

Reasons for Enrolment in the Kindergarten and Parents' Satisfaction with Specific Elements of the Kindergarten

Jasmina Hadelá¹, Nena Rončević¹ and Melita Pergar²

¹University of Rijeka, Faculty of Philosophy

²Vrapčić Kindergarten

Abstract

The importance of partnership between the parents and the kindergarten is indisputable and there are a number of works which explore the topic of the collaboration between the parents and the preschool teachers. However, there is a lack of studies that examine the parents' perception of the satisfaction with specific elements of the kindergarten, which is an important predictor for a high-quality partnership, both in the present and in the future. In accordance with the aforementioned, the goal of this research is to determine the level of the parents' satisfaction with specific elements of the kindergarten, as well as the reasons for the enrolment of children in the kindergarten. The research participants are the parents (N=132) of children in early childhood and preschool children who are enrolled in the kindergartens established by the local self-government in Međimurje County. The results show that the parents are predominantly satisfied with the kindergarten, and the children's social and emotional development is highlighted as the reason for their enrolment in the educational institution.

Key words: attitudes; communication; parents; partnership with the kindergarten; space.

Introduction

Today, the process of organising a high-quality and adequate care for the children in early childhood and the preschool-aged children is becoming increasingly important. Everyday obligations of working parents lead to difficult decisions when it comes to the selection of the educational institution in which their children will spend the

majority of their time. Since the Croatian National Educational Standard (2008) stipulates the maximum number of children in a class and in a kindergarten group, parents are often not able to select the desired kindergarten due to the lack of its capacity. However, it is interesting to note that today an increasing number of parents recognise the importance of their children attending an educational institution. Taking into account these findings regarding the educational practice, it is of crucial importance to point out that the educational staff have a responsibility to organise and implement high-quality practice which fosters a comprehensive development of children and ensures that the opinion of each individual is recognised and respected, including the parents who are the primary and the most important subjects in the children's lives.

The National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (2014) (further in the text NCECPE), describes the parents as the members of the kindergarten who enrich the institution with their culture and individual characteristics, and contribute to the quality of the institution as a whole. In accordance with the aforementioned, it is important to take into account the parents' opinion on the quality of the educational process; that is, to enable the parents to openly discuss and express their opinion regarding their satisfaction with the specific elements of the kindergarten. Since the "contemporary parenthood is seen as the process, role, and relationship undergoing the constant change and interaction with the wider social context," it is important that the kindergarten recognises and responds to the needs which are the parents' priorities, such as the "availability of the appropriate programmes for children; flexible organisation of the children's enrolment; adjustment of the daily rhythm; advocating the children's rights and needs; that is, discovering how to foster the children's development" (NCECPE, 2014, p. 15).

A number of authors (Bassok, Markowitz, Player, & Zagardo, 2017; Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002; Cleveland, Susman-Stillman, & Halle, 2013; Shatti, 2011; Sharp & Davis, 1997; Tompson, Benz, & Agiesta, 2013; Waluyo & Formen, 2015) have focused on the parental satisfaction with the specific aspects of the kindergarten, and explored the process itself, as well as the parents' perception of the quality of the kindergarten, emphasizing the spatial and material organisation of the educational institution, the interaction between the children and between the children and adults, as well as the positive and open communication between the parents and teachers. In Croatia, the majority of studies have focused on the exploration of attitudes toward the collaboration or partnership between parents and preschool teachers (Kanjić & Boneta, 2012; Mlinarević & Tomas, 2010; Nenadić Bilan & Zloković, 2015; Nenadić Bilan & Matov, 2014; Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2017; Vlah & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2011). The emphasis was placed on the open and truthful communication, and the possibility of the parents' direct participation in the educational practice. Vekić-Kljaić (2016) examined the parents' attitudes toward the key competencies that are important for the children's future success. The study was based on the exploration of the parents'

activities which were undertaken in order to develop the particular competencies in preschool children. The results show that the parents perceive the development of the competencies related to children's academic achievements as important. On the other hand, the three-year longitudinal study conducted by Cleveland et al. (2013) reveals a great importance of the children's social and emotional development.

Regarding the educational process itself, it is important to emphasise the development of the children's social and emotional competencies. Social development involves the acquisition of the specific forms of behaviour required for initiating, maintaining, and ending social contact (Milanović, Stričević, Maleš, & Sekulić-Majurec, 2000). It includes the development of the children's interaction with the environment. Even though all children undergo the same developmental phases, life experience brings happiness and contentment to some of them, and unhappiness to others. Different life experiences result in the differences in personality (Maleš & Stričević, 1991). Every child exhibits a specific, personal behaviour toward the individuals in their environment, and faces those individuals' reactions accordingly. Therefore, a particular challenge for the adults is to "strengthen the child's self-respect, self-confidence, and initiative, as well as to strengthen her or his autonomy in the process of learning and education" (Vekić-Kljajić, 2016, p. 382). In order to create the conditions for the children's high-quality development, the collaboration between the kindergarten and parents is necessary, as well as the examination of the parents' attitudes regarding their perception of the important elements which, in their opinion, have the greatest influence on their children's development.

Taking into account previous studies, the analysis of the educational practice, and a relative lack of the studies which explore the parental perspective on the satisfaction with the kindergarten, this paper aims to examine the parents' attitudes regarding the reasons for the children's enrolment in the kindergarten, as well as to determine the level of the parents' satisfaction with the specific elements of the kindergarten's performance. In accordance with the aforementioned goal, the following was examined:

- (1) What the main reasons for the children's enrolment in the kindergarten are;
- (2) Which elements of the kindergarten, or the aspects of the educational process, the parents identify as the most satisfying.

Methodology

Participants

A total number of 132 parents participated in the research, with 100 female and 32 male parents. The participants are the parents of the children in early childhood and the preschool-aged children who are enrolled in the kindergartens established by the units of the local self-government in Međimurje County. The participants' age ranged from 23 to 46 years ($M= 33.27$, $SD= 5.20$). With regard to the level of education, 62.9% of the participants ($N=83$) have a secondary level of education, 14.4% ($N=19$) have a

higher level of education (that is, a bachelor's degree), while 22.7% of the participants (N=30) have a high level of education (a master's or a doctoral degree).

Procedure

Prior to initiating the research, an interview with the headmasters of the kindergartens which were established by the units of the local self-government was conducted in order to explain the purpose and the goal of the study. The kindergartens that decided to participate in the study received a written request, which ensured a formal consent of the institution. The research participants were given detailed instructions by the headmasters and preschool teachers on how to complete the questionnaire. The participants were then informed that participation in completing the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous, as well as that the data collected during the study would be used for scientific purposes and treated as the feedback intended for the early childhood and preschool education institutions. The process of completing the questionnaire lasted approximately 10 minutes. The research was conducted from September to December 2017 during the parent-teacher meetings in the kindergartens.

Instruments

Two instruments were created for the requirements of this paper: the questionnaire on the reasons for the enrolment of children in the kindergarten and the questionnaire on the satisfaction with the specific elements of the kindergarten.

The Questionnaire on the Reasons for the Enrolment of Children in the Kindergarten

The questionnaire initially consisted of 16 items and the participants rated every item on the Likert scale (from 1 *I strongly disagree* to 5 *I strongly agree*).

A principal component factor analysis was conducted in order to determine the aspects that influence the parents' decision to enrol their children in the kindergarten. In the later stages of the analysis, four items or two factors were excluded because they had a low number of items and the factor's internal consistency was unsatisfactory $\alpha=0.564$ (*The child spends too much time in front of the computer and television. / The child is procrastinating at home.*), and $\alpha=0.204$ (*Both parents are working parents. / There isn't anybody who can provide care to the child [in the nuclear and extended family]*). The Guttman-Kaiser criterion for the restriction of factor extraction (greater than 1) was applied and two factors were extracted (Table 1) and retained as statistically significant. Since the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was valued 0.737, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 859.903$; $df = 55$, $N=125$, $p < 0.001$), the basic requirements for the continuation of factor analysis were met. The basic solution was transformed into the orthogonal varimax position and the obtained factors explain 63.7% of the total variance. The first factor explains 43.5% of the total variance, and the second factor explains 20.2% of the total variance.

Table 1

The matrix of the components of the questionnaire items for the two-factor solution and the reliability coefficients

Items	Factor saturation	
	Factor 1	Factor 2
It is important for the child to meet other children.	.609	
It is important for the child to play with other children.	.793	
It is important for the child to have conversations with peers.	.855	
It is important for the child to live in a community.	.786	
It is important for the child to learn something new.	.833	
It is important for the child to gain new experiences.	.812	
It is important for the child to become independent.	.517	
It is important for the child to become self-confident.	.551	
The child will learn to share with others in the kindergarten.		.874
The child will learn to help others in the kindergarten.		.950
The child will learn how to be a good friend in the kindergarten.		.919
Unique value	4.783	2.220
Cronbach's α	0.857	0.917

Taking into account the content of the specific items, the obtained factors could be described as the *child's social development* and the *child's emotional development*. Even though the social and emotional development can often be explained by the child's social competency, in this case the decision was made to analyse each concept individually with regard to the obtained factors. The first factor, the *child's social development*, is comprised of the following items: *It is important for the child to meet other children; It is important for the child to play with other children; It is important for the child to have conversations with peers; It is important for the child to live in a community; It is important for the child to learn something new; It is important for the child to gain new experiences; It is important for the child to become independent; It is important for the child to become self-confident*. The aforementioned items highlight the child's ability to adjust to new situations and circumstances, as well as her or his perception of herself or himself as a member of the community, and the development of the sense of acceptance and belonging (NCECPE, 2014). The second factor, the *child's emotional development*, is comprised of the following items: *The child will learn how to share with others in the kindergarten; The child will learn how to help others in the kindergarten; The child will learn how to be a good friend in the kindergarten*.

The Questionnaire on the Satisfaction with the Specific Elements of the Kindergarten

This questionnaire consisted of 20 items and the participants rated the statements on the Likert scale (from 1 *I strongly disagree* to 5 *I strongly agree*).

In order to determine the structure of the parents' satisfaction with the kindergarten, a principal component factor analysis was conducted. In the later stages of the analysis, three items were excluded because they equally saturated the second and third factors

(*The possibility to select additional content. / The gatherings of parents, children, and preschool teachers. / The level of quality of the gatherings of parents, children, and preschool teachers.*). Therefore, the aforementioned items were excluded from further analysis. Since the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test was valued 0.868, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1572.391$; $df = 136$, $N=128$ $p < 0.001$), the basic requirements for the continuation of factor analysis were met. The Guttman-Kaiser criterion for the restriction of factor extraction (greater than 1) was applied and three factors were extracted (Table 1) and retained as statistically significant. The basic solution was transformed into the oblique position and the obtained factors explain 66.9% of the total variance. The first factor explains 47.2% of the total variance, the second factor 12.2% of the total variance, and the third factor 7.5% of the total variance.

Table 2

The pattern matrix after the oblique rotation of the axis for the three-factor solution and the reliability coefficients

Variables	Factor saturation		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
The preschool teachers' positive communication with the parents.	.906		
The preschool teachers' positive communication with the children.	.891		
The preschool teachers' professional behaviour.	.830		
The preschool teachers who are qualified.	.829		
The preschool teachers' behaviour toward the parents.	.775		
The preschool teachers' behaviour toward the children.	.751		
The preschool teachers who value discipline.	.742		
The communication with the headmaster.	.635		
Keeping the parents informed about the current events.	.408		
A large and functional outdoor playground.		.931	
The tidiness of the playground.		.918	
The meals which meet the children's nutritional needs.		.774	
Appropriate activities for children.		.702	
Sufficient space in kindergarten groups.			.803
Adequately decorated inner area.			.801
Clean environment.			.757
Safe environment.			.660
Unique value	8.016	2.082	1.273
<i>Cronbach's α</i>	<i>0.920</i>	<i>0.876</i>	<i>0.802</i>

The retained factors (Table 2) could be described as the *communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships* (factor 1), the *activities and the environment in a wider context* (factor 2), and the *space* (factor 3). The first factor, the *communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships*, is comprised of the following items: *The preschool teachers' positive communication with the parents, The preschool teachers' positive communication with the children, The preschool teachers' professional behaviour, The preschool teachers who are qualified, The preschool teachers' behaviour toward the*

parents, *The preschool teachers' behaviour toward the children, The preschool teachers who value discipline, The communication with the headmaster, Keeping the parents informed about the current events.* Taking into account the level of factor saturation, it is possible to conclude that the factor is determined more by the indicators of positive communication and the preschool teachers' qualifications than by the items which point to the interpersonal relationships. The second factor is comprised of the following items: *A large and functional outdoor playground, The tidiness of the playground, The meals which meet the children's nutritional needs, Appropriate activities for children;* therefore, the factor was named *the activities and the environment in a wider context.* The third factor, the *space*, is comprised of the following items: *Sufficient space in kindergarten groups, Adequately decorated inner area, Clean environment, Safe environment.*

Results and Discussion

Reasons for Enrolment

On the basis of the obtained factors, two scales were created and named according to the content of the items - *social development* and *emotional development*, as the reasons for the enrolment in the kindergarten. Table 3 outlines the arithmetic means and standard deviations for each item of the instrument *Reasons for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten*, as well as individually for two scales.

Table 3

The descriptive statistics of the items of the instrument Reasons for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten

Content of the item	M	SD
The child's social development	4.73	.342
It is important for the child to meet other children.	4.73	.480
It is important for the child to play with other children.	4.83	.375
It is important for the child to have conversations with peers.	4.79	.446
It is important for the child to live in a community.	4.70	.522
It is important for the child to learn something new.	4.81	.412
It is important for the child to gain new experiences.	4.83	.378
It is important for the child to become independent.	4.47	.672
It is important for the child to become self-confident.	4.69	.510
The child's emotional development	4.56	.603
The child will learn to share with others in the kindergarten.	4.55	.681
The child will learn to help others in the kindergarten.	4.56	.633
The child will learn how to be a good friend in the kindergarten.	4.59	.641

Taking into account the range of the agreements with the statements, it can be noted that almost all of the statements range from *I agree* to *I strongly agree*, which is also indicated by the high averages of the arithmetic means. The parents think that it is important for the children to meet other children, probably in order to develop the key social competencies. For example, Slunjski (2015) highlights the power of

the child's social interaction and communication with peers because it stimulates the development of the child's thinking and learning, and she also emphasises the social support of the child's learning. A high level of agreement can also be noted in the statements regarding the importance of play, the child's self-confidence, the habit of sharing with others, helping others, and being a good friend. Katz and McClellan (1999) stress the importance of developing the social competency in the early childhood and preschool age, first within the family home, and then in the institutional context, as well as the importance of developing the components of social competency such as: the ability to control emotions, the familiarity with the norms and social rules of the particular group to which the child belongs, and the social skills and social dispositions which are acquired through experience. All of the items on the scale of the child's social development are relatively highly rated, except for the statement that it is important for the child to become independent, which has a lower rating in comparison with other statements. The parents' high assessments indicate that they understand the importance of providing the possibility for the "children to choose and change the activities and spaces, to choose with whom and with what to play, to enter into different relationships with the older and younger children" (Miljak, 2015, p. 21). Even though all of the items on the scale of the child's emotional development have a lower average than the items related to the child's social development, they are still high. The items which explain the child's behaviour toward others describe the influence on the child's emotional development, when the child is developing emotional intelligence by recognising his or her own emotions and the emotions of other individuals, helping others, mastering her or his own emotions, and adjusting to the emotions of other individuals (Chabot & Chabot, 2009).

In order to examine the association between the scales, the Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated (Table 4). The results show that the correlation coefficients are statistically significant.

Table 4
Correlations between the scales

	V1	V2
Social development (V1)	1	.293**
Emotional development (V2)		1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

A low, positive correlation between the child's social and emotional development was determined. Brusić (1994) states that in the preschool age there is an increase in the control of the emotional expression and the emotions are associated with a wider scope of events, including the social relationships. Therefore, it is important to note that in this case the child's social development has a positive correlation with the assessment of the emotional development as the reason for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten.

Satisfaction with the Specific Elements of the Kindergarten

On the basis of the obtained factors, three scales were created and named according to the content of the items: *satisfaction with communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships*, *satisfaction with the activities and environment in a wider context*, and *satisfaction with the space*. Table 5 outlines the arithmetic means and standard deviations for each item of the instrument regarding the parents' attitudes and satisfaction with the specific elements of the kindergarten, including the final result for the three scales.

Table 5

The parents' satisfaction with the specific elements of the kindergarten – descriptive statistics

Content of the item	M	SD
Communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships	4.61	.428
The preschool teachers' positive communication with the parents.	4.66	.507
The preschool teachers' positive communication with the children.	4.67	.487
The preschool teachers' professional behaviour.	4.64	.542
The preschool teachers who are qualified.	4.64	.540
The preschool teachers' behaviour toward the parents.	4.61	.549
The preschool teachers' behaviour toward the children.	4.64	.514
The preschool teachers who value discipline.	4.56	.584
The communication with the headmaster.	4.45	.681
Keeping the parents informed about the current events.	4.56	.528
Activities and environment in a wider context	4.34	.646
A large and functional outdoor playground.	4.30	.800
The tidiness of the playground.	4.27	.799
The meals which meet the children's nutritional needs.	4.34	.760
Appropriate activities for children.	4.44	.657
Space	4.27	.579
Sufficient space in kindergarten groups.	3.97	.965
Adequately decorated inner area.	4.26	.716
Clean environment.	4.42	.632
Safe environment.	4.42	.594

The parents are predominantly very satisfied with the preschool teachers' behaviour toward the children and themselves, as well as the preschool teachers' level of qualification and professionalism. In her exploration of the context of the preschool institution, Petrović-Sočo (2007) states that a number of studies (Clarke-Stewart, 1987; Phillips & Howes, 1987) highlight the importance of the preschool teachers' competency for working with children and parents. Furthermore, the author claims that the "preschool teachers who have a higher level of education in the area of child development and education display a higher level of social stimulation, fewer negative emotions, and a higher level of sensitivity, (...) they are more sensitive to the needs of

children, (...) the non-directive coaching is predominant, the children's initiative and verbal expression is supported, and there are very few restrictions" (Petrović-Sočo, 2007, p. 54). That could explain a high level of satisfaction regarding the statements that the preschool teachers maintain a positive communication with both children and parents, with 98.5% of the parents being mostly to very satisfied.

Furthermore, it can be noted that, on average, the scales related to the space, and the activities and environment in a wider context have a lower rating. *Sufficient space in kindergarten groups* is the item with the lowest rating. Taking into account the possibilities and conditions which are predominant in the majority of the educational institutions in Croatia, it can be noted that there are often twenty or more children in one kindergarten group. However, it is important to point out that in these situations the preschool teachers' competency, creativity, and expressivity become perceptible. In these conditions, the preschool teacher organises and creates the space and environment that is rich in material stimuli by constructing smaller centres of activity equipped with various materials, which is a precondition for the children's self-organisation into smaller groups according to their interest in the particular activity. The parents mostly observe the space when the children arrive to, or depart from the kindergarten and are often faced only with the first impression of the lack of space. In those cases, it is very important to establish a collaborative relationship with the parents and to enable them to spend time in the kindergarten groups and experience the environment which their children inhabit daily. In her study of the parents' attitudes toward the collaboration with the school attended by their children, Doutlik (2014) highlights the significance of collaboration and states that it is important to involve the parents in the activity of the educational institution.

In order to examine the correlation between the scales, the Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated (Table 6). The results show that the calculated correlation coefficients are statistically significant and range from the moderate to high correlation. The maximum positive correlation was determined between the satisfaction with the *space* and the satisfaction with *communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships*.

Table 6
Correlations between the scales

	V1	V2	V3
Communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships (V1)	1	.462**	.622**
Activities and the environment in a wider context (V2)		1	.435**
Space (V3)			1

*p<.05; **p<.01

The connection of space with all of the variables is significant and ranges from the moderate to high correlation. Therefore, the space is positively connected with communication and the quality of interpersonal relationships, as well as the activities and the environment in a wider context. It is especially significant that the

parents' satisfaction with communication and the interpersonal relationships in the kindergarten has a positive and high correlation with the assessment of the parents' satisfaction with space. These results can be connected to the study conducted by Harrist, Thompson, and Norris (2007) who point out that a stimulating and supportive environment fosters the child's development from the earliest age, as well as Kreider's research (2002) which shows that the parents who establish a positive communication with the preschool teachers during their first meeting are satisfied with their selection of the kindergarten because they know that their children will be safe in the chosen kindergarten, and will find their place in the community.

Conclusion

Taking into account the literature which explores the parents' attitudes about the satisfaction with, and the reasons for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten, it is noticeable that there is a relatively low number of studies (Manfra, Carlo, & Coggeshall, 2014) which focus on this topic, especially in the Republic of Croatia, where the published studies on this topic are rare. Therefore, this pilot research is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of these phenomena, and a step toward the creation of the future, more complex instrument which would be utilised to explore the aforementioned segments. Even though the sample in this research is not representative of the population of parents in the Republic of Croatia, it is indicative as an insight into the parents' assessment of the aspects which influence their satisfaction with the kindergarten, as well as the main motives for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten. The results show that the parents rate the child's social and emotional development as the most important factors, which is in accordance with Hoon's conclusion (1994) that social development is one of the more important reasons for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten. The parents rate communication and the interpersonal relationships as the most important aspect of the satisfaction with the kindergarten, where the preschool teachers' positive communication with children and parents is the highest on average. The parents are less satisfied with space; that is, with the size of the groups in the kindergarten.

It would be advisable for the future studies to include a larger number of items with regard to the reasons for the child's enrolment in the kindergarten, such as the readiness for school, the environment, and the position of the kindergarten. Furthermore, in the assessment of the satisfaction with the specific elements of the kindergarten, the specific items should be operationalised, such as the items regarding the preschool teachers' behaviour toward the children and parents, and the various dimensions of the collaboration with the preschool teachers. Additionally, the triangulation of the methods could provide a deeper insight into the context of the educational institution.

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Jasmina Hadela

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Philosophy
Sveučilišna avenija 4, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia
jhadela2306@gmail.com

Nena Rončević

University of Rijeka, Faculty of Philosophy
Sveučilišna avenija 4, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia
nena.roncevic@ffri.uniri.hr

Melita Pergar

Vrapčić Kindergarten
J. Bedekovića 11, 40000, Čakovec, Croatia
melita.pergar@gmail.com

Razlozi upisa i zadovoljstvo roditelja pojedinim elementima rada dječjeg vrtića

Sažetak

Važnost partnerstva roditelja i dječjeg vrtića neupitna je te postoje mnoga istraživanja i radovi koji se bave pitanjem suradnje roditelja i odgajatelja (Chan i Ritchie, 2016; Kanjić i Boneta, 2012; Vlah i Tatalović Vorkapić, 2011). Međutim, manji je broj istraživanja koja ukazuju na percepciju roditeljskog zadovoljstva određenim elementima dječjeg vrtića, što je svakako važan prediktor kvalitetnog partnerstva, kako u sadašnjosti tako i u budućnosti. U skladu s tim cilj je ovog istraživanja bio utvrditi u kojoj su mjeri roditelji zadovoljni pojedinim elementima rada dječjeg vrtića i koji su razlozi upisa djeteta u dječji vrtić. U istraživanju su sudjelovali roditelji (N=132) djece rane i predškolske dobi koja su polaznici dječjih vrtića čiji su osnivači lokalne jedinice u Međimurskoj županiji.

Rezultati ukazuju na to kako su roditelji uglavnom zadovoljni dječjim vrtićem, a kao razloge upisa djeteta u odgojno-obrazovnu ustanovu procjenjuju one koji se odnose na socijalni i emocionalni razvoj djeteta.

Ključne riječi: komunikacija; prostor; partnerstvo s vrtićem; stavovi roditelja.