

## Paradigm Shift in Early Learning In Montenegro

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### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, we try to look at the dimensions of the educational context in Montenegro, from the perspective of reform goals/changes that have occurred in the past decade in the field of preschool education.*

*Objective: To determine the extent to which the upbringing and education process in pre-school institutional context Montenegro corresponds to the fundamental reform requirements /tasks in the field of: educational process (learning), curriculum, competencies, educators /teachers, organizational conditions governing the upbringing and education work (environment) and cooperation with family. Starting from the key research fields (active learning/child interaction in the process of education; holistic approach to child development and learning; open curriculum and integrated planning; opening the institution to family and community), we structured a questionnaire for educators and implemented it in selected sample areas in Montenegro. We surveyed 484 respondents from the three regions, and the interviews were conducted in the focus groups. Our respondents claim that the quality of preschool education in Montenegro, in general, is at a relatively high level, but it is necessary to stimulate further research practices, and to make cooperation with the family and environment more diverse and interactive, to change the attitudes of the participants in the preschool context towards the necessity of a permanent change of the kindergarten into a "learning organization".*

**Keywords:** active learning; curriculum; open system; reform,

### Introduction

Long-term consideration of early childhood in the context of the deficit model, "the concept of missing childhood" and clearly delineated development categories, which precisely determine children's capabilities and limits, neglected the internal and external context of growth and development. Mechanistic, positivist paradigm which promotes the fragmentary image of childhood and early learning, is being replaced by a holistic, systematic, probabilistic paradigm, which is based on a full understanding of the child in the context, and which takes into consideration all the intertwining variables that determine children's development and learning needs (Slunjski, 2011). Holistic consideration of children's early learning and development, gains in importance in 80's and especially 90's of the last century, thanks to the scientific findings and relevant research by renowned pedagogues and psychologists in this area, as well as thanks to their discoveries about cause-and-effect connections between the ways of encouraging children and long-term effects of these interventions (Villegas Reimers, E. & F. Reimers, 2000). Support of the concept of open education and systemic paradigm reaches far back into the past (Rousseau, representatives of maturation-socialization theories), and more recently, there have been theories of Piaget, Bruner, Erikson, Bronfenbrenner and others.

Instead of a scholarized, didactically fragmented, field-specific curriculum and entire organization of life in preschool, which exist in a controlled and clearly delineated spatial-temporal framework, the reformed concept in Montenegro, now promotes an approach which is holistic-oriented, open and context-dependent (Pešić, 1989).

Context is a system which is organized and layered around child/educational group/kindergarten. In the 90's of the last century, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model becomes the new mainstay of research and examining of the dimensions of preschool context. Child is a unique being, a person with complex and varied resources and who should be understood that way, and provided with adequate support for the full projection of their potential. Vividly explaining the need for affirmation of children's unique capabilities, Loris Malaguzzi (The Hundred Languages of Children, 1998) writes: "There are a hundred of them out there. The child has a hundred languages (and hundreds and hundreds more), but ninety-nine are being stolen from them. The school and the culture separate the head from his body. They tell him to think without hands/ to work without head / to listen and not to speak/to understand without joy, love and to admiration" (Miljak, 2009, p.11).

A new concept of childhood affirms active child, who affects his learning and development, which has his own culture and own opinion and who is capable to organize and be responsible for his own choices and actions, in order to manage them and to develop his intellectual, social, emotional, creative and other resources. Therefore, the kindergarten is a mat composed of many interactive and related structural components (physical, temporal and social), which are based on a deeper foundations of culture (attitudes, values, beliefs, educators, etc.). (Slinjski & Ljubetić, 2012).

#### Changes In The Context Of Preschool Education In Montenegro

Montenegrin education system, after decades of nurturing preschool concept focused on the contents in a structured school system, defined the concept of preschool education that is based on the holistic-ecological understanding of children's learning and development. It starts from the child and his or her unique capacity within a distinct family and social context. In the essence of children's learning and development process is a unique developmental socio-constructivist way of learning.

Starting from the paradigm of active learning and development of children's potential in the process of exchange with peers and adults, education reform brought a new concept of preschool education, focused on the child, which is developing an integrated curriculum, through the engagement of team of professionals, parents, and representatives of the local communities in Montenegro (Sočo-Petrovič, 2011). A new look at the child and childhood, and recognizing exceptional importance of this fundamental developmental stage in the life of every person, leaning on the latest scientific knowledge on the potential of early development, gradually changes social awareness of the position of preschool education in educational continuum and society. Thus, it becomes clear that the effects of socialization and personal empowerment in the peer community for children are invaluable for strengthening their cognitive-conative, socio-emotional, speech and motor potentials. Although we are slow to break from the tradition to perceive kindergarten as "babysitting facilities" and an extorted solution, the idea of a childhood rich in interactions with peers and adults, as a natural supplement to the family life, is becoming more and more popular. Social awareness of the need to strengthen this segment is seen through the intentions of educational policy makers which are present in strategic and other official supporting documents. The strategy of early and pre-school development (2010) pointed out that the coverage of children in Montenegro, in the period up to the 2015, should increase from the current 32.2% to 40%. In the context of open kindergarten, which is the framework for a pedagogical approach that focuses on the needs of all participants in the upbringing and education process, children have the opportunity to realize their needs and capabilities in a spontaneous and permanent exchange with all internal and external stakeholders. The role of teachers is becoming more complex because, instead of guiding the whole process and having the pedagogical view "from above", and pre-defined interventions and corrective actions, they more naturally "sink" in the internal relations and exchanges in the educational environment, getting to know the children individually. They also get to know themselves in this professional position in relation to all participants in the life of preschool. The development of cooperative relations, the strengthening of mutual trust in the community, supporting the process of development of educational processes, joint problem solving and cultural two-way, reciprocal and respectful communication among all participants in the process are important dimensions of the development of quality of life and learning in preschool." (Slinjski & Ljubetić, 2012).

#### METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we will try to look at the dimensions of preschool context in Montenegro, from the perspective of reform goals/changes that have occurred in the past decade in the education system. Our focus will be predominantly focused on the review and assessment of the reformed preschool context, from the perspective of a part of the research sample, i.e. pre-school teachers, as key actors and stakeholders of educational life in kindergarten.

The wider objective: To determine the extent to which the upbringing and education process in pre-institutional context Montenegro corresponds to fundamental reform requirements/tasks in the field of: educational process (learning), curriculum, competencies, educators/teachers, environment) and cooperation with the family.

Given the complexity and layers of the research subjects/fields, methodological concept was based on the combined quantitative-qualitative approach and the application of appropriate instruments. In this paper we will analyze the opinions of teachers on the efficiency of a new paradigm in preschool practice, based on the responses obtained from surveys and focus groups interviews.

Analysis Of The Responses Of Teachers (questionnaire and interview)

Starting from the key fields the research is focused on, we have structured a questionnaire for pre-school teachers, and, according to the designed criteria (thematically concentrated categories: active learning/participation of children through play, a holistic approach to child development and individualization, open curriculum, opening of the institution to family and community) and realized it in the sample selected areas in Montenegro.

### Sample

Because of the representativeness of the sample, 484 respondents from all three regions of Montenegro were surveyed (North - 131, central -227, southern - 126), including all pre-schools in these areas.

Table 1 The research sample-educators

region	JPU "Vukosava Ivanovic	JPU "Ljubica Jovanovic-Mase"	JPU "Nasa radost" Herceg Novi	JPU "Dragan Kovacevic" Niksic	JPU "Djina Vrbica" Podgorica	JPU "Ljubica Popovic"	JPU "Zagorka Ivanovic" Cetinje	JPU "Eko bajka" Pljevlja	JPU "Radmila Nedic" Berane	JPU "Duso Basekic" Bijelo	JPU "Sestre Radovic" Kolasin	JPU "Djeciji vrtic" Play	JPU "Bosko Buha" Rozaje	total
Southern	39	42	45	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	126
Central	0	0	0	44	69	80	34	0	0	0	0	0	0	227
Northern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	43	43	4	6	10	131
total	39	42	45	44	69	80	34	25	43	43	4	6	10	484

By analyzing the sample, from the standpoint of the level of education of teachers, we find that most of the teachers hold a college degree, that is 61.4% of them, followed by 10.5% with bachelor degree and 28.1% who have completed specialist studies. Permanently employed respondents dominate in our sample (68.9%). In order to obtain the most consistent and objective indicators of the focused aspects of empirical research fields, survey responses will be accompanied by statements from the interviews that were held with focus groups in all three regions of Montenegro.

The introductory question in the survey was related to the assessment of the quality of preschool education in Montenegro by our respondents, and it offered a scale of four options (very good, mainly good, mainly not good, and not good at all). The results show that the second option dominates the respondents' answers, and that in in all regions/preschools, surveyed respondents believe that this segment is predominantly well organized.. Thus, 67.1% of respondents from the central region mark the option by which the preschool education in Montenegro, is mainly good, and 30.6% of them say that it is very good. We find that 94% of respondents from the southern region hold the opinion that the pre-school education is very good and mainly good, and that percentage is even higher in the third group of surveyed teachers and amounts to 97%. Below we will filter the obtained information through the already mentioned research segments.

Region	fully achieved	mostly achieved	mostly not achieved	not achieved	total	fully achieved%	mostly achieved%	mostly not achieved%	not achieved%	total %
Southern	39	84	0	0	123	31,7%	68,3%			100,0%

Central	114	107	1	1	223	51, 1%	48, 0%	, 4%	, 4%	100, 0%
Northern	58	71	0	0	129	45, 0%	55, 0%			100, 0%
Total	211	262	1	1	475	44, 4%	55, 2%	, 2%	, 2%	100, 0%

Active

#### Learning/participation Of Children In Educational And Upbringing Activities (Interaction)

For the purposes of assessing of the level and quality of the representation of one of the very important components of the reformed pre-school education system – the active learning through play and full participation of children in educational and upbringing activities, in the survey we asked a question, operationalized through several individual items. The respondents chose the option on a four-degree scale that was closest to their assessment of the level of representation of the concept in question. Starting from the region, as a criterion variable, the respondents evaluated: The extent to which the stated objectives of the reform of preschool education were achieved? Option: promoting active learning through participation in educational and upbringing activities (and play) (N = 475)

#### Table 2 the level participation in educational and upbringing activities

As can be seen from the table with frequencies and percentages, respondents from all three regions estimate that encouraging active learning in children (through participation) in pre-school institutions is represented in high percentage: southern region 31.7% (fully achieved) and 68.3% (mostly achieved); central region - 51, 1 % (fully achieved ) and 48.0 % (mostly achieved); northern region - 45, 0 % (fully achieved) and 55.0 % (mostly achieved). To be honest, choosing, predominantly, the second option may indicate a certain reserve and caution in consideration of the level and quality of implementation of this important concept in practice.

Another item that further operationalizes the question - teacher encourages children to choose their centers of interest , as opposed to the option that children are directed towards the centers at certain times in the determined period/interval also indicates a high value, in favor of a modern approach, the one oriented on the child (arithmetic mean/95 % confidence interval from 1-5 : south - 4, 2642; center - 4, 4695 , north- 4, 6000 ), affirming child's right to choose and be responsible for their own initiatives.

On a 5 degree scale, in the interval from expects reproduction and repetition (1) to encourages children to experiment and explore (5), respondents predominantly opted for values toward the second part of the continuum (5) , so the cumulative score/arithmetic mean (95 % reliability ) is: 4.0784 (south), 4.3412 (center) and 4.2857 (north), suggesting a significant positive changes in practice, in the opinion of our surveyed teachers, towards a much more active involvement of children in educational process by opening an opportunity for them to independently investigate, explore, express their curiosity. According to the respondents' answers, teachers do strive to provide children with learning from experience, through direct participation and sharing, and use of various cognitive processes-observing, manipulating materials, combining, research, and experimentation.

Also, respondents were estimating the professional conduct of teachers in practice, in direct contact with them in the upbringing and education process, on a continuum of expects obedience from children (consistently follow orders given by their teacher - 1) to encourages initiative, freedom of thought , autonomy in children (5), and marked high values in all research areas, and the arithmetic means on a scale of 1-5 were: 4.0192 (south) , 4.2701 (center) , 4.2627 (north) . So , very high values in the assessment and selection of our respondents indicate that in practice children we given much more space for independent action and decision making, and that it is less insisted on "blind " and uncritical obedience of children, and heteronomous consistency in the execution of the given instructions.

Assessing the extent to which, in the opinion of the teachers in our sample, the entire process is directed towards the needs of children and their better interaction (5), as opposed to the earlier, directive guiding and controlling (1), our respondents dominantly mark the high value, so that the average score is 4.3628 in the 1-5 intervals. "Children should be allowed to independently investigate whenever possible. This knowledge is both lasting and better, and they can learn from each other, "says one of the interviewees (Podgorica).

One of the indicators of stimulating active learning/participation of children in educational process is encouraging children to solve problems, so our respondents say that pre-school teachers reinforce these skills in children very often - 55.0 % and often - 41.8 %. Participating in a collaborative, team activities, in the centers of interest, children are able to coordinate

their perspective with others, to be tolerant to different needs and opinions. Also, they are in a position to overcome the conflicts themselves, to solve problems, to share with others, to rethink their responses, to wait their turn, in order to preserve their place in the peer community, improving their socio-emotional and other competencies.

To the question To what extent, in your opinion, educators encourage children to explore the causes and consequences, our respondents answer: in 21.8 % of cases - very often and in 65.2 % of them often. Instead of memorizing poems, content, guided and controlled child's expression, these new opportunities for learning in kindergarten allow recognizing causal relationships, identifying new meaning, and practicing continuous cognition.

Furthermore, in the interval from imposes roles on children to respects the child's interest, respondents predominantly mark the second-mentioned option, or category 5, on the interval scale, which fully corresponds with previous answers about respect for children's autonomy , the right to choose and to have own opinion , and to act in practice .

In the context of the perception of quality and ways of encouraging children to actively learn/ participate, educators assessed the extent to which, in their opinion, in kindergarten, children were encouraged to apply their knowledge to new situations (N = 469): educators from the southern region 95, 1 % very often and often , educators from the central region: 95 % very often and often , educators from the northern region: 96 % very often and often . This is supported by the assessment of our respondents when considering the following option in the questionnaire: the extent to which the practice fosters development of children's independence and securing the right to choose, take initiative and make decisions. Dominantly , our respondents felt that the aforementioned intentions are realized, i.e., respondents, in a very high percentage, estimated that educators allowed children to work independently and supported the possibility of choice (arithmetic mean: 1-5 , with 95 % reliability : southern region – 4. 2170, central – 4. 4038, northern – 4. 3697).

Respondents/pre-school teachers estimate that, in practice, all aspects of development in children , as well as all areas of activity, affirm evenly. "Educators prefer some areas (e.g. cognitive domain or mathematical or logical area) (1)... to they take into account the equitable representation of all areas /fields (5)." High values dominate (5) in most respondents from all three fields ( arithmetic mean - 4.3921, reliability interval - 95 % ), which implies the belief of our respondents that the fragmentary and scholarized and area-structured approach of teachers was replaced in practice with a new, holistic approach to children's learning and development. A holistic approach allows natural linking internal and external constituent components of educational environment. The selection of learning content in shaping the curriculum is based on an understanding of children and respecting their perspectives (opinions, ways of understanding, etc.). Enabling choices of different content and selections of other children and adults in shaping their own activities encourage the development of the child's autonomy, and the development of his identity, self-esteem, self-confidence and self-realization. Therefore, it is necessary to activate children through activities in which they explore, discover, build and review their own theories, building their concepts and terms. It is therefore necessary to provide a rich and varied offer of appropriate materials and situations for learning, which enable the child to self-discover and solve problems". (Slunjski & Ljubetić, 2012).

From the interview we learn that educators connect life-practical activities from different areas and fields and allow children to use linguistic-communicative, cognitive and socio-emotional skills through a variety of play contents. After the phase of surface and associative linking of different objectives and contents from certain areas/domains of learning, pre-school teachers understand and apply specific integrated curriculum in practice , seeking deeper connections between certain areas through the development of key terms and concepts .

Judging by the responses received, the respondents estimated that the practice has undergone significant change, and that children in pre-schools have the opportunity to actively participate in educational activities, according to their possibilities and needs, to follow their interests and coordinate them with others , both those of their peers and adults around them. From the interview we learn that this is significantly contributed by a more flexible spatial-temporal organization of life in kindergarten, centers of interest, diversity of materials , more open attitude to parents and the wider community. They find that children develop their skills better in this environment, that they are more independent, more open, more active, and more cooperative, that they know how to share duties and responsibilities, and know how to freely communicate with peers and adults. Also, the teachers encourage critical thinking by opening opportunities for research, comparing, and manipulating objects. In the words of the interviewed teachers, the practice reaffirms integrated learning through sharing with peers and adults because children "learn through responding with their whole being " (Krnjaja , Miškeljin, 2006 : 126 ). Shaping the curriculum is based on careful observation, listening to children, and documenting their activities. This mode is directed to the full development of the child, with respect for his personality and individual characteristics.

### Competences of the educator

The openness of educational and training institutions, as a "learning organization", has influenced the changing role of teachers with its new tasks and responsibilities. Professionals are turning to a different conception of labor in which children should be encouraged to learn "to know, to do, to be, to live together" (Delors, 1998). The teacher today is not only the interpreter of the given and ready-made solutions but also a "thinking practitioner", "critical professional" and intermediary in program ideas re-shaped by children themselves. Therefore, teacher's role is very complex. He/she creates the conditions for life and work in the community, chooses and carefully models own professional techniques and strategies of work, constantly observes, monitors and evaluates the progress and development of the child, or a group with continuous self-evaluation of his/her own professional growth in order to plan improving the quality of educational process. The teacher creates opportunities for children's active participation in reviewing and discovering reality, relationships between people, events, questioning his abilities, without offering ready-made answers and rounded suggestions. In order to respond to these complex professional challenges, educators must reconsider missing skills and systemically and continuously develop competencies of the modern pedagogical context. In a poll regarding the question of urgent professional needs, the respondents singled out the key fields, where they need professional support.

Region	seminars which will enrich the practical knowledge	training for organizing drama workshops	training for teaching dance	workshops for making dolls	cooperation between kindergartens/institutions in the country and region	computer training	advancement to a higher degree	training to work with children with special needs (handicapped and gifted)	training in communications	training on music education	workshops on the individualization	Workshops on planning	Total
South	33	3	3	1	3	1	0	7	3	0	0	0	54
Central	16	11	0	16	10	3	2	12	4	8	1	1	84
North	41	1	2	4	3	3	3	9	1	3	0	0	70
Total	90	15	5	21	16	7	5	28	8	11	1	1	208

Challenges and obstacles: As one of the problems, our respondents in the central and coastal region (the northern region the situation is different) mention supernumerary educational groups that exceed pedagogical norms, and in such circumstances the work is extremely complicated, and space for children's active participation and full individual expression is limited. From interviews with the teachers we observed and marked some of the barriers in the current pre-school context: the incoherence of preschool institutions at the level of Montenegro; disconnection between preschools with the school; lack of literature, manuals, didactics... Teachers from the focus group interviews, in coastal/southern region pointed out, "The practice shows a lack of training of teachers to work with children in nurseries. Work with talented children is neglected too; there is no relevant research and publishing activities for children, as well as publishing of professional literature. "

Also, the respondents report that cooperation with parents , is only declaratively varied and intense. Most of the time, general parent-teacher meetings and individual exchanges of information dominate, while some modern forms of communication between families and kindergarten are often missing. The new paradigm of childhood, focusing on the child



as an active and competent, requires a systemic and holistic relationship between all relevant parties in the child's life, on the road to accomplishing so-called "Pedagogy of reciprocity." (Bruner, 2000)

## DISCUSSION

The study, which was devoted to the consideration of the dimensions of the revised pre-school context in Montenegro, which affirms a new paradigm of learning and development, notes both significant changes that were adopted in practice, as assessed by the surveyed teachers, and challenges for systematic and targeted intervention.

Surveyed and interviewed pre-school teachers from all three regions estimate that encouraging active learning in children (through participation) in preschools is present in a high percentage and that in this regard there is a pedagogical shift of the focus from the teacher to the child, and from the contents to the practical activities. The spatial organization of these institutions and work at the centers of interest essentially determines the quality of social interaction of children with each other, as well as children with their teachers. Children have the opportunity to learn from experience, through direct participation and cooperative activities, and the use of different cognitive processes - observing, manipulating, combining, research, and experimentation. Also, in the atmosphere in which educators open more space for independent action and decision making, temporal and spatial organization of learning are constantly changing. The practice, according to the respondents, evenly affirms all aspects of development in children, as well as all areas of activity (holistic approach). Instead of a frontal, unified approach and guided activities, the new context allows all parts of the day to be open for learning, even those which belong to routine daily activities (sleeping, eating). Replies of respondents from the three regions indicate the expected differences. While the number of children in the northern region is much smaller (population migration, lack of awareness of the need for the involvement of children in preschool institutions), central and southern regions suffer from supernumerary educational groups and rather cramped conditions for individualizing educational actions and developing the distinctive quality of children. Also, in interviews, educators articulate the need for better designed and dedicated to structured training. Respondents point out that the context of preschool is dynamic and open, but that cooperation with parents, as important actors in the life and work of kindergarten, is to a large extent routinized, reduced to the old external actions.

As a part of the open question, created for the purpose of identifying the strengths and shortcomings of the reformed system in Montenegro, surveyed and interviewed educators have stated the following recommendations for promoting this segment.

### Recommendations :

- It is essential to systematically improve the position of the preschool segment at the level of the overall educational and social context in Montenegro's milieu ;
- Educational- teaching process should be more flexible , i.e. it is important to improve interaction and active participation of all children in the upbringing and educational context , to improve the overall atmosphere culture in educational groups/ kindergarten;
- It is necessary to stimulate research practices, openness of institutions "inside and outside ", as well as to involve all stakeholders intensely, methodically and functionally because kindergarten is a "living system" (Fullan, 2000 : 106 ) ;
- Cooperation with the family and environment must be diverse and eventful;
- There must be respect for the educational standards in terms of the number of children in educational groups; it is also important to "stretch" time and space "boundaries" in kindergarten , increase the enrollment of children in pre-school context (today it is 30 %);
- Changing the attitudes of participants in the preschool context about the necessity of a permanent change of the kindergarten into a "learning organization ";
- Encouraging personal and autonomous engagement of children in learning;
- Improving professional training and basic university education.

Finally, high-quality, developmentally promising improvement of preschool education, largely depends on the current social reality, but also on the implicit image of a child, childhood, and education model of all professionals. Environment for learning , spatiotemporal organization, the quality of social-emotional reactions in kindergarten, pedagogical and psychological

environment of learning, imply a fundamental orientation of educational professionals who create and develop preschool system in their communities.

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