

Teaching Methodology of Preschool Education

Metodika 21 (2/2010), page 358-371

Professional paper

Paper submitted: 20th January 2010

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION IN CHILD-CENTERED EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Ganimete Kulinxa

Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina

***Summary** - There is an ever-present need in every person to communicate with others. Interpersonal communication is dependent on different life experiences that affect the level of its development. Such experience is powerful and particularly predominant in early childhood through the planned and structured processes of teaching and learning. Structured teaching and learning currently offer a range of experiences depending on philosophy of education and the methodology used as the basis for work. A child-centered approach introduces educational experiences which differ from traditional programs. Therefore, the aim of this research was to investigate how a child-centered approach affects the development of interpersonal communication between teachers and children as well as among children in pre-school settings, in comparison with traditional educational programs. Once the results of systematic observation had been processed, they showed that a child-centered approach develops, enriches and increases the quality of interpersonal communication among children and between children and teachers.*

***Key words:** interpersonal communication, child-centered approach, early childhood*

INTRODUCTION

We live in a time of great and turbulent changes, which means that we sometimes feel confused and insecure. The old value system is unstable, and a new value system has not yet been fully established.

In such a, not uncommon, social context, in an attempt to rationalize and protect values and a value system which has been adopted previously and which spontaneously manifests itself in the modern world, a vacuum is created in interpersonal communication. As we live our experiences, our preoccupations and our attitudes to others, and, as we are confronted with manifold experiences, preoccupations and attitudes which do not agree with our own, the flow of communication with others is often not as we would like it to be. When this happens, a range of misunderstandings and prejudices arise, which can lead to undesirable and even conflict situations. This situation can perhaps serve as a rationale for an initiative that seeks to find a way to investigate quality communication among people.

Human transformation and the transformation of the social circle in the service of ongoing humanization, is greatly facilitated through creating the conditions for the development of a multi-faceted culture of interpersonal communication. The fact that 'communication is a process through which the human collective creates and regulates the social reality' (Trenholm and Jensen, 1999: 4) prompts us to think about and, moreover, to bring about various special elements and qualities of communication which are reflected in the field of interpersonal relationships created through interactive activity in specific social environments, leaving aside, for the moment, the ethnolinguistic problems which are of some value and importance for communication.

The development of interpersonal communication, understood as a *process of mastering active and interactive skills and competences in communication, expression and logic*, is necessarily supported by specific knowledge, expression and skills, which help in creating sustainable and high-quality relationships among people.

Such competences, developed through interpersonal communication, can be developed from early childhood in pre-school settings.

Since interpersonal communication requires particular things depending on the different life experiences of the child, in our case it was challenging to understand how the development of interpersonal communication operates within the pre-school setting in educational environments differing in their organization and planning of teaching and learning. Although the implementation of a child-centered approach in Kosovo's kindergartens represents a new educational experience, differing from traditional educational practice, the area of study is defined in this context as "The development of interpersonal communication in early childhood in a child-centered program." Such a definition of the problem communicates that the focus of this study is research on the effects of the child-centered approach on

the development of interpersonal communication in early childhood. Many child-centered programs are internationally established, including the Reggio Emilia program, the Step by Step program, the Montessori program, etc. but it is also a fact that in Kosovo the most widespread and most long-lived program is the Step by Step Program. That is why this is the only program considered for our research.

Since early childhood is a time of turbulent change, bringing in new factors which do not last, the interpersonal communication of children of this age is also affected in this way. This is seen particularly at the age of 5-6, when collaboration with others begins along with discussions incorporating the meaning of words.

“At approximately five years of age, children begin discussing rather than simply talking with others” (Reardon, 1998). One particular aim of the research was to verify how the Step by Step program, as a child-centered program, affects the development of interpersonal communication in early childhood (at the age of 5-6).

The overall aim of our research was to draw a comparison between the effects of a child-centered program in relation to traditional educational methods in the field of interpersonal communication in early childhood settings. We aimed to identify the differences in interpersonal communication:

- between teachers and children,
- among children.

In order to achieve this aim it is necessary:

- to identify the differences in interpersonal communication between teachers and children in the experimental group, where a child-centered approach is implemented, and the control group where a more traditional teaching method is used,
- to identify the differences in interpersonal communication among children in the experimental group, where a child-centered approach is implemented, and the control group where education is more traditional.

HYPOTHESIS

A comparative study as planned for this research serves to verify the underlying hypothesis related to the belief that **the implementation of a child-centered program develops, enriches and raises the quality of communication among children as well as between children and teachers.** This underlying hypothesis is accompanied by the following auxiliary hypotheses:

A child-centered program:

- raises the quality of interpersonal communication among children
- creates opportunities for developing free expression through interpersonal communication,
- encourages the enrichment of interpersonal communication,

- encourages the development of more effective interpersonal communication skills.

The independent variables in our research are the educational methods used. The dependent variables are the positive effects on interpersonal communication between the subjects included in the research, as the results of the implementation of a child-centered program.

METHOD

Participants

On the basis of statistical data provided by the Department for Pre-School Education of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, a total of 33 public kindergartens are registered in Kosovo. A total of 166 groups operate in these kindergartens, incorporating 3440 children aged 3-6. Of these, 65 groups include children aged 5-6 which is the base population of our study, from which our representative research sample was taken.

Two groups of children make up the sample of children - the experimental group and the control group from public kindergartens in the Republic of Kosovo. The experimental group was made up of 5-6 year olds from 5 classes where the 'Step by Step' program is implemented, while the control group was also made up of 5 classes working according to a traditional education program.

Thus, our study includes 10 groups of children, or 6.02% of all the pre-school classes in kindergartens, or 15.38% of the groups of 5 to 6-year-old children.

Since the setting up of education groups is dictated by the reality of life in Kosovo (a small number of pre-school settings and a great demand of children wanting to attend these settings), the number of children in each group is about 25. Approximately, 250 children were included in our research, representing 7.26% of the total kindergarten population and 15.38% of children aged 5-6.

With this number of groups and of children we aimed to achieve the highest objectivity in research data and the highest level of precision in the results obtained from the research. In the experimental groups we chose only teachers who had completed all the training organized by the Step by Step Kosovo Education Centre (KEC), while the teachers included in the control group sample were not trained in any child-centered program.

The sample of teachers comprised 20 teachers (2 teachers work in one group), 10 from the experimental group and 10 from the control group.

This means that of the 332 teachers teaching in kindergartens, the group of teachers included in the research represents 6.02 % of the total number of teachers in kindergartens, or 15.38 % of teachers working with children aged 5-6 in the Republic of Kosovo.

In selecting the pre-school settings we were careful to have equal representation of different socio-cultural contexts. Since our kindergartens exist in cities and towns, we selected three city kindergartens and two town kindergartens.

Method

Theoretical analysis methodology. Theoretical analysis clarifies a range of approaches to the problems and helps draw particular conclusions on important issues linked with particular problems.

Comparative method. By means of the comparative method the data collected in the experimental groups and the control groups can be compare.

Statistical method. It refers to the numerical statistical processing of data gathered through appropriate techniques and instruments. Drawing out relevant indicators in research, expressing data in tabular form, graphic representation and quantifying expression in values which prove the stated hypotheses is made possible through statistical methods.

Descriptive method. It is used to describe the number of kindergartens, children, teachers and data by which a general idea of the pre-school educational practice in the Kosovo context can be gained. The descriptive method is also deployed in using the results of the research, through which we arrive at a number of generalizations which are interpreted on the basis of evaluation, comparison and discovering the shared characteristics of phenomena. Representing and commenting on these results in a descriptive way helps draw conclusions and recommendations for future practice.

Research techniques and instruments

Our research techniques and instruments depended on the research methods. We used systematic observation with the aim of collecting data on interpersonal communication in groups using a child-centered program (experimental group) and groups using a traditional program (control group). The protocol for noting interpersonal communication during teaching and learning within the group was modeled on the Observation protocol for dimensions of learning (Cornell, 1953; Mužić, 1986) which was modified for the needs of this research.

Procedure

While researching the problem, the planned work fell into three phases.

The first phase was the preparation phase. In this phase, preliminary research was conducted in two different contexts where a child-centered program was being successfully implemented

The implementation phase was the longest phase of the research. It began with the organization of systematic observation. During this phase, it was planned how to follow teaching and learning activities.

The observation of children's interpersonal communication with other children and between children and teachers was carried out during teaching and learning activities in both experimental and control groups.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results research of the research related to the extent to which various indicators which were considered to be evidence of quality interpersonal communication in the relationships created in the education process were present. With the aim of verifying the stated hypotheses, we identified indicators in the observation protocol which would give focused and valuable information.

When the observations had been completed in both the experimental group and in the control group we were able to collate considerable information about the state of these programs. Statistical processing enabled us to draw concrete conclusions about the problem we were dealing with. The data were presented through tables and graphs.

The T-test of proportion was selected for results of teacher observation, comparing the proportions of the options "often", "sometimes" and "rarely". Test verification was done for 95% and 99% reliability, $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$ respectively.

We identified that the data gathered through statistical tests of teachers' communication with children and of children's communication with peers during teaching and learning activities, showed a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group.

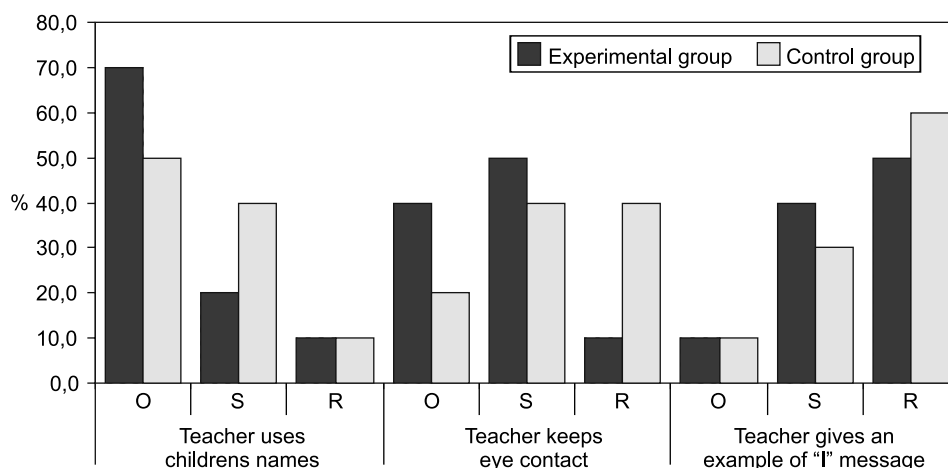
When each indicator was taken separately, statistical analysis showed a similar significant difference and led to the conclusion that we were dealing with a significant superiority in the experimental group.

Our results confirmed the basic hypothesis that the implementation of a child-centered program develops, enriches and increases the quality of communication among children as well as between children and teachers.

TEACHERS' COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN DURING THE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS

The analysis of the results regarding teachers' communication with children during teaching and learning in pre-school settings shows a clear difference in interpersonal communication, depending on the teaching method used in the experimental and the control group.

Whether the teacher uses children's names, keeps eye contact, or tells children what to do by using "I" messages for effective interpersonal communication or not, is of great importance for creating interpersonal relationships. It is through these features of communication in the teaching and learning process that respect



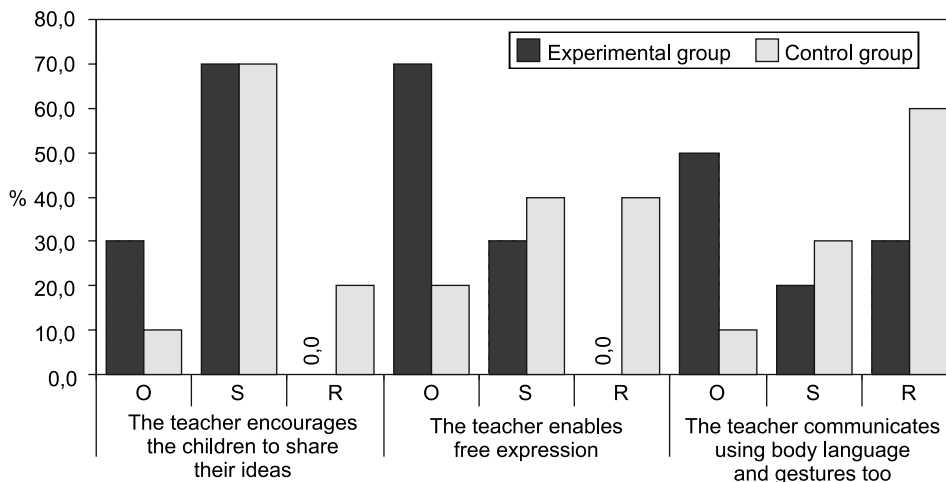
Graph 1: Teachers' communication with children (names, eye contact and "I" messages)

is shown for the child's individuality, evidence is given of the feeling of belonging to the social environment, and a basis is established for creating an appropriate positive relationship which can ensure effective interpersonal communication

In the world of education, at various different levels, there are often instances when the teacher gives directions to a child using the pronoun 'you' (for example 'you near the window', 'you in the red shirt', 'you in the third row' etc). According to our research, it remains true that, unfortunately, such things still occur in pre-school settings, even if they are much rarer than before. It is true that teachers usually speak to children using their names, but it is also rather typical for a teacher, trying to call a child by his/her name, to use the name of their friend instead, which is not a good experience for the child. There are rare examples of a teacher approaching a child, talking to them, but not once calling them by their name.

Bearing in mind the importance of eye contact for effective interpersonal communication, the results of our research show that this does take place, but not at a satisfactory level (see Graph 1). When the results are compared for the research groups, even though it can be seen that the experimental group is superior, it was observed that even in that group, the majority of teachers only sometimes maintained eye contact while communicating with a child, by which we mean that they were looking, but not focusing (i.e. while the teacher was talking with the child, she checked other children, seeing where they were, looking at the materials being used, looking for something in the cupboard, etc.).

The results of our research show that in the experimental group and in the control group teachers often do not give children instructions by using 'I' messages. This shows that the communication between teachers and children is not very close.



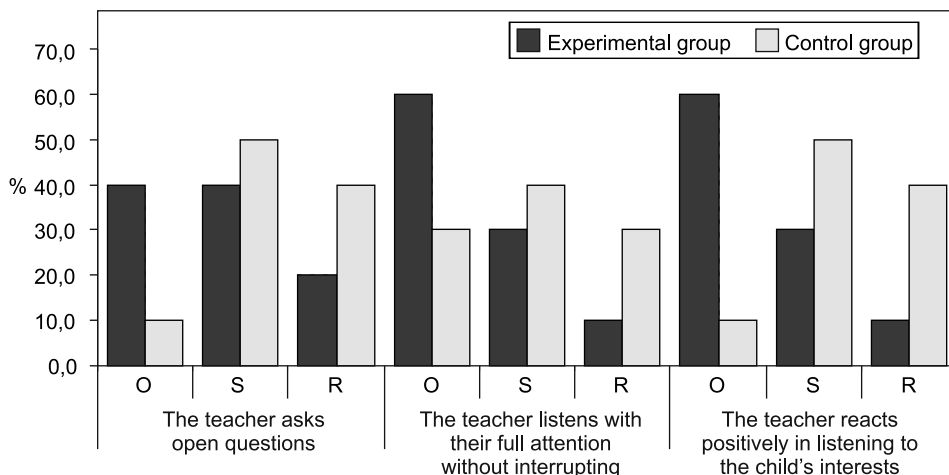
Graph 2: Teachers' communication with children (encouragement of children's ideas and free expression and teachers' body language)

Encouraging the sharing of ideas, opinions and knowledge, creating opportunities for free expression and for non-verbal communication by the teacher are important indicators of effective interpersonal communication.

Sharing ideas, opinions and knowledge is not greatly encouraged by teachers in direct teacher-child communication. In both research groups, the results show that in 70% of cases, children are sometimes encouraged to share ideas, opinions and knowledge with one another. This is shown when the teacher gives a task to a group and encourages them to talk about it, such as when, in the art area, while drawing examples of family celebration, the teacher encourages the children to share their experiences about celebrations, family relationships, people's ages, etc.

During the research it was noted that there was a distinct difference in the creation of opportunities for free expression and free communication by the teacher. Statistical results show the experimental group favorable when compared to the control group in this aspect of interpersonal communication. This is a consequence of the idea that untrained teachers are prone to that where there is no silence there is no work being done, while the teachers from the experimental group believe that constructive noise, the so-called "noise of work" is tolerable, and value children expressing themselves and communicating freely.

Given the characteristics of children, and often given their mode of communication and learning, a teacher's non-verbal communication is more acceptable to them and often more appreciated. In connection with this aspect of teachers' communication, statistical data show that in the experimental group the teachers uses non-verbal communication much more frequently than the teachers in the control group.



Graph 3: Teachers' communication with children (open questions, listening to children)

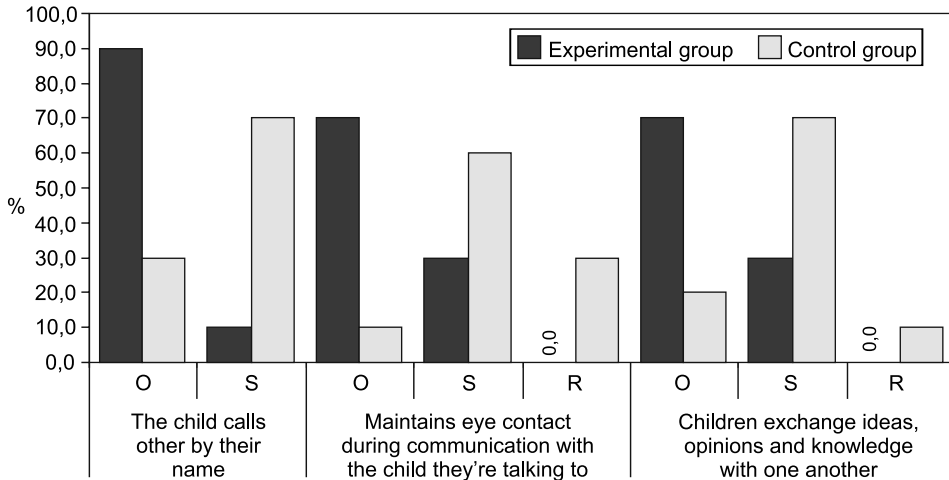
The teacher asking open questions, listening attentively without interrupting the child as well as listening to the child's interests are very important aspects of interpersonal communication for teachers, through which they gain enormous amounts of information to apply in the successful organization and planning of teaching and learning.

The results show that there are considerable differences between the teachers from the two research groups. The results are much more positive and encouraging for the experimental group. However, considering the importance of these indicators for interpersonal communication, statistical data still leave room for improvement. Such results must be contextualized by the fact that for a long time our teachers considered their position in the teaching and learning relationship to be the dominant one, and - even more so - that they were the main source of information, so they expect to be listened to, and not to listen. The trend in changing this practice in child-centered programs should definitely be encouraged.

COMMUNICATION AMONG CHILDREN DURING TEACHING AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Communication between children in the two groups with different educational approaches also reflects the noticeable features of each. The indicators of quality interpersonal communication were much more significantly represented in the experimental than in the control group.

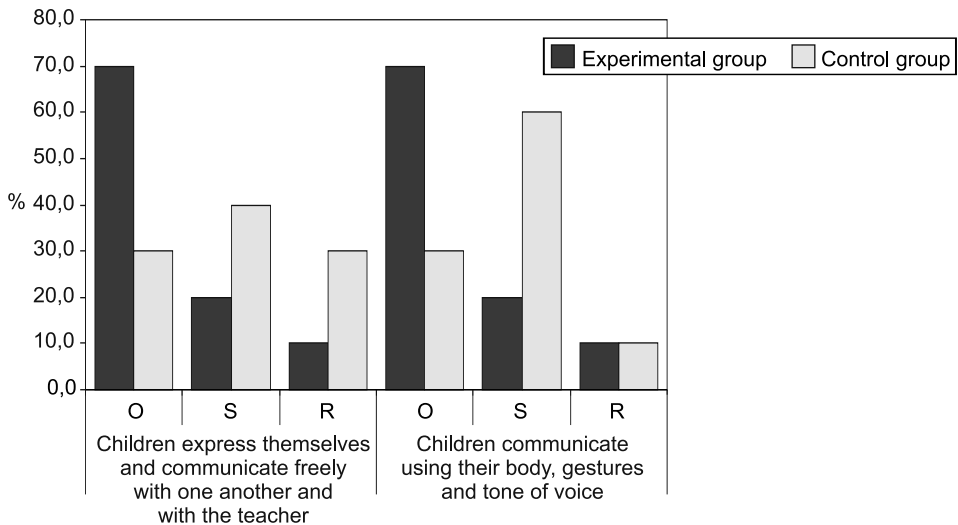
In the experimental group, in 90% of the cases children often called other children by name. This fact stems from the practice observable in almost every morn-



Graph 4: The observation of communication among children (using names, eye contact, exchanging ideas and knowledge)

ing meeting, when the children introduce themselves (giving information about themselves and those close to them) and then say which friend is on their right and which on their left. Various forms of play also create closeness among the children.

The results also show that eye contact during communication among children is very different. Such a difference in eye contact during communication creates



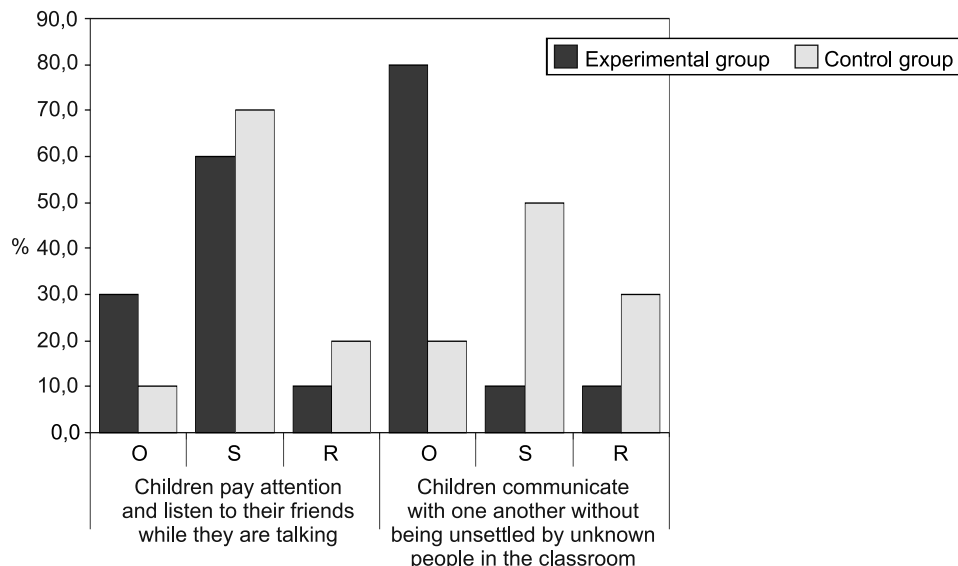
Graph 5: The observation of children's communication while learning

a physical focus for children in their teaching and learning activities. While in the experimental group children were seated in a circle during the teaching, in the control group children usually sat one behind the other, thus making eye contact during communication difficult.

Sharing ideas, opinions and knowledge among the children was present at different levels in the two research groups. A noticeable difference in results is believed to be a consequence of learning through play. The spontaneous play which takes place in the experimental group in line with children’s interests means that the exchange of ideas, opinions and knowledge is here more natural and richer.

Children’s communication through body language, gestures and tone of voice is closely connected with children’s expression and free communication among each other and with the teacher. We found correlation in the results between these two indicators.

Even though this would enable children to express themselves and work in harmony with their interests and wishes, children’s free expression and communication among each other in their educational environment does not happen often in the control group because “this would cause anarchy in the class.” These results differ greatly in comparison to the experimental group, where the child-centered approach is being implemented. In the control group there is not only a lack of children’s free expression and communication among children, but also a lack of



Graph 6: The observation of children’s communication during activities in the classroom

body language, gestures and tone of voice which necessarily has consequences for the clarity and richness of interpersonal communication among children.

The observation of the experimental and the control group shows that children are not often attentive or listening to their peers while they are communicating. We believe that this is a consequence of their egocentric nature and their limited skills for maintaining attention. In this case, the statistical results also show that in the experimental group children are much more attentive and that they listen to their peers while they are talking. It is believed that attention is greater and they listen more carefully because the children's interests are being matched and these are often shared by many.

When the presence of unknown people does not unsettle children and they continue to communicate with one another without being upset by strangers in class, the children are truly focused on the processes of their work and interpersonal communication. In the experimental group the children communicate with one another much more frequently, without being troubled by strangers in the class, than in the control group where the presence of any unknown person interrupts all forms of communication in class for a considerable time.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research it can be concluded that the observed child-centered program develops, enriches and raises the quality of interpersonal communication both among children and between teachers and children.

In the child-centered program:

- Children and teachers usually call children by their name and look each other in the eye much more often than in the control groups, and work at creating a potential interpersonal relationship for communication.
- Freedom of expression in communication among children and between teachers and children, as well as the right to share ideas, opinions and knowledge with one another contributes to the richness and variety of the information they have.
- Children's interpersonal communication as well as their communication with teachers, using body language, gestures and their tone of voice, makes the information exchange much richer, clearer and more accurate, which noticeably contributes to understanding information.
- In communicating with one another in a way appropriate for their developmental potential and the characteristics of their age (limited attention and an egocentric nature), children listen attentively to their peers while they are talking. This important interpersonal communication skill means that there are fewer misunderstandings in communication.

- When teachers are communicating with children by asking open questions, they receive fuller and more accurate information about the developmental potential of the child, as well as about their interests, wishes and, most importantly, developmental needs, which helps them to achieve better quality communication.
- Giving examples and requests with “I” messages, which is a good example for expressing values, wishes, needs and psychological state (self-expression), creates a psychological closeness that leads to both the creation of social relationships and the overcoming of prejudices between different cultures.
- Children communicate with other peers without being unsettled by the presence of strangers, which suggests focus and commitment to the interpersonal communication process.

Recommendations

Based on the results of our investigation the following recommendation can be formulated:

- Child-centered programs should gain greater influence in educational settings dedicated to early childhood.
- Continuous training should be provided for teachers in effective implementation of child-centered programs.
- Special programs should be designed for courses within the University, which will help with professional training of all pre-school teachers regarding developing interpersonal communication in educational contexts.
- Teachers should be provided with literature, handbooks and professional resources covering numerous techniques which can be used to advance the development of interpersonal communication.

The following Issues remain open for discussion:

- Particular study of the effects of concrete methods in teaching and learning for developing interpersonal communication.
- Study of the impact of different cultures in educational contexts during the process of developing interpersonal communication.
- Study of the possibilities for managing conflict situations by teachers through the development of interpersonal communication
- Study of the development of interpersonal communication in adolescence.

REFERENCES

- Bekteshi, B. (2005). *Statistika Elementare*. Prishtina: Libri shkollor
- Brajša, P. (1994). *Pedagoška komunikologija*. Zagreb. Školske novine.

- Bredenkamp, S. (Ed.). (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age eight*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Çomo, B. (2001). *Psikologji Komunikimi*. Tirana: Pegi.
- Graorac, I. (1995). *Vaspitanje i komunikacija*. Novi Sad: Matica srpska.
- MEST (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology) (2006). *General Standards of Preschool Education in Kosovo (age 3-6)* Prishtina.
- MEST (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology) (2006). *Curriculum of Preschool Education in Kosovo (age 3-6)* Prishtina.
- Miljak, A. (1984). *Uloga komunikacije u razvoju govora djece predškolske dobi*, Zagreb: Školske novine.
- Mužić, V. (1986). *Metodologija pedagoškog istraživanja*. Sarajevo: Svjetlost.
- Mužić, V. (2004). *Uvod u metodologiji istraživanja odgoja i obrazovanja*, Zagreb: Educa.
- Neill, S. (1994). *Neverbalna komunikacija u razredu*, Zagreb: Educa.
- Reardon, K. K. (1998). *Interpersonalna komunikacija, Gdje se misli susreću*. Zagreb: Ali-nea.
- Scully, P., Isenberg, J. P. & Jalongo, M. R. (1999). *Kurrikulumi me në qendër fëmijën, Një kurs Universitar që përgadisin mësues të Fëmijërisë së hershme*, Tirana.
- Schulz von Thun, F. (2001). *Kako međusobno razgovaramo 1 - Opća psihologija komunikacije*. Zagreb: Erudita.
- Schulz von Thun, F. (2002). *Kako međusobno razgovaramo 2 - Opća psihologija komunikacije*. Zagreb: Erudita.
- Schulz von Thun, F. (2001). *Kako međusobno razgovaramo 3 - Opća psihologija komunikacije*. Zagreb: Erudita.
- Standards for teachers and the “Step by Step” Program, for Preschool and Elementary level, International “Step by Step” Association.
- Trenholm, S. & Jensen, A. (1999). *Interpersonal Communication*. Wadsworth publishing Company.
- Verderber, S. K., Verderber, F. R. (2004). *Inter-act, Interpersonal Communication Concepts, Skills, and Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.