient tool for the development of kindergarten educational practice and curriculum.

Keywords: Preschool curriculum, educational policy, quality of educational practice, critical reflexions

1. Introduction

The importance of institutional education of young and preschool age children has been stressed in numerous longitudinal studies that have focused on early childhood (e.g. Osborne & Millbank 1987; Schweinhart & Weikart 1999, according to McLachlan et. al 2010). They show that there is a strong link between the quality of early childhood in an institutional context and the subsequent educational achievement. This is no longer a controversial issue. The priority issue now is the quality of the institutional context in which children are raised.

The young Republic of Croatia was founded in 1991 on democratic principles which provided the basis for the development of institutional education based on the pluralism of pedagogical ideas and concepts, the basis of which are the ideas of humanism and developmentally appropriate practice. The desire to establish a system devoid of indoctrination in favour of the affirmation of personal, civil and other freedoms and rights of all the subjects involved in the educational process (both children and adults) is woven into the majority of documents that the official educational policy has adopted in the past twenty years.

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However, their modest reflexions on the educational practice itself consistently bear witness to the fact that the traditional understanding of children and childhood, as well as the traditional organisation of the educational process that is the result of such a traditional understanding, cannot be simply and easily abandoned, and that this abandonment cannot be achieved with the help of administrative procedures. This conclusion is supported by the quality of educational practice, which has not changed significantly in many Croatian kindergartens over the past twenty years, despite the modern orientation of the curriculum. The retention of various traditionalisms in the educational practice bears witness to the fact that it is not governed by the 'official concept', even when this 'official concept' is prescribed by the state, that is, the Ministry of Education, but primarily by 'personal concepts' of kindergarten teachers employed in a particular institution.

Two approaches to the improvement of educational practice and curriculum

The process of change, that is, improvement of preschool educational practice and curriculum in the Republic of Croatia has been running on two parallel tracks since 1991. One of them was initiated by the official educational policy and is founded on the idea of creating a 'miraculous document' that should help modernise pedagogical practice in kindergartens. This approach, referred to as 'top-down' approach, has, on multiple occasions, proven to be ineffective both in other countries and in Croatia (Šoljan, according to Krstović, 2007). The ineffectiveness of such an approach is due to many reasons, the most important of which is the fact that it does not take into consideration the complexities and dynamics of educational practice which make it impossible to implement qualitative changes in pedagogical practice with unified, linear interventions 'from above' (Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000; Datnow et al., 2002; etc.).

Systematic characteristics of educational practice determine all the processes that it involves, including the process of development of its practice and curriculum. This is why attempts to implement certain changes in the educational practice do not lead to the improvement of the quality of practice if they are not connected with the other segments of practice and are not founded on the way in which teachers actually think about them, that is, on the way they understand and interpret them. Such mechanical interventions soon begin to interfere with the characteristics of the extant practice leaving the impression of a 'foreign body', which leads to various attempts to reject them. The great difference in the quality of practice in Croatian kindergartens, although all of them have been 'working' in accordance with the same official document for two and a half decades, bears witness to the fact that practice cannot be changed from 'above' by adopting a new reform document.

In parallel to such attempts at change, another process, which is 'bottom-up' oriented, and which tries to take into consideration the systematic characteristics of educational practice has been taking place in the Republic of Croatia and it has influenced the change in educational practice. In this sense, over the past fifteen years qualitative changes have been implemented in a certain number of kindergartens in various Croatian towns and a number of studies on these qualitative changes have been published (Miljak, 2015, Petrović-Sočo, 2007; Slunjski, 2011, 2015. etc.). During this period a number of research teams composed of researchers employed at universities and researchers-practitioners who work at kindergartens were, or still are, active. The research they carried out was of the *participatory-action research* type, that is, it involved processes of gradual 'building-up' of quality 'from within' (within the institutions themselves), which many contemporary scientists (Dantow et al., 2002; Hopkins, 2001 et al.) consider to be the most effective approach to the improvement of educational practice and curriculum.

Characteristics of the process of change in educational practice and curriculum

Besides understanding the characteristics of educational practice, which is a precondition for implementing qualitative changes to it, it is equally important to understand the logic, that is, the characteristics of the process of change itself. According to Fullan and German (2006), the process of change has several key characteristics all of which bear witness to the fact that change is a (permanent) process, and not a (one-time) event. They stress that a development strategy and strategic ideas are necessary, but they also stress that they should be viewed as a *process of continuous evolution*, and not as something that can be defined precisely at the beginning of the process.

It is a well-known fact that good educational practice and curriculum cannot exist without good teachers – competent practice calls for competent teachers. They are the true implementers of the process of change, because the quality of practice depends on what the teachers do and what they think about their practice and how they understand it. The idea of 'going in a new direction' which is not completely clear or predictable frequently makes teachers feel very insecure.

At the very beginning of the process of change practitioners are not certain what they will gain from 'the new way of working'. But, Fullan and German (2006) remind us that practitioners cannot know what they will gain from change until they accept the change, and that takes time. The authors add that a clear, inspiring vision of development definitely helps the process, but that such a vision is not sufficient in itself. People need new experiences and reflexive learning in order to gain the confidence to think and act 'in the new way'. The prospects of the development are also strongly determined by the way the institution is managed – it should be directed towards encouraging all the participants in the process to explore together, which will then enable them to recognise and eliminate all the structures that inhibit, that is, to create structures that enable the creation of a better educational practice and curriculum. This is why training the teachers to recognise interfering structures that thwart or slow down the development of good educational practice is an imperative precondition for the process of change.

Institutional support for the process of change, Fullan and German (2006) stress, includes a sophisticated combination of exerting pressure on and giving support to the people involved. Otherwise, the particularly inspired and motivated educators might find themselves 'at the receiving end' of the process, while the rest will stagnate carried by the force of 'institutional inertia' (Hopkins, 2001), that is, by the institution's tendency to retain the extant practice. Fullan and German (2006) stress that the 'pressure' includes setting ambitious goals, transparent evaluation and monitoring, while the 'support' includes enabling the development of new competencies which calls for setting aside as much time as possible for cooperation and peer-learning. The next aspect of understanding of the process of change is the awareness of the fact that occasional appearance of the so called *implementation dips* (Fullan and German, 2006) is not only possible and natural, but unavoidable. 'Implementation dips' are periods in the process of change when it seems that everything 'is going downhill', which may manifest themselves in the educational institution as burnout and fatigue in teachers (educators), absence of new ideas, used-up teaching materials, 'strained' interpersonal relations, etc. Such 'difficult' periods of development are well-known from both literature and practice. Therefore, they should be anticipated and met head on. For problems, if approached in an appropriate way (i.e. overcome), can be the generator of the development of educational practice.

Finally, it should be born in mind that the process of actual development of practice (unlike the 'cosmetic touch-ups') is very slow, frequently full of various frustrations and (temporary) failures. As a result, the success of the process of change will frequently be decided by the perseverance of people involved. It takes three to five years to change the educational practice and curriculum for the better, and up to ten years to achieve real (sustainable) change (Fullan, 1999). For many educational institutions this period is too long to maintain the appropriate level of patience, energy and motivation in teachers (educators) and other people involved. In addition to this, the great discontinuity in the attitudes and actions of the political structures, both on the level of state and on the level of global, and especially local, educational policy, has a negative impact on the development of educational practice. For better or worse, this is not an exclusively Croatian problem. The tensions generated by the educational policy, which, on the one hand, advocates more creativity and an individual approach, and on the other, firmer structures and uniformity, are present in many other countries, as is described in literature (Pound, 2011).

In our circumstances the absence of consistent attitudes in educational policy has lead to a situation in which many processes that are started and many changes that are implemented fall through when a new political party or person takes power, and then they try to implement them again as the political current changes. This leads to a great waste of energy and finances and it also strongly de-motivates those institutions and their employees that have put considerable effort into the development of quality.

Continuous learning by teachers as a *conditio sine qua non* of change in educational practice and curriculum

The change in kindergarten educational practice and curriculum is closely related to continuous learning by teachers. The process of continuous learning begins during their initial education, i.e. during their university education.

A good foundation for the development of competencies necessary for the change of educational practice and curriculum can be provided by a course of studies that does not follow the positivist view of education, that is, the view that reduces education to conveying the content as the most important component of their work. In contrast to this, a course of studies that is based on modern views encourages intellectual curiosity and criticism towards anything that is positivist in orientation, and helps students to develop a wide array of competencies. For example, Peeters and Brandt (2011) stress the importance of *action-oriented competencies* which enable kindergarten teachers to act reflexively in complex situations, to construct practical knowledge through their interaction with children, parents and colleagues, and to change the extant practice.

The next important issue is that of quality, that is, frequency, intensity and form of additional professional training. Numerous authors (Fullan, 1999; Hopkins, 2001; Senge et al., 2003, etc.) stress that the traditional forms of professional training, which are usually reduced to occasional participation in workshops and seminars or to attending lectures, have a very limited impact on the change of teachers' practices. These authors support their view with a number of arguments such as the following one: professional development needs to provide the teachers with an opportunity to question their beliefs, experiences and habits because these are directly reflected in the quality of their work. In addition to this, professional development needs to take place in the institution which employs them and it needs to become an integral part of the events the institution organises (Fullan, 2002). It needs to be based on research and mutual understanding of the complex phenomena that arise from practice.

It is obvious that this view of professional training encourages autonomy and empowers teachers to take on the role of researcher and take initiative in the (joint) creation of better practice (Hopkins, 2001). In this sense, the professional development of kindergarten teachers is more and more associated with their inclusion in *action research*. This is a long-lasting process in which self-reflexion and joint reflexion on actions taken by teachers themselves is encouraged. It is the most important, integral and self-sustaining process of good, that is, reflexive practice, because teachers first have to understand their own practice and its characteristics in order to be able to gradually change it. Active thinking and continuous improvement of the quality of one's own educational practice puts the teacher in the role of the creator and re-creator of the curriculum and gives him/her an opportunity to (re)construct his/her own professional identity. An unavoidable prerequisite for change is precisely the training of teachers to implement critical reflexion. As long as the teachers do not have the tools necessary for critical reflexion on the theoretical foundations of their work at their disposal and do not have the opportunity to actively decide on it, we cannot expect anything but the transmission of the dominant discourse (Nuttall, 2002), that is, of the traditional educational practice.

This is a new kind of professionalism in which teachers take on the role of active, creative, constructive, thinking subjects. In their kindergartens such teachers represent the leaders of positive change, that is, 'thinking practitioners' who see themselves as researchers, designers and innovators of the part of the system in which they work. Because, it is the teachers who are the ones who are the ultimate change agents (Bruner, according to Richards, 2011).

The impact of educational policy

Educational policy has a great impact on the prospects of the development of educational practice and curriculum. It is not that simple to identify who actually represents (or, more precisely, all those who actually represent) the educational policy, because several parallel bodies, whose authorities are not clearly demarcated and whose ambitions are frequently in conflict, exist. It seems almost surplus to explain what an impact this parallelism has, or could have, on the development of educational practice, because it is precisely the systematic support and coordinated work of various parts of the system, on both the state and the local level, that are necessary for its development.

Lack of coordination between the state educational policy and the pedagogical profession when it comes to the important issues of early childhood institutional education can have a negative impact on the development of educational practice and curriculum. This can represent a significant 'structure of growth limitation', because educational practice and the curriculum change very slowly and with difficulty even under favourable conditions. Educational practice is in itself very resistant to change and tends to maintain *status quo*.

The articulation of a clear attitude towards the importance and characteristics of a well organised institutional early childhood education should not pose a problem for the creators of educational policy, because contemporary science, in cooperation with practitioners, has found the answers to many important questions that arise in this domain. However, the issue of the sensitivity of state policy to scientific achievements and their influence on the creation of the policy does arise here. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) stress, unlike the state educational policy which frequently imposes a certain universal truth, it is the scientists who should, together with practitioners, critically challenge the standards and ideas that the state accepts as good without question. The authors go on to state that it is precisely because of this that the development of ethical (preschool and school) educational practice, as well as of educational policy, is necessarily connected to the academic community. Only those who are extremely motivated (kindergarten headmasters, certain teachers, etc.) will embark on the 'adventure' of significant change in practice without a clearly articulated approach, defined by the educational policy, to the importance and characteristics of a well organised institutional early childhood education which is based on contemporary scientific insights.

Curriculum as a controversial experiment

The curricular approach aimed at the development of competencies that is promoted by the new *National curriculum for early childhood and pre-school education* (2015) calls for changing the methods and techniques, and not for retaining and maintaining the present educational practice. This document represents a 'legal framework' of sorts for conducting 'experiments' aimed at the development of curriculum at the level of individual kindergartens. For, as one of the leading experts in this field, Elliott (1998), claims, the change of curriculum in every educational institution is nothing but a controversial experiment of sorts. It calls for deviation from routine, good communication and teachers being open to experimenting and research. However, a number of factors are resistant to changes and obstruct them directly or indirectly. We have already mentioned the unclear and inconsistent attitude of educational policy towards the issue of (the development of) quality of educational practice and curriculum that can also be expressed by the representatives of local educational authorities, i.e. bodies of local government. This can confuse the headmasters and make them feel insecure, and result in periods during which the kindergarten practice develops in some parts of the country while it stagnates in others. Because of this, kindergartens in certain regions of the Republic of Croatia tend to develop during a certain period, while others stagnate, and with the change of the (local) policy the situation changes.

This is not an exclusively Croatian problem. It is mentioned in many recent works by authors from other countries. For example, Hargreaves and Fink (2016, 132) claim that it is not only teachers (educators) that are resistant to changes – the educational policy and bureaucracy can be just as resistant and can thwart changes. Bruner also supports this claim (2000, 29) and stresses that efficient education is always threatened by either the wider cultural context, or by school authorities, who are more dedicated to maintaining the *status quo*, than to its flexibility, and goes on to state that educational institutions that constantly refuse to take risks become hidebound and in the end put their students (children) in jeopardy.

However, as time frequently shows, the attempts to stop changes do not in fact reflect a consistent strategy or policy of the body of local government (institution), but the actions of individuals working in it, who during a certain period of time make autonomous decisions and mainly 'tailor' educational policy in an arbitrary manner.

The problems presented above speak in favour of the claim presented by several authors in their recent works that systematic support and coordinated work of various parts of the system are necessary for the process of development of educational practice and curriculum. In this vein, Vandebroek and Urban (2011) stress that competent practice does not only call for competent teachers, but also for a competent support system. They stress that a competent system is developed on the basis of reciprocal relations between individuals, groups and institutions in a wider socio-political context. In this sense, the authors discuss (inter)institutional competencies, and stress the importance of connecting and of coordinated work of kindergartens and many other services and institutions, as well as the importance of bringing closer the theory and practice of early childhood education.

Joint process of research and development of educational practice and curriculum

Guided by the ideas presented above, we decided to start a joint process of research and development of educational practice and curriculum in several kindergartens in Zagreb and the surrounding area. Taking into account the above described characteristics of kindergarten educational practice and curriculum and the deficiencies of the 'mechanical' approaches to the improvement of their quality, we opted for action research.

Action research is the opposite of the approach in which educational theory (curriculum) is created outside the field of practice, that is, it is an opposite of the approach in which the changes to the practice and curriculum are prescribed from 'above'.

Action research, as a methodology where research and change in the educational practice take place at the same time, relies on the development of research and reflexive skills of practitioners and on a holistic approach to the improvement of their practice, and not on the standardised, fragmented, mechanical interventions aimed at 'fixing' certain aspects of practice. In fact, such research is aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice, that is, at overcoming the limitations of traditional research when it comes to having influence on practice or improving it (Cohen et. al., 2007). Action research is a specific type of empirical research that is carried out during the immediate educational process. It is a scientific way to change the educational process in which the main organisers and creators of the process also at the same time take on the role of researchers.

The central idea of our research was to encourage teachers and other experts who work in kindergartens to take on an active role in this process in order to strengthen their powers of judgement, improve their educational practice and become professionally emancipated. In this sense, we decided (together with teachers and other experts who work in kindergartens) to first implement changes, i.e. intervene in those structures that can be (directly) affected, and then learn from the consequences of those changes. This is also the reason why we decided to begin our research by changing the physical surroundings. We expected that the improved surroundings would provide children with a much wider array of choices and that they would be able to better self-organise their activities in improved conditions. In turn, this would provide the teacher with an opportunity to see the children in a different light and gradually develop a new understanding of children and their capacities which would lead to the teacher developing new modalities of educational practice.

The focus of our research was the creation of conditions in which the teachers would have an opportunity to continuously question their educational practice and understanding, that is, the values and beliefs on which it is based. The teachers were systematically encouraged to explicitly think about and discuss their basic assumptions about education and to, when appropriate, dispense with them or modify them in a way that would contribute to a more efficient education practice. This approach is congruent to the idea that every organisation, and therefore every educational institution, is the result of the way individual people think and interact. The process of changing it can only take place if individuals are given an opportunity to try and change their interpersonal relations and the way they think (Bruner, 2000, 25). A similar view is shared by many other contemporary authors, such as Elmore (2002), Stoll and Fink (2000), Hopkins (2001) and Fullan (1999). They believe that the change in the curriculum must be coupled with the change in the way of thinking and the system of values, attitudes and basic beliefs of teachers because these represent the reference framework of their entire educational practice. But, since the way of thinking and beliefs cannot be changed easily, it is necessary to ensure a sufficient amount of time and systematic support to the practitioners.

This is also the reason why the entire research, which was also an intensive professional training for teachers, took place in the kindergartens themselves, and not outside of them. Action research is carried out in a real-life situation, that is, in the educational institution itself. This characteristic of action research is congruent to the attitudes of many authors (Malaguzzi, 1998; Fullan, 1999; Fullan et. al., 2006), according to which there is only one place where an efficient professional development of teachers can take place, and that is the kindergarten, that is, the educational group. Educational practice is the key element in the development of professional knowledge of teachers considering that this knowledge is constructed through the communication between teachers, other experts working in the kindergarten and external experts.

In this sense, from the position of an external expert, we tried to support the development of the research and reflexive skills of teachers, because they are the tools for continuous development of their professional knowledge and competencies and, therefore, their educational practice. We tried to act in the role of a 'resonator' or a good-natured 'critical friend' who provides the participants with a wider view of practice, asks them to explain their ideas, provides various forms of support, etc. Senge (2003) describes this role as 'systems thinking' that tracks how the system constantly reorganises itself, how new forms of behaviour emerge from these reorganisations and how new patterns of participants' activities that are improved are created.

In the period of five years during which the research was conducted we acted within several fields, which could be summed up as: *the establishment of self-sustainable change in Kindergarten* (self-improvement and self-development of educational practice), *the development of the autonomy and emancipation of teachers* (reflexive professionalism of teachers), *the redefinition of the role of headmaster* (good kindergarten management) and *the strengthening of professional cooperation among the employees of a kindergarten* (collaboration culture in kindergartens), as described in Slunjski (2015).

Our research has convinced us that these fields are interdependent and that they need to be developed in parallel because good educational practice is a collective, not an individual, achievement. Therefore, active participation of, and contribution by, all the subjects working in an educational institution is necessary to achieve it.

Our research encompassed seven kindergartens, each of which has its own authentic culture and an authentic development path which is not simple and mechanical, but complex, dynamic and dependant on many variables and their correlations (Fullan, 1999; Dantow et al. 2002; Bascia, Hargreaves, 2000). Even when they are parts of the same legal entity, i.e. have the same founder, headmaster and members of the expert team, various kindergartens function in their own authentic ways which are defined by the children, their families and physical and other characteristics, and primarily by the teachers who work in them.

The meetings in each kindergarten included recording the educational process during the mornings, followed by a joint analysis, i.e. joint critical reflexions, in which the teachers, other experts and the headmaster participated. During the afternoon meetings the analysis of photographs, video tapes and other forms of documentation collected by the teachers themselves was carried out. Each meeting had a great potential for peer-learning. While the morning meetings provided a better insight into the context in which the educational process in a particular kindergarten takes place as a whole, the afternoon meetings provided a better insight into the way in which the teachers themselves see the educational process. In other words, they enabled us to see the practice 'through the eyes of the teachers' – each and every one of them.

Conclusion

During our research we found that the joint discussions, i.e. critical reflexions with the teachers and other experts who work in kindergartens (educator, psychologist, social pedagogue, etc.), were an invaluable tool for peer-learning. We found that they enabled the teachers and other experts working in kindergartens to interpret and better understand their own professional experience and, as a result, to improve their educational work. Teachers (and other members of expert teams) develop their professional knowledge and competencies by acting, but acting in itself does not necessarily result in learning, or the development of competencies. Acting becomes learning and leads to the development of competencies only if it is linked to the process of reflexion, which usually takes place during discussions with other experts. Participation in a discussion can help the practitioners to understand the problems they face in their everyday practice much better than they could on their own. Joint discussion, i.e. critical reflexion, can help them to better understand the children, their own role in their education, and the educational practice as a whole. During our meetings this was the basis for deliberating and planning new interventions to be undertaken in practice, which would be analysed jointly in the future and represent the basis for new discussions and insights.

We have also found that joint discussions give teachers an opportunity to understand each other's points of view – on numerous occasions we found that they can see and interpret the same problems in a completely different way. It is precisely during a discussion that the teachers and other experts working in kindergartens can exchange different, individual interpretations of reality, which, considering the differences in their knowledge, understanding and interests, are always subjective and partial, and can construct a more holistic, *joint reality*. In this case, understanding becomes a joint construct – it is constructed (co-constructed) jointly via social interaction, i.e. discussion. In this sense, discussion can enable the teachers and other experts working in kindergartens to achieve a meta-level of their own thinking and learning. This is especially important because raising of the awareness of teachers of their own thoughts, knowledge and learning, i.e. strengthening of their meta-cognitive skills, is a step towards their reflexive thinking and new learning. This is why it is not too bold to say that, in addition to possessing a research spirit and openness to change, the cornerstone of professional development of teachers is precisely the practice of discussing different viewpoints of educational practice, which in turn represents the path to the development of educational practice and curriculum.

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