

CONTEXTUAL DETERMINANTS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S EXPRESSIVE POTENTIAL IN KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract -

The realisation of quality educational work with kindergarten children greatly depends on the readiness of the educator to have a good understanding of the child, its perspectives, experiences, knowledge and understanding. These can be discovered via various forms of children's expressions, i.e. their symbolic capacities that (Malaguzzi, 1998) calls "a hundred languages". These include artistic, graphic, kinaesthetic, verbal, gesture and many other "symbolic languages", i.e. expressive modalities. The most developed pedagogical conceptions and curricula place great emphasis on creating the conditions for the continuous development of various expressive modalities in children, which they can use to symbolically represent their knowledge, ideas and emotions. The perspective of the development of children's expressive potential in various institutions does not depend only on the children, but on the features, i.e. the quality of the educational practices of the kindergarten. When attempting to improve the conditions for the development of children's expressive potential in kindergarten, it is necessary to acknowledge the systemic features of the educational process, as well as its non-linearity, complexity and unpredictability. The paper presents a qualitative research and explains the reason why the authors opted for the interpretative, naturalistic and phenomenological research approach. Since the intent was to research the existing practices, but also to gradually improve the possibilities of developing children's expressive potential in kindergarten, an action research was conducted as a methodology for simultaneous research and change in the educational practice which relies precisely on the development of the practitioners' research and reflexive skills. Elements of the ethnographic approach were used in various stages of the research, in order to understand the manner in which certain subjects (children and/or educators) understand and interpret individual activities. The paper questions the relationship between the development of the children's expressive potential and the quality of the spatial-material environment in the kindergarten, the quality of the educational interventions by the educators, the democracy of the educational process and the manners of evaluating the children's activities and achievements.

Keywords - Action Research, Expressive Potential, Children's Symbolic Languages, Educators' Competences

I. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary approach to shaping the educational process in kindergartens is determined by many features, including the importance of encouraging children to express their perspectives, experiences and ways of thinking using various forms of expression. This empowers their "100 symbolic languages" (Malaguzzi, 1998) that include artistic, graphic, kinaesthetic, verbal, gesture and many other "symbolic languages", i.e. expressive modalities. For example, Giudici and Rinaldi (2002) emphasize the verbal, graphical, musical and gesture language the child can use to communicate by utilising appropriate expressive media. Expressive media include various materials that enable the child to materialise their ideas, i.e. the translation of its knowledge and understanding to an external, i.e. two-dimensional and three-dimensional form (Giudici and Rinaldi, 2002, Slunjski 2012).

II. THE VALUE OF CHILDREN'S EXPRESSIVE POTENTIAL AND THE PERSPECTIVE FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT

The quality of the kindergarten's educational process is proportional to the measure in which the

educator is ready to recognise and understand the children's various perspectives, expressed with one of the expressive media. The most developed pedagogical conceptions and curricula, such as the Reggio Curriculum (Edwards et al., 1998, 2012, Rinaldi, 2006, Gandini et al., 2008) place special emphasis on creating the conditions for the continuous development of various expressive modalities in children, which they can use to symbolically represent their knowledge, ideas and emotions. Drawing, painting and the general use of own symbolic languages presents a type of life, purpose and meaning exploration experience for the child, claim Gandini and associates (2008). It uses them to express their needs, wishes, explorations, preconceptions, constructions and discoveries. The authors further state that these activities encourage solidarity, communication with themselves, their physical environment and other children and adults. The expressive capacities correlate with children's creativity, which is also positioned highly in quality preschool educational practices. Creativity usually involves creating something new and it is actually a mental process which includes creating new ideas and concepts, new solutions to problems and new links between existing concepts (Mitchell, according to Jackman, 2012). It is a combination of motivation,

openness/flexibility, curiosity and autonomy, as well as a person's creative thinking, explains the cited author.

The perspective of the development of children's expressive potential in various institutions does not, however, depend only on the children, because these are their innate potentials. Their development greatly depends also on the features, i.e. the quality of the educational practice of the child's kindergarten, which could also be called the kindergarten's culture. The culture of a certain kindergarten represents a framework that determines what is possible at a certain moment and what is considered desirable, and this does not necessarily have to be true in another kindergarten (Vujičić, 2011). This is precisely why the features of educational processes, and consequently its quality, vary quite a lot across kindergartens.

With any attempt at improving the practice, it is necessary to keep in mind the complexity, multidimensionality and the interactions between all organisational structures. This is due to the fact that quality is determined by context. Each educational institution approaches the process of change differently, since the innovations are modified in line with their context (Soll and Fink, 2000). In other words, the potential of improving the educational practice is determined in great deal by the context in which these processes take place (Rinaldi 2006, Slunjski, 2016). At the same time, changing the context is a precondition for changing the educators' behaviours (Fullan, 1999). This also refers to the process of improving the conditions for the development of children's expressive potential in kindergartens.

III. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Subject and aim of the research

The subject of our research are various organisational features of kindergartens which determine the possibility of developing the children's expressive potential. Our aim was to view the whole picture, i.e. the interactions between various contextual factors in the kindergarten which determine and shape its educational process in a specific way. Taking this into consideration, we have opted for the qualitative research approach which enabled us to gain insight into the authentic features of various institutions, since each of them represents one thread in the bundle of interactively linked organisational structures determined by their culture.

In this paper, we will consider as the determinants of the quality of educational processes that have a positive impact on the development of children's expressive activities the quality of the spatial-material environment, the quality of the educational interventions of the educators, the level of democracy of the total educational process, with

emphasis on the quality of children's relationships and communication with the educator, and the manners of evaluating the children's activities and accomplishments. We believed that the potential of the development of children's expressive potential is determined by the interaction between the said dimensions of the institution's culture, and not only one of them, removed from the context of the others. Moreover, we presumed that there are variations even within various groups in the same kindergarten, in which case it makes sense to also discuss the culture of each educational group.

We also opted for qualitative research methods due to the specific features of the educational process in a kindergarten. In addition to its holistic nature, the educational process within the institution is determined by non-linearity, complexity and unpredictability (Fullan, 1999). These are also the basic arguments for selecting an interpretative, naturalistic and phenomenological research approach, which relies on qualitative research.

We wanted to explore and determine the existing practices and gradually improve the possibilities for developing children's expressive potential in kindergartens. The goal of our research was not only to determine the existing state of the educational practice, but also to train educators to research and gradually improve the quality of various organisational features that determine the possibility of the development of children's expressive potential.

This is why we opted for an action research, as a method of simultaneous research and change of the educational practice, which relies precisely on the development of the research and reflexive skills of practitioners, as well as on the holistic approach to the improvement of their practice (Cohen et al. 2007). Action research is a specific type of empirical research which is conducted with direct pedagogical action.

In various phases of the research, elements of the ethnographic approach were used in various stages of the research, particularly in those phases where it was important to understand the manner in which certain subjects (children and/or educators) understand and interpret individual activities, i.e. what do activities mean to them. Considering all of this, we asked ourselves several research questions: How is the development of children's expressive potential influenced by:

- the quality of the spatial-material environment of a certain educational group and/or kindergarten
- the quality of the educational interventions of the educator
- the democracy of the educational process, with emphasis on the quality of the children's relationship and communication with the educator
- the manners of evaluating children's activities and accomplishments?

Sample, data collection techniques and course of the research

We conducted the action research in three kindergartens, during three pedagogical years. It involved educators, pedagogues and kindergarten headmasters, as well as children in younger, middle and older education groups. The institutions differ in their size (one has 2, the other 6, and the third one 3 education groups), founder (two are city institutions and one is private), year of establishment (two with longer traditions and one founded recently). The number of educators and children involved varied during the research, as did the intensity of the educators' active participation in the research.

The data was collected using direct, i.e. participant observation and interviews with subjects of the educational process, and by obtaining various ethnographic records, such as photographs and videos, transcripts of the children's discussions with educators, various children's two- and three-dimensional pieces of work, as well as various narrative forms. We paid special attention to collecting transcripts of common discussions with educators and pedagogues. We used these in all phases of the research as the foundation for a common analysis, i.e. reflexion with all subjects involved in the research.

During the action research, we relied on Lewin's spiral model (according to Kemmis and McTaggar 1981), which involves several planning, action and results evaluation cycles. In this way, we started with questioning the concrete conditions and with determining the existing state of the practice. We used this to decide on the general action plan together with educators and pedagogues. We used this model to draw concrete steps that can be realised in practice, and together we developed manners of monitoring their effects as the foundation of a new planning cycle. Each starting plan was revised in the light of new information, making a foundation for new actions. In this manner, we monitored and supported the development of various organisational features of kindergartens which determine the possibility of developing the children's expressive potential.

Research results interpretation

The initial quality of the educational practice in the institutions involved in the research varied between the institutions, as was the case after three years of research. However, each of the institutions recorded a visible increase in quality, taking into account its specific possibilities and features. We will not describe all of the research and practice development processes in this paper, because that would be beyond the set framework of the paper. We will present the most important insights and changes in the educational practice, for which we believe have

stronger implications on the possibility of the development of the children's expressive potential.

During the research, we have determined a strong reciprocal relationship between the **institution's spatial-material environment and the possibility for the development of children's expressive potential**. Improvements in the quality of the environment, in the sense of offering various inspirational materials, enabled a greater variety and substance in children's activities, which lead to a gradual revision of the educators' positions and beliefs regarding children's expressive potential. In this sense, our research helped the educators to review their own implicit pedagogy and the way it reflects on shaping the environment for the development of children's expressive potential, as well as its gradual change.

By gradually improving the quality of the environment, the opportunities for the development of children's expressive potential changed as well. From the initial conditions, in which certain educators believed that the children had already provided their maximum and were sceptical regarding the further development of their expressive potential, they gradually became aware of the previously undiscovered expressive abilities of the children. The increase in the quality of the children's expressions was greatly due to the increase in the quality of various expressive materials that the educators prepared and offered to the children. It is a process that had been developing slowly, but that was greatly influenced by the discussions between the educators, i.e. the activities in which they interpreted the recorded children's activities together. In this research dimension, the improvement was equally successful in all three kindergartens. However, it is important to stress that the achieved improvements were most visible in the self-organised children's activities in which the educators' role was reduced to preparing the material for the activities.

The initial state of the practice regarding the **quality of the educators' educational interventions** demonstrated great differences between the kindergartens, but also between various groups within the same kindergarten. In the majority of cases, the educators held a strikingly dominant and teaching role. In certain cases, it completely disabled the children's opportunities for taking initiative and expressing themselves freely, i.e. to demonstrate existing and develop new expressive capacities. The result was that the children made pieces of work that were overly similar, unified and formulaic and that, evidently expressed the educators' ideas and plans, and not the children's.

During our research, certain improvements in the sense of understanding and acknowledging children's authentic expressions were achieved with a certain number of educators. This led to the gradual redefinition of the educator's role. With a certain number of educators, this role was gradually directed

towards observing and accepting various children's ideas and performances, replacing those that the educator envisaged, planned or expected. However, the process of abandoning the practice of educators' over-intervention in the children's expressive activities took place much slower than was the case with acquiring new materials. The quality of the educators' interventions in encouraging children's expressive activities correlates with the quality of their interventions in all other children's activities. If those interventions were generally characterised by the educator's dominance, improvements might be slow and correlated with raising of the educator's continuous professional awareness. In such conditions, its dominance could be gradually decreased in favour of accepting children's initiatives, their authentic effort and greatly diverse expressions. However, redirecting the role of the educator from the position of over-control and dominance in relation to the children, to their understanding and acknowledging children and their expressive activities, necessarily delves into the area of their power relationship. We have witnessed on countless occasions that for any development aspect, it is necessary to destabilise the controlling structures in the educational work with children, i.e. to distribute the power between children and educators more equally (Bath, 2012). Therefore, a mechanical or single introduction of innovation, which should lead to the development of children's expressive potential, would be doomed to failure.

In this sense, the quality of the educator's interventions was to be problematised in a wider context, i.e. from the perspective of the *democracy of the educational process* and the daily experiences children have with a certain educator or kindergarten. The quality of the relationships and communication between educators and children included in the research varied in many ways and on many levels. The dominant practice of certain educators was characterised by an extremely unequal power distribution, with strong hierarchical relations, which jeopardised the opportunities for developing children's expressive capacity. The significant asymmetry of their relationships, i.e. of the children's dependence on the educators' instructions and the direct management of the children's activities by the educators, have shown to be a serious threat to the expression and development of children's expressive capacities. This problem was emphasized by other contemporary authors such as Foucault (1982) and others, who claim that in all serious deliberation on the issues of education, there is always an underlying theoretical perspective that takes into consideration power relations. Abandoning the dominance of the educators in the educational work with children, and abandoning its adultcentric practice is a long, complex and quite unpredictable process. However, without a continued and systemic professional development of educators, based on the development

of their research and reflexive skills, the potential of increasing democracy in their educational practice as a whole is doomed to failure.

The final direction of our research, based on the fourth research question, referred to the *manners of evaluating children's activities and accomplishments*. The antiquated and non-democratic practice can also be visible in the educators' focus on the universality of children's development, instead of approaching them as active and competent individuals, was observed on many levels. Such practice is primarily guided by the idea of evaluating children's progress in strict categories and classifying and categorising children according to general norms and development levels (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999). At the same time, the approach of many educators to children's expressive activities was based on training the children to reproduce something (preparing plays for an audience) or had a decorative character (exhibitions of children's art). In this way, the issue of the educators' insufficient understanding of children and their expressive potential was enhanced by presenting such practice as desirable and pedagogically justified to the parents and the public. The basic problems lie in the fact that such practices do not focus on children's authentic expressive potential, but rather on their responsiveness, reproduction skills and the way they were trained to perform certain skills in a uniformed way (using movement, speech, gesture, dance). This does not help the public (including parents) to achieve a better understanding of the children and their expressive abilities, but rather fortifies the positivistic perspective which already dominates our pedagogical tradition and culture. In this way, the negative effects of such practice, which is defended precisely from the position from which it should be broken, i.e. the education institution, become the means of additional control of children, i.e. of expressing the adults' power (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007). The goal and purpose of contemporary education, including early education, is not to fortify the power of adults and their supervision of children, nor should it be in the function of adapting children to a life in a society based on supervision (Sparman and Lindgren, 2010). This was something we discussed on many occasions with the educators on our common reflective sessions. Deliberation on the manners for developing children's expressive potential might not be able to eliminate the non-democratic features of the education process, nor result in the abandonment of the practice which primarily relies on supervision. However, the way in which children's expressive activities are approached in a kindergarten can be an excellent indicator of such practice and a "warning sign" that indicates a practice which should work on its democracy. The basic tool for the development of democratic pedagogy and practice is, as shown by our previous published research, systematic professional

development of these educators, based on research and reflexion (Slunjski, 2016).

This is the reason why we encouraged educators continuously to reflect on the various aspects of children's activities and their expressive potential during the research. After three years, certain improvements were achieved with most educators. The development of the research and reflective skills of the educators gradually led to the increase in the quality of their educational interventions in encouraging the development of children's expressive potential. Their skills started to reflect the educators' belief that the child's expressive activities should serve the purpose of understanding the child's authentic ideas, experiences, perspectives and sensations, instead of putting the child in the function of realising the set, universal and unified goals of the educator. In the latter case, the child's expressive potential is held back, stagnates and regresses.

In our common reflective sessions with the educators, we discussed on many occasions the possibilities of diverting the perception of the children's expressions from their aesthetics and decorative use (decorating signboards) to the "readability" of the children's work. In other words, towards the level at which the educators understand the meaning of these pieces of work. In this sense, we discussed overcoming the need for directing children towards drawing, painting and modelling pre-set topics, and focusing on understanding what the children were trying to express in an authentic way (be it verbally, using gestures, art, etc.)

From the initial state in which educators were primarily focused on the child's end product, they gradually developed awareness of the fact that the child and the processes leading to its well-being, which vary greatly from one child to another, should be the centre of any evaluation. Their experiences of partner learning with other educators and pedagogues, i.e. their common work on interpreting the recorded activities, contributed significantly to this. The differences and variety of the educators' thinking processes, which were reflected upon in common analysis sessions, over time came to be considered their advantage, something that contributes to the development of their practice. The process of their common (research and reflective) professional development in which they developed common understanding and complementary competences also contributed to this.

IV. CONCLUSION

During the conducted action research, the quality of the educational practice in the institutions included in the research was developed. However, the intensity of this development, as well as the achieved result, varied between institutions. During the research, a strong reciprocal relationship between the institution's spatial-material environment and the

possibility for the development of children's expressive potential was determined. Likewise, a correlation between the development of children's expressive potential and the quality of the educators' educational interventions was determined. This role, from one that is teaching- and dominance-oriented, was gradually diverted to better understanding and acknowledging of children's authentic expressions. For improving the educator's role, it is necessary to destabilise the controlling structures in the educational work with children, i.e. to distribute the power between children and educators more equally. The quality of the educators' educational interventions corresponds with the democracy of the educational process. Therefore, the questioning of their relationships and communication with children is the foundation for the development of the educators' role. Manners of evaluating children's activities and accomplishments are developed parallel to abandoning the antiquated and non-democratic practice aimed at encouraging an universal development in children. All of these aspects of the educators' development are the result of continuously encouraging educators to reflect on the various aspects of children's activities and their expressive potential during the research. Progress was made in the development of the educators' belief that the child's expressive activities should serve the purpose of understanding the child's authentic ideas, experiences, perspectives and sensations, instead of putting the child in the function of realising the set, universal and unified goals of the educator.

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