

Pregledni članak/

Review paper

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CHILDREN'S AND TEACHERS' LEARNING TOGETHER IN A PRESCHOOL PROJECT

Abstract: *In postmodern times, it is impossible to seek universal truths in education that would be constant and valid for all times and places. Therefore, the basis for our decision-making in education is the question of how we – adults – see 'the child' and 'childhood', what we call subjective theories of teachers. In this article, I start from the view of the child as a powerless and help-needing individual, an 'empty vessel' into which we 'pour' knowledge. An alternative to this perception is the competent child, especially stressed in the Reggio Emilia approach. The Reggio Emilia preschool teachers include participation of children to their work and they believe that in educational process everybody learn: not only children but the adults also. In a related research and education project at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana (2009–2013), we encouraged about 200 Slovenian teachers to introduce the Reggio Emilia elements to their preschool practice. I will illustrate and analyse the idea of the competent child and children's participation in preschool with the remarkable project: how the children and their teachers from the Globoko Preschool together and with the aid of film director, schoolchildren and janitor made a cartoon. I believe that such experience can be a motivation and challenge for preschool workers to embrace the children's participation and to learn together with children.*

Keywords: *subjective theories of preschool teachers, competent child, Reggio Emilia approach, participation of children, learning together.*

1. Introduction

My paper stems from the belief that the subjective theories about the child and childhood held by teachers and researchers in education essentially influence the way children are treated in preschools and schools, along with policies and formal curricula at all levels of education. As Moss (in Kroflič, 2011) says, the basis for our decision-making in education is the question of how we – adults – see ‘the child’ and ‘childhood’. Our perception of the child is essentially an ethical and political issue; the social construction of childhood influences the politics and practices in the field of education. Another important characteristic of subjective theories is that they only change with difficulty and slowly (Korthagen, 2004).

Having worked in preschool education for more than 30 years, I am particularly satisfied that this field has recently gained in importance and validity. Perhaps also due to it not being part of compulsory education, in the relatively short history of preschool education many interesting ideas have emerged.

I see a vital shift in contemporary preschool education in the concept of the competent child, especially stressed in the Reggio Emilia approach. Because the Reggio Emilia approach is contemporary and, as has been assessed, congruent with the system of preschool education in Slovenia (Batistič Zorec, Kalin, Kržan and Sedeljšak, 2012), at the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana we carried out a project called *The Professional Training of Educators to Include Elements of the Special Pedagogical Principles of the Reggio Emilia Concept in the Area of Preschool Education*. The project started in 2008 and ended in 2013 and was financed by the Slovenian Ministry of Education, and the European Social Fund. In this research and education project, we encouraged about 200 Slovenian teachers to introduce the Reggio Emilia elements (participation and listening to children, the advantage of learning before teaching, the hundred languages of children, cooperation between children and between children and adults, project work in small groups, documentation, the preschool as a laboratory of culture, the space as a third teacher...) to their preschool practice.

In this article, I will illustrate the idea of the competent child and children’s participation with a remarkable project involving children and teachers from the Globoko Preschool that was carried out as part of the above-mentioned research project. On my opinion, the special worth of their work is that children and adults learned together while making the cartoon, which was a final product of their excellent educational project.

2. Subjective theories about 'the child'

Most people believe that science can objectively determine how children develop and learn and which education is most appropriate for them. However, if we look at childhood and educational institutions from historical and intercultural aspects, we can see that views from these aspects differ greatly among themselves and that they change over time. Recently, due to the growing influence of a new sociology of childhood, cultural and anthropological studies, an alternative view, which argues that childhood is an adult construction that changes over time and place has been put forward (Waller, 2014). The understandings of the child and the standpoints about which education is best for them not only differ with regard to socio-historical circumstances, but also within them since even in a society of the same place and time not everybody thinks and acts in the same way.

Teachers' subjective theories about childhood and education include their expectations and assumptions about the possibilities of children's development and learning, and importantly influence their actions in educational work with children. Although subjective theories also comprise the individual's explicitly expressed viewpoints, values and interpretations even more influential are the implicit assumptions of which the individual is most often unaware (Marentič Požarnik, 2000). We can only indirectly make assumptions about them through actions, which are often in opposition with explicitly expressed beliefs. Teachers' subjective theories develop throughout their lives, they are built on their personal experiences even before they enter formal education, then they elaborate throughout the life under the influence of professional knowledge and the beliefs and actions of people in the environment in which teachers live and work.

As a developmental psychologist, I am particularly interested in the influence of developmental psychology on teachers' subjective theories. In spite of the undoubtedly positive influence of this science on understanding of the child's development, in the past few decades there has been a growing number of critical reflections regarding its role. These represent attempts to deconstruct its self-evident assumptions, and to self-question the usefulness and consequences of its interpretations for children's education (e.g. Burman, 1994; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2000; Greene, 1999; Lubeck, 1996; Singer, 1992; Riley, 1983).

Critics warn that the tendency of most developmental psychology theories is normalisation, namely, to describe and explain the child's development by looking for universal, culture-independent laws of 'normal' development. Theories describe an average child of a given age, which critics

consider to be an abstract norm that is a poor description of each individual child. In Greene's (1999) opinion, the normalisation of development is based on the assumption that most of what is developing is genetically determined, which the author attributes to the attempts by developmental psychology to come closer to the natural sciences resulting in a biologicistic view of development. Burman (1994) adds that the normalisation of development allows psychology to explain differences between children as deficiencies, thereby pathologising individuals and groups that deviate from idealised models. The categorisation of children produced by psychology has also made talk about education become increasingly talk about how to replace children's 'deficiencies' (Lubeck, 1996).

The result of these beliefs is that children are thought about in light of their opposition with adults. Such thinking well illustrates Flaker's (1990) metaphor that adults consider childhood to be an illness, which passes if the 'patient' is taken well care of. I will show that it is possible to think about children in a different way, if – as opposed to the predominant thinking that only adults know what children lack and what they need to learn – adults believe that children are curious, creative and competent.

3. The competent child, participation and listening in the Reggio Emilia approach

First, I need to point out that the concept of the competent child does not mean that today's children have greater abilities than children in the past, as is sometimes wrongly understood (e.g. The White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia, 2011). The competent child is about how adults see children, that is, what are adults' subjective theories about children and education. The competent child has been specifically stressed by Reggio Emilia educators (Malguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 2006) who do not believe that science can objectively describe a child of a certain age without ignoring the richness of differences between children and cultures. In Reggio Emilia preschools, images of an average child of a certain age are consciously renounced, as they believe this would limit them in their understanding of each child in the preschool. They believe there is a mass of countless different children and childhoods, which they try to get to know each time anew through children expressing themselves in their hundred languages and through their culture. An important contribution of the Reggio Emilia approach is their openness and doubt in their knowledge about who the children are, what is best for them and how best to raise them.

Therefore, the competent child is an image of a child – and with it the relationship of the adult to children, that can be understood in the opposition with the predominant beliefs and practices which can be followed through

history and are still present today. Moss (in Kroflič, 2011) explains the concept of the competent child by its comparison with the 'child in need'. In the author's opinion, 'the child in need' is a construct created by adults based on a deficiency, that is, on what is supposedly missing in a child. The result of this view of the child is that the main aim of education is correcting or replacing of what the child lacks. Close to this is also the view of cultural transmission (behaviourist theory), which sees the child as one who reproduces knowledge, like an 'empty vessel' that needs to be filled by adults with the knowledge, skills and values of the dominant culture (Dalberg, Moss and Pence, 2000). According to Moss (in Kroflič, 2011), the idea of a competent child is about something completely different, it is about the child of infinite potential and possibility. The essence of the competent child in the Reggio Emilia approach is that they try to see in each child what she or he can do, knows, understands... (Thornton and Brunton, 2007). Moreover, Moss (in Kroflič, 2011) points out that this does not mean that the so-called 'rich child' does not need our care and reflection, loving relationships and everything that is important in life.

There is another concept that opposes the concept of a competent child, that is, the 'innocent child'. The conception of the child as a powerless being which, according to Short (1999), mainly prevailed in the 1960s and 1970s typically protects the child's 'innocence', shown in the protection of children against the harsh reality of the world. The excessive consideration of the child's (im)maturity results in the exclusion of curricular contents which the child presumably does not yet understand or are too cruel for them (such as death, war, politics). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2000) contend that this view denies children the right to be respected and taken seriously. Further, Singer (1996) thinks that children are extremely interested in the life and work of grown-ups and they want to be included in it, so she does not agree that children need special treatment.

The concept of a competent child is closely related to the right of children to participate in preschool, which is not only asserted in the Reggio Emilia approach but in many contemporary, particularly Scandinavian national curricula. According to Kjørholt (2005), the rising interest in participation projects over the past few decades must be seen in the context of the international discourse about children as social actors who have the right to participate or make decisions about things that concern them. An important shift in the view of the child is presented in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which besides the adult's duty to take care of children explicitly states the right of children to express their opinion on decisions that are important to them, and that adults respect their opinion (Lansdown, 1996). However, according to the same author adults still typically patronise children; it is easier to agree with the rights

of protecting children and with being responsible for them than with making agreements with them.

Apart from the concept of participation, another similar and partly overlapping concept has developed, namely listening, which is one of the central concepts of educators in the Reggio Emilia approach. They emphasise that listening is more important than talking; the educators listen to the children's questions, answers, ideas, explanations without holding any previous assumptions about what is right and what is wrong (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2000). Listening in Reggio Emilia preschools implies getting to know the children through observation and listening to their verbal and non-verbal behaviour, namely 'listening' to all of the children's languages (Thorton and Burton, 2007).

4. The making of an animated cartoon in the Globoko preschool

The Globoko preschool is a small countryside preschool adjacent to the Globoko elementary school, with only three classes of children in which three preschool teachers and three teacher assistants (hereinafter: teachers) work. In the class of children aged four to six, at the start of each school year the children together with their teachers choose the themes that will be the subject of their research in that year. In the 2010/2011 school year, the theme chosen by the children was a cartoon. Upon hearing of such an idea, most adults would probably think that the children simply chose what they liked and not what was good for their development and learning. Contrary to that, the Globoko preschool teachers accepted the children's idea without any second thoughts, while thinking like this (Batistič Zorec et al., 2012):

"Teachers are aware that the children suggested themes that are in their zone of the known which means they probably chose the cartoon wishing that they would be able to see as many cartoons in preschool as possible, while the teachers were aware of the responsibility to bring a theme that is known towards new and unknown. In this initial phase of the research, even the adults did not know exactly up to which point this project would bring us." (p. 33).

In the teachers' statement that they did not know where the project would bring them, the way of planning that is in use in Reggio Emilia preschools, also called 'progettazione', can be recognised. This way of designing the learning context is in opposition to 'programmazione', which implies predefined curricula. The 'progettazione' concept thus implies a more global and flexible approach in which

initial hypotheses are made about classroom work, but are subject to modifications and changes in direction as the actual work progresses (Giudici, Rinaldi and Krechevsky, 2001, p. 17).

The claim that teachers are responsible for taking the children from 'the known to the unknown' can be linked to Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky (1977) named the space between a child's independent knowledge and skills and that which they might attain, but where they need the support of a 'more expert other', as the zone of proximal development.

The planning of the project was open, in conversations the children told what they knew (how a cartoon is made, where I can get it, what I can learn from it...) and what they are interested in. They talked about where we can watch cartoons, how they are made and what message they convey. In the class, they watched several cartoons, each time followed by a conversation about the process of making the cartoon, its heroes, its message, its country of origin etc. The teachers followed the principle that the children can turn to them not so much to get answers to their questions than to get help in discovering their own answers and raising good questions (Rinaldi, 2006).

Since they all soon found out that the children mainly watch cartoons at home, and that only one child has watched a cartoon in a cinema before, they decided to go to the cinema and take their parents along. The making of the invitations for the parents followed, and they talked about the rules of behaviour in the cinema. Some children wrote their parents a note they had composed themselves through copying the letters, while others designed it by drawing. One of the girls wanted the poster to also say: »Those who feel sick (during the car journey) should stay at home«. A boy mounted a play banknote on the poster, »because you need to pay for the ticket« (Batistič Zorec et al., 2012, p. 35). The visit was followed by an evaluation in which their experiences of and new knowledge about the cinema were summarised, and which they drew on a poster.

The greatest challenge for the children was the question of how the cartoon was made. To this end, they started to research the ICT (the overhead projector, the beamer, the computer, the TV, the DVD player...). The teachers thought it was important to trust the children's capabilities and enable them to acquire their own experience in dealing with the devices. The children are quick to acquire skills in handling these tools; they know how to deal with them carefully and responsibly if only adults allow them to and trust them (Batistič Zorec et al., 2012, p. 44). In the process, the children created plans and made their own devices from recyclable material.

During the Christmas period, the children gave the initiative that they would make their own story. They started with their key words or proposed their heroes: the castle, the treasure box, the ring and the tree, and one child added "a rabbit with a cake" to all of those. For some time, the story ran fluently with individuals adding in their suggestions, and sometimes there were contrasting ideas, which opposed each other. In these cases, the children wrote down different possible solutions, substantiated them and harmonised them until they reached an agreement on which solution is best. In their way of work socially-cognitive conflict can be recognised, which Rinaldi (1993) explains as a causal-consequential relation between cognitive and social development. The conflict represents the driving force of development in which both cognitive and social systems undergo changes.

After two weeks of negotiations, they created the story with the title *The Hidden Treasure*, which the children and the teachers wrote down, equipped with illustrations and bound into a book. Since the teachers from the Globoko preschool regularly participate in team meetings, the idea arose that this book would 'travel' to other classes. In all of the classes, the book attracted the children's great interest and triggered various conversation themes and activities. Teachers carefully documented the learning process through photographs, video recordings, records of the children's statements, initiatives and proposals ..., posters, portfolios and other documentation were created. We can see that they used knowledge about the Reggio Emilia approach, which they had acquired in our educational and research project.

Since the cartoon was the leading subject of the school year it is not surprising that the children wanted to make the cartoon after their story or book. First, they made a recording plan; each child drew one of the agreed scenes which they glued together to make a several-metre-long recording tape. Several unsuccessful attempts at animation and photography followed, after which the children and the teachers were forced to realise they were unable to make the cartoon on their own. In this 'admission' of the teachers, it can be seen that the teachers dared to participate in the adventure, to research and do things along with the children, even if they as adults did not master them! By doing this, they followed an important principle of Reggio Emilia educators that in preschool adults learn along with the children (Giudici, Rinaldi and Krechevsky, 2001).

When asked by their teacher who could help them, the children proposed calling "the cartoon masters". Probably this was the moment, in which most adults would take the matter into their own hands, find an appropriate person and make contact with them. However, here the teachers encouraged

the children to find their own solutions. They first found the name of a director, Kolja Saksida, on the cover of the DVD of a cartoon they have watched. After having a conversation about the ways in which people can communicate (by phone, by SMS, by mail or email... and through messages in bottles also), the children decided to write a letter to the director and sent it by ordinary mail. They found his address themselves on the home page of his photo gallery.

The children composed the letter together by all of them designing the text, some in writing and others by illustrating individual words. The result was a letter on five A3 sheets of paper, glued to form an over 2 m long tape. They explained to the cartoon director that they would like to make a cartoon about a rabbit and a cake, and they asked for his help because they did not yet know how to make a cartoon, also adding the phone number of their preschool. We can imagine Kolja Saksida's surprise and enthusiasm! He called them immediately and then visited them. He suggested the stop motion technique to make the cartoon. The result was the making of a completely new setting and of a recording space, the drawing of the main protagonists followed. When they discovered that for just one second of the cartoon they must make 12 – 25 photos, they needed to find help once more. Children from the elementary school helped them take the photos, and the school janitor offered technical help with editing and sound effects. The children told the story into a dictaphone, they chose and recorded the music... This is how the 5-minute cartoon *The Hidden Treasure* was made.

The project concluded with Family Day, an annual event where children and teachers of the Globoko preschool prepare a performance for the parents and other family members. In addition, children from the other classes had followed the creation of both the story and the cartoon so that in one class they composed a song about the *Hidden Treasure* and in another a dance choreography and a treasure hunt game. The children who made the cartoon did not think it was enough just to show the cartoon, they also wanted to perform themselves. With their teachers they prepared a performance in which they added even more heroes and roles to the original story of *The Hidden Treasure* (horses, guards, the castle cook, dancers and musicians), with the result that they all were able to perform at the final event.

5. Conclusion

When I saw the cartoon *The Hidden Treasure*, I thought it was a splendid achievement, especially considering that preschool children made it. However, I was only convinced about the excellent quality of the work of the teachers at

the Globoko preschool when I gained a deeper insight into the process of their educational work. They proved that children really can do a great deal if adults trust their abilities and are ready to learn with them. Listening to children's theories allows us to understand how children think, which questions they raise and what kind of relationship they establish with reality (Rinaldi, 2001). They are highly motivated if they can participate throughout the process, from the choice of theme, the planning and execution through to the project evaluation. They are especially motivated if they are allowed to do things they consider important and sensible, and that are not usual or expected for children of their age!

In postmodern times, it is impossible to seek universal truths in education that would be constant and valid for all times and places (Moss in Kroflič, 2011). I think that the best answer to the dilemma of how to educate children is to critically analyse the theories and practices used in our educational work with children, including the deconstruction and re-interpretation of established truths, which many believe are universal and eternal. As the Reggio Emilia educators say (Rinaldi, 2006), to achieve this dialogue and listening are vitally important. Similarly, Mac Naughton (2003) emphasises the importance of reflection in the group as an intellectually engaged activity whose purpose is to change the practice via the transformation of knowledge. Group reflection always goes on in a dialogue, which implies conversation, listening, the exchange of ideas and support. As I pointed out before, adults find it difficult to change our beliefs, which we have been building for years. In my experience, it helps if in the education process student teachers acquire theoretical knowledge, which helps them understand children, especially if they are encouraged to evaluate critically scientific theories, educational practices and the relationship between both. I also think that, more than scientific theories and research, teachers are persuaded by examples of good practice if they can be theoretically grounded and analysed from the aspect of the process and its impact on children and adults. I hope that the experience of the teachers and the children in the Globoko preschool presented in this paper represents a small step in that direction.

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ZAJEDNIČKO UČENJE DJECE I ODGOJITELJA U PROJEKTU VRTIĆA

Sažetak: U post modernom vremenu u polju edukacije nije više moguće tražiti univerzalne istine, koje bi važile za sva vremena i krajeve. Baza za naše odlučivanje u edukaciji je pitanje, kako mi – odrasli – vidimo ‘dijete’ i ‘djetinjstvo’, što je poznato pod nazivom subjektivne ili implicitne teorije odgojitelja. U članku počet ću sa podobom djeteta kao nemoćne osobe za koju treba brinuti i kao ‘prazne posude’ u koju sipamo znanje. Alternativa ovoj percepciji je kompetentno dijete kojega najviše in dosljedno podudare u Reggio Emilia pristupu. Odgojitelji u Reggio Emilia vrtićima pored drugog uključuju participaciju djece u svoj pedagoški rad i vjeruju da u odgojnom procesu uče svi: ne samo djeca nego i odrasli.

U istraživačkom i obrazovnom projektu na ovu temu, koje smo vodili na Odjeljenju za predškolski odgoj na ljubljanskom Pedagoškom fakultetu od 2009 do 2013. godine sudjelovalo je više od 200 predškolskih radnika. Pomoću izlaganja i radionica stimulirali smo ih, da principe Reggio Emilia pristupa unose u rad sa djecom u svojim vrtićima. Ovdje ću ilustrirati i analizirati ideju kompetentnog djeteta i participacije djece u vrtiću preko jednog od tih projekata: kako su djeca i odgojitelji Vrtića Globoko zajedno i uz pomoć režisera, školske djece i domara izradili crtani film. Nadam se, da će prikaz ovog praktičnog edukacijskog rada služiti predškolskim radnicima kao izazov i motivacija, da podržavaju participaciju djece i zajedničko učenje djece i odraslih u vrtiću.

Gljučne riječi: subjektivne teorije odgojitelja, kompetentno dijete, Reggio Emilia pristup, participacija djece, zajedničko učenje.