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Theoretical starting points and characteristics of the National Curriculum for early and preschool education in the Republic of Croatia¹

Abstract: The contemporary conception of early and preschool education is based on a humanistic developmental paradigm orientation that stipulates that the child is an individual personality from birth and should be respected as such. In the educational process, the child is not an object but a subject who participates, (co)constructs and largely determines its own life and development. In the Republic of Croatia, the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) affirms the pluralism of humanistic development pedagogical concepts and the diversity of approaches in implementing educational work with early-aged children. The emphasis is placed on ensuring the quality of pedagogical practices, which implies respect for all aspects of child development as well as importance of both educators and parents in educational practices. According to its starting point and organisational strategic structure, the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) is oriented towards a transformational and open sub-constructural model of educational work instead of the traditional transmission model. The humanistic developmental and dynamic approach is the fundamental starting point highlighted in this document, as well as its openness and support of the initiative and activity of children. From an official point of view, the traditional paradigm—according to which the educator is a teacher, a knowledge provider, a leader and a controller of the educational process—is abandoned. By implementing and conducting the process of (self)assessment of early and preschool education, striving to ensure the culture of dialogue, the personal and professional responsibility of main participants, as well as the culture of self-assessment in the early and preschool education system.

Key words: early and preschool education, national curriculum, humanist developmental approach, educators, parents and guardians.

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Introduction

In contemporary pedagogy, the child is viewed as the subject of its own development. From a historical point of view, the origins of such a conception of a child are found in the works of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel, as well as in the Waldorf and Montessori theories of pedagogical concepts. Slavica Bašić (2011) states that: “From the encounter of the reformist-pedagogical thinking with cognitive and psychoanalytic psychology (Piaget, Klein et al.), emerged the idea of a child as a subject of self-development” (ibid., p. 25). The child is the co-author of its educational process and social relationships. Bašić specifically emphasises that the foundation of a child’s image is “the child as a social being and a child in social relationships” (ibid.). In light of the new paradigm and image of the child, the basic features are mentioned: the pedagogical way of viewing is an anthropological construct; there is no universal nature of the child; the child is actively and competently involved in the social context; the child has its own theories to be taken into account; there are no unique learning paths; the child learns self-initially but in social relationships; the fundamental relationships are the ones the child establishes with itself, the world and others; the child is a researcher of its material and social environment; the world has a subjective meaning for the child, which is the key to its relationship towards the world; the child needs another who will respond to its experience (ibid., pp. 31–33). According to the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) the definition of childhood is: “The period when lifelong learning competencies are being developed, including interpersonal and civic competences, awareness of the importance of environmental preservation and sustainable development, intercultural understanding, the skills of using information and communication technologies” (Kompetentni odgajatelji ... 2011, p. 14).

Contemporary social changes and challenges in all aspects of life stimulate the changes in the theoretical and practical paradigms of understanding the child and childhood, the role of its parents and the position and influence of encouragement in early and preschool education on child development. Social changes determine the conception of *The National Preschool Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014, hereafter National Curriculum), which is a fundamental document that assigns

special importance to the humanistic developmental and constructivist approach in encouraging child development.

Contemporary efforts to raise the level of *the National Curriculum's* quality focus on providing the best support for the personal development of the child. Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring the quality of pedagogical practice, which implies respect for all aspects of child development and the importance of educators establishing partnerships with parents or caregivers (Zloković and Nenadić-Bilan 2017). The definition of quality pedagogy practice that the ISSA provides, revises pedagogical standards: “early and preschool education services should cover all aspects of child development and should not only focus on academic achievements, but focus on individual needs of the child, and accordingly select the approaches that are most beneficial to its development. This starting point stems from the view that children are active participants in their development and changing the environment, citizens with rights and personal responsibilities. The role of the educator is to support the children to become responsible citizens, to develop empathy towards other people, to respect diversity, to acquire the skills necessary for formation, expression and argumentation of personal attitudes, to be able to listen to what others are saying and to respect the attitudes of other people” (Kompetentni roditelji ... 2011, pp. 13–14).

Considering the main overall objective of this paper—to analyse the paradigmatic-theoretical and qualitative value-organisational and strategic starting points of *the National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), as well as the quality of the institutions—the paper is conceived in accordance with this set goal and follows the humanistic developmental orientations when looking at the child's development through its active participation and interaction with the environment.

The paradigmatic and theoretical orientations of the National Curriculum in the Republic of Croatia

Through the humanistic developmental paradigm in *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), the plurality of pedagogical concepts and the diversity of approaches to early childhood education is affirmed. In a modern paradigm orientation, the child is affirmed “as a personality since birth and as such should be understood and respected; a child is not an object in the educational process, but an entity that participates, constructs and largely determines its own life and development; childhood is not just a preparatory stage for a future life, but a life period with its values and culture; childhood is the process of social construction, which children and adults build together; childhood is a process that is contextualised in relation to space, time and culture (socio-constructivism) and varies with regard to the different conditions and cultures in which it is taking place. As there is no universal child, there is no universal childhood” (Odluka o donošenju ... 2015, p. 3).

The National Curriculum (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) aims to achieve specific educational goals to ensure the wellbeing of the child, particularly: to encourage full development, upbringing and learning, to develop competences, to

exercise the right of children to equal chances and equal rights for all. *The National Curriculum*, as a fundamental document for the implementation of institutional education during the early life and preschool period, respects contemporary scientific knowledge and examples of good practice (Slunjski 2006; Whitebread and Coltman 2007; Jurčević-Lozančić 2010; Ljubetić 2014 and others, in the Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014, p. 3).

Considering the paradigmatic starting point, the scientific and practical foundation and the goals of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), it focuses on respecting the humanistic developmental theoretical concepts such as: philosophy of constructivism, socio-constructivism, social and structural developmental and integrative approaches, ecology of human development, constructivist and other humanistic developmental theoretical approaches. According to Piaget's philosophy of constructivism and co-constructivism, learning is not based on transmission and knowledge presents the self-construction of the child. Socio-constructivism is one of the most influential of Vygotsky's theories on how the social experience influences cognitive development (Vasta et al. 1992, p. 37). According to the socio-constructivist theoretical foundation found in *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), the child's knowledge is acquired and constructed in the process of social interaction. The interconnection of several factors is emphasised, and the development of the child in context and learning through experience appear to be the determinants of an individual's development. Cognitive development is the result of a dialectical process (Vasta et al. 1992) and, according to Bruner's (ibid.) theory, children build their own image of the world and manage to function in it both independently and in co-operation with others who are also trying to understand the world around them. Thus, learning becomes an interactive social process that involves children, educators and the environment.

An examination of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) concepts, such as its starting point, orientation values, principles, goals and key competences for lifelong learning, finds that the theory of social relations also represented here as a theoretical framework that respects the influence of the environment (parents, peers, educators, teachers, etc.) as emphasised by the importance placed on the child's activities in changing itself and its environment. According to this theory, the quality of the relationship between the child and its narrower and wider environment affects its development, level of self-regulation and willingness to cooperate. The child and the environment are in a reciprocal relation (Kuczynski and Parkin 2006). *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) structure also recognises the self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000 in ibid.), according to which each person is proactive, acts in the environment, answers to its influence and changes it considering its needs. In addition, every person has the need for freedom, making decisions, connection and competences as he or she establishes relationships with other people.

Particularly highlighted are the goals aimed at achieving successful interpersonal (social) functioning and developing social competences, as well as at establishing, developing and maintaining quality relationships with peers and adults. Communication in both the mother tongue and foreign languages strengthens the development

of basic competences for lifelong learning. Democratisation and emancipation of people in society inevitably implies communication and free dialogue with everyone, as emphasised by the Habermas's theory of communicative action (ibid.). In the process of socialisation, attention is paid to the development of an active subject and to the relationship between the subjects and superior levels (Tillman 1994 in ibid.). The emancipation and free dialogue of everyone, according to Habermas, reflects the state of a successful life (Rosić and Zloković 2002). Habermas (ibid.), the creator of critical theory, introduces the concept of communicative ethics and the concept of an ideal speech situation, which implies the idea of a clear kindness—an agreement of the participants during the discussion no matter of their positions, avoiding coercion and manipulation.

Humane relationships and the understanding of one's own and of other people's feelings are implied between children and other people, and are set forth in *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) as one of the important goals. Empathy is a coherent process that implies physiological, kinaesthetic, affective and cognitive aspects (Bratanić 1990). The achievement of this goal is found in parts of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) that primarily relate to the achievement of values related to promoting the development of humaneness, tolerance, responsibility and social welfare (ibid., pp. 5–8). In social and structural developmental theories, the parents or guardians have the primary influence on the moral development of the child (Colby and Kohlberg 1987). However, another dominant factor that influences the formation of the child's moral development is its relationship with its peers and the influence of social institutions, such as preschool institutions. Moral judgment assumes obligations, general values, perseverance, selflessness, determination, establishment of mutual agreements, adherence to rules of conduct agreed to between individuals and institutional rules of society (Nucci 1996). Children have qualitatively different social interactions through which they develop different types and systems of social and moral knowledge. In addition to the foundation of the "social area" theory (Vasta et al. 1992), one of the other generally accepted theories—Kohlberg's theory of moral development (Hart 1988, pp. 245–260; Powers 1988)—is respected in all aspects of the set goals, principles and orientation values that are found in the National Curriculum (2014, pp. 6–7). Traditional structural development theories (Colby and Kohlberg 1987) describe moral development as a process of enhancing the difference between a moral and an immoral concept, implying agreement, prudence, caution, knowledge and pragmatism.

Since traditional curricula are based on behaviourism, integrative theories try to surpass the behavioural approach to knowledge acquisition that results in unusable and mutually unrelated knowledge. The integrative model (Patterson et al. 1992) observes the functioning of the child through both cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic processes, and it systematically combines the interventions of different theoretical models while simultaneously examining and explaining the causes of the risk factors and the needs of the child.

In the ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979), a conceptual approach to the ecology of human development research is considered necessary. If human

development is to be fully understood, the interaction of the unique features of the child and the environment needs to be considered. *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), taking into consideration its starting points, orientation values, principles and goals, is based on the notion of the ecology of human development theory as a sign of reflection on the physical and social conditions for learning, as well as on the need to account for the differences in the way children think and learn. It states that "With regard to the active, integrated and research nature of children's learning, the developmental, integrated, humanistic and co-constructivist-oriented curriculum features, contextual conditions (environments) for the maintenance of various educational activities and the acquisition of diverse child experiences are planned, and not the precise course of their activities or fragmented learning contents" (ibid., p.15). The humanistic developmental approach is also emphasised in the constructivist theory. Contrary to the objectivistic approach, in which the child is perceived as an objective, static phenomenon, as a problem or as a person to whom scepticism arises, a constructivist approach according to Habermans and Klafka (in Mušanović 1998) looks at the overall position of the child and the complexity of the phenomena in its interaction process. As a fundamental principle of the constructivist paradigm holism, the man is conceptualised as a unique being not as a set of attributes. From a holistic perspective, the personality and freedom of the child should be taken care of. Developing a culture of responsibility towards children does not only imply the obligation of protecting and providing various forms of help to children but also of high expectations in accordance with the child's interests, needs and abilities (ibid.).

Pluralism in the interpretation of the National Curriculum

Contemporary pedagogy and pedagogical practice accept the humanistic developmental approach to children and education as a process. However, there are still traces of the traditional approach to educational practice and the influence of behaviourism as a theoretical course that "implies the process of education as planned exercise and habituation, algorithmic action with didactically shaped and mutually isolated content selected from a number of scientific disciplines that should by the means of 'mental training' lead to reactive learning" (Petrović-Sočo 2009, p. 124). Slunjski (2011) considers that the differences in the interpretation of the curriculum and its implementation in practice is the consequence of opposing approaches at different levels: ontology (between the objective and subjective interpretation of social phenomena), epistemology (between the static and dynamic state, the human as a passive or active being) and methodology (quantitative and/or qualitative approaches). Some argue that it is justified to equate the concept of curriculum with that of the plan and program (Jungck and Marshall 1992; Legrand 1993; Mijatović 1999; and others), while some others define curriculum as a document that is wider than the plan and program (Rosandić 2003; Matijević 2004; Bogнар and Matijević 1993), and the remainder consider the two to represent completely diverse terms that cannot be equalised (Rinaldi 1998; Miljak 1996; Bredekamp 1996). These

three approaches still exist in the practice of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), which is why some traditionally consider that preschool education in preschool institutions can be pre-planned, unified and controlled, with all the goals, contents and activities pre-set. The educator is an initial and executive centre and the unpredictable factors, which are the everyday factual situations and childhood initiatives, often provoke discomfort, disenchantment, tension and mutual misunderstanding, because such an approach promotes passivity instead of activity as a predominantly imposed option.

The authors of this paper agree with those who believe that educational practice is a unique and irreplaceable process, which implies strong support for the initiative and activities of the child. A holistically contextualised approach is considered to be crucial in encouraging children's development. Hopkins (in Slunjski 2011a, p. 193) compares the educational process illustratively with the game of chess, which has its own rules, certain fields and movements of the figures, and yet the same two games of chess are never played. Given the fundamental characteristics of educational practice—the unpredictability, authenticity and unrepeatability of the process, the curriculum as a theoretical concept develops from the practice of an individual educational institution and in each institution it is different, unique and unrepeatable. According to Slunjski (2011a), "The curriculum is a theoretical concept that is built in practice, constructed based on mutual learning, research and participation of all participants in the educational process. Two educational institutions cannot have the same curriculum, with this understanding of the curriculum one cannot 'have' it at all, it 'happens' through time and develops. Here the curriculum is described in the 'narrow sense.' The curriculum viewed in the 'broader sense' represents an official educational concept, common at the country level, prescribed by acts that contain the basic ideas and principles of education, living and learning of children in an institution of early education" (ibid., p. 196).

Understanding the importance of the curriculum also implies differentiating its forms: official (formal and assigned), real (connected with realisation) and informal (i.e. hidden curriculum) (Kelly 1989; Colin 1994; Miljak 1996). The official curriculum implies set goals, contents and methods associated with social values, while the informal—hidden—curriculum implies the influence of the socio-emotional aspect of the educational group and the fact that the preschool institution is a social space through which the child first enters society (Lepičnik Vodopivec 2004). The hidden curriculum has a special significance since it allows children to accept everyday habits during the first months of their stay at the preschool institution. Previously adopted habits are the foundation of the experiences that are acquired during education (Apple in ibid.). In both the official and in the hidden curriculum, a significant position is given to the personality of the educators, because "It depends on them what kind of education to choose, what kind of communication there will be between the child-parent-educator and what learning situations will be organised. If you choose a frontal form of teaching, communication will be one-way with its consequences, and the manner of teaching will be based on authoritarian style. The educator will look for his leadership role in the formal position and hierarchy of relationships" (Apple in ibid.).

The hidden curriculum fills the gap between the official curriculum and the goals of an educator who expects a certain behaviour, learning style or psychophysical abilities from the child, as well as those expectations that are not written but represent an important part of educational effectiveness (Kroflič 1997). The creators of the hidden curriculum are considered crucial and fundamental for the success of education for sustainable development (Lepičnik Vodopivec 2004). The positive or negative effects of the hidden curriculum depend on “the values of an individual and the dominant value system of the society in which the school operates, the overall classroom and school atmosphere” (Matijević 2010, p. 394). It is an implicit curriculum in which the educator’s image of the child is of special importance. Implicit pedagogy, i.e. an image of the child, directs the educators in their communication and interaction with children and adults.

Starting points, principles and values of the National Curriculum

According to the starting point and its organisational and strategic structure, *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) is oriented towards the transformational and open co-constructive model of educational work, instead of the transmissive model. The humanistic developmental and dynamic approach is a fundamental starting point highlighted in this document, as well as its openness and support of the initiative and activity of children. This requires the educators to possess knowledge, to be open to new things, to support and understand the child’s abilities, needs and interests, as well as to establish partnerships with parents and the local community.

Given the spatial limitation of this paper, the authors focus on some basic starting points, principles and values when analysing *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) concept, beginning with the basic documents: *Program Orientation of the Education of Children of Preschool Age* (Programsko usmjerjenje.... 1991), *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Konvencija ... 2001), *National Curriculum Framework for Preschool Education and General Compulsory and Secondary Education* (Nacionalni okvirni ... 2011), *Strategy for Education, Science and Technology* (Smjernice za strategiju ... 2012), *Handbook for the Self-Evaluation of Early Childhood and Preschool Education Institutions* (Priručnik za ... 2012) and *Strategy for Education Science and Technology Croatia* (Strategija obrazovanja ... 2014).

The basic foundations of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) are aimed at ensuring the inter-disciplinary compliance between the principles, values and goals, and a clear orientation on the partnership of all the participants in the design and implementation of the curriculum (Figure 1).

PRINCIPLES	VALUES
✓ Flexibility of the educational process ✓ Partnership with parents and the community ✓ Ensuring continuity in education ✓ Openness to continuous learning and willingness to improve practice	✓ Knowledge ✓ Identity ✓ Humanism ✓ Tolerance ✓ Responsibility ✓ Autonomy ✓ Creativity
GOALS	LIFELONG LEARNING - COMPETENCES
✓ Personal, emotional and physical welfare ✓ Educational welfare ✓ Social welfare ✓ Full development, upbringing and learning of a child and development of competences	✓ Communication in the mother tongue ✓ Communication in foreign languages ✓ Mathematical competence and basic competences in natural sciences ✓ Digital competence ✓ Learn how to learn ✓ Social and civic competence ✓ Initiative and entrepreneurship ✓ Cultural awareness and expression
PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM	
Contemporary understanding of the child and organisation of the educational process in the pre-school institution:	
✓ A child is a full being ✓ A child is a researcher and an active creator of knowledge ✓ A child is a social subject with specific needs, rights and culture ✓ A child is a creative being with specific creative and expressive potentials ✓ A child is an active citizen of the community	
CULTURE OF THE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTION	
✓ Encouraging spatial and material environment ✓ Encouraging social environment ✓ Management of the preschool institution	
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTE CURRICULUM	
✓ Integrated ✓ Developmental ✓ Humanistic ✓ Constructivist and co-constructivist	
PLANNING AND FORMATING OF THE CURRICULUM OF THE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTE - CONTEXTUAL CONDITIONS	
With regards to children	
✓ Documentation of the children's activities—individual portfolio, children's works (both individual and group) ✓ Self-reflection of the children ✓ Narrative forms ✓ Observations of the children's achievements	
With regards to the educators	
✓ Documentation of the educators' activities—individual and group portfolios ✓ Self-reflection and common reflection of the educators and other preschool professionals	

Figure 1: Structure, organisation and strategies of The National Curriculum (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014).

Assuming the respect for the opportunities, needs and interests of the child, expressing his or her proposals and initiatives, active participation in educational activities, adaptability to the conditions and culture of the environment and appropriate responses to the needs of parents (in the offer of a child program, flexible organisation of child acceptance, daily rhythm—nutrition adaptation, daily rest, promotion of the rights and needs of the child or finding the necessary information, resources and services that can enhance the development of the child) is considered situational adaptability and flexibility by *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014, pp. 3–4). The principle of *flexibility* starts with the belief that: “Learning is an active, subjective process of constructing an individual’s knowledge that can only be initiated externally but it cannot be directly controlled, and that in different subjects of learning (children and adults) it occurs neither in the same order nor in the same speed. The application of the principle of flexibility enables full learning of children and adults by actively questioning pre-constructed concepts and continuity in building new ones” (ibid., p. 3).

In order to successfully realise the principle of flexibility, the determination of strict weather, spatial and organisational patterns should be avoided. Everything that restricts, prevents or disregards the individual rhythms of children and their interests is contrary to the principle of flexibility. The successful implementation of this principle is reflected in the respect of the rights of every individual in a preschool institution, as well as in ensuring “meeting specific needs, personal rhythms and individually different strategies for teaching children” (ibid., p. 13).

The principle of *partnership with parents and the community* is achieved through “the conditions in which parents or children’s guardians, are allowed to spend time with their children in the educational groups, to monitor and actively participate in the immediate educational process and to get acquainted to their own children in a different context from the one within the family” (ibid., p. 14). The educators are focused on recognising the needs of the parents. They regularly inform them, and support and empower their parenting skills. *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) aims towards the active involvement of parents in joint decision-making so that the parents become the partners of the educators, acting as promoters of preschool institutions and mediators in the partnership with the local community (ibid.).

The principle of *ensuring continuity in education* allows for the child’s right to education to be upheld in order to remove the obstacles that are a possible source of stress and discontent among children, parents and educators before and during the transition to the subsystem and between the systems. The basic task of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) is to provide the preconditions for unhindered and “more natural” passage/continuity in education (ibid., p. 16).

The principle of *openness to continuous learning and the readiness to improve practice* is achieved through “continuous research and improvement of the quality of the educational process by the practitioners themselves - educators and other experts; training of practitioners - educators and other experts for research and active reflection of their own educational practice; connecting all participants in the educational process that learn, explore and change the educational practice

and share that experience with others (especially other experts and parents) in the communities they teach” (ibid., pp. 16–17). *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) encourages the formation of so-called developmental centres that would be trained to assist in professional training of employees.

Values, as a guide for the achievement of educational goals, are derived from the “commitment of the Croatian educational policy for the whole personal development of the child, to the preservation and development of the national, spiritual, material and natural heritage of the Republic of Croatia, to European coexistence and to create a society of knowledge and values that will enable progress and sustainable development” (ibid., p. 19). *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) promotes the following value system: knowledge, identity, humanism, tolerance, responsibility, autonomy and creativity (Figure 1) (ibid.).

Goals of the National Curriculum

In *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), two fundamental goals are highlighted: ensuring the child’s wellbeing and development, the child’s education and learning and the development of competences. *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) defines three groups of wellbeing: personal, emotional and physical wellbeing; educational wellbeing and social wellbeing (Figure 1). Ensuring wellbeing is a “multidimensional, interactive, dynamic and contextual process which integrates healthy and successful individual functioning and positive social relationships in a quality setting of preschool institutions” (ibid., p. 24).

The second important goal of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) is the development, upbringing and teaching of children and the development of their competences. For the realisation of this goal, the first step is the picture of the child as a whole being and an acceptance of the principle of integration of all developmental areas and their permeation in different segments of the educational process. Acceptance of the competence approach is based on the following principles: competences are developmental; competences of the child are assessed in a holistic and contextual way; and competences are viewed in the context of different developmental possibilities of the child, not in the context of its chronological age (ibid., p. 21).

The National Curriculum (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) promotes the development of eight basic competences for lifelong learning: communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in natural sciences; digital competence; learn how to learn; social and civic competence; initiative and entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression (ibid., p. 27).

Contemporary roles and strategies of educators

In early and preschool educational theory in the Republic of Croatia, the traditional paradigm—according to which the educator is a teacher, a knowledge provider, a leader and a supervisor of the educational process—is abandoned. Adults who rely on a contemporary pedagogical image of the child assume new roles and strategies in order to create the context of the preschool institution that, according to *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), is: a place of full development, education and teaching of the child; a place of research, discovery and active learning; a place of quality relations, cooperation and tolerance; a place of creation and expression in different expressive forms; and a place of democratisation, active participation and childhood involvement.

In order to provide support to the contemporary child and childhood in the preschool institution context, the educator develops new strategies in the field of education. By observing and listening to children, the educator chooses and provides adequate support for them and for the purpose of their transition to the next development zone (Vygotsky 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), the basic goal of teaching is to provide space for the next developmental zone. Under the *concept of the next developmental zone* theoreticians understand learning and teaching as distributed, contextual, interactive, cooperative and participative (Babić 2007). The educator provides the kind of support that enables the child to move from the current to the next developmental zone. This is the indirect support of the educator, which is still called *scaffolding*, and it consists of the assessment of “what kind of assistance is needed and how this assistance can best be provided” (Donaldson 1997, p. 93). Heterogeneous educational groups (groups of peers and non-peers, groups of children of different developmental statuses and opportunities) allow for social interaction that leads to next developmental zone.

In order to make the right decision regarding the level of support needed, the educator should establish and maintain high-quality communication and a quality relationship with the child. Listening attentively connects all participants in the learning community. In terms of listening pedagogy, Carla Rinaldi (2006) explains the basic features of listening: openness, sensitivity, activity, interpretation, giving meaning, feedback, deep consciousness, accepting change and the unknown, leaving anonymity and reflection. The quality of the educator’s support for the child determines their overall relationship with the children, especially the level at which they understand and respect them (Slunjski 2011b).

The educator is a co-constructor and partner to the child—together with the child they construct meaning, knowledge, understanding and relationships. On the other hand, the child is a critical supporter of the dialogue with the educator. The educator encourages children to argue, explain and conclude, while the children reorganise and redefine their knowledge during the discussion. It is about social construction and understanding through social interaction. The open discussion, as a free exchange of opinions, requires patience, flexibility and active listening from the educator.

The role of the educator is to encourage the children to plan their own activities and self-assessment of the learning process, but also to group planning and evaluation. The children are encouraged to reflect and self-reflect on their activities, as well as on their ways of thinking and learning. Through self-assessment, they develop self-awareness and perceptions of personal forces, as well as constraints. The educator also motivates the children to evaluate and self-evaluate their communication and cooperation with others.

A competent educator encourages the children to “learn how to learn,” i.e. to develop their metacognitive abilities. According to David Whitebread and Penelope Coltman (2010), metacognitive abilities include metacognitive experiences (awareness of their own metacognitive processes), metacognitive knowledge (knowledge of mental processes and their own learning strategies) and self-regulation (metacognitive control of mental processes). That is how children gradually develop the ability to regulate their thinking and learn how to make choices between different action strategies.

The educator prepares the material, spatial and social environment and various learning situations that the children will experience at different developmental statuses and competences. Quality-moulded learning situations encourage the development of independence and creativity in children. Providing different media for creative expression makes it easier to express your child’s ideas. With quality educator intervention, children of different competences can participate in group activities.

In order for educators to successfully manage complex professional roles, *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) emphasises the importance of quality initial education and continuous professional development. “The quality of educational practice of the preschool institution and the curriculum that is generated from it, is realised and developed ‘from the inside’ by the educators and other experts, for which they need to ensure appropriate continuous professional learning and development” (ibid., p. 57).

Quality assurance and evaluation process

In *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), it is possible to perceive the commitment to ensuring a high level of education quality and curriculum. Continuous monitoring of the educational work quality is carried out “according to predetermined and agreed standards” (ibid., p. 54) and is performed in the form of internal quality assessment and external evaluation. In addition to general common evaluation standards, each preschool institution has its own specific standards that respond to the specifics of that particular institution and ensure the principle of autonomy in functioning. According to *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), the internal and external² evaluation

² The external evaluation information is available on the website of the National Center for External Evaluation of Education and preschool institutions publish regular annual reports on their websites regarding their work, within which the reports about the internal evaluation of the institution’s work are included.

includes: “the whole (overall functioning of the institution - legal arrangement, application of the pedagogical standard, overall quality of the educational process etc.) and certain segments (monitoring of children’s advancement, respect for children’s rights, parents and other factors, inclusion of children with special needs, training of experts in the institution, etc.). An important element of the internal quality assessment of an institution is the qualification of all factors of the educational process (adults and children) for a continuous and quality self-assessment” (ibid., p. 54).

The National Curriculum (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014) lists factors for curriculum evaluation in preschool institutions and factors for curriculum evaluation outside the institution (Figure 2).

FACTORS FOR CURRICULUM EVALUATION IN THE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTION	FACTORS FOR CURRICULUM EVALUATION OUTSIDE THE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTION
✓ Educators and other experts in the preschool ✓ Children ✓ Parents	✓ Reflective friends from other preschool institutions and academia, factors of the network of professional community learning ✓ Responsible institutions (local community education departments, Ministry of Science and Education, Education and Teacher Training Agency, National Centre for External Evaluation of Education, etc.)

Figure 2: Factors for curriculum evaluation according to *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014).

The National Centre for External Evaluation of Education³ (NCVVO) began work in 2010 with the project *Self-Evaluation of Early and Preschool Institutions*, and the project was completed with the publication of the *Handbook for the Self-Evaluation of Early Childhood and Preschool Education Institutions* (Priručnik za samovrednovanje ... 2012, hereafter the Handbook). *This Handbook* (Priručnik ... 2012) is intended for quality teams and all other professional staff members in early and preschool education who want to engage in quality improvement and research. Self-evaluation is a “process of systematic and continuous monitoring, analyzing and evaluating the performance of the work, in which all the participants of the educational process (children and adults) participate actively and is carried out according to a predetermined methodology and this methodology interests us in accordance with well-known/agreed criteria we are as well interested in (areas

³ A public institution founded in 2006 and tasked with introducing external evaluation into the education system of the Republic of Croatia. The Center provides a framework for the self-evaluation of the institution, within which it develops the methodology and instruments used for self-evaluation, provides support in the processing and interpretation of self-evaluation results and in monitoring the progress in work quality of educational institutions, organizes professional training with the aim of strengthening organizational structures within the institutions that are tasked with evaluating and monitoring quality (quality teams).

of evaluation)” (ibid., p. 3). Continuous self-evaluation of the educational practice is an obligation⁴ for all factors of the educational process.

In the *Handbook* (ibid.), the key areas of work quality for the early and preschool institutions are listed: institutional strategies, organisational management, cultural, spatial-material and technical conditions of work, health and hygiene conditions, safety, curriculum and educational processes, human resources, co-operation with the broader and wider social community and the process of monitoring and evaluation. The key quality components and guidelines for self-evaluation and quality improvements are specified for each quality area. For example, the self-evaluation of the institution’s strategy is considered to be one of the dimensions of quality (ibid., p. 101).

KEY QUESTIONS	DATA SOURCE
✓ Does our institution have a vision and mission developed?	✓ Results of questionnaires for principals, educators, teams of experts, administrative, technical and other staff, board of directors of the institution and parents
✓ Do the vision and mission meet what we are and what.	✓ Network sites of the institution
✓ Are all participants familiar with it?	✓ Advertising boards and other forms of informing the parents and other participants
✓ Do our vision and mission make our institution recognisable?	✓ Annual document of early education institutions
✓ Do we live a daily vision and mission of the institution?	✓ Other sources
✓ How do we do this?	

Figure 3: *Evaluation of Early Education Institution Strategy (Vrednovanje strategije ... 2012).*

Figure 3 lists the key questions in the self-evaluation of the institutional strategy as one of the quality dimensions. Data sources are also listed in the self-evaluation process of the mentioned dimension.

The methodology of the self-evaluation of early and preschool education, the structure and the organisation of quality teams are also mentioned.⁵ The quality team “is an informal organisational structure within an institution whose primary task is to ensure the quality of the institution’s work, i.e. the implementation of self-evaluation and monitoring of progress in key quality areas” (ibid., p. 93).

The institutional quality team consists of: the school principal, at least two educator representatives, at least one professional development service representative, at least one administrative-technical and support staff representative, at least one parent representative and at least one local community representative.

⁴ The legal basis for the quality assurance process is contained in the *National Center for External Evaluation of Education Act* (Zakon o nacionalnom ... 2004), the *Education Sector Development Plan 2005–2010* (Plan razvoja ... 2005), the *Croatian National Educational Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care* (Državni pedagoški ... 2008) and the *Act on Changes and amendments to the Pre-school Education and Training Act* (Zakon o izmjenama ... 2013).

⁵ The NCVVO developed the methodology of external evaluation according to existing world models and aligned them with the existing needs in the Republic of Croatia. “The Center provides a framework for self-assessment of the institution within which it develops the methodology and instruments used for self-evaluation” (ibid, p. 31).

The NCVVO proposes three quality team models for the organisational structure of the institutions that determine the number of team members.⁶

The Handbook (ibid.) also provides guidelines for insight and analysis of the current status of the institution's work quality. In order to achieve a more objective evaluation of quality, gathering the opinions of all key participants is recommended for the purpose of detecting an objective image of the institution. Participation in the implementation of the questionnaire is anonymous and voluntary, and the assessment analysis provides data that perceives which quality areas are better and which are worse. The mentioned results should be supplemented by institutional documentation. The quality team evaluates what is good at the institution for each quality area, as well as what is not good and what requires further work to improve quality. After a detailed analysis, the elements where additional efforts should be made to achieve higher quality levels are identified for each quality area. In order to define the priority areas for quality improvement, it is recommended to conduct the CREDA⁷ analysis.

Internal and external evaluations differ in relation to entities that carry out evaluation processes. While the internal evaluation is carried out by staff, the external evaluation is carried out by entities outside the institution. "External evaluation is characterized by well-known and mutually aligned criteria and uniformity of the methodology, which ensures a higher degree of objectivity and the possibility of generalization and comparison" (Antulić Majcen and Pribela-Hodap 2017, p. 25). Self-evaluation manages the processes, relationships and conditions under which the educational process is realised. The purpose of self-evaluation is to identify the current state of affairs in different quality areas, to detect shortcomings and advantages and to stimulate the institution to improve the quality of work (Priručnik ... 2012).

In 2014, the NCVVO organised an introductory module for the professional development of early and preschool education quality teams, called *The First Steps in the Self-Evaluation Process* and *Images for Self-Evaluation: New Challenges in Teamwork and Exchange of Institutional Experience with Implementation of the Development Plan and Self-Evaluation Process*. Lectures and workshops were held in different counties of the Republic of Croatia. Sandra Antulić Majcen (2014) states that the goal of professional training is "to exchange experiences in the process of self-evaluation through an overview of the work of the quality teams and the implementation of the self-evaluation process in the last three years. Through professional training, participants are introduced to the implementation of the self-evaluation process in the pedagogical year 2012/2013 and 2013/2014, the experience of the participants involved in the work of the quality team and the implementation of the self-evaluation process have been exchanged, vision and mission of the self-evaluation process, the competences necessary for the implementation

⁶ After establishing a quality team, the principal of the institution informs the NCVVO, the administrative council, the employees of the institution and the parents, and submits the decision on appointment to team members (ibid., p. 96).

⁷ The CREDA analysis is SWOT adapted to the requirements of the self-evaluation of educational institutions.

of the process and the network of support networks for institutions in the process of self-evaluation are refined and reconciled” (ibid., p. 4). In 2015, a module for the professional development of quality teams for early and preschool education was organised, called the *Basic Knowledge and Skills Necessary for the Implementation of the Self-Evaluation Process*.

In their publication, S. Antulić Majcen and S. Pribela-Hodap (2017) provide results of a five-year implementation of the self-evaluation process, with an emphasis on institutional experiences and examples of good practice gathered from the institutions involved in the *Self-Evaluation of Early Childhood and Preschool Education Institutions* project (2011–2015). The work is based on the specificity of the development of preschool children, requiring a high level of institution quality. In it, the results of the self-evaluation of 140 early and preschool education institutions in Croatia are presented for the 2011–2015 period. The authors conclude that, through the implementation of the self-evaluation process, the culture of dialogue and the personal and professional responsibility of key participants, the culture of self-evaluation in the system of early and pre-school education is attempted to be preserved. There are also areas in which further work is needed to improve quality: the employment of a professional team, the provision of material-organisational conditions and the reduction of the number of children in educational groups (ibid.).

Each institution for early and preschool education carries out self-evaluation processes in accordance with the latter instructions. After the self-assessment process is carried out, the self-evaluation reports are written. These reports state how often the quality team met, how the self-evaluation process was going, how satisfied they were with the job they were doing, what obstacles and problems they encountered, and how the self-assessment process can help improve the quality of the institution’s work. This process of the institution represents a continuous process, requiring lifelong learning and development of the professional competences of the educators and other staff.

Conclusion

Particularly important for the organisation of early and preschool education in the Republic of Croatia is *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014). Its conception begins with a modern orientation paradigm that affirms the child as its own personality from birth, which needs to be understood and appreciated as such. The humanistic developmental paradigmatic orientation of this document affirms the plurality of theoretical concepts and the diversity of approaches to the implementation of early and preschool education. The child is an entity that actively participates in its environment, (co)constructing and largely determining its own life and development. Childhood is the process of social construction, which the children and adults construct together, and it is a process that is contextualised in relation to space, time and culture. Starting with the constructivist paradigm of *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), the child is viewed as a complete, competent and active being that participates in a variety of inter-

actions with its natural and social environment. Accordingly, the document aims towards the realisation of specific educational goals in ensuring the wellbeing of the child, in particular: to promoting full development, upbringing and learning, to developing competences, to achieving the right of children to have equal chances and equal rights for all.

By observing the child as an active citizen of the community, the preschool institution affirms itself as a place for the child to live democratically and co-decide actively in shaping the life and work of the institution. In *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), "The quality of education for all children in the Republic of Croatia is defined as the goal and principle of the Croatian educational policy" (ibid., p. 3). The basic purpose of early and preschool education is to optimise the development of all potentials, traits and abilities of the child, its creativity and problem solving, independence, positive communication and better relations with others, as well as its initiative and personal responsibility (Zloković and Nenadić-Bilan 2017). In *The National Curriculum* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014), it is possible to discern a clear formal commitment to ensuring a high level of quality and the factors of the internal and external curriculum quality evaluation are clearly defined. The basic conditions for achieving early and preschool educational quality in the Republic of Croatia are created, starting with the new National Curriculum (ibid.), as well as legal requirements and evident qualitative changes in the pedagogical practices and activities of educators. In the increasing number of preschool institutions, the qualitative changes in early and preschool education performance are visible. Certainly, the development of quality not only expects creativity of and new ideas by all early and preschool educational participants (the educators, preschool professional teams, children, parents, etc.), but also the faster and better development of spatial and material conditions as well.

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