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Contextual determinants of kindergarten culture as indicators of children's well-being during their transition and adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Transition and adaptation are challenging periods in children's lives, and some of the most common ones are concerned with the setting of early childhood care and education institution. The contemporary Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition highlights the importance of interaction between many intra- and interpersonal factors in the efficient transition and adaptation, which often reveals the key contextual factors of kindergarten culture. Therefore, the fundamental objective of this paper is to provide a detailed and systematic overview of contemporary knowledge in the field of the culture of early childhood care and education institutions and theoretical models of transition as well as relevant practices. The contribution of this review of recent scientific literature is all the more significant since there are very few such studies as well as empirical research in our country. The defined conclusions should provide guidelines for future research in our country as well as guidelines for further theoretical reflections and discourses related to the possibilities of improving practices related to children's transition and adaptation in early childhood care and education institutions.

1. Introduction

In an attempt to understand contemporary transition models and indicators of child welfare in their transition and adaptation to an early childhood education institution, it is necessary to look at the contemporary cognitions of the multidimensional concept of well-being (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frones, & Korbin, 2014). Namely, based on the fundamental settings of the model for adults' well-being, this model is extremely complex because it encompasses problems of subjective well-being and happiness, the Aristotelian prospect of a good life, and the right of a person to their voice and personal choice (Rijavec, Miljković, & Brdar, 2008). When it comes to children, the

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situation is even more complex because the well-being of children implies the lives of children in the present but also the way the present affects their future and development. The understanding of children's well-being should take into account the component of the process, which reflects the application of the term *well-becoming* and not only well-being. Also, a child's development is not only a matter of psychological well-being but is closely related to the characteristics at the social level (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

Contemporary knowledge of children's well-being and the importance of all those factors that can be significantly improved and empowered are also recognized in the fundamental national documents of the Republic of Croatia, the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (2014). The Curriculum is aimed at securing children's benefit, including his personal, emotional, physical, educational, and social well-being. Ensuring well-being is a multidimensional, interactive, dynamic, and contextual process, which integrates healthy and successful individual functioning and positive social relationships in a quality setting of kindergartens. In addition to providing children's well-being, the emphasis is on the full development of the child, care, and learning and the development of competences. The values underpinning the Curriculum, which represent a permanent orientation for the achievement of educational goals, direct the care and educational activities towards the assurance of individual and social well-being, reflecting thereby the culture of institutions for early childhood care and education.

1.1. Theoretical view on the transition and adaptation in institutions of early childhood care and education

The conceptual approach to understanding the well-being of early and preschool-aged children, which was also the basis for the development of the contemporary Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), is based on the well-known Bronfenbrenner's Model of Ecological Systems (1979). This model defined four key concentric regions of the system: micro-system, meso-system, exo-system, and macro-system, whereby child development is inseparable from the context and time in which he or she lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). According to Bronfenbrenner's understanding, the child and the environment are in a continuous, two-way and transactional interaction (Lippman, 2004). In this interaction with different systems and subsystems, children and their families are faced with various protective and risk factors, relationships, barriers, and facilitators, which are also defined within the previously presented modern model of well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014) as indicators of a child's well-being (Bradshaw, Hoscher, & Richardson, 2007).

As noted, Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) created a modern Ecological and Dynamic Model of Transition based on the foundation of ecological systems and the importance of context for children's development according to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Development (1979). Contemporary theoretical models, such as this one, emphasize the complexity of transition and adaptation due to the interaction of different intra-personal (child's characteristics) and interpersonal factors (environmental characteristics and relationships) at a given time. For most children, the

transition from a family home to an institution of early childhood care and education is the first and most ecological transition to their educational life. The transitional periods and the way children adapt during early childhood age, observed simultaneously as pedagogical continuity and change, represent a real challenge for the beginnings of socio-emotional development. Significantly large numbers of studies indicate transition as a change of context, i.e., moving from one institutional framework or phase to another in the educational continuum (Blatchford, Battle, & Mays, 1982; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Dockett & Perry, 2005). So, in order to highlight a change of context, the transition is marked as a process of change and movement from one identity to another (Griebel & Niesel, 2002). Adaptation, which is closely related to transition, can be defined as harmonization with the environment and can be observed in two ways: as an adjustment and adaptation. Adjustment refers to the process that marks the characteristic way an individual faces new environmental requirements, while adaptation is a child's achievement or success resulting from more or less successful adaptation to environmental conditions. Therefore, adjustment is expressed as adaptation *inside* the kindergarten, while adaptation is expressed as an adaptation *to* the kindergarten.

To fully understand children's competences, it is necessary to explore the impact of the connection between the characteristics of the child and home, school, peers, family, and neighborhood and how these relationships change over time. Different contexts and their interrelations over time are the keys to the adaptation outcome, and Rimm-Kaufman and Pianta (2000) emphasize that practice and educational policy should facilitate transition so that they are mutually coordinated and aligned. A more detailed view of the key factors includes: intra-personal factors of children (temperament and other characteristics of children), family (personality and parent sensitivity, parenting style, communication style, etc.) and preschool teacher/school teacher (preschool/school teacher's personality, competences, attitudes); and inter-personal factors of child-caregiver-preschool teacher/school teacher (attachment style, course and outcome of adaptation, relationship with the caregiver, relationship with the preschool teacher/school teacher, working methods in the kindergarten/elementary school, family-kindergarten relationships, relationships between families, kindergarten-school-local community relationships, social values). It is not just the temporal changes in a child's life that are significant, but also changes in contexts, the family, society, and changes in their interactions, which suggests a high complexity of transition to early and preschool-aged children and hence the difficulty of predicting successful adaptation. Considering the importance of contextual factors of the kindergarten culture that are less pronounced in the existing relevant and contemporary literature than the characteristics of children (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), especially in Croatia (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019), this paper will focus precisely on their analysis in relation to the transition process and adaptation.

1.2. Contextual factors of the kindergarten culture in the process of a child's adaptation to an early childhood care and education institution

Early childhood education institution, the kindergarten, is a very lively and dynamic institution, full of visible, less visible, and invisible customs, rituals, and relationships that make up its culture. The culture of institutions of care and education is a

growing research field across the world (Allder, 1993; Hargreaves, 1995; Prosser, 1999; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Bruner, 2000; Stoll & Fink, 2000; Schein, 2004; Maslowski, 2006), and in the last 20 years it has become more current in Croatia (Vrcelj, 2003; Domović, 2004; Vujičić, 2011; Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2016; Peko, Varga, & Vican, 2016; Vujičić, Pejić-Papak, & Valenčić-Zuljan, 2018). The culture of early childhood care and education institution is most often described as the personality of the institution, the way of life and work, thinking and behavior, as a set of shared values shared by the employees of the institution, which are reflected in their characteristic patterns of behavior. It is shaped by its history, context, and people and substantially affected by the external political and economic factors as well as changes in education policy (Vujičić, 2008).

Although it is noted that numerous researchers are concerned with the issues of the culture of educational institutions, very few of them deal with the culture of institutions of early childhood care and education; instead, they mostly deal with the school culture. Kindergarten culture implies a continuous exploration of educational practice as a path to its more in-depth understanding and change, which recognizes, even demands, the need for continuous two-way communication and reciprocal relationships between children, adults, and learning environments, and emphasizes the importance of the joint life of all participants (Vujičić, 2011). Given the very nature of the definition of institutional culture, it is clear how important the concept is to understand the needs of children during their transition and adaptation to an early childhood education institution.

Buljubašić-Kuzmanović (2016) lists three basic categories of cultural measurements of an educational institution, namely: values, normative beliefs and expectations, and perception of organizational practice, and emphasizes that values, along with the beliefs and expectations, are the primary element of the operationalization of culture by most researchers. Peko et al. (2016) give special attention to factors such as educational objectives, the learning environment, teaching participants, and extracurricular activities, curricula, textbooks, homework, and parents that affect the school effectiveness. Stoll (1999, according to Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2016) proposes a study of the concept of 10 cultural institutional norms: **shared goals** (we know where we are going), **responsibility for success** (we must succeed), **collegiality** (we jointly work on it), **continuous improvement** (we can improve), **lifelong learning** (learning for all), **risk-taking** (learning by accepting something new), **support** (there is always someone to help you), **mutual respect** (everyone can offer something) **openness** (we can talk about our differences), **celebration and humor** (we are content with ourselves). This model of norms significantly overlaps with the value of a positive institution as well as the value of employees on an individual level, which is recognized within the framework of Positive Psychology (Tatalović Vorkapić, Vlah, & Vujičić, 2012). Vujičić (2011) outlines the dimensions under which she bases her research on the culture of institutions of early childhood care and education, namely the **Professional relationship**, which implies collaborative relations between preschool teachers, principals, associates, and other participants in the work of the institution, among institutions, and institutional management itself; **the organizational and physical environment** and **the orientation of the preschool teacher to continuously learn and research his/her personal practice**.

In addition to the family, are to some the first and most important places where interpersonal relationships, beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and written and unscripted rules are created, developed, and applied (Buljubašić-Kuzmanović, 2016) and in which the culture of certain communities comes to the fore. Culture as a whole, as well as every separate subculture within it, is made up of the mutual influence of many factors, and some of them are attitudes and beliefs, cultural norms and interpersonal relationships (Vrcelj, 2003) influenced by the culture of the social environment, the culture of institutions, and the cultures of an individual.

According to the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (2014), kindergarten culture is reflected in the common foundations and convictions of preschool teachers, principals, and other professionals, the administrative and auxiliary staff, and parents. Culture is recognized by their mutual relationships, joint work, the way they govern and lead the institution, the organizational and physical environment, whereby the emphasis is placed on the degree of their common orientation towards continuous learning and research of their practice to improve it. Institutional culture significantly affects how children and adults in the institution feel, think, and work. The contextual factors of the kindergarten culture, according to the National curriculum of an Early and Preschool Care and Education (2014), are divided into spatial-material factors, social factors, and institutional leadership, and each of these three factors as well as the culture as a whole depend on how the children feel during their first entry into the institution and how successful their separation from the family will go, i.e., the adaptation to the new space, materials, new adults and children, and a new way of life.

Under the term **spatial-material environment** in the kindergarten, we mean the organization of space and the organization, quantity, and availability of different materials. Children have a free spirit and childhood is a period when the freedom of children should be encouraged, and this allows them to organize space in such a way that they feel safe and free to move and to independently use and manipulate materials, independently explore, experiment, solve problems, set hypotheses, construct their own knowledge and understand using their own initiative and creative autonomy in cooperation with other children and with the support of adults (Slunjski, 2008). The spatial-material environment sends children messages about desirable behavior, well-structured spatial kindergarten units encourage children to socialize in smaller groups and thus encourage a better interaction among children with fewer disturbances. They also enable children to learn in accordance with their holistic nature and offer content for the diverse interests and possibilities of the child. An early and preschool-aged child learns when he/she is independent and free in the choice of learning incentives in accordance with his or her needs, through active participation and stimulation of all senses. Spending time in open spaces and nature is of crucial importance, especially for their overall optimal psychophysical development, which is described in detail through the theoretical permeation of pedagogy of sustainable development and the modern theoretical model of transition in the paper of Anđić and Tatalović Vorkapić (2019).

The spatial-material environment is critical in the period of children's adaptation to the kindergarten since it impacts, to a great extent, how the child will feel. An inviting space lets the child know that space is well prepared for him. The space that

makes it easier for the child to stay is that which attracts him with his challenging incentives, invites him to play, socialize, and explore, and one that resembles the family space; space where the child can play but also have some privacy. The organization of kindergartens should enable the free movement of children and be focused on promoting encounters, communication, and interaction among children. When a child has the opportunity to interact with other children in a safe, attractive environment, they can build their confidence in their skills during play and real life, develop trust in the space, in adults in his or her environment, and other children.

The **social environment** of kindergartens, according to the National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education (2014), is based on democratic foundations, mutual respect, and good communication between all participants in the educational process, which leads to autonomy and emancipation of children and adults. Relationships between adults reflect on the relationships between children, their mutual communication, and cooperation as well as the development of their social competences. Since the criterion for grouping children, given their developmental and individual characteristics, cannot be their chronological age, the creation of a heterogeneous group aims to avoid an artificial atmosphere. The child is thus in a natural social situation where he has the opportunity to experience himself in different relationships. Thus, children of different ages exchange their experiences, younger children learn from the older ones, while the older children, through teaching their younger friends, actually organize their knowledge, confirm their competences, and develop self-confidence. Vygotsky (Berk, 2015) established long ago the significant role of collaborative learning and how children can be an excellent stimulus to other children for their development. According to his well-known socio-cultural theory of cognitive development, children with more adult or mature, more competent peers can achieve significantly more and develop more psychic functions at an abstract level than the one they are currently contemplatingis well-known. A family is a community that comprises more people of different ages and naturally provides many opportunities for learning, observation, understanding, and imitation of various skills. Older members are offered opportunities to guide and assume responsibility for the younger or those with less experience (Katz, Evangelou, & Hartman, 1991; Petrović-Sočo, 2007). Today, children spend less and less time with their families, in peer groups on the street, or the village; therefore, the kindergarten plays the vital role of providing the children with opportunities to acquire different social experiences and to try different roles that appear during contact with persons of different ages. Heterogeneous age groups can be especially beneficial to those children who in some areas of their development work below the developmental level of the appropriate age. These children might find it less demanding to interact with younger children than with their peers, and such interactions may encourage motivation and self-confidence in younger children. *The interaction and co-operation of children (of different opportunities, abilities, as well as different chronological ages) have high educational potential, which is why it is especially encouraged and supported* (National curriculum of an Early and Preschool Care and Education, 2014, p. 36).

In the period of children's adaptation to the kindergarten, besides creating trust in the preschool teachers, it is critical to create trust in other children and to develop a sense of belonging to the educational group and the institution itself.

Age-heterogeneous groups, groups of children in different stages of adaptation, especially groups with children who are already adapted to the kindergarten (enrolled in the past years) provide a more significant benefit for children in the adaptation period because, by observing the other children, children undergoing adaptation will find it easier to develop confidence in the kindergarten way of life. Age-heterogeneous groups allow young children to see other children who engage in relaxed exploration, work, play, and they encourage new children to take part in it.

The third factor of culture, according to the National curriculum of an Early and Preschool Care and Education (2014), refers to leadership of and inside the kindergarten, which implies an appropriate and responsible distribution of power in the kindergarten as a factor of achieving flexibility, facilitating creative and other potentials of each individual in the kindergarten and the preservation of human resources. The definitions of educational institution leadership are mostly taken from the business world. The terms of leadership, handling, and management first started to be used in the school and then also in the preschool system. Leadership is present at all times, although we are often unaware of it. This unavoidable occurrence, leadership in human relationships, its way and purpose set the tone for interpersonal relationships, the culture of the institution, and community (Seme Stojnović & Hitrec, 2014). In the area of early childhood education all the more important ideas about the significance of research and leadership improvement are the basis for the creation of high quality care and education (Mujis, Aubrey, Harris, & Briggs, 2004; Rodd, 2013; Sims, Waniganayake, & Hadley, 2018; Strehmel, 2016; Antulić Majcen & Pribela-Hodap, 2017). Essential characteristics of contemporary leadership are caring for people (employees, parents, children), dedication to teamwork, distributed leadership, and commitment to a shared vision. A child's adaptation process to the kindergarten largely depends on the leadership. The way in which leaders (principals, professional associates, and preschool teachers) introduce their kindergarten to the parents even before their child has begun the process of adaptation and how the first few days upon enrollment will be organized in agreement with the parents so as to reduce the level of stress for the child are very important. Familiarizing the parents with the institution, its educational work, the daily structure, the leaders, and the manner of institutional management contribute to the parents' trust in the institution, which is then transferred to the child. A timely encouragement of the parents to slowly adapt their home ritual with that of the kindergarten (meals and naps) and the encouragement to talk in a positive tone with the child about the institution can also contribute to the process of the child's adaptation to a new way of life in the kindergarten.

Kindergarten is the first step of institutionalized care and education, and for most children, it is the first encounter with organized care and education. The culture of the institution and its contextual factors (spatial-material, social environment and the management of the institution) depend on whether this first step will be a firm foundation for future growth, development, and learning, or will it be a weak, dilapidated step that provides even greater resistance to all organized forms of care and education in general, and both the preschool teachers, children, and parents, as well as professional associates and all other kindergarten staff to a great extent, live and feel the culture of the institution in which they spend their time.

1.3. Transition and adaptation in kindergartens – perspectives of the practitioners and managers

The inadequate number of empirical research in the area of transition and adaptation of children in preschool care and education institutions, especially in our country, has resulted in a variety of practices used during these challenging life periods in children, regardless of whether they are moving from a family home to a kindergarten or from the kindergartens to elementary school. Also, international research has so far shown that practices are very different, not just between individual countries, but also between individual institutions for early childhood care and education and elementary schools within the same country (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019). Although this variety derives partly from the inadequate research but also the uniqueness and diversity of each institution that is specifically adapted to the child, Early, Pianta, Taylor, and Cox (2001) emphasize the need to define clear guidelines in the early childhood education system that will offer a framework for an efficient work of key institutions during children's transition and adaptation. Early et al. (2001) conducted a study on a stratified random sample of 3,595 American preschool teachers on the work organization of the transition and adaptation, which showed that the most commonly used practices are applied after enrollment in the kindergarten and are aimed at the entire educational group. It is interesting to note that, at the moderate level, they use activities of coordinating the kindergarten and the local community/society, which include: opportunities of the preschool teacher related to the available records of the child's past and early experiences or the psychophysical status; opportunities to visit kindergartens or preschools of all children from a particular local community/city and similar; opportunities for informal contacts with children's preschool teachers; opportunities of direct contacts and visits between those preschool teachers and teachers who will be carrying out educational work with the same children before switching from the kindergarten to elementary school; implementation of regular meetings of kindergartens, preschools, and elementary schools at the institutional level in the local community; and the realization of contacts and meetings with the aim of developing coordination between early childhood curricula and primary education.

These activities are very interesting since they are not being implemented in Croatia, and are a fertile ground for discussions about whether they are useful and whether they are available in our country. Research shows very clearly that the more remote and direct the transition, i.e., directly aimed at a particular child and his or her family, the fewer preschool teachers use them. In addition to the above-mentioned American study, it is interesting to mention research in which comparative practices were carried out by preschool teachers and schoolteachers in Iceland and Australia (Einarsdóttir, Perry, & Dockett, 2008). During the transition from the kindergarten to elementary school, in the practice of these countries, it is evident that there is a markedly developed cooperation between institutions of early childhood care and education and primary education institutions, whereby a pedagogical continuity is achieved, which is very important.

Although analyses of quality and practice of transition from kindergarten to elementary school dominate the research literature, for a vast number of children today it is not the first meeting with a new environment. This fact directly places the contextual factors of the institution of early childhood care and education in the focus when

it comes to the transition and adaptation in the kindergarten, with a number of research turning in the direction of the importance of transition analysis in early childhood care and education settings (Dalli, 2000; Datler, Datler, & Funder, 2010). In the attempt to identify the risk factors that make transition and adaptation stressful, certain studies have highlighted the separation of the primary caregiver as the root cause (Cryer et al., 2005), while others have highlighted the micro-environment, i.e., the spatial-material environment (Recchia & Dvorakova, 2012). The spatial-material environment becomes even more critical when it comes to the so-called "hidden transitions" that take place between individual age groups in the kindergarten itself, for example, from the nursery group to the mixed kindergarten group. It is worthwhile to add, that even though very much important in children lives, outside spaces and nature has been neglected in related research what will be analyzed in future studies (Anđić & Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019).

Given the most powerful influence of the institution's culture in such transitions, it is important to point out the results of qualitative research conducted in Ireland (O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2013). Thematic analysis of conducted interviews with managers of institutions of early childhood care and education has identified six significant categories with regards to the quality of transition and adaptation. In the category of what helps children and families during the transition, managers have highlighted the following: child-centered approach, flexibility, consistency, familiarity, everyday practices, working under the radar, and keeping change to a minimum. In contrast, four factors hinder a quality transition: too much change, parents' anxieties, the realities of practice, and regulations. Of particular importance was the Early childhood matters category, which highlighted the following: children spend a significant amount of time in ECCE, children are learning all the time, early childhood is a critical period, ECCE stands to them, social and emotional development matters, transition matter, the importance of ECCE in not recognized, and they provide a quality service. Within the category named "Times of challenge and opportunity" they emphasized: the emotional and behavioral impact, change is hard, things are different, what children need to know to go, and developmental opportunities. They also recognized the factors that are contributing to transitions: child characteristics, family, environment, policy and other settings (ECCE or other). Finally, they articulated several practices and activities that work during the transition: get the timing right, work with the child, go gradually, work together, maintain relationships, involve parents, stay positive, mind the gap and it works. Although this research has offered significant guidance for improving the practice, due to the lack of perspective on the parents and children, future research should take these other considerations into account in order to holistically approach the implementation of the transition research with the aim of improving the practice (O'Farrelly & Hennessy, 2013).

2. Conclusion

Transitional periods in the life of early and preschool-aged children, especially the first ones, have a significant impact on the strategies that children use in later transitions and adaptations and have a significant impact on their psychological well-being, both

in current development periods and later in life. Therefore, it is essential to systematically and validly research all aspects of transitions that can significantly facilitate the transitions and enable children to build those strategies that are constructive and effective for each child. A number of these aspects are described in this paper through individual elements of the institution of early childhood care and education. Although no research holistically encompasses all of the above elements, Loizou's study (2011) confirms the assumptions about the importance of spatial-material environments for optimum transition from children's perspective. Children in the first grade of the elementary school mentioned the size of the playground, despite the missing toys and its size which they find impressive, as a powerful positive factor and one of the most popular places in the school. In addition to the research that is based on the findings of children's perspectives, one should keep in mind the perspective of the parents and preschool teachers as well as kindergarten management. Therefore, the contribution of this work lies not only in the sensitization of the academic community and experts about the importance of all these elements during children's transition, but also in clear guidelines for the implementation of empirical research, which would also contribute to the elaboration of the existing, previously described, modern transition model.

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