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## The quality of the preschool education process in Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Abstract:** This paper deals with the quality of preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) with a special emphasis on the process dimension. The analysis is approached through key areas that include defined goals and standards of quality, curriculum development and its implementation, individualisation and observation, professional training of employees, as well as monitoring and evaluation. The main goal is to point out the key systematic solutions and research results that refer to the analysis of the preschool education process quality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Due to a lack of significant empirical data in this domain, a survey was conducted with the principals of public and private preschool institutions. The results of the research point to an inconsistent legislation that regulates the activities of institutional preschool education, resulting in the occurrence of deviations in the practical implementation of the Common Core of Integral Development Programs for Preschool Institutions. In preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the dominant approach is the one in which the educator is in the centre and, therefore, the emphasis is placed on the need to empower the educational professionals to develop a child-centred curriculum. It is evident that there is an inconsistent approach to internal monitoring and quality evaluation of the educational practice in preschool institutions. A requirement that is necessary for achieving of the process quality is the development of continual professional improvement of the educators by encouraging and motivating the openness, research and critical reflection of one's own practice.

**Key words:** quality of the process, preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), quality standards.

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## Introduction

By the end of the 20th century, the study of institutional preschool education effects on children's development and learning intensified. While the initial studies attempted to answer the question whether children attending preschool institutions develop differently than those who do not attend them, later research focused on differences in child development and learning outcomes in relation to the quality of the preschool institutions they attended (Melhuish 2001, p. 1). The quality of a preschool institution stands out as a key factor that contributes to children's development and learning, regardless of the characteristics and quality of the family environment.

The results of many studies (Anderson 1992; Belsky et al. 2007; Hunstman 2008; NICHD 2000; NICHD 2002; Silva et al., 2011; Vandell and Wolfe 2000) show that the quality of the preschool programs largely determines a child's future development and learning outcomes. The children who attend higher-quality preschool institutions start school with a higher level of cognitive, linguistic and social skills (Abreu-Lima et al., 2013; NICHD 2000; Peisner-Feinberg et al. 2001; Silva et al. 2011). On the other hand, research (Silva et al. 2011) also suggests that there are no significant difference in the development and learning of the children attending lower-quality preschool programs and those who have not attended such programs at all. High-quality preschool programs are defined as those that promote the optimal development and learning outcomes in all developmental domains, while the low-quality ones are those associated with negative outcomes on the development and learning of children (Hunstman 2008, p. 7).

Defining and determining the quality of institutional preschool education is not an easy task. In this regard, Hwang (Hwang in Hunstman 2008, p. 1) points out that quality is a 'slippery' and multifaceted term that can be estimated from different aspects and perspectives. Smith (Smith 1996, p. 7) states that quality is a relative concept that reflects values and beliefs which depend on the social and temporal context. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline the elements of preschool education that are universally recognised as important for the optimal development and learning of children: a safe and healthy environment, developmentally

appropriate stimulation and learning opportunities and positive interactions with peers and adults (Vermeer et al. 2016, p. 35).

Institutional preschool education is viewed as a system in which the quality of the structure and the quality of the education process can be recognised. Hunstman (2008) lists a number of elements that can be evaluated within the structure: the size of the educational group, the ratio of the children and educators, the education and professional development of the educators, the permanence of the educators in educational groups, the salary of the educators and the physical environment of the kindergartens. The quality of the education process encompasses: the interaction of the child with its peers and educators and its engagement in various activities and with different materials (Vandell and Wolfe 2000, p. 3; Vermeer et al. 2016, p. 35).

The structural aspects of quality are strongly related to the quality of the education process and they are both considered to be reliable indicators of the quality of the educational practice in the institutional context (Cassidy 2005; Hunstman 2008; Marjanović Umek 2014; NICHD 2002; Vermeer et al. 2016). The structural quality directly influences the quality of the process and the quality of the process affects the development and learning outcomes of children (NICHD 2002). Therefore, a lower ratio of children to educators, a lower size of educational groups, higher levels of education and professional development of the educators and their permanence in educational groups are all associated with the higher quality of the process itself (Hunstman 2008, p. 7). The best structural quality indicators of the process, according to Cassidy (2005, p. 3), are the educators' salaries and their education. Consequently, the claim is made that the quality of the education process is higher in countries with stricter standards in terms of teacher education, salary levels and teachers' and principals' experience levels (Phillipsen et al. 1997; Cassidy 2005, p. 3).

Although there is evidence of many studies (Hunstman 2008; NICHD 2002; Vermeer et al. 2016) on the importance of the structure and quality dimensions of preschool institutions' quality for the child's development and learning, there is little cognition of the quality of preschool education in different countries. There are great differences in educational policies, legislation and standards that can affect the quality of the preschool education process. The aim of this paper is to present the preschool education quality in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) with a special emphasis on the quality of the process. This quality of the process is analysed using systematic solutions, legislative and professional documents and relevant research.

### **The status and development perspectives of preschool education in B&H in legal acts and strategic documents**

In recent years, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) has placed considerable interest in the development of preschool education, which is reflected in the adoption of a number of legal acts and documents, the most important of which are mentioned next. The *Framework Law on Preschool Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Okvirni zakon ... 2007, hereafter the *Framework Law*) regulates the activity of

preschool education. In 2008, the *Strategic Guidelines for Education Development in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Strateški pravci ... 2008) were adopted together with the 2008–2015 Implementation Plan, which foresees short-term, mid-term and long-term development goals. The *Framework Law* (Okvirni zakon ... 2007, Article 22) also defines the need to establish a common core of comprehensive development programs for work in preschool institutions. In accordance with the aforementioned, the ministers of 12 Educational Ministries in B&H concluded the *Agreement on the Common Core of Integral Development Programs for Preschool Institutions* in 2009 (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009, hereafter the *Common Core*). In this manner, they committed themselves to take the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) as the basis for the development of programs to be implemented in all entities/cantons/Brčko District of B&H, starting at the beginning of the 2009/2010 school year. This was done to ensure the compliance of entity/cantonal programs and the consistency in the quality of preschool education (Camović and Hodžić 2017).

The aim of preschool education in B&H is to ensure optimal and equal conditions for every child from birth to school, without discrimination on any grounds, in order to develop and realise all of their intellectual and physical abilities and competences through various forms of professional and quality autonomous, institutional and non-institutional preschool education (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009, p. 7). According to the *Framework Law* (Okvirni zakon ... 2007), preschool education in B&H is based on the humanistic developmental principle, the principle of professional autonomy<sup>1</sup> and professional responsibility, along with the principle of democracy, which guarantees the right of each child to equal opportunities for participation in an appropriate form of preschool education without discrimination on any basis.<sup>2</sup> It promotes the best interests of the child, secures his/her own values and thus ensures optimal child development along with the right to language and respect for religious freedom. Such a legislative context of preschool education quality in B&H has its starting point in the new insights into the child and childhood as outlined in the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Konvencija ... 1989) and the role that the community plays in preschool education. Basically, everything that is mentioned contains an important determinant of quality—the view of children as subjects with their own capacities, intentions, interests and needs, and with the right to respect and dignity. All of the above-mentioned basic principles and goals that ensure the fundamental rights of children are defined in the legislative framework of preschool education in B&H, however, there is little knowledge of

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<sup>1</sup> The principle of professional autonomy implies the ability of professional staff to critically review and evaluate their work and its effects, which can be achieved through continuous professional development and constant support for work quality (Strateški pravci razvoja ... 2004, p. 9).

<sup>2</sup> The principle of democracy is based on the fundamental right of all children to upbringing and education. It is based on the idea of upbringing for tolerance, respect for diversity and multiculturalism and the idea of pluralism and freedom in order to meet the most diverse needs of children and families. The humanistic and developmental principles are reflected in the right of the child to live in a healthy environment, to have equal rights when it comes to conditions for normal growth, development and learning, so that it can optimally develop in the physical, intellectual and social spheres. It implies equal rights for all children, regardless of physical and psychological development, sexuality, social status, cultural milieu and so on (Strateški pravci razvoja ... 2004, p. 9).

how they are understood and implemented in the practice itself or in the program content during the daily interactions of educators and children, and yet these are the most reliable indicators of the education process quality.

In order to harmonise the policy of preschool education with the goals of the European Union, the *Platform for the Development of Preschool Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Platforma za razvoj ... 2017, hereafter the *Platform*) was adopted in December 2017 for the 2017–2022 period. The *Platform* (Platforma za razvoj ... 2017) combines the strategic goals of preschool education in B&H that are grouped into five packages: increasing coverage, ensuring quality of preschool education,<sup>3</sup> regular funding, inclusion and sensitisation of society for the importance of institutional preschool education. For the amenable educational authorities, this serves as a basis for the development of their own strategies and plans that are aimed at furthering the quality of preschool education, as well as an important precondition for cooperation with international partners.

The *Law on the Agency for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education* (Zakon o Agenciji ... 2007) gives jurisdiction to this institution type for preschool education as well. Since its establishment until nowadays (2007-2018), the Agency for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education (hereafter the Agency) has made significant contributions to the development and improvement of the quality of preschool education in B&H.

Within its mandate, the Agency has the jurisdiction to establish the standards of knowledge and assessment of the achieved results, to develop a common core of the preschool, primary and secondary education curricula and to take other professional activities that fall within the area of standards of knowledge<sup>4</sup> and educational quality assessment, as determined by special laws and other regulations. The Agency's activities in the field of preschool education in B&H are mainly focused on establishing and developing quality. The Agency, within its competence, undertakes activities aimed at establishing the standards for work quality of the educators, pedagogues and principals in preschool education, drawing up recommendations, reports and analyses for competent educational authorities in the sphere of improving and developing the quality of preschool education in B&H based on empirical research (Informacija o implementaciji ... 2012, p. 6). It is also competent to cooperate with pedagogical institutes and other institutions designated to offer support, modernise and develop preschool, primary and secondary education by

<sup>3</sup> To achieve this goal, it is necessary to analyse and modernise the existing programs and to develop new ones for preschool education, while taking into account the facilitation of the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school; to ensure the quality of the staff (management, professional and other staff) through appropriate initial education and lifelong learning or professional development; to introduce the practice (system) of monitoring and evaluation of preschool institutional practices and their programs; to create necessary pedagogical documentation; to create a database, i.e. a statistical system that meets the requirements of Eurydice and Eurostat (Platforma za razvoj ... 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Standards of knowledge and student achievement in B&H have thus far been defined only at the level of primary education but not of preschool education. At the preschool education level in B&H there are the *Standards of Quality of Work of Educators, Pedagogues and Principals in Preschool Education* (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011) and the current plan is to draft quality standards for other professional associates. The process of developing the Common Core of Integral Development Programs for Work in Preschool Institutions in B&H is underway.

providing advice to competent educational authorities on the development and implementation of new program contents and so on.

In addition to the Agency, other competent educational authorities also play a major role in establishing the quality in preschool education. Pedagogical institutes play a significant role in the process of quality evaluation and expert supervision of the work of preschool institutions, as well as in monitoring and evaluating the work and professional development of the educators. There are eight pedagogical institutes and one pedagogical institution in the Department of Education of the Government of the Brčko District in B&H. The institutes vary according to their legal status, so that some of them are set up as administrative organisations or units within the Ministry of Education, while others are autonomous administrative units or organisations responsible to the canton government. Regardless of their legal status, the pedagogical institutes and the pedagogical institution in B&H generally have a similar function, namely linking the framework legislation and educational policy with the educational practices, thus directly affecting the functioning of the education system at the level of educational institutions (Izveštaj o inicijalnom ... 2016, p. 20). The pedagogical institutes monitor, assess and evaluate the quality of educational work in preschool institutions. Competent educational authorities are obliged to provide the control mechanisms for the professional supervision of pedagogical monitoring and work quality improvement in both public and private preschool institutions in order to ensure that all preschool institutions work in accordance with the same standards and norms.<sup>5</sup>

### **Structure, content and quality analysis of preschool education programs in B&H**

According to the *Framework Law* (Okvirni zakon ... 2007, Article 21), the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) must be applied in all public and private preschool institutions. Consequently, it takes into account that each preschool institution can retain the freedom to create content in accordance with the specific needs of the institution and the local community. The *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) and its plans should be implemented in a way that guarantees and ensures quality education for all children, which in turn ensures the application of programs that meet the developmental needs of preschool children, as well as the satisfactory compliance and adaptability of these programs to the specific needs of the preschool institution and the local community (ibid.).

The structure of the programs in the Entity of the Republic of Srpska and of the cantonal and Brčko District B&H programs is regulated through four developmental domains: physical development, socio-emotional and personality development, intellectual and speech development and communication and creativity development. All developmental domains are defined through the development and

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<sup>5</sup> They mainly refer to the structural quality: space, equipment, number of educational groups, number of adults per number of children, vocational qualifications of the educational workers and structure of the working week.

learning outcomes<sup>6</sup> within the integrated program. The structure of the program is operationalised through expected outcomes and potential activities for children at different ages<sup>7</sup> within the framework of each developmental domain (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009).

Due to the unadjusted time dynamics of when the Entity and Cantonal laws on preschool education came into effect, there are also certain deviations in the integration of the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) into the overall development of their programs and, consequently, there is a need for further research in this area. In order to create recommendations for the improvement and development of comprehensive curricula for the educational activities with children of preschool age, the Agency conducted an analysis<sup>8</sup> of the existing curricula to determine the extent to which they are based on the *Common Core* (Čurak 2011).

Through this analysis of the integral preschool programs in all B&H administrative units, many shortcomings, deviations and disagreements with the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) are noted. It is pointed out that in many of the existing programs there is no noticeable shift from the traditional emphasis on the content of teaching to the development and learning outcomes that are found in the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009). Recommendations concerning the improvement of the existing programs and the development of new comprehensive programs that aim to improve educational work with preschool children can be summarised as follows: (1) it is necessary to reconceptualise the cantonal preschool programs and to harmonise them with the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) and the *Framework Law* (Okvirni zakon ... 2007); (2) there is a need to create a framework curriculum for preschool education that would define, in more detail, its theoretical starting points, goals and concrete developmental tasks, as well as the principles for the organisation of learning environments. The framework curriculum would clearly define the role of the educator and the principles of planning and programming while also determining the role of the family.

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<sup>6</sup> Preschool education should be based on the outcomes for child development and learning, focusing on the child rather than on the content, which implies a quality program and competent professional staff, a safe and stimulating environment, a holistic approach to the child, a pluralism of work methods and interdisciplinarity, as well as flexibility. (Platforma za razvoj ... 2017). An example of development and learning outcomes for children at the age of five: 1. Communication skills (understands and uses comparative adjectives; raises questions *when, how* and *why*; ...) 2. Motor skills (climbing and descending stairs without help, from one leg to the other; ...) 3. Self-reliance (dressing and putting on shoes alone; ...) 4. Social skills (playing with other children; ...) 5. Cognitive abilities (grouping pictures of familiar subjects; ...) (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri... 2009, p. 22).

<sup>7</sup> Operationalisation is performed according to the developmental psychological model (children aged six to nine months, 10–12 months, 15–18 months, 19–24 months, 24–36 months, four years, five years, six years).

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, valid comprehensive developmental preschool programs were gathered that are applied in all administrative units in B&H (programs of the Entity of the Republic of Srpska, the Brčko District of B&H and the five Cantons in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

## **The quality standards for educators, pedagogues and principals in preschool education in B&H**

The quality of the initial education of the educators and of their continuous professional development, which is oriented towards the improvement of their practice, are both important for the development of the educators' professional competences and, in turn, for the quality of preschool education itself. In B&H, professional training is the right and the obligation of the educator, defined in legal acts and subordinate legislation. Each of the 12 ministries of education has subordinate legislation that is regulated in education systems but there is no such type of act at the national level of B&H, which is understandable in terms of jurisdictions.

In cooperation with relevant educational authorities, the Agency started working on activities for the project called the *Standards of Work Quality in Preschool Education in B&H* at the end of 2010. Emphasising the need for quality standardisation in this area, the *Standards of the Work Quality for Educators, Pedagogues and Principals in Preschool Education* (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011, hereafter the *Standards of Work Quality*) document was developed. The main goal of this process is to develop the quality standards and their indicators, which should enable external and self-evaluation of the work of the educators, pedagogues and principals and serve as a guide through their professional development. This document enables the amenable persons and institutions to monitor the work quality and professional advancement of the educators, pedagogues and principals in preschool educational institutions, thus facilitating the evaluation of preschool institutional work as a whole and identifying the needs in the field of professional training, as well as developing a professional training system based on the identified needs and interests (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011, p. 4).

The *Standards of Work Quality* (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011) are made up of a set of indicators that are grouped into thematic units and a list for external and self-evaluation that is conducted through the self-reflection of educators and the documentation of pedagogical practice.<sup>9</sup> They relate to the following thematic

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<sup>9</sup> Examples for educators: 1) applies a program based on principles and particularities of the work with children of preschool age—respect for the child's personality, active learning, holistic approach to development and planning based on the principles of an integrated curriculum; 2) understands and acknowledges the characteristics of development and learning of the children of preschool age; 3) knows the theoretical attitudes about children's learning and development and follows professional literature that deals with these issues; 4) applies activities that are based on play, while respecting the principles of personality development and behavioural development; 5) plans activities and content that initiate and support intellectual development, critical thinking and judgement making, while also supporting the child's affinities and aspirations; 6) while performing activities, links the cognitive development and academic achievement of the children with socio-emotional development and other aspects of development; 7) encourages the children to discover and experiment intuitively and naturally, to analyse and generalise the observed principles that they have become able to cope with; 8) provides conditions in which the children are involved in resource management (equipment, resources and materials) in accordance with their capabilities; 9) knows, regularly evaluates and monitors the learning outcomes, and interconnects and adjusts the children's learning and developmental needs; 10) collects, stores and records data on the changes in the children's development and progress; 11) encourages the children's autonomy and sense of responsibility for the procedures they have become able to deal with ... (ibid.).

units:<sup>10</sup> (1) understanding the constructivist philosophy of education and the basic principles of preschool education; (2) individualisation and differentiation; (3) observation and monitoring of children in accordance with the development and learning outcomes;<sup>11</sup> (4) partnership with family and local community; (5) planning based on Integrated Curriculum Principles; (6) strategy for supporting the development and learning through play; (7) creating an environment for the development and learning through play; (8) implementation of philosophy and skills of quality / non-violent communication in upbringing; (9) embracing diversity and democratic principles; (10) teamwork; (11) quality improvement and continuous professional development; and (12) professional ethics and responsibility (ibid.).

The aforementioned quality standards of the educator's work emphasise the importance of the child-centred approach, in which the child constructs and develops knowledge and insights through active participation, experiences gained directly and spontaneous learning opportunities, and not via direct content teaching by the educator. The main focus for the future reforms in preschool institutions in B&H should precisely be on ensuring that the suggested quality standards of the educators' work are fully implemented in practice, with orientation towards the children as researchers and active participants in the learning process. The *Standards of Work Quality* (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011) should serve as a tool for moving towards a more focused approach to children, based on play and stimulating forms of learning (UNICEF 2016, p. 33).

Through on-site observations during research<sup>12</sup> (UNICEF 2016), it is concluded that a mere definition of the *Standards of Work Quality* (Standardi kvaliteta rada

<sup>10</sup> They are structured through 12 educator standards, each of which contains a short description if the standards, guidelines or indicators with accompanying evaluation lists that have descriptors and a blank space for brief examples or illustrations of the realised indicators. They are founded on the pedagogical, methodological, action, organisational, social and communication competences of educators and on the need for permanent professional development, responsibility and ethics (ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> Examples for educators. Standards: The educator applies expert and scientifically based procedures to track the development and detect its positive trends in preschool children along with the indicators of developmental change. The educator applies appropriate procedures and techniques for systematic observation of the children's activities and behavioural manifestations, tracks developmental changes and may link them to learning activities that affect developmental changes. Indicators: Qualified to evaluate the outcomes and to timely detect the trends in developmental changes under the influence of pedagogical measures and procedures within the applied learning programs. Qualified for the methodology of systematic observation in the function of recognising the manifestations and indicators of changes in development with the support of a professional team in kindergartens. Uses different techniques for the observation, recording and tracking of child development and learning. Qualified to collect and sort the products that can be used as arguments and explanations for the observed developmental changes, including "sensitive development periods". The information that is obtained during the process of child observation and monitoring is used by the educator to further develop an action plan with the group and to plan individualised activities. The results of the observation and monitoring of children are exchanged with other professional staff and parents, respecting the privacy of the data. Qualified for micro-research in the group and the application of different research instruments with the aim of improving pedagogical practices and effects of educational activities (ibid.).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro, UNICEF (2016) conducted research on the quality of preschool education in B&H. The quality assessment was carried out through the European Quality Framework (EQF) in early education, which is defined through broad transversal principles (availability, workforce, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, funding and management). The research was based on consultations with relevant representatives of competent educational authorities, including observations and visits to preschool institutions.

... 2011) does not guarantee their application in practice as well. The *Standards of Work Quality* (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011) are a recommended but not a mandatory resource. After the Professional Committee of the Agency adopted the *Standards of Work Quality* in 2011 (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011), their promotion was arranged and dissemination activities were organised. The Agency held 31 expert meetings for all qualified educators in preschool institutions in order to educate them on the implementation of the work quality standards for educators. A total of 1,550 preschool educational workers have thus been trained and everyone received a copy of the document for use in practice.

Taking into consideration that the change of pedagogical practice cannot survive without continuous and concrete actions and preparations for the transfer, it is important to further develop the continuous professional development of the educators in order to transfer the defined educator work quality standards into their educational practice. This implies the creation of a system (Urban 2011, p. 28) in which the educators have the opportunity to act, explore and develop their professional competencies in a community of reflective practitioners. In order to improve the professional development of the educators, the Agency announced a *Model for the Promotion of Continuous Professional Development of Educators, Teachers and Professional Associates in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Model za unapređenje ... 2014) in 2014.<sup>13</sup> The main objective of this model is to encourage the educators to assume responsibility for their own individual professional development and thus improve the quality of preschool education in B&H (ibid., p. 7). As a basic assumption in this organisational model of the system of professional improvement of educators, the analysis of the needs of the educators at both a personal and institutional level is emphasised.

In order to gain insights into the educators' professional development needs,<sup>14</sup> the Agency has also carried out a research project entitled the *Analysis of Needs for Occupational Advancement and Professional Development of Educators for Preschool Age Children in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Analiza potreba odgajatelja ... 2016). The main objective of the research was to establish a list of priorities for the reform of continuous professional development for the educators in accordance with the competencies defined in the *Standards of Work Quality* (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011). The research results suggest that the educators evaluate their professional competencies highly. High estimates are established for the following standards: creating an environment for development and learning through play;

<sup>13</sup> The model for improving the system of continuous professional development of educators, teachers and professional associates in Bosnia and Herzegovina includes three important segments: planning, implementation and evaluation. Within these three segments, there are four levels that are reflected on all components of the educational system. Planning (objectives and needs of the system, needs analysis, educational institution's plan, individual plan), implementation (rule books, accreditation, databases, preparation and conduct of seminars, trainings in and out of the educational institution, individual activities), evaluation (conclusions in program evaluation, conducting program evaluation, self-evaluation, reflection). The model points out the directions and forms of professional development at the institution and beyond (Model za unapređenje ... 2014, pp. 8–9).

<sup>14</sup> The research was conducted on a representative sample of educators working in public and private preschool institutions under the jurisdiction of the amenable educational authorities in 10 cantons in the FB&H (N = 147) and in the Brčko District of B&H (N = 7).

support strategies for the development and learning through play; individualisation and differentiation; understanding the constructivist philosophy of education and the basic principles of preschool education; and partnership with the family and the local community. Slightly lower estimates are identified for quality improvement and continuous professional development, planning in accordance with the integrated curriculum, child observation and monitoring in accordance with the development and learning outcomes (Analiza potreba odgajatelja ... 2016, p. 51). The aforementioned results of the educators' self-assessment are considered and argued to be an overrated image of their own competencies. Through an in-depth analysis and comparison of research findings, the claim is made that the educators are partially convinced of their own professional competencies and that the results, therefore, do not reflect the real state of affairs in this domain (ibid., p. 52).

### **The research goal**

In order to obtain more significant empirical data, the authors of this text conducted research with the principals of public and private preschool institutions in B&H. The main aim of the research was to analyze the opinions of the principals of preschool institutions on certain aspects of quality. Accordingly, three research questions were asked: (1) How is the quality of the process regulated and evaluated within preschool institutions? (2) How are the principles of individuality and equal opportunities implemented in daily practice of kindergartens as basic quality determinants? (3) How do the principals perceive possible difficulties, challenges and opportunities to improve the quality of preschool education through the process dimension?

### **Method**

A descriptive method was used to analyse and interpret the research data obtained through the survey questionnaire. The constructed questionnaire contained seventeen open and closed question types, which included the general indicators of the preschool institution functioning (the lawful and legal regulations, the pedagogical standards and norms, the program offer and its diversity), as well as specific process quality segments (respecting the rights and needs of children, inclusion of children with special needs in preschool institutions, observation of children, individualised access, professional qualification of staff, accompanying expert services, etc.).

### **Sample**

The initial plan was to include 100 principals of preschool institutions into the research, or 30% of the total number of principals in preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Accordingly, the survey questionnaires were sent to 100

email addresses of potential respondents, obtained through a random selection within predefined stratum (administrative units). Very few principals responded in the first fifteen days after the emails were sent, i.e. within the time scheduled for sending a response. In a prolonged time-frame of one month, with the questionnaires repeatedly sent to the same e-mail addresses, a total of 50 principals responded, which is 50% of the initially planned sample or 15% of the total number of principals in preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey sample has the characteristics of a randomly stratified, non-representative sample but with very good territorial distribution (per administrative unit), providing a more complete insight into the subject matter of the research. The number of principals per each administrative unit is as follows: Una-Sana Canton (N = 3), Tuzla Canton (N = 3), Zenica-Doboj Canton (N = 16), Bosnian-Podrinje Canton (N = 2), Central Bosnia Canton (N = 2), Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (N = 7), West Herzegovina Canton (N = 3), Sarajevo Canton (N = 4), Republic of Srpska Entity (N = 6), Posavina Canton (N = 1), Canton 10 (N = 2), Brčko District of B&H (N = 1). Taking into account the type of the institution founder, 20 principals (40%) from private preschool institutions and 30 principals (60%) from the institutions whose founder was a local self-government unit participated in the research. Two respondents are male (4%) and 48 female (96%). The average age of the respondents is 47.5 years, with the participant ranging from 35 to 60 years of age.

## **Data analysis**

The collected data were analysed using qualitative and quantitative analysis that provided a more complete picture of the research problem. By using a quantitative approach, the qualitative data (answers to open type questions) were transformed into numerical indicators with the aim to obtain a more accurate display of the research results. With respect to the statistical data analysis, frequency and percentage calculation were used.

## **The research results and their interpretation**

### *1. The regulation and evaluation of the process quality within preschool institutions*

The aim of this research was to examine the existence of subordinate legal acts that regulate the quality of educational work in preschool institutions. Most (93%) of the surveyed principals list rule books that primarily regulate the activity, organisation and functioning of the preschool institutions while emphasising that there are no rule books that regulate the quality of the educational work of an institution. In each preschool institution, more or less, certain internal procedures exist that regulate the quality of work. The principles mostly emphasise the existence of an expert body of the Council of Educators, followed by a plan for visiting the experimental educational activities of educators and examining the analytical work

on monitoring the implementation of the annual work programs. Therefore, there are no special rule books that regulate quality, although most of the institutions monitor the quality, assessing and evaluating it using certain internal procedures.

The responses of the principals surveyed to the question of how the quality of work and the functioning of an institution is monitored point to an incoherent approach to monitoring and self-evaluation of educational work (Table 1).

How do you monitor the quality of work and the functioning of the institution?	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
There are individuals who are in charge of monitoring the quality.	12	24%	43	86%
There is an internal team / service for the quality.	32	64%	18	36%
By creating a development plan for the institution.	17	34%	33	66%
Management by international standards (ISO, HACCP and similar).	3	6%	47	94%
None of the above mentioned.	5	10%	45	90%

Table 1: Monitoring the work quality and functioning of the institution (N=50)

In the majority of preschool institutions (64%) there are expert commissions, working groups or quality teams responsible for monitoring the quality of work at the institution, while several institutions (24%) only have individuals responsible for this task, mostly pedagogues and/or principals. The principal of a preschool institution “having his role of a manager, assumes the greatest burden (responsibility) of planning, organizing, motivating and evaluating the success of the kindergarten” (Mlinarević 1999, p. 34). The Law on Preschool Education (Zakon o predškolskom ... 2008, Article 49) defines the roles of principals in B&H, which may range from proposing the curriculum and activities to improve the work to monitoring and directing the work of the educators. Therefore, this research is based on the fact that the principle has the highest responsibility in the process of evaluating and improving the work quality of the preschool institution.

There are also development plans in some preschool institutions (34%), while only a few (10%) evidently lack a continuous, critical review and self-evaluation in practice—and consequently their openness to research and willingness to change are questionable. The results point to the existence of different forms of work quality and institutional functioning monitoring, led by individuals or teams of experts. With this in mind, it is important to point out that it is only a team approach—a joint action and team engagement for quality—that can be taken as a prerequisite for an effective change and quality shift in educational practice. The role of the quality team implies not only the assessment and evaluation of quality but also that there is work on its improvement, which cannot be achieved through the action of an individual only. That is why the existence of working groups or teams is more significant for the process quality rather than individuals responsible for quality monitoring.

*2. The implementation of the individuality and equal opportunity principles as basic quality determinants in the everyday practice of kindergartens*

The continuous monitoring and evaluation of the quality of educational work ensures the compliance with the principles of individuality and equal opportunity, which is one of the basic determinants of the quality of the educational process. An individualised approach takes into account what each child brings into the educational process and is based on the following beliefs and practices: there are no two completely equal children; the children bring their own experiences, perceptions, skills and learning styles into the teaching and learning activities; the educators respond to individual differences (Saifer et al. 2000, p. 25). An individualised approach to child development intends to take into account all aspects of the child’s personality, whereby “the educator applies proven and effective ways of working while choosing and preparing the learning activities that correspond to the achieved levels of development, possibilities and styles, and thus adjusts his procedures and methods of work” (Standardi kvaliteta rada ... 2011, p. 11).

Daily routine and individualisation	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
The daily rhythm is in compliance with the children’s individual needs.	30	60%	20	40%
The child can choose the activities on its own.	39	78%	11	22%
The child can decide on the afternoon nap.	23	46%	27	54%

Table 2: Harmonisation of the daily rhythm with the children’s needs (N=50)

According to the responses of the respondent principles (Table 2), there are different approaches to time management and differing levels of respect towards the children’s individual needs in kindergartens. While 60% of the respondent principles say that the rhythm of the day is fully in compliance with the individual needs of the child, 40% of them say that the daily rhythm and the schedule of activities are generally the same for all children but that freedom of choice is given within the framework of individual activities—e.g. a child chooses alone which drawing accessories it will take or which centre to join. The greatest challenge for educators is the time allotted for the children to sleep. While 46% of the respondents say that an afternoon nap is optional and that the children who cannot sleep at that time can be engaged in quiet activities, 54% of them state that sleeping is mandatory for all children at an anticipated time. According to the responses, the reasons for this can be conceptualised in three ways: there are no spatial and personnel conditions for special seclusion and treatment of some children if they do not want to sleep; the attitudes of the educators are negative towards the possibility that the child should decide about it at all; the sleep time for the children represents the leisure time that the educators need during the day for other professional activities. If the educators are solely focused on direct contact with children during the entire day,

the question is whether there are possibilities for mutual cooperation, organised professional discussions and individual/team work on different segments of preparation and improvement of the educational practice. Therefore, it can be concluded that time organisation and the dynamics of daytime activities in a kindergarten is a very complex issue that implies key elements that affect the quality of the education process: the implicit pedagogy of the educator, the organisation of kindergarten space and also the question of additional working hours without direct contact with children. All this points to a need for an active reflection on the mentioned segments, which in their interrelated and interactive relationship point to the path of quality development for the kindergartens' educational practice.

It is interesting to note that in this research with the principals, the question was asked whether the annual reports of their institutions contain data (procedures, methods, plans) from the domain of individualisation in the educational process (Table 3). Most of the respondents (74%) stated that they do not include this information in their annual report because the reports are written according to the prescribed methodology. Only a few principals (26%) responded positively and as examples mentioned "tailored programs for children with special needs, child portfolios, and reports of educators and professional associates on the implementation of the Annual Program," and they also mentioned the "plan and program of teams for inclusion, along with the social and public activities, where there is a discussion on individual cases that require special attention" (Principal 38). The obtained results indicate that the educators maintain a certain form of record keeping for child observation, but that the principals (74%) do not present the evidence of this practice in their reports.

Aspects of individualisation	Yes		No		When needed	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Do educators possess certain documentation for observing and monitoring the children?	48	96%	17	34%		
Do your annual reports contain information from the domain of individualisation in the educational process?	13	26%	37	74%		
Do educators, together with the professional team and parents, create individualised programs for children with special needs?	17	34%	16	32%	17	34%

Table 3: Aspects of individualisation (N=50)

Individualisation implies the knowledge of the child's developmental characteristics as well as continuous observation and monitoring of children's development and learning. On this basis, by using different strategies of individualization, educators can adequately respond to the child's needs, with the aim of creating better educational effects. Most principals (96%) point out that the educators have specific documentation for observing and monitoring the children (Table 3) and they mention the following: an observation diary, a book for keeping a record of

the children's development and learning, a book of pedagogical documentation, a portfolio for each child, an observation leaflet, a development map for tracking the children's progress and a check list. However, the question arises as to whether the documentation is collected systematically and whether it is used to improve the practice or to serves its own purpose. The systematic collection of documentation (which materialises and visualises the real interactions between the educators and children) is important for a better understanding of the children and the process of their learning and advancement, and leads to better interaction with them (higher quality of the process). Through documentation (children's portfolios, diaries, written notes, photographs, etc.) the educators can gain a more complete insight into the child's achievements and developmental needs and interests and, thus, the whole process is based on the basic principles of preschool education.

The humanistic principle is most often applied in preschool institutions in an effort by the educators to respond in a proper way to the developmental needs and interests of the children, especially when it comes to the specific needs of the child. In this regard, the respondents state that there are mainly no assistants in institutions to work with the children who have developmental difficulties and, in some institutions, there are even no individualised programs for children with special needs. An equal number of respondents (34%) states that the educators, along with the professional teams and parents, continuously or occasionally create individualised programs for children with special needs while almost the same number of respondents (32%) responded negatively to the same question. It is this particular problem stated by the respondents that is also recognised in the wider community as one of the most important problems, and is converted into a strategic goal of the new strategic document for the development of preschool education in B&H as a result (Platforma za razvoj predškolskog ... 2017). For the purpose of achieving this goal, the proposed measures call on and empower the competent educational authorities to engage more intensively in developing additional capacities of the preschool institutions to provide expert support for an early recognition of and early intervention in children with disabilities, and in the adaptation of programs and methods of work while creating the prerequisites for engaging assistants in the educational work with children.

When it comes to the principle of professional autonomy, the responses suggest that in preschool institutions this principle comes to the fore in those educators who are ready to be innovative, different and more productive, and who are ready to explore and change the practice. The autonomy of the educator is respected when it comes to the freedom of choice regarding the content and different methodological approaches in order to meet the diverse needs of children and families. The results obtained suggest that additional efforts should be made to ensure equal conditions for all children.

### 3. *The perception of possible difficulties, challenges and opportunities for the improvement of preschool education quality through the process dimension*

Multidimensionality and the complexity of educational work implies the existence of different challenges for all participants in this process. According to the respondents' replies, the challenges faced by educators can be divided into several major sources of difficulty, namely: large group sizes, lack of expert teams to work with children who have developmental difficulties, problems of educational work planning and lack of continuous external and internal evaluation of the institution's work quality. Among other difficulties, they also mention problems of material nature, the lack of professional staff and the lack of parental interest.

Improving the quality of educational work, according to the participants' responses, can be understood through four levels. The first level refers to *the wider community/system/founder* (adoption and implementation of the preschool law, adoption of pedagogical standards, operative program coordinated with the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) for the cantons where it is not regulated; the expansion of the network of preschool institutions; the smaller proportion of children compared to educators; the smaller number of children in the groups). The second one is the level of *the local community* (extending the existing institutional capacity and expanding the network of preschool institutions). The third level which needs continuous work on education quality improvement is *the institutional level* (opportunities for professional development and improvement; more stimulating working conditions, including material and spatial conditions, inclusion of professional associates—pedagogues, speech therapists, psychologists, and assistants in the educational work). The fourth level refers to *the individual level* (continuous work of the educators on themselves and permanent professional training).

It is quite clear that the development of the quality of preschool institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not something that can happen only occasionally and partially, but it requires daily and continuous investment in all aspects mentioned. The path of developing the quality of the preschool education process needs to be based on quality structural elements (a lower ratio of children in relation to educators, smaller groups, higher level of education and professional development of the educators and their permanence in the educational group), and adequate legal regulation. However, since the quality of the process of educational practice is not a direct consequence of the improvement of structural elements and legal regulations, it is necessary to build it in the context of educational work, through the support of the educators as reflective practitioners. In accordance with all of the above-mentioned research results in this paper, it can be concluded that investing in the continuous professional development of the educators in the context of their real pedagogical work and the development of preschool institutions "from within", both represent a link that is significantly missing in the process of planning the quality of the preschool education process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Concluding remarks

Institutional preschool education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in addition to its long tradition, is still socially marginalised and faces difficulties that require systematic solutions. First and foremost, it is necessary to continue and accelerate the initiated reform processes aimed at improving and developing quality in all its dimensions—administrative, structural and process. In this context, it is necessary to complete the processes of enactment and adoption of legal and subordinate acts that regulate the activity of institutional preschool education, harmonised within the *Framework Law* (Okvirni zakon ... 2007). A particularly significant step towards obtaining quality is the empowerment of the educational professionals to develop curricula that is focused on the child and to develop curricular documents that are based on the unique principles and standards established by the *Framework Law* (ibid.) and the *Common Core* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009) for work in preschool institutions in B&H, as well as to develop guidelines to implement the development and learning outcomes. A condition that needs to be achieved is the encouragement of professional autonomy and the motivation to explore one's own practice, empowering educational professionals through the processes of critical reflection, self-evaluation, evaluation and creation of developmental plans at the level of an institution, a team and an individual. In this context, the initial education of the educators and the continuous vocational advancement and professional development of all employees in preschool education should be based on the principles of lifelong learning and the defined standards for the job of an educator, as well as the standards of work quality in preschool education. In addition, it is necessary to provide accessible, methodologically unique trainings that are based on needs, and to maintain continuity for all professionals dealing with children. In order to achieve adequate training standards, it is necessary to establish a certification and accreditation system for educator training.

It is also necessary to develop system mechanisms for the development and quality assurance of preschool education in B&H and a unique model for the process of self-evaluation of preschool institutions, coordinated with the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches and European guidelines at the level of educational policies (Recommendation of the European ... 2010, pp. 4–5; Evaluating quality in ... 1999, pp. 89–92), in accordance with the expressed needs of the practitioners and the needs of the society as a whole.

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