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Assessing and ensuring preschool quality in Slovenia – a systemic analysis and overview of the current state of affairs[1]

Abstract: The authors analyze the systemic solutions of assessing and ensuring preschool quality at the process level and address the questions of whether and how quality policies at the global level influence the considerations and solutions of preschool quality evaluation in Slovenia. The documents adopted by many organizations at the global level focus increasingly on assessing quality in terms of its effectiveness, and the effectiveness is related to society's economic development and strength, as well as the "added value" to which preschool education programs contribute. Emphasis is placed on the children's fitness for school, and the effectiveness of preschool education is measured in terms of the children's school and life achievements (employability, welfare). The authors of the article rely on the thesis that quality preschool education should plan, conduct and evaluate the educational process in pursuit of the goal of educating a free, autonomous and critical subject. Quality indicators at the process level define the key points that impact the quality of preschool education and that are reflected in the child's social and emotional responses, communication, behavior, and the acquisition of new experience and knowledge. Therefore, they start by considering the concept of the current *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999), because it is crucial in designing and understanding the evaluation of educational work in preschools. They conclude that the *Preschool Curriculum* (ibid.) is designed in a way that perceives the process of education as a goal in itself with a value of its own, taking precedence over the results that children attending preschool should attain. They also analyze the solutions that relate to the models of preschool quality assessment and assurance in Slovenia. They demonstrate that despite two projects financed in the past to establish and successfully evaluate a conceptually well thought out model of preschool self-evaluation, decision-makers have not been building on their further development or implementation in preschools. Rather, they have focused on the development of a new "common model" of quality evaluation for the entire educational vertical, which emphasizes learning and teaching children and their achievements. The authors write that still today we know little about important aspects of preschool process quality. The latter requires preschool educators to evaluate critically (and monitor) an educational process that foregrounds the child's development and learning in interaction with adults and preschool peers. This also means we know little about whether the educational process is planned and conducted to work toward the goal of educating a free, autonomous and critical subject. The decision-makers (i.e., financing policies) are simply not interested.

Keywords: process quality, curriculum, preschool quality (self-evaluation) in Slovenia, children's achievements, preschool education, kindergarten

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Introduction[1]

The quality of preschool education has been the subject of many expert debates for at least two decades (see Lamb 1998; Vandell and Wolfe 2000; Janta 2016) and resonates in the policies of many global organizations (for example, UNICEF 2012; UNESCO 2014; UN 2015; International Monetary Fund 2015; World Bank 2015; OECD 2015). The documents endorsed by these organizations (see ibid.) focus increasingly on assessing quality in relation to efficiency associated with economic development, economic power of society, and the "added value" the preschool educational programs generate. At the forefront is children's readiness for school, while the effectiveness of preschool education systems is measured by the learning outcomes of children[2] in school and their achievements in life (employability, general well-being as adults). Economists, for example Heckman (2008, 2012), write that financial investment in preschool education can be very profitable.[3] We will examine more fully below our observation that the policy decision-makers of various countries appear to be less interested in procedural quality, as it relates to development and implementation of the educational process, primarily to ensure optimal conditions for the child's development and learning, as well as for the development of a free and autonomous personality. Providing structural quality, which contributes significantly to process quality, is considered a burden and an unnecessary investment, rather than a reflection of the concern for quality childcare[4].

Applying the described perspective at the global level and also to Slovenia specifically is illustrated by the results of two studies (Bole et al. 2016; Bole and Rebec

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[2] See footnoote 1 in the Editorial in this issue of Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies.

[3] Canada, for example, has calculated that every euro invested in preschool education "brings" $6 of savings to the state (with a conservative estimate of $4 of savings). In the US, however, it was calculated that the dollar they bring into preschool education brings with savings of 16 dollars (CBC 2017, NCSL 2018).

[4] See the introductory text of this issue of the Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies

2017), which were proposed and financed by the Union of Education, Science, and Culture (SVIZ), the largest trade union in the field of education in the Republic of Slovenia. The trade union sought arguments against the constant reduction and rationalization of resources in the education system. In the context of such debate, we reckon that the union wanted to introduce "objective data" to the public and to policy-makers, demonstrating that Slovenia's education system is high quality and efficient in light of the budget allocated to it and that further financial rationalizations will have negative consequences on its quality (see SVIZ 2017).

The results of both studies suggested that the Union had been caught in its own trap. The effectiveness of preschool education in kindergartens was measured by the results children attained on international knowledge assessments in later years, and those results showed that the preschool education is not efficient enough, given the financial investments in the system. The research conducted pointed out that the availability of kindergarten increases the performance of immigrant children, and especially of children whose parents had a lower education level, on international knowledge assessments taken at the end of their elementary education (TIMSS[5], PIRLS[6]) by up to 36%, as compared to children who did not attend kindergarten and whose parents had elementary education only. The effect of kindergarten on performance for these children is significantly greater than the effect on the entire population of children of the same generation who were included in kindergarten programs; therefore, in this context, this subsystem of education was deemed ineffective (Bole et al. 2016, pp. 28-31).

By comparing the results of several groups of pupils[7] who had been involved in kindergarten for varying periods and who participated in the TIMSS 2015 study, Velimir Bole and Peter Rebec (2017) concluded that in Slovenia, the influence of including children in preschool was almost negligible on their success in tests of knowledge in mathematics and natural science at the end of primary school. Three years of a child's attendance in kindergarten, compared to one year, increases the pupil's performance on international knowledge assessments by only about two percent (ibid., p. 9). On the basis of these results, the authors concluded that in Slovenia, "the relative ineffectiveness of preschool education of children" is notable (ibid., p. 10), while the "expenditure per child is relatively high, compared to other developed countries" (ibid., p. 7), because Slovenia is "way over the median of developed countries" (ibid.). Thus, policy-makers tend to understand this message literally as "too much investment means low efficiency and quality," judging from the data and calculations from assessments of the subsequent learning outcomes for children who attended kindergarten. It does not, however, consider whether the expenditure per child for the structural and procedural quality of kinder-

[5] TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) is an international study of trends in mathematics and science. It is carried out in four-year cycles, measuring knowledge of mathematics and natural science among pupils of the fourth and eighth grades of primary school through the use of uniform knowledge tests (Pedagoški inštitut 2008).

[6] PIRLS is an international reading literacy survey. It examines reading literacy of 9-10 year olds (Pedagoški inštitut 2008a).

[7] See footnote of the Journal of Contemporary Studies.

garten is high or at least appropriate, as reflected in the quality of children's lives and in ensuring and implementing the conditions for the optimal development of personality and education of children, factors which are not and cannot be measured with only the results of knowledge assessments in the continuation of schooling.

Below, we analyze the systemic solutions for assessing and ensuring the quality of kindergartens in Slovenia at the procedural level, stemming from the thesis that "the indicators at this level define the key points of preschool education that influence the quality of work in kindergarten and are mirrored in children's social and emotional responses, communicating, behavior, acquiring new experiences, and knowledge" (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002, p. 41). Therefore, we consider that the analysis must first reflect the concept of the established preschool curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999, hereinafter referred to as the Curriculum), since it is crucial for the conception and understanding of the evaluation of educational work in kindergartens. We are also interested in how and whether quality policies at the global level affect the solutions and reflections on evaluating the quality of kindergartens in Slovenia.

Preschool curriculum and the model for assessing and ensuring the quality of preschool education in Slovenia

Goal-oriented and process-development planning of a partially structured curriculum

The current *Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999) is based on the goal-oriented and process-development strategy of curricular planning. The reason for such an expert decision is based on the requirement to change from the formerly established content-oriented strategy of curriculum planning and implementation of the *Educational Program for the Upbringing and Care of Preschool Children* (Vzgojni program … 1979, hereinafter referred to as the *Educational Program*) and the *Educational Program for Preparing Children for Elementary School* (Vzgojni program … 1981). According to the *Educational Program* (ibid.), "the most important task of kindergarten was preparing children for school" (Bela knjiga … 1995, p. 45). Both of these programs defined precisely the contents of the educational process for each year of a child's age. With older children, "the dominant content was in the field of cognitive development, while in the 'preparing for school' program, the content related to the acquisition of academic skills." (Bela knjiga … 2011, p. 84). Even more so than in the *Educational Program* (Vzgojni program … 1979), "the schooling at the preschool level was evident in its practical use, which was characterized by detailed timing and duration of all elements of the agenda, and detailed content and methodical design of preschool activities [i.e., activities led by the preschool teachers who provide children with content determined by the Curriculum – author's note]" (Bela knjiga … 1995, p. 45).

The drafters of the new curriculum revealed the weaknesses of the scholarised kindergartens, so they did not merely decide on a relatively simple transition from the content-oriented to a goal-oriented strategy in planning the life and work in the kindergarten, where the goals would be linear and hierarchically set in advance, and where teachers would help children achieve these goals with "more operant conditioning," as Kroflič (2002, p. 177) puts it.

They assumed that not all learning objectives can be expressed simply in the form of desired behavioral changes, and that there is no simple causal link between the set goals and their implementation; the effects of pursuing goals are often unpredictable, even undesirable, so teachers can feel split between intended goals and the actual educational outcomes. The educational process also cannot assume that the educational effects will follow the linear and hierarchical scheme, but will instead follow them according to their set goals, writes the author (ibid., p. 179). In such planning, consideration of the role of the child in realizing the set goals can easily be overlooked, and the relationship between teacher and child can be instrumentalized to the extent that it becomes difficult to "establish a transference relationship" (ibid.). A goal-oriented strategy of curriculum (similar to the content-oriented one) therefore does not protect the kindergarten from normativity or from blindly following externally set goals. The authors of the curriculum document have thus acknowledged that teachers can "lose the child" by applying such strategy, as they direct their activity predominantly to learning outcomes, putting children's cognitive development at the forefront.

The shortcomings of a goal-oriented strategy of curriculum planning could be overcome through the use of the process developmental strategy (see Kelly 1989, p 84-113), which guides preschool teachers to formulate educational objectives as they go, in accordance with general principles as well as children's interests and needs. Such planning aims to achieve results throughout the process, not just the consequent effect from realizing the precisely set and operationalized objectives of the curriculum (ibid., p. 98). The combination of the two planning strategies safeguards against the weaknesses in the process-development planning strategy: key among them is that its content and incompleteness can very easily become an area for justifying inconsistent, poorly thought out and badly planned educational practices (Kroflič 2002, p. 205). This is also the main reason that Slovenia decided not to implement the concept of the so-called open curriculum, as Iannacci and Whitty (2009) write, according to which the teachers respond only to the child and to his or her "corpus of knowledge" (ibid., p. 9), while the goals for life and work of the kindergarten are fully formed as they go, based on "education as hearing and responding to the voices of children in their everyday lives" (Cannella 2008, p. 162). The teachers in such a model create the conditions for the child's active research and design of knowledge (Terhart 2001, p. 168), following the children's interests and needs, and adapting the educational process to them. The open curriculum develops in the process of negotiation between teachers and children, who "establish common meanings" together (Rinaldi 1998, p. 113; see also Moss 2013). The inventors of the *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999), however, took into account that among the critiques of any pre-planned curriculum (e.g.,

Malaguzzi 1998; Dahlberg and Moss 2005; File et al. 2012; Dahlberg et al. 2013), one should not neglect the fact that in Slovenia we have a widely diverse public network of kindergartens in which all children, regardless of the kindergarten they attend, must have realistic equal opportunities for the optimal development of personality and learning. The partially structured curriculum with general goals and activities, and with tasks assigned to significant adults (see Siraj-Blatchford 2002) presents less risk for a systemically just and quality preschool education. It is also more in line with the objective reality of educational practice. It precludes the notion of unprofessional arbitrariness of teachers and of practices that have the opposite effects from the desired. Since it is only partially structured, it gives the teachers enough space and time for individual observation of children as to their motivation, and for introducing such forms and methods in the management of the educational process that promote understanding, criticality, responsibility, active use of knowledge, eradication of prejudices, etc. (Kroflič 2001, pp. 15-16).

The convergence of the different ways of planning the *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999) and its partial structure provide further safeguards against the shortcomings of both planning strategies, as well as against shortcomings inherent in complete openness and unstructured curriculum (see Kovač Šebart 2012, p. 4; Hočevar et al. 2013, p. 481). Of course, the concept does not answer questions of how and whether the solutions are properly implemented in practice. We can only judge this on the basis of the results of research concerning the procedural quality of kindergartens.

Structure of the curriculum for kindergarten

At the outset, the *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999) defines goals on which its basic concept and principles for their realization are based. This is followed by the introductory chapter on the development and learning of children in the broader social and cultural context, following the theoretical bases of various scientific disciplines. In the central part of the *Curriculum*, six areas of activity are defined: movement, language, art, society, nature, and mathematics.[8] For each area of activity, global objectives are defined, and generally formulated objectives are derived therefrom, as well as examples of activities and the role of adults (see ibid., pp. 18-75). Teachers should understand the principles and set goals, but transform them independently into operational plans for concrete educational activities (Kroflič 2001, p. 16). Their role in reality is not and cannot respond only to the child's needs and currently expressed interests, but must enable and promote activities in the area of proximal development, that is, the activities the child would not undertake on his own, but is able—from the developmental-physiological viewpoint—to follow or perform and excel in them with the help of an adult (see Vigotsky 1977, p. 259; Marjanovič Umek 2010).

[8] Some cross-sectoral activities (for example, health care, traffic education ...) intertwine through all areas and form part of the way of life for children in kindergarten (ibid., p. 7-8).

Conception of the curriculum therefore adheres to the idea that teachers in the process of education will follow the general, pre-set goals to include children in the planning of operational goals and activities. With the contents and methods through which children achieve the set goals, their interests, wishes, and needs are taken into account (see Kurikulum za vrtce 1999, p. 12 and p. 16). This assumes that the principles of activity, development of closeness, individualization, experiencing, etc. (Klafki 2000) are among the basic didactic principles which can sensibly be applied in the field of preschool education, namely as they express the general guidelines and conditions for a successfully methodical carrying out of the educational process in terms of its aims, contents, and organization. That is to say, these principles presuppose that children, their needs, benefits, and development, are crucial to the professional considerations of how curriculum is planned and followed (see Hočevar et al. 2013, p. 482).

What we have written so far is shown in the "principle of active learning in all areas of a child's development and learning," which reminds the teachers that they need to provide a stimulating environment for learning and development for the children, to guide them in both a planned and an unplanned manner, and to follow their self-conceived initiatives.[9] Following this principle, the professional attention of the teachers is also directed toward the development of the children's sensitivity to identifying problems and reflecting on them: they accustom the children to use different strategies and tools to help them find solutions to different problems, and encourage them to verbalize (use language for different functions) and to use other means of expression, taking into account the child's individual needs and interests and their right to privacy. The teachers, therefore, indirectly promote the child's activity, support the child's learning, and guide them—to observe, imitate, examine (manipulate things and materials), construct, solve problems and comment on them—through the activities they are planning and through guided and independent games. The children are encouraged to ask, listen to others, resolve conflicts, and deal with others (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999, p. 16-19). The process of education is understood "as a goal on its own, with a value of its own" (Kroflič 2002, p. 180), which takes precedence over the "results".

Development of models for assessing and ensuring the quality of kindergartens in Slovenia

One of the objectives of the *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999, p. 10 and p. 16) points to the need to increase the critical evaluation of professionals in planning life and work in kindergarten and the day-to-day interpersonal interactions in the department; to the need to create individual fields of activity, content and methods of work, and everyday order in the department; to the need of providing

[9] Preschool children cannot learn everything through the process of play, because besides child's play, there are other types of activities that can be equally or more professionally important and justifiable than the play itself, depending on the goals pursued by the kindergarten teacher (Marjanovič Umek and Lešnik Musek 2001, p. 150).

the necessary conditions for the implementation of preschool education; to monitoring the development of the class and of an individual child, etc. Pursuant to this, the ministry financed the developmental research project called *Assessing and Ensuring the Quality of Preschool Education* (2000-2002, hereinafter the *Quality Project*), in which experts developed the most comprehensive model of quality assessment and assurance of kindergartens in Slovenia. At the procedural level, there are four areas for quality assurance in kindergartens: curriculum planning, curriculum implementation, routine activities, and children in the process of curriculum implementation. The model is based on self-evaluation but also enables evaluation with external experts who can help in detecting and analyzing, finding approaches for the self-assessing of teachers, and also in finding strategies for resolving possible problems in kindergarten. External experts can only assume an advisory and support role, but not supervisory. Concern for the quality of education is transferred to the institutions and to the teachers in them (Gaber et al. 2011, p. 39). The results of self-evaluation of quality and the plans for preservation and assurance of quality can only be presented to the public by kindergartens if, at its planning stage, all participants of the (self) evaluations in the institution agree to it (Marjanovič Umek 2002, p. 67).

In the project, researchers also prepared evaluation tools for assessing the processual quality of kindergartens. They created three questionnaires for parents, for managers, and for teachers that "include all levels of quality" (Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 81). The survey, for example, includes questions about the characteristics of the department and about the satisfaction of teachers, about the planning and implementation of the curriculum as it concerns the processual quality of the kindergarten. They also prepared an evaluation scale concerning the processual quality of the kindergarten: the first one enables teachers to assess both the desired as well as the actual work in the kindergarten. It also provides an assessment of the importance of a particular activity for a quality educational process and an opinion on the frequency of the execution of this activity in the department, while also reflecting the relation between the ideal and the actual work of teachers in their department. Estimates and a comparison of the desirable versus the actual performance of educators serve as a guide to their educational behavior concerning the social and emotional development of children and the promotion of the child's thinking. With the second evaluation scale, the teachers assess their usual behavior in the department concerning the use of speech, movement and interactions with children (e.g., declarations about their informal use of speech, on promoting language comprehension and expressions of children, about responding to children, on the implementation of activities that promote lesser and greater movements of children, and about taking into account individual differences between children in movement activities, etc.) (ibid., pp. 145-173).

In the framework of the research project entitled *Self-evaluation of Preschool Education in Kindergartens: Quality Assurance* (2003-2005, hereinafter referred to as the *Self-evaluation Project*), researchers in seventeen different kindergartens from different geographical backgrounds tested the model of self-evaluation and

evaluation tools prepared by the *Quality Project* (2000-2002).[10] They also designed and applied a scale of social interactions with children (the adaptation of the Arnett scale (1989)), which includes four sub-scales; they refer to the positive interaction of the educator with children—the manner and the quality of communication, as well as the involvement in work with children—and the negative interaction of educators with children and the control over them, their emotional and behavioral restraint towards children, the social interaction of teachers with children, and their behavior in disciplining children. In the project, researchers also prepared evaluation scales for assessing the inclusion and well-being of an individual child: they monitor, follow, and evaluate the child in various activities on the basis of prepared criteria of the child's well-being. Similarly, the involvement of a child in activities related to the quality of his or her activity is also assessed (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2005, pp. 123-129).

A brief presentation of the model considered for assessing and ensuring the quality of kindergartens at the procedural level shows that it is based on a thorough understanding of the concept prescribed in the Curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999). According to this model, the quality of kindergartens is assessed and ensured at the structural, indirect, and procedural level, thereby enabling one to create a comprehensive picture of the quality of the institution. The model declines to use the results of self-evaluation to supervise teachers and kindergartens.

There is no political interest in systemically introducing a comprehensive model of self-evaluation from the Quality Project (2000-2002) into kindergartens.

After assessment of the aforementioned model of self-evaluation in seventeen kindergartens, activities in the field of quality assessment and assurance (according to this model) died down due to the absence of systematic and financial support (Gaber et al. 2011, p. 43). Additionally, the competent National Education Institute of Slovenia did not systematically monitor quality assessment and assurance in kindergartens (Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 84), although in 2006, the then-director of the Institute wrote a piece in the book *Quality in Kindergartens and Schools (2006)*, in which he said that the Institute's advisors will offer interested kindergartens "support at every step of the decision-making [of the self-evaluation – author's note], will advise them on research methods, and will play the role of critical friends at their request, with the help of their development teams" (Zorman 2006, p. 30).

In the academic year of 2004-05,[11] the National School for Leadership in Education (before the funding of the *Self-evaluation Project* (2003-2005) ceased)

[10] Each kindergarten has formed a project group that included teachers, counseling service, parents of children enrolled in the kindergarten, representatives of the local community, researchers from the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, and the regional advisor for preschool education from the National Education Institute Slovenia.

[11] A year later, under the auspices of the Slovenian Institute of Quality and Metrology, a model for determining and ensuring the quality of kindergartens called *The Quality for the Future of Education* was created. We are merely mentioning it in the text, as it has not been financed by public funding and was not systematically introduced and monitored by the competent institution. Kindergartens implementing this model of quality assurance and assessment follow the requirements of the ISO 9001 quality management system standard (Zavrl et al 2006, p. 55). To date, 11 kindergartens have received the certificate of quality.

included kindergartens in the execution of the self-evaluation model of the Networks of Learning Schools and Kindergartens (Erčulj in Trunk Širca 2000, hereinafter the Network Model) which has been executed in schools since the 1998-99 academic year. The model was based on a so-called approach of permanent school improvements and the approach of learning communities. It enables the monitoring of improvements in individual segments of the educational process in kindergarten as well as the training of teachers based on the experiences of others (collaborative learning). The goals of the Network Model (ibid.) are, inter alia, to train teachers to find solutions for problems that arise in their educational practice and to implement improvements, and self-evaluation of educational practices, when they detect a problem (Šola za ravnatelje … n. d.).

Despite the financing of two projects that established and successfully evaluated the conceptually well thought out model of self-evaluation of kindergartens, the decision-makers did not build on its further development and monitoring its introduction in kindergartens—instead, all activities in connection with it have completely ceased, and the funds were directed toward the creation of a new "common model" of quality evaluation (more on this below).

Evaluation studies of procedural quality of kindergartens in Slovenia

From 2000 to 2003, the Ministry financed three national evaluation studies to assess the then-new Curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999): *The Views of Preschool Teachers and Preschool Children Towards the Kindergarten Curriculum and their Qualifications for Introducing Change* (Stališča vzgojiteljic … 2002, by Breda Kroflič), *Daily Routine in Kindergarten and School* (Dnevna rutina … report is not available,[12] by Eva Dolar Bahovec and Sergij Gabrščeк), *Effects of Introducing Curriculum for Kindergartens in the Field of Communication and Socio-emotional Development of Children* (Učinki uvajanja … 2003, by Ljubica Marjanovič Umek).

In the period from 2001 to 2006, the Ministry financed the targeted-research project entitled *Influence of the Kindergarten on the Child's Development and its Success in School* (by Maja Zupančič, hereinafter referred to as the *Influence of the Kindergarten*), which was executed in two separate segments.[13] The research project was prepared in accordance with the requirements of the call for tender of the *Targeted-research Program Competitiveness of Slovenia 2001-2006*. One of the topics in the tender was the study of "human resources and social cohesion;" as part of this, the theme "School performance as a factor of social success—the implementation of European development orientations" has been published, with the aim of studying the "influence of psychological and sociological factors on school performance" in educational institutions (Javna agencija ... 2004). It

[12] The report is listed in the Cobiss database (2018), but „No library in the COBISS.SI database has a copy of this material." (Ibid.) Some of the data obtained from the study can be found in the text of Ksenija Bregar Golobič, published in the year of 2015.

[13] Ljubica Marjanovič Umek was responsible for the first part of the project, and Maja Zupančič for the second part of it.

is clear from the tender that the financier was interested in the implementation of European development policies and the impact of children's involvement in kindergarten on their development and learning, and their subsequent academic achievement.

The researchers prepared a longitudinal study, comparable to the studies that were carried out around the world in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in the Nordic countries (which have a preschool education system comparable to Slovenia's). They were interested in the importance of attending kindergarten in the early development of children, especially in relation to the factors of the family environment from which the child originates.

In the first part of the research project, the study focused on the effect of kindergarten on the children's speech and cognitive, social, and personality development in relation to several factors of the quality of the kindergarten and the family environment. They conducted several independent studies (e.g., on the effect of the child's age when entering the kindergarten and the effect of it towards various aspects of the child's speech development, on the effect of the kindergarten on the child's readiness for school) (Marjanovič Umek and Fekonja Peklaj 2008, pp. 131-135). They were interested in the effect kindergarten has on readiness for school in connection with the child's intellectual abilities, vocational competence and the education of his or her parents. In their contemplation, the researchers relied on the findings of foreign research (Marjanovič Umek 2009, pp. 70-73), showing that the developmental level of speech, cognitive and social development of a preschool child at the time of their entry into school is significantly linked to the child's learning success in their further education. Potential deficits in the development of the child upon entering school are rarely exceeded in later years of schooling. Early experiences, talents, abilities, and skills that children acquired in kindergarten before the start of formal education have, according to these findings, a significant effect on their current and later development and on performance at school. The children in the kindergarten[14] were evaluated by researchers for four consecutive years in various areas of development (social, personality, cognitive and speech). In the fifth year, after the children had entered school, they also evaluated their readiness for school.[15] In the last (fifth) year, the research sample was expanded with a group of students who did not attend kindergarten prior to entering school (Marjanovič Umek 2014, p. 18).

The results of the first part of the study, concerning children's speech development, showed that the effect of kindergarten or the age at which children attended kindergarten is relatively small, but increases in relation to the education of the child's mother. Thus, kindergarten has a significant effect on the development of children's speech in cases where their mothers have a lower level of education,

[14] A total of 274 three-year-old children were included in the entire study, of which approximately half were included in the kindergarten at the age of one and the other half at the age of three (Marjanovič Umek 2014, p. 18).

[15] They have prepared the *Assessment of the Preparedness for School* (Toličič and Skrget 1996; Toličič 1986), which includes visual tasks related to understanding of speech, reasoning, graphomotorical skills, and perception of quantity.

and on children who live in a family environment that is often less encouraging. The results of the study point out that the effect of the mother's education on a child's speech development increases with the child's age. An important finding of the study is that children who had parents with lower education levels but who were included in the kindergarten for a longer period significantly improved in the field of speech development in comparison with children who had parents with a higher level of education (Marjanovič Umek and Fekonja Peklaj 2006, p. 44). Children's speaking competence was also significantly linked with the child's readiness for school and with his intellectual abilities, regardless of the level of education of the parents and the child's involvement in kindergarten. The age at which children attended kindergarten, or the age at which children who have not attended kindergarten were included in school, did not significantly link with any of the assessed metrics of the child's development (speech competence, intellectual abilities, readiness to enter school). Children who were included in kindergarten at various ages or who had not attended it at all achieved comparable results in this study. In the group of children who did not attend kindergarten prior to entering school, the education of their mother and father had a significant influence on the child's readiness for school. The differences between the results of children whose parents had a high or low level of education were important. However, the education of the mother and father did not significantly affect the child's readiness for school compared to children who were enrolled in kindergarten five years before entering school. The collected data show that kindergarten reduces, to some extent, the effect of parents' education on children's readiness for school and provides those whose parents have a lower level of education with a more qualitative and simulative environment for development. In the group of children whose parents had a high level of education, those who had not attended kindergarten prior to entering school showed greater readiness for school. The effect of kindergarten was therefore not a significant factor in readiness for school for children whose parents had a high level of education. The education of parents along with the age at which the children were included in kindergarten, or the age at which children who had not attended kindergarten entered school, explains a noteworthy proportion, namely a 10% variance in the child's readiness for school. According to the results of this research, children's speech competence and intellectual abilities are better predictors than the education of the child's parents, which together accounted for 51% of the variance in children's achievements on the School Preparedness Test (Marjanovič Umek 2009, pp. 84-87).

In the second part of the study, researchers Maja Zupančič and Tina Kavčič (2007) studied the social and personal development of children in kindergarten and the correlation of their school performance in the first grade of primary school. They measured the development of character traits of children attending kindergarten, their non-verbal cognitive abilities and social behavior, which are the early predictors of the learning success of children at school. Teachers assessed the level of the child's achievement, however, by defined standards of knowledge in three subjects; Slovene, mathematics, and nature study.

The researchers compared the measured indicators of child development and the level of achieved standards of knowledge between first-graders who were included in kindergarten, and those who were not. They sought to determine the extent to which the individual characteristics of children, family environment, and kindergarten (including the age at which a child has entered it) contribute to the studied psychological outcomes and to the achieved level of standards of children's knowledge in the first grade of primary school. Along with conscientiousness and openness (which are character traits or features), the results showed that the general non-verbal cognitive ability of children in the first year of schooling is the predictor to which the extent of achieved standard of knowledge depends. According to the results of the research, rather than the characteristics of family environment and the age at which the child enters kindergarten (or if the child has entered it at all), the so-called robust character traits[16] and non-verbal cognitive abilities at the end of the first grade play a more important role in achieving standards of knowledge. Some of the characteristics of first graders played a significant predictive value in achieving knowledge standards; among them, non-verbal cognitive ability (predicting results in Slovene, mathematics, nature studies and in all three subjects together) and conscientiousness or openness, which the teachers themselves assessed (predicting results in Slovene, nature studies, and in all three subjects together). The set of children's individual characteristics best predicted learning outcomes at the end of the school year. Involvement in kindergarten prior to attending school significantly improved the prediction of learning outcomes in school, except for the results in mathematics. Based on the achieved standards of knowledge in the three subjects at the end of the first grade, the learning outcomes of pupils who were enrolled in kindergarten (N = 218) were significantly better than the learning outcomes of pupils who did not attend kindergarten (N = 158) (ibid., pp. 149-232). In the conclusion of the book, the authors state that early development of a child's consciousness and openness (statistically) makes an important contribution to social adaptation and to the learning outcomes of children in the first grade of primary school, and that this is a message that should be heard by kindergarten institutions. Although they did not determine the extent to which kindergarten involvement influenced the development of these character traits in preschool children,[17] they emphasized that perseverance, target orientation, organization in the planning and implementation of various activities, diligence, accuracy, maintenance of targeted attention, and curiosity are the character traits that are already relatively stable in early childhood, and that their stability increases with age. Therefore, they advised preschool teachers as well as their parents to have a deliberate influence on children's development in this direction, because they anticipated that influences in the kindergarten period are more effective than later, when children attend school.

[16] The character traits of younger children were combined into fewer robust characters: extraversion - emotional instability, conscientiousness - openness, neuroticism and unacceptability - expressing feelings of hostility.

[17] The authors did not measure the various areas of development of children who were not included in kindergarten prior to entering school; the parameters were measured only when these children were already in the first grade of elementary school (ibid.).

They also advised that children be systematically directed to conscientious behavior, motivating them to learn about new things and to learn in different contexts at home and in kindergarten (ibid., pp. 202-203).[18]

In the first part of the project called Influence of Kindergarten (2001-2006), the procedural quality of kindergarten was evaluated among five-year-old children. The second part of the project, however, did not evaluate the influence of the procedural quality of kindergarten on the social and personal development of children and their learning outcomes in the first grade of elementary school. We initially cautioned about a problem that may also concern this study and was already mentioned in the *Self-evaluation Project* (2003-2005). The researchers then noted that "the assessed effect of kindergarten on children's development and learning, regardless of the age at which the child entered kindergarten, [...] can be strongly distorted if we do not know the quality of the kindergarten at both the structural and the procedural level" (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2005, p. 17). Only such an assessment of the quality of kindergartens allows us to study possible differences in the development and learning of children who are involved in kindergartens of varying quality and to study the perception of critical points that need to be changed in the educational process in order to increase the probability that all children develop optimally in the area of proximal development (ibid., p. 87). Knowing and improving structural and procedural quality can therefore increase the probability that all children will develop optimally in kindergarten. Short and long-term effects on output quality indicators, such as children's vocational competence, readiness for school and learning performance, would consequently be more significant. This warning should not be ignored by decision-makers in the field of education in Slovenia.

In the text below we examine how and to what extent the warning was taken into account by the decision-makers in planning and financing the policy, as well as in the design of systemic solutions for assessing and ensuring the quality of kindergartens. We do not share the opinions of those who oppose any kind of evaluation of the influence kindergarten has on the results of children's learning (e.g., Moss and Lloyd 2013; Moss 2014) or who are against any kind of evaluation of children's development in different fields (e.g. Campbell-Barr and Nygård 2014; Vallberg Roth 2014). We do, however, consider it completely inadmissible professionally—and extremely harmful in child-raising and childcare practice—for the learning outcomes of children at school, including learning outcomes in kindergartens concerning readiness for school, to be the most important and fundamental criterion for the assessment of quality of preschool education (see the introductory text of this issue of the Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies).

According to all evaluation studies financed by the ministry between 2001 and 2006, the longitudinal study *Influence of Kindergarten* (2001-2006) was the first to discuss the effect kindergarten has on children's performance at school: it

[18] Adults are directed towards the systematic development of those abilities and characteristics of children that are consistent with the abilities and characteristics of children to be measured by the *International Early Learning Study and Child Well-being Study – IELS*) (OECD 2018) and the *Study on Social and Emotional Skills – SSES* (OECD 2018a), which we write about in the introductory text of this issue of the Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies.

followed a tender for research projects, which addressed the impact of "psychological and sociological factors on school performance" in educational institutions due to the development of "human resources" and "the realization of European development orientations" (Javna Agencija ... 2014). It is therefore not surprising that children's readiness for school was examined in the first part of the study. As the research has pointed out, in the context of the individual development of a child in kindergarten—a process which is not educational—only a comprehensive view of the procedural quality of the kindergarten enables examination of possible differences in the development and learning of children who are involved in kindergartens of different qualities, as well as the perception of critical points that need to be changed in the educational process in order to increase the probability that all children in kindergarten will develop optimally in the area of proximal development. Consistent observation of the results of the study (at least of the first part) leads to the requirement to design systemic solutions that highlight the reflection of different levels of procedural quality, the development of the child's personality, abilities, knowledge, and experience, as well as the conceptual understanding of the model of a valid curriculum document in the development, learning, and education of children.

Children's learning outcomes as a measure of the efficiency and quality of kindergartens in Slovenia

In accordance with the design of the quality model from the *Quality Project* (2000-2002), which enabled kindergartens to decide when, in which areas, and on which levels of quality they will self-evaluate and independently assess, assessment was not legally regulated until 2009. Article 17 of the *Amendment to the Organization and Financing of Education Act* (Zakon o spremembah … 2008) stated the responsibility of the headmaster for "quality assessment and assurance with self-evaluation, and preparation of an annual report of the evaluation of school or kindergarten" (ibid.). Among the competences of the board of the institution, Article 16 stated that the board "accepts the annual report on self-evaluation of school or kindergarten" (ibid.). Thus, the obligation of a kindergarten to carry out self-evaluation of quality was enacted. The model of self-evaluation itself, according to which kindergartens should evaluate the quality, was not prescribed by law.

New conceptualization of quality assessment and assurance of kindergartens

The adopted legal solutions were followed by financing the project *Design and Introduction of the System for Assessing and Assuring the Quality of Educational Institutions (kindergartens and schools)* (2008-2014, hereinafter the *KVIZ Project*). It was executed by the National School for Leaders in Education and included eighteen kindergartens (Končno poročilo ... 2014, p. 9). The project was financed by European Structural and Investment Funds.

While planning the project, the Human Resources Development Operational Program served as a source (Operativni program … 2008). It underscored "improving the quality and efficiency of education and training" (Javni razpis ... 2008, p. 1). The goal of the project was the "development and implementation of a quality model of kindergartens and schools, and the definition of quality indicators at the national level (external evaluation) and at the level of kindergartens and schools (self-evaluation)" (ibid., p. 2). The self-evaluation model (and its design) created during the project was presented in the *Quality Assessment and Assurance: Theory and Practice of Introducing Self-Evaluation in Schools and Kindergartens* (Brejc et al. 2011).

It leaves schools and kindergartens to define data and criteria on the basis of which they will make improvements in the discipline that they plan to self-evaluate (ibid., p. 23). It defines three areas of quality assessment: learning and teaching, professional development of workers (preschool teachers) and headmasters, and management of the kindergarten. Self-evaluation focuses on learning and teaching or achievements of pupils in the broadest sense and "does not 'affect' all areas and all activities of kindergarten or school, which are defined in the annual plan" (ibid., pp. 18-19). They made such a decision because they believed that "quality in education cannot be changed and improved, if it does not change at its foundation—in the work in the classroom itself" (ibid.). For us, it is important that the field of learning and teaching children is also the central field of self-evaluation of the kindergarten and that texts concerning the project specify both the terminological use of "prevailing school" terminology and the significant non-differentiation of content between the role of kindergarten and the role of school (e.g. Brejc and Koren 2011; Brejc and Poličnik 2012). Children in kindergarten are included in the category of pupils taught by teachers who are working with them in classes. They do not even mention the specifics of kindergartens in the cited texts when they illustrate or explain the issues.

Unlike the well thought out model of self-evaluation from the *Quality Project* (2000-2002), we encounter the "globalized discourse" that "lacks critical potential for an analytical overview of the concept," in the writings of the model in question (Barle Lakota 2011, p. 68). For kindergartens, this is clear at first glance: the "learning and teaching" relation is mechanically transferred from primary school to kindergartens as if they were not two fundamentally different institutions. If we add to all this the focus on achievements, it becomes clear that the "common model of quality" does not take into account the design of the Curriculum (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999).

The *KVIZ Project* (2008-2014) introduced the *Protocol for the Introduction of Improvements and Self-evaluation in Schools and Kindergartens* (Brejc et al. 2014, hereinafter referred to as the *Protocol*), which is important for kindergartens as well. The text is structured by the stages of introducing and implementing improvements in the self-evaluation process. These stages are: planning of improvements, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation and reporting of improvements. When considering individual phases, "examples and tips" for schools are offered in the text (the term "school" includes both kindergartens and schools throughout

the text), and what they "should" pay attention to at each stage. In the document's appendix, questionnaires are added, which schools (the terminology here specifically talks about schools) can use in the process of self-evaluation. With the help of the questionnaires, they can assess the extent to which the expected standard of implementation of improvements and self-evaluation has been reached (ibid., pp. 65-68).

In the introduction, the text presents the fields of quality. They are defined as areas of basic operation that contribute to the realization of the school's mission (the terminology, which should also apply to kindergartens, is referring to "school" (pupil, school, teacher)). Learning and teaching (in addition to pupils' achievements) are again set as a priority, while other fields include school management and professional development of employees, climate and culture of the school, cooperation with parents, etc. Typical indicators are included for various fields, for example, in the field of "learning and teaching," the quality or correctness of students' responses, how the student compares, relates, and evaluates individual content, etc. (ibid., pp. 12-14).

Regarding the priority field, the text presents "the basic findings of pedagogy and psychology concerning learning and teaching," which are said to "benefit schools to thoroughly consider the issues of learning and teaching in their own situations" (ibid., p.12). Indicators for this field can be qualitative (e.g., description of satisfaction, attitudes) and quantitative (e.g., data from national knowledge assessment), and are shown as "indicators of knowledge, which are usually expressed in the form of taxonomic levels or standards of knowledge" (ibid., p. 14).

In the evaluation of the priority field (similar to the rest of the fields), educational institutions follow the principle of improving the quality of learning and teaching and of achievements of pupils (the writings stop mentioning children at this point) in the planning phase: they define an improvement plan for a period of three years and long-term goals in this field, which must be specific and measurable, and selected by the educational institution. The text takes into account the "different starting points and documents" (e.g., general goals of education from the Organization and Financing of Education Act), objectives from sectoral laws, results of national and international examinations of knowledge (e.g., Assessment of Knowledge, the matura examination, PISA, or PIRLS) and documents at the national and transnational level (e.g., the Lifelong Learning Strategy, the Literacy Strategy in Slovenia, Key Competences or Future Work Skills) (ibid., p. 29).

For the learning and teaching field, the following examples of goals are listed in the *Protocol* (Brejc et al. 2014) (the terminology is again associated with schools only): to improve the development of language for the efficient and creative use of speech; to improve the development of motor skills; to develop critical and logical thinking; to promote the development of the competence of learning to learn; to improve functional literacy; to improve reading for understanding; to strengthen work habits and pupils' responsibility; to improve teacher-student relationships; to reduce peer violence; to strengthen students' ability to monitor and evaluate their work and achievements; to strengthen the development of fundamental values (mutual respect, tolerance, responsibility, knowledge, work and learning habits); and to strengthen the concern for one's own health and a conscious attitude toward

the environment (ibid., p. 31). These include goals that can be followed in kindergartens (e.g., to improve the development of language for the efficient and creative use of speech; to improve the development of physical abilities and skills). But kindergartens in Slovenia, for example, cannot pursue the goal of improving pupils' reading literacy, as children in kindergarten are not taught reading, but they are taught to develop their pre-reading and pre-writing skills. Nonetheless we should keep in mind that this concept is not foreign to some educational kindergartens around the world. Similarly, the *Protocol* (Brejc et al. 2014) does not state a case that could easily be applied to preschool education in kindergartens, in this regard.

The defined goals are followed by the preparation of an improvement plan along with an action plan. Schools define the criteria for monitoring the achievement of goals. For the learning and teaching field, they set out criteria concerning the "knowledge and skills of students" (ibid., p. 32). They include information that will help schools follow the objectives pursued at the level of the activity of professional staff and the pupils' results. We again observe terminology that relates only to school – the same goes for all the represented stages of self-evaluation.

In the next phase of the self-evaluation process, the implementation of the planned activities takes place, and the effectiveness and efficiency of implementing planned activities to improve learning and teaching are monitored and self-evaluated. The *Protocol* (Brejc et al. 2014) lists and briefly presents various ways of monitoring, the implementation of the activities, and the realization of the goals set (e.g., a portfolio, a critical friend, teaching observations, mentoring), which enable the collection of data regarding the achievement of set goals, that is, the pupils' results and the collection of data regarding the process and effectiveness of the implementation of the planned activities. The collected data can be quantitative (counting and measuring, data on decrease, national knowledge assessments, etc.) or qualitative (descriptions of phenomena, characteristics, processes, or relationships, for example, satisfaction, opinion, etc.) (ibid., pp. 38-42). In order to monitor and evaluate student achievements and introduce improvements, educational institutions also use "the results of national (Assessment of Knowledge, Matura examination) and international (PISA, TIMSS) examinations of knowledge" (ibid., p. 68).

At the final stage of the self-evaluation process, educational institutions evaluate the set goals of improvements on pupils and teachers, groups (e.g., assets) and schools (ibid., p. 46). The institutions prepare a report in which, among other things, employees write their reflections on the results of the self-evaluation process, answering the questions: "What are the concrete results at the level of the implementation of the activity and the level of the results (achievements) of pupils? How do we know this? What do the data show? Can they be compared to previous years? Can the results be linked to the data of national knowledge assessments (Assessment of Knowledge, Matura examination)?" (Ibid., p. 48).

The *Protocol* (Brejc et al. 2014) has operationalized reflections as set out in the *KVIZ Project* (2008-2014): kindergartens are "lost" at both the terminological as well as the conceptual level here also. The document follows the field of learning and teaching (and pupils' achievements). The examples focus on school and lessons; the specifics between the two institutions are not established. Experts

(Vallberg Roth 2014; Alasuutari et al. 2014; Paananen et al. 2015) have already pointed out that the work is focused (albeit unintentionally or unreflectively) on the schooling of kindergarten practices. The preparation of the studied model of collective assessment and assurance of quality was not guided by a reflection of the specifics the two sub-systems of educational institution possess, as this would otherwise be suggested in the content and the terminology used. Therefore, it is completely expected that kindergarten staff (unlike those in schools, who believed the self-evaluation process in the field of learning and teaching encourages a more consistent and systematic monitoring of achievements of pupils) reported that the goals they set "are difficult to measure with the achievements of children" (Zasnova in uvedba ... 2013, p. 24). The objectives of the curriculum are not designed in such a manner that they would normatively determine what all children in a given age bracket should achieve; according to the current *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999), educational work in kindergarten is oriented towards the process and progress of an individual child in various fields of development and learning.

Writings concerning the project in question often talk about the achievements in the field of learning and teaching, but fail to warn that achievements of children in kindergartens cannot be understood as norms in development and learning representing the framework of the functioning of schools; therein they differ from the understanding of pupils' achievements in school, which specifically sets operational objectives and/or knowledge standards in the curriculum. Kindergartens speak of the achievements of the child's individual development, that is, the interaction between development (in the sense of disposition, maturity) and learning. Quality assessment and assurance in kindergartens should therefore be based on monitoring and progress of an individual child rather than comparing a child with predetermined standards (e.g. norms in development, standards of knowledge) that all children in kindergarten should reach at a certain age. Such understanding of children's achievements would allow a reflection on whether the kindergarten has created opportunities for the development and learning of each individual child in different areas of development and learning (Marjanovič Umek 2011, p. 65). According to the agenda of official guidelines and documents, as well as projects carried out by the competent institutions, it would be rather surprising if the (self) evaluation of quality of kindergartens would be based on the understanding of achievements of children as presented. Similarly, the *Preschool Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999) does not talk about teaching in the school sense of the word. Therefore, the established analogy with school in measuring the achievement of children, which concerns the basis of the self-evaluation of institutions, is professionally unacceptable.

Supporting the new model for assessing and ensuring the quality of kindergartens

As a continuation of the *KVIZ Project* (2008-2014), the *Establishment, Complementation, and Pilot Test of the Model of Quality Assessment and Assurance in Education - OPK* project (2016-2020) (hereinafter referred to as the *OPK Project*) was introduced and financed in Slovenia. Up to this point, the information about the

project was scarce.[19] The main objectives of the project are two: the establishment of a national quality assessment and assurance system with relevant indicators at all levels of education, and the preparation of a draft of "standards and indicators for the field of learning and teaching (subsections: achievements of pupils, and the development and learning of children)" (Šola za ravnatelje 2016). Along with the application for the input of compulsory indicators at the systemic level of education, they were to have been designed by August 2018. The quality assessment model that is being tested through the *OPK Project* (2016-2020), will "gradually be implemented in all Slovenian kindergartens and schools" (Nacionalni okvir… 2017, p. 15) after completion of the pilot phase of the project, in August 2018.

Open day material, prepared by the *OPK Project* (2016-2020), which provided information about the course of the project to kindergartens and schools, stated that they plan to follow and pursue the goal of "unifying the understanding and approach of self-evaluation of schools and kindergartens by taking into account sectoral specifics" (Brejc 2016, p. 7). However, the specifics of kindergarten are not evident from the material: although we come across terms such as "kindergarten, school" or "school, kindergarten," the content draws attention to a differentiated usage of different types of institutions. The term "children," throughout the text, is used in only one section, which explains that the task force for the preparation of indicators of quality (led by the National Examinations Center) will try to answer the question: "What do we want children, pupils, students to achieve (knowledge, skills, relationships, values …)" that was set in the priority field of learning and teaching, and its subsection of "achievements of pupils" (ibid., p. 11).

The specifics of kindergartens cannot be identified on the basis of the terminology used. Similarly, as the definitions of the accessible documents of a quality model are non-differentiated, and the preparation and launch of the model at the national level is justified by "international trends," it seems that we are faced with a structural fault, a fault revealing how, gradually but consistently, the expectations of international financial organizations, as we presented in the introduction, are being implemented in Slovenia and other countries in the field of preschool education. Slovenia draws from research funds and follows developmental orientations through public tenders that rely on preschool education as preparation for school. It is considered a factor of strengthening human resources, which in the long-run significantly influences the development of the economy, and consequently the development of the society as a whole, while leaving the structural and procedural quality, and optimal development of children, in the background. The same month we were finishing this text (September 2018), the deliberated quality model was to be gradually introduced into kindergartens in Slovenia, so numerous things remain unknown.

[19] The €1,000,000 project is being executed under the Operational Programme for the Implementation of the European Cohesion Policy for the period 2014-2020. The operation is partly financed by the European Union from resources of the European Social Fund (80%) and by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport as an intermediary body (20%). It is being implemented by the National School of Leadership in Education, National Education Institute of Slovenia, Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training, and National Examination Center. With the public tender, four kindergartens were selected for participation in the program (Šola za ravnatelje 2018a).

In order to finalize our conclusions on the considered model of quality evaluation, it will be necessary to wait for the prepared standards and indicators of quality for kindergartens that are being designed in the project. During the finalization and submission of this text, the data were not yet presented nor accessible to the public, although they should have been, according to the expected time frame. Not even the basic information on which we could conclude the final part of the analysis were made accessible. Answers to how kindergartens will monitor and evaluate the achievements of children, and how they plan to connect the improvements with the results of national (NPZ, Matura examination) and international (PISA, TIMSS) examinations of knowledge, will be indicative for the assessment concerning the discussions of this article. Will this integration be a basis for determining the effects of already established systemic and content solutions that have a "proven" positive impact on subsequent results for children in the assessment of knowledge, on the attainment of formal education, and on other achievements of children in life?

On the basis of texts analyzed, project reports and cases presented in the text, we estimate that the emergent model of quality assessment and assurance (at least in regard to kindergartens) will follow international trends and requirements of the concept of quality unreflectively, a concept that is "sufficiently universal precisely because it has never been adequately well defined," and thus, in essence, the "tendency to control" is being reinforced (Barle Lakota 2011, p. 68). We can only agree with Andreja Barle Lakota (2009), that "international research has developed many strategies to measure the quality of educational systems through achievements of pupils, indirectly creating standards and indicators that have, to a certain extent, linked national systems to the phantom community" (ibid., p. 68-69). However, as the author adds, belief in these universal concepts of phantom communities did not provoke questions: who defines standards, how internationally comparable indicators are created, etc. (e.g. ibid.).

At the time the *OPK Project* (2016-2020) is being conducted, the board of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport adopted the *National Framework for Assessing and Assuring Quality of Education* (Nacionalni okvir … 2017, hereinafter the *National Framework*). It states that the need to assess and ensure quality in the field of education is influenced by several factors, including increased sensitivity to the effectiveness of education systems and the awareness that high quality education is essential for employability, social cohesion and overall economic and social success in Europe (ibid., p. 4).

The theses are consistent with those presented in the introduction and affirm that in the field of preschool education, policies of quality at a global level are set in relation to the effectiveness of the latter. At the forefront is the expectation of equating the entry conditions of success at school with general economic and social success.

The document establishes a three-year cycle of quality assessment as part of the Kindergarten Development Program and the basis for further planning of edu-

cational work. In addition to the mandatory domains of self-evaluation,[20] which are identical to those proposed by the *KVIZ Project* (2008-2014) and the *OPK Project* (2016-2020), kindergartens will have to define precisely the selected domains and sub-domains that will be given special attention. The definitions of the optional domains will be based on the acknowledged needs of the kindergarten, enabling "better development and well-being" and "achieving the best results of working and learning" in children (Nacionalni okvir ... 2017, p. 24). Furthermore, we follow the requirements for compulsory monitoring of achievements of children in the process of self-evaluation in kindergarten, which are subsections of the learning and teaching field (ibid., p. 27). The statement in *Obligatory sections and subsections of quality monitoring* (ibid.) is noteworthy, as it states the parameters for assistance in monitoring the achievements of children in the priority field: the results obtained at national examinations of knowledge and Matura exams (e.g. ibid.). The text also lists potential data sources and the database manager, which can be used to monitor the achievements of children by self-evaluators in kindergartens: The National Examinations Center and the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education[21] are listed as managers.

Although the text explicitly states (which is a novelty in the texts analyzed) that these data define only one "dimension of quality assurance" (ibid., p. 24), it further notes that the results of this dimension "will be the basis for further planning of activities and quality improvement in kindergartens" (ibid., p. 25). *National Framework* (Nacionalni okvir … 2017), and further emphasizes that "an awareness of the correlation between the results and the processes leading to them is important" (ibid., p. 9), while at the same time states that quality assessment and assurance builds on the extraction of "data from existing databases, while ensuring their integration into a whole" (ibid., p. 10). Kindergartens will thus be able to obtain the collected data on national (National Examinations of Knowledge, Matura examinations) and international examinations of knowledge that are conducted by OECD and IEA (ibid., p. 13-14), from the databases of external institutions (e.g., the National Examinations Center, the Educational Research Institute). Thus, the basis for comparing the results of international examinations of knowledge with the achievements of children in kindergarten is established.

After analyzing the materials related to the *KVIZ Project* (2008-2014), its progression, the *OPK Project* (2016-2020), and the *National Framework* (2017), we established that, at least as far as it relates to their content, the Ministry and those involved in the design of the solutions did not take the specifics of kindergartens into account. While preparing the basis for all levels of educational institutions, they did not formulate a conceptually distinct model of quality assessment and

[20] Each year the Minister can set the indicators that are mandatory over a given period of time at the national level. At the level of educational institutions, the Minister can determine an additional section/subsection, which is in line with the national assessment of the needed improvements (Nacionalni okvir… 2017, p. 21).

[21] This text also follows the logic that was established in the KVIZ Project (2008), and which we also highlighted when we discussed the Protocol (2017).

assurance that would take into account the specifics of the role and functioning of kindergartens and schools.

Conclusion

Insight into the *National Framework* (Nacionalni okvir … 2017) and the conceptualization of quality assessment and assurance in preschool education, as well as research carried out in kindergartens in Slovenia, show that Slovenia is one of the countries that the *OECD Report* (in Curristine 2007, p. 2) mentions, where governments pay more and more attention to "creating incentives to increase the effectiveness of education" (ibid.). This points to a recognizable orientation in efforts to improve quality in relation to the effectiveness of early childhood education and the tendency to identify and measure the results of learning and achievements of children in kindergartens (OECD 2012, p. 298) and their comparison with the learning outcomes of children at school.

Arising from international analyses and recommendations for the development of policies in the field of assessing and ensuring the quality of preschool education, the analysis points to the uncritical and non-conceptual adoption of guidelines that we have been witnessing for some time. It also draws attention to how easy and, for policy-makers, unproblematic it is to transmit the guidelines for quality assessment and assurance from the level of elementary school to preschool education (reflections on teaching and learning in the "school" sense cannot be transferred to kindergarten). After analyzing the available documents, one might think that the policy-makers in Slovenia have overlooked the texts one of the responsible policy-makers of nearly twenty years ago wrote ten years before the creation of the *National Framework* (Nacionalni okvir … 2017), and the creation of a self-evaluation model in the *KVIZ Project* (2008-2014) and the *OPK Project* (2016-2020). At that time, she pointed to the danger that school policy would become increasingly concerned with the concept of quality, "only measuring what is sometimes difficult or impossible to quantify; that indicators of quality are too instrumental and insufficiently focused on the fundamental mission of [...] education" (Barle Lakota 2007, p. 37). The warning was completely on the mark. However, when it came to quality assessment and assurance in the field of preschool education, the policy-makers unfortunately did not take it to heart in regard to the implementation of systemic solutions. It seems that decision-makers followed the trend of "engaging in the measurement of efficiency;" moreover, they abandoned the model of quality for kindergartens, which included assessment and assurance of all levels of quality by connecting and thinking of them within the conceptual solutions of the *Curriculum* (Kurikulum za vrtce 1999). We can only hope that the picture we present will be different, when the materials with the prepared standards and quality indicators are published, and when it is possible to determine how the monitoring of children's achievements in kindergarten was conceived within the framework of the *OPK Project* (2016-2020).

We finalize this text with the conclusion that in regards to the important aspects of the procedural quality of kindergartens in Slovenia—which expects a

critical evaluation and monitoring of the educational process, in which the child who is developing and learning in interaction with adults and peers in the kindergarten is at the forefront, and in which the educational process is planned and implemented in pursuit of the goal of educating a free, autonomous, and critical subject—we still do not know much today. The analysis shows that this is not a priority for key decision-makers and funders of research.

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