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Social Environment and the Quality of Social Interactions: The Perspective of Future Preschool Teachers

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Abstract

Initial education of future preschool teachers is discussed in the context of them being researchers of their own educational practice, who, on a daily basis, think about and discuss their work. Even at university level, students should be encouraged to develop competencies that will help them build their professional knowledge in interaction with other students.

We will present the results of research on practical exercises for students as part of the course Integrated Curriculum of Early and Preschool Education within university undergraduate study Early and Preschool Education. The purpose of this research is to carry out an analysis of the frequency of situations from the social environment that influence the quality and direction of children's interactions. The instrument for data collection consisted of video recordings of children's and students' activities. The total material consisted of 660 video recordings, and 174 reflections and self-reflections of students. After their analysis, we designed a written protocol (a posteriori), which formed the basis of the content analysis.

The research results show that, during their initial education, students perform exercises in kindergarten as a form of reflexive practice, and in that way they develop the skills of reflexive practitioners who continuously evaluate the effects of their own achievements.

Key words: *initial education of preschool teachers; reflexive practitioner; social interaction.*

Introduction

The contemporary preschool teachers are perceived as researchers of their own educational practice who, along with children, contemplate and discuss their own work on a daily basis, and who are constantly trying out new ways and approaches to create knowledge in concrete conditions within an institution. This new position requires a different level of education and training of preschool teachers with the aim of establishing links between initial education of preschool teachers and encouraging continuous professional development (lifelong learning). In other words, we believe that university level students should be encouraged to develop those competencies that will enable them to build their professional knowledge in interaction with other students and at the same time be able to contemplate, revise, and build upon them (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). This holistic process, also referred to as reflexive discourse, is a way of learning and researching in which theory is integrated with reflection and practice, and in which reflection is the essence of the process of learning and changing the culture of an educational institution (Vujičić, Boneta, & Ivković, 2015).

The theoretical framework of this paper is social constructivism, one of the fundamental principles which states that full development and upbringing of children are strongly influenced by the social and cultural context in the broad and narrow sense. It is assumed that the child is primarily a social being and that, besides their biological nature, children are also influenced by the social and cultural environment. In the institutional context, children and preschool teachers live in a multi-personal world, which is, in addition to adults, predominately made up of children. Social interaction is a process in which there is interaction between two or more persons so that their perception and behaviour are mutually conditioned and interdependent (Jurčević Lozančić, 2016). This is a two-way, mutually active relationship, which leads to behavioural change within the participants in that interaction (Petz, 1992).

The educational group provides abundant opportunities and is an environment for acquiring and practicing social experience. Since a child interacts both with children and adults in the educational group and, in more broader terms, in the institution, (s) he requires more than just the social skills to interact with his/her mother in a dyadic relationship. The child should learn how to interact with several people simultaneously, i.e., (s)he requires the skills of the polyadic group (NAEYC, 1991; Plummer, 2010). Adults are the children's first teachers of social relations. The child creates his/her own behaviour by looking at adults as they relate to other people and to the child. If these interactions between children and adults, and between a child and other children, are based on mutual trust, they affect their behaviour and learning, encourage physical and cognitive development, creativity, and language development through verbal exchange of ideas, as well as other areas of development (Valjan Vukić, 2012). Children can improve their social skills if they have the opportunity to practice a wide range of social behaviours. Social skills and dispositions such as providing assistance,

providing leadership, collaborative work, and expressing altruism must be "practiced" and experienced as an effective source of enjoyment throughout childhood.

The overall development of the child is influenced by the quality of relationships the child has with the important persons in his/her life, and the feelings that the child associates with the relationships and interactions (s)he has with such people. The child's social, emotional, and cognitive development is related to the level of attachment which the child has with the preschool teacher, who will develop a safe affection with the child if (s)he responds to the child with sensitivity. This means responding in a timely and appropriate manner to the child's behaviour, trying to find out what the child is saying, how (s)he feels, and what (s)he needs. Getting down to the child's eye level, establishing eye contact, providing a gentle touch, a pleasant and quiet tone will positively influence the development of safe attachment in this relationship.

In their relationship with the preschool teacher, children need laughter, genuine interest in them and their needs, feelings, interests, and experiences. Research shows that such children will develop good, positive peer interactions, internalized control, will be more kind to others, less aggressive, and will engage in more complex activities (Crowley, 2017; Katz & McClellan, 1999). If the preschool teacher provides comfort and support, the children will have confidence in social relationships. Also, they will be self-confident because they will feel they deserve love and attention. They will be able to engage in appropriate interactions with peers and adults, which means that they will draw attention and focus in appropriate ways. In addition, they will be able to share, find compromise, communicate, and deal with negative emotions (Jurčević Lozančić, 2016).

The socio-constructivist approach does not portray learning as a process that takes place in isolation, but in a community in which the child constructs and co-constructs his/her knowledge and understanding of the surrounding world together with other children and adults (Miljak, 2007). "Acquisition of knowledge and communication are ultimately interdependent; in fact, they are almost inseparable" (Bruner, 2000, p. 19), so we conclude that the child's knowledge is shaped by social interactions. Bruner (2000) sees learning as a transaction, an exchange between the learner and a member of his/her culture who has more experience than him/her. Petrović-Sočo (2011) agrees with this and argues that the child, in joint activities with other children and adults, co-constructs, reflects, and reconstructs his/her knowledge. Accordingly, learning is not a transmission in which a child is a passive consumer of knowledge or constructs his/her knowledge himself/herself, but that "knowledge is generated by social construction in cooperation with other children and adults in which the child takes the role of an active participant" (Petrović-Sočo, 2011, p. 242). Social interactions put the child in charge of coordinating his/her perspective with the perspective of other children with whom (s)he participates in activities (Malnar, Punčikar, & Štefanec, 2012; Palaiologou, 2016), because children are coordinated in joint action, complemented by degree and the way of understanding, and they gradually build mechanisms and strategies

that will lead them to the solution of a task (Petrović-Sočo, 2011). Similarly, Slunjski (2008), Miljak (2015) and Vujičić (2016) argue that children learn by doing (by actively participating in activities that make sense to a child) and in cooperation with others (other children and adults). Petrović-Sočo (2009) adds that the child's peers serve to check and re-examine or reflect on personal "theories" or perceptions, to learn how to achieve self-fulfilment and self-interest in a polite way, while respecting the interests and needs of others. Miljak (1996) points out that children can easily overcome the gap between actual and potential development if they have peer support, i.e., in social interaction. In this way, children are able to solve a task which they would not be able to solve on their own, individually, while at the same time they learn about understanding, tolerance, co-operation, and independence. It is stated in the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (2014) that the environment and the overall preschool teachers' educational approach should encourage children to discuss and exchange ideas and knowledge, test and correct the existing (one's own) theories and understanding, and to continuously build new ones, in social interaction with other children and with indirect support from adults.

It follows that knowledge and understanding of children represent a social construction that is jointly constructed, reconstructed and co-constructed, in social interaction or discussion. Different forms of social grouping of children, i.e., children with different perspectives, knowledge, and understanding, are favoured by such learning. They encourage children to communicate more dynamically and enhance the socio-cognitive conflict. A high-quality social context is an opportunity for a child to engage in diverse social interactions with other children, and it presupposes an unobtrusive but supportive approach of preschool teacher (Slunjski, 2011). The preschool teacher plays a very important role of creating and securing a stimulating social environment that will enable and support different forms of social interaction of children of different ages and different competencies. In order for the preschool teacher to achieve this, it is necessary to be a researcher of one's own practice, which means "focusing not only on observing and understanding of children's activities and on the awareness of these activities, but also changing and adapting the environment to the needs and interests of specific children in a concrete institution on the basis of that knowledge" (Miljak, 2015, p. 36). Therefore, it is important for the preschool teacher to continuously monitor, observe, listen, and document the activities of each individual child (Vujičić & Miketek, 2014).

In other words, the preschool teacher is an integral, inseparable part of the institutional context, who consciously and unconsciously brings in it his/her professional and personal development and acts in it on the basis of his/her own expectations, beliefs, norms, knowledge, strategies, and designs of educational situations (Petrović-Sočo, 2007). "A true preschool teacher makes an impact primarily with his/her personality and values" (Krešić, 2011, p. 213). This refers to the teacher's implicit theory of the child and his/her practice. In order for the preschool teachers

to become aware of their practice, their relationship with the child, and their attitude towards that child, reflexive practice is necessary, which is the determinant of the modern preschool teacher we are striving to achieve. For these reasons, we particularly want to point out the need for understanding the interaction and communication with children as well as its importance in the initial education of students - future preschool teachers.

Research Subject, Aim, and Task

We attempted to critically probe the aforementioned theoretical notions on the example of initial education of preschool teachers within the course *Integrated Curriculum of Early and Preschool Education* implemented in the third year of undergraduate university studies of Early and Preschool Education at the University of Rijeka. For the purpose of this research, we highlight the learning outcomes specified in the study programme in the academic year 2013/2014, which form the competencies that students should develop upon completing the course, that is, upon completing exercises in a preschool institution during their initial education:

– demonstrate research skills and continuous ability and readiness to learn in a team,
– develop the ability of a reflexive practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of one's achievements,
– demonstrate the ability of criticism and self-criticism in the creation of interpersonal skills,
– discuss, plan, and organize essential elements in the creation of a quality educational process,
– develop students' sensitivity to recognize and adequately meet children's cognitive and socio-emotional needs,
– demonstrate the knowledge of effective strategies to encourage the overall developmental reach of a child in early childhood,
– present the knowledge of observation and assessment of children's activities and abilities as a prerequisite for the construction of an integrated curriculum in terms of responsiveness to children's developmental and educational needs,
– distinguish different preschool teacher's roles in children's activities and projects.

The research problem is focused on questioning the learning outcomes mentioned above, i.e., seeking an answer to the question whether the organization of student exercises and their performance supports the strengthening of the practical competencies of students within the abovementioned course.

With this research we especially wanted to explore to which extent the students have the opportunity to develop their competencies to encourage children's interactions in a quality social environment during undergraduate university studies of Early and Preschool Education within the course *Integrated Curriculum of Early and Preschool Education*. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to analyse the appropriateness of the organization of practical exercises, i.e., the content analysis of the frequency

of social environment situations that have influenced the quality and direction of children's interactions.

The aim of the research is to find answers to the following questions:

- What is the impact of the social environment on the direction and quality of children's interactions?
- Does the frequency of raising incentive questions enrich the quality of interactions and is the direction of the interaction thereby determined?
- Is the chosen way of performing student exercises a good way to develop the students' practical competencies? Engaging in and understanding the importance of the child – preschool teacher (in our research this refers to the student), preschool teacher – child, and child – child interactions so as to properly and timely support them in their initial education.

The following research tasks emerge from the research subject and research aim:

1. Identifying examples or types of student – child and child – student interactions by analysing the available and collected documentation.
2. Analysing the examples of interaction according to the constructed observation protocol for the purpose of this research.
3. Determining which types of student behaviour occur most frequently.

Research Procedure

The research provides an overview of the student population's pedagogical documentation (non-experimental research). The collected data consisted of video footage of activities between children and students. The total material, i.e., pedagogical documentation, consisted of 660 videos recorded by 29 students, who were enrolled in the course *Integrated Curriculum of Early and Preschool Education* in the third year of undergraduate university studies of Early and Preschool Education at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka in the academic year 2013/2014. The analysis of the pedagogical documentation began by watching all 660 videos. For each video it was recorded what it contains, with a special focus on the students' interaction with the children. More specifically, a video that showed social interaction was additionally marked so that it could later be reanalysed and transcribed in detail. Also, 174 self-reflective student reviews (29 students x 6 stays spent in a preschool class) were analysed for each visit to the preschool institution (reflection and self-reflection) in order to gain a more complete insight into the situation or a better understanding of the context in the video. The process of viewing all 660 videos and 174 reviews lasted for about six months.

Sampling of documents resulted in 220 videos that showed the students' interactions with the children, and these videos were extracted and reviewed, as well as those student reviews relating to the extracted videos. This process lasted for about three months and resulted in 34 videos that featured longer, but more meaningful and better interactions between the students and the children. Each of the displayed interactions and communications between the students and the children was transcribed and

with the help of reviews (reflection and self-reflection) by students a description and clarification of the context in which the interactions had occurred were added.

Data Processing

The sample consisted of 34 separate videos recorded during the academic year 2013/2014 by the students of the undergraduate university studies of Early and Preschool Education, enrolled in the course *Integrated Curriculum of Early and Preschool Education*. The videos were recorded in the Subdivision of Preschool Institution Srdoči (Kindergarten Rijeka), where students took part in practical exercises as part of the course. Exercises were performed in mixed age preschool classes where the age of children ranged between three and seven years. A written protocol was developed after months of analysing the complete video material, transcriptions of individual parts, and students' written reflections and self-reflections.

The written observation protocol was created using a combination of *Activity Observing Protocol in the Work with Young and Preschool Aged Children* for the purpose of the course *Research-Cognitive Curriculum in the Integrated Curriculum I* (Vujičić, 2010) and *NAEYC's Early Education Quality Assessment Instrument*. In the observation protocol, the categories, 30 in total, were set *a posteriori*, i.e., they were altered, rearranged, or eliminated based on insights and analysis of students' videos. Each category is operationally defined or explained in more detail, meaning that it lists what behaviour must appear in the video in order for it to be classified into a particular category. Using this procedure, we identified 30 categories that are described in detail in Table 1 in the section containing discussion on research results.

Sampling within the document was initiated because some videos relate to the same situation (they were recorded one after the other, e.g., the student stopped recording a situation, but proceeded recording immediately after having stopped – this resulted in two separate videos that relate to the same situation). Such videos were watched and analysed as if they were one video; therefore there is only one protocol for it. For this reason there are fewer protocols (27) than videos (34). A sample of the analysis resulted in 27 observation protocols, i.e., as many as there are situations in which the interaction between the students and children had occurred.

Processing of the collected data was done by the researchers according to the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), which involves transcribing the video (Sidnell, 2016) and analysing the data based on the obtained transcripts. The analysis unit is thematic (Kuckartz, 2014), and it is the interaction between the students and children. Data analysis implied a three-step process: the first reading, and two levels of coding. Coding refers to the classification of interactions (communication) into categories, i.e., binary determination was applied according to the principle "appeared – did not appear." Each of the 34 videos was reviewed again so that it was marked in the written record whether or not a particular behaviour appeared in the video.

The frequency of occurrences of a category/behaviour is shown in the following way: e.g., 25/27, which means that a certain category appeared in 25 of the possible 27 observation protocols; in this case f=25 and 27 is the total number (N). Also, the frequency is shown in percentages, e.g., 25/27 corresponds to a percentage of 92.59%.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the observation protocol with operationally defined and ranked categories created after videos had been watched multiple times, and the frequency of their occurrence was compared to the total number (N = 27).

Table 1

Operationally defined categories in the protocol

Operationally defined categories in the protocol	f	%
1. The student is making efforts to communicate with the children (the student comments on what the child is /children are doing, asks questions about what (s)he is /they are doing).	25	92.59
2. The student individually talks with each child (the student addresses individual children).	22	81.48
3. The student listens to the child with care and respect (does not interrupt the child while (s)he is talking, is focused on him/her and his/her speech, does not correct the child, e.g., "We don't say *I wants*, but *I want*").	22	81.48
4. The student talks to the children at the children's eye level (the student does not address the children by looking down at them, but rather lowers herself to their eye level).	21	77.77
5. Children generally feel comfortable, relaxed, happy, and they participate in games and other activities (children are engaged in games and activities, they are focused on what they are doing).	21	77.77
6. The student addresses the children by name.	18	66.66
7. The student is trying to understand the meaning of the children's messages (the student repeats what the child has said to her, tries to understand what (s)he is saying, and asks questions to understand better).	18	66.66
8. The student is focused on the group (the student asks questions to the entire group of children engaged in a specific activity, comments on the activities of the whole group).	16	59.26
9. The student models desirable behaviour, identifies, describes, and offers strategies for developing positive pro-social behaviour (the student shows an example of how children are expected to behave and verbalizes pro-social behaviour, such as: "Good job, Ivan. You've helped Luka put on his jacket."; the student suggests or provides guidelines for resolving a conflict).	12	44.44
10. The student encourages the children to present their experiences and opinions when they are in a smaller/larger group of children (the student asks questions, addresses individual children, e.g., "What do you think, Ivan?" when they are in a smaller/bigger group of children).	12	44.44
11. The student is both an observer and a partner in children's activities (in the same video-recording).	12	44.44

Operationally defined categories in the protocol	f	%
12. The student allows the children to subsequently join a conversation (the student does not neglect those children who subsequently join a conversation, but rather asks them a question or encourages them to make a comment as a way of stimulating a conversation).	10	37.04
13. The student is focused on individual children (the student addresses one child or talks only with one child).	10	37.04
14. The student is a partner in children's activities (the student asks questions, elaborates on what the child has said, participates in children's activities).	9	33.33
15. The student responds to the child's questions and requirements (provides the child with feedback).	7	25.92
16. The student takes the position from which she can see the children with whom she is currently not communicating (the student is positioned in the room in such a way that she can see what is happening - for example, her back is facing the wall, is sitting in a corner of the room so as to see the rest of the room).	7	25.92
17. The student talks individually with the child (both when they are alone and when they are in a group of children, e.g., more children are present, but a child might feel the need to talk to the student alone and addresses only her).	6	22.22
18. The student immediately responds when the child is asking for help/co-operation/comfort (the student immediately takes the necessary steps to properly assist the child, to participate in games or to comfort him/her, she is trying to find out what has made the child upset and how to help him/her, places the child on her lap, cuddles with the child).	6	22.22
19. The student redirects unwanted behaviour and promotes desirable behaviour (the student responds to unacceptable behaviour, verbally directs the child to help solve the problem).	5	18.52
20. The student is an observer in the child's activities (the student observes what the child is doing, does not get involved in his/her activities).	5	18.52
21. The student describes the situation so as to encourage the children to assess the problem but without the student providing a solution (the student describes the situation, verbalizes what is happening to make the problem clearer to the children, asks questions that "lead" the children to the solution).	4	14.81
22. The student offers materials/games/activities that encourage the children to interact (the student offers materials/games/activities that will encourage the children to participate in the same activity, to co-operate, help or to engage in a conversation).	4	14.81
23. The student listens and responds to the child's comments and suggestions (the student tries to listen to the individual child and his/her comments and/or suggestions regarding a situation/game/activity in which they are currently engaged and responds to it (comments).	3	11.11
24. The student encourages children's independence (the student encourages and supports a child to make a specific action alone or with minimum help).	3	11.11

Operationally defined categories in the protocol	f	%
25. The student includes children in the conversation: describes actions, experiences, and events (describes, verbalizes the situation, what is happening, what she presumes that children are currently experiencing).	2	7.41
26. The student enables the children of both sexes to share equal opportunities by participation in all activities; the student is trying to overcome the stereotypes that children have taken over from adults (e.g. boys do not go to a hairdresser's and they do not cook; girls do not play with tools, cars, etc.).	2	7.41
27. The student responds quickly when the child is upset (the student approaches the child, tries to find out why the child is upset, and tries to help him/her).	1	3.7
28. The student encourages the children to cooperate in small groups (the student encourages the child/children to cooperate with another child).	1	3.7
29. The student leads the activity (e.g., everyone is sitting in a circle, the student asks questions, the children can only talk if they have raised their hand (sign) and they are given the approval to do so, etc.).	1	3.7
30. The student is focused both on the individual and the group (the student is observing or is engaged in group activities, shows interest, and comments on what the children are doing, asks each individual child questions, but also the whole group).	1	3.7

The analysis of video recordings has established that students are trying to achieve communication with children (92.59%) in almost all selected videos, they address children individually (81.48%), and mostly refer to them by their name (66.66%). They also acknowledge the children by listening to them attentively and respectfully (81.48%) and are trying to understand the significance of their messages (66.66%). They most frequently address the children by talking with them at their eye level (77.77%). The high frequency of described behaviour suggests that students are showing interest in the children, interest in what the children are concerned about, what they are talking about, and that they perceive children as equal partners in activities. In most videos, children are focused on what they are doing, they are engaged in games and activities (77.77%), and students are focused on the group (59.26%).

Modelling of desirable behaviour, identifying, describing, and introducing strategies for the development of positive pro-social behaviour occur somewhat less frequently (44.44%), but it can be concluded that students understand that children learn by the model and that sometimes they need help or guidance to solve minor problems related to social relations.

Students encourage the children to share their own experiences and opinions (44.44%) by asking questions and addressing the individual child (for example, "What do you mean, Ivan?"). Students are thereby trying to influence the direction and quality of children's interactions and communication by acknowledging each child and addressing them individually. A student is at the same time both the observer and partner in children's activities in 44.44% of cases, from which it can be concluded

that they understand the situations when it is more appropriate to be a partner than an observer, and vice versa. An equal percentage points to the students' frequency of being directed towards the individual (37.04%) and allowing the children to engage in conversations (37.04%).

A student as a partner in children's activities occurs in one third of all cases (33.33%), while a quarter of the students respond to children's questions and requests (25.92%). A lack of practical experience of independent work in the preschool class can explain why in only 25.92% of cases students take the position where they can see the children with whom they are not currently communicating. In a slightly smaller number of occasions they engage in individual conversation with the child (22.22%), showing the child that they respect him/her by taking the time to talk to them while the child is in the group with other children. This, according to Katz and McClellan (1999), is important because individually focused and warm interaction increases the child's ability to listen and respond to the teacher's suggestions. In just under a quarter of the situations (22.22%), students responded immediately when a child requested help, co-operation in a game or comfort. Students re-direct unwanted behaviour and encourage appropriate behaviour in 18.52% of cases, indicating that they recognize the importance of responding to undesirable behaviour and encouraging children to resolve the problem properly.

Students are observers of children's activities; they observe what the children are doing but do not participate in their activities/games in 18.52% of the analysed situations. The students in such cases concluded that their interference would not support the child's activity and/or interaction or were not considered competent enough to get involved. For the quality of pedagogical practice it is important to evaluate the time, mode, quality, and quantity of interaction and communication techniques and strategies (Šagud, 2015). A valid assessment of effective intervention strategies of preschool teachers is an important part of their professional competencies. The development of this competency ought to be supported by the learning outcomes recognized in the demonstration of knowledge of effective strategies to promote the overall developmental potential of a child in early childhood (Vujičić, 2013).

The research results show that in the analysed videos in 14.81% of cases students described the situation so as to encourage the children to evaluate the problem instead of the students providing the solution, thus affecting the quality and direction of children's interactions. Describing the situation helped the children to understand it better, and this in return helped them solve the problem independently. Asking questions in a group of children supports children's interaction and communication. Fluent and open interaction and communication between preschool teachers and children, comments, questions, explanations, descriptions, meaningful repetitions of testimony, etc. can be an important impulse and support for children's learning and development, as well as a creative and intellectual challenge through self-initiating and self-organizing activities (Šagud, 2015).

By examining Table 1 it is obvious that in 14.81% of cases the students offered materials/games/activities that encouraged the children to interact, participate in activities, collaborate, help or talk. This is the kind of behaviour with which students can influence the direction and quality of children's interactions because "the spatial and social dimensions are inextricably linked and determine the direction and overall quality of children's activities" (Slunjski, 2008, p. 50).

Furthermore, the student was listening and responding to the children's comments and suggestions in 11.11% of cases, thus showing that she is respectful of each child and of what the child was doing. Listening, responding, and commenting supports the interaction between the child and the student, but also between the child and other children. In 11.11% of situations the student encouraged children's independence, i.e., she encouraged and supported the child to make a specific action independently or with minimum help. This kind of behaviour of the student affected the direction and quality of children's interactions because she either encouraged the child to do something or advised him/her to seek help from another child, or the student even asked another child to help the child in need of help, thereby showing an understanding of the importance of children's independence.

As can be seen from the data presented in Table 1, the student included children in a conversation in 7.41% of cases – she described actions, experiences and events, described and verbalized the situation, what was happening, what she presumed that children were experiencing at that moment. By describing what is happening (action) or what was happening (experiences, events) she affects the quality of children's interactions because children will share their thoughts, emotions, thoughts about something that is going on or something that had already occurred. Also, this behaviour can affect the direction of children's interactions since it is very likely that children will relate to someone else's statement and comment on it, and associate it with their own experience.

It was noted that in 7.41% of cases students allowed the children of both sexes the same opportunity to participate in all activities, and that they strived to overcome the kind of stereotypes children have adopted from adults (for example, boys do not go to the hairdresser's and do not cook; girls do not play with tools, cars, etc.). The students' behaviour influences the direction and quality of children's interactions given that children without gender stereotypes are more likely to interact, communicate, and play with children of the opposite sex, especially in games that are gender-coloured (playing with cars, playing with dolls).

The smallest number of videos showed students conducting an activity (3.7%), encouraging children to cooperate (3.7%), and reacting when the child was upset (3.7%). By conducting activities, the student certainly does not affect the quality of children's interactions, but she does affect their direction. By encouraging children to co-operate in smaller groups, the student influences the direction and quality of children's interactions since in smaller groups it is more likely that children's interactions will be at a higher quality level than in larger groups (Slunjski, 2008).

Children in smaller groups feel comfortable and less likely to engage in conflict over materials and toys. A smaller number of children in a group has a positive influence on the quality of their communication and the development of social competencies (Miljak, 2015; Vujičić, 2016). A fast response to children's distress enables the student to influence the development of children's trust, which facilitates their interaction/communication, and thus influences the direction and quality of children's interaction. The situation in which the student was focused both on the individual child and the group occurred only in 3.7% of cases. By getting involved in children's activities, the student shows interest in what the children are doing, while comments and questions encourage further development of ongoing activities, encourage children and/or the whole group to think. Authors point out that this is also a type of behaviour with which a student can influence the direction and quality of children's interactions. However, the abovementioned low percentages (3.7%) of the frequency of described behaviour may point to those aspects of student activities which, in the future planning and designing of student exercises in kindergarten and reflexive practicums, require further reflection and elaboration, and are the starting point for new research.

Conclusion

By searching for answers to the question of the extent to which the quality of the social environment and the quality of children's interactions is encouraged within the initial education of students – future preschool teachers, the conducted research has shown that this way of performing students' exercises through reflexive practicums can contribute to the development, strengthening, and improvement of practical competencies of students directed at the development of social interactions.

Analysis of video recordings has shown that the most common way students attempted to impact children's interaction was by establishing communication with children through comments on what the child was/children were doing and asking questions about what he was/they were doing, as well as through individual interaction with each child, listening to children, and trying to understand the meaning of their messages, communication with children at their eye level, addressing children by their name, and focusing on the entire group. A less frequent but still common student behaviour was modelling of desirable children's behaviour in terms of identifying, describing, and introducing strategies for the development of positive pro-social behaviour, encouraging children to share their experiences and opinions in smaller/larger groups, enabling children to engage in conversations, focusing on a particular child, and taking on the role of a partner in children's activities. In a quarter of the analysed situations the students responded to children's questions and requests, talked individually to the child, responded promptly when the child came asking for help, cooperation or comfort, re-directed unwanted children's behaviour and promoted appropriate behaviour, as well as took on the role of observers in children's activities without getting involved in their activities/play.

As a rarer form of student behaviour we point out describing situations that encourage children to evaluate problems, offering materials, games, and activities that encourage children to interact, listening to the children and responding to their comments and suggestions, encouraging children's independence, encouraging children to participate in conversations with action description, experiences, and events, and providing both sexes with equal opportunities to participate in all activities. The rarest means in which students attempted to impact the children's interaction are a quick reaction to the child's distress, encouraging children to engage in cooperation in smaller groups, directing activities and their simultaneous orientation to both the child and the group. It should be emphasized that by engaging in all these activities, the students impacted, to a lesser or greater extent, the quality and direction of children's interactions.

Based on the above, we can conclude that the students, during their initial preschool teacher education, have been reflecting on their actions in working with children through exercises in preschool and reflexive practicums, and have achieved a certain level of autonomy in judging the quality of their educational interventions, which will be of great importance in their future work. By watching their own videos as well as providing reflections and self-reflections (reviews), they gained an insight into the complexity and responsibility of the preschool teacher's role. Research results have confirmed the thesis of contemporary authors (Barth, 2004; Bruner, 2000; Gardner, 2011) that theory is generalized conceptual knowledge, while practical theory is perceptual knowledge, personally relevant, and closely related to the given context. It is the knowledge that is developed through experience in practice and that enables us to understand the nature and complexity of situations that are not known in advance, and that we are competently developing and exploring the culture of the educational institution.

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Socijalno okruženje i kvaliteta socijalnih interakcija: perspektiva budućih odgojitelja

Sažetak

O inicijalnom obrazovanju studenata budućih odgojitelja raspravlja se kao o istraživačima odgojno-obrazovne prakse koji svakodnevno razmišljaju i raspravljaju o svome radu. Već na fakultetima studente treba poticati na razvoj kompetencija kojima će moći graditi svoje profesionalno znanje u interakciji s drugim studentima. Predstavit će se rezultati istraživanja o praktičnim vježbama studenata, odnosno refleksivnom praktikumu unutar kolegija Integrirani kurikulum ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja na sveučilišnom preddiplomskom studiju Rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje. Svrha istraživanja je sadržajna analiza učestalosti situacija iz socijalnog okruženja koje su utjecale na kvalitetu i smjer dječjih interakcija. Instrument za prikupljanje podataka činile su videosnimke aktivnosti djece i studenata. Ukupan materijal sastojao se od 660 videozapisa i 174 refleksije i samorefleksije studenata. Nakon njihove analize, pristupilo se izradi pisanog protokola (a posteriori) koji je činio temelj sadržajne analize.

Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da studentice tijekom svoga inicijalnog obrazovanja, provedbom vježbi u dječjem vrtiću kao refleksivnih praktikuma, razvijaju sposobnost refleksivnog praktičara koji kontinuirano vrednuje učinke svojih postignuća.

Ključne riječi: *inicijalno obrazovanje odgojitelja; refleksivni praktičar; socijalna interakcija.*