

# Editorial

## Editorial

The present issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, which is entirely thematic, addresses the question of *quality in education*. It is a very topical and wide-ranging field that has been increasingly put into the foreground of thinking and discussions in recent years—both in formal and non-formal education and learning at all levels, from preschool to tertiary and adult education. In the last several decades, practically all of the “big narratives” of education have been related, directly or at least indirectly, to either structural or process quality in education. They have a crucial influence on expert considerations and educational policies, whether in relation to pressing for the reforms of school and educational systems, their connection with the labor market, the introduction of one austerity measure after another, the competence-based design of curriculum documents, the didactic transformation of conducting various educational programs along the whole vertical or the extremely prominent international assessments of knowledge, competences or literacy, whose results have a substantial impact on national educational policies and, consequently, on the quality of education. How can the concept of quality in education be understood, how can it be assessed and evaluated, and, finally, how can it be ensured that everyone participating in an educational program is provided with a good-quality education? This, of course, is a topic that cannot be exhausted with the limited (although high-quality) selection of scientific articles. Nevertheless, the contributions in front of you approach the topic systematically and clearly enough, and sometimes also entirely empirically.

The issue of the journal is opened by **Ljubica Marjanovič Umek**'s article *The structural quality of preschools: How it influences process quality and children's achievements*. The author studies both process and structural preschool quality, defining process quality as a comprehensive system that includes different dimensions and aspects related to material and human resources. She writes that these conditions enable children to develop in physical, movement, cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional areas, and they also allow for learning as well as the realization of preschool educational goals. She also emphasizes that a high quality of preschool education at the process level is related to suitable working conditions, which are defined through structural quality indicators. The author highlights three conditions: the size of the classroom (the number of children in the classroom), the adult/child ratio in the classroom, and the size of the indoor play area per child. These indicators are increasingly included in various international comparative analyses of preschools, which demonstrate that Slovenian preschools are broadly comparable to preschools in the European countries with highly developed preschool education, but not evenly in all structural indicators or all children's ages. Marjanovič Umek also underlines the fact that preschool classrooms demonstrate great variety regarding their process quality, although they function

within comparable structural quality. According to the author, this leads to the conclusion that structural quality is a necessary, but not the sufficient condition for the maintenance of high quality at the process level.

Process quality has an important influence on students' pre-reading competences in the first primary-school educational period. This is the topic examined by the author of the second article. In *Assessment of prereading competence*, **Ivanka Bider Petelin** shows that, according to research, various competences acquired in the preschool period (i.e., in the pre-reading period) are closely related to subsequent reading achievements. She emphasizes that learning to read is a long-lasting process, starting with the development of pre-reading competences. It gradually leads to independent reading for learning, which also means that students must develop different competences well before reading—recognizing letters, knowing that speech is made up of different phonemes, understanding that letters represent phonemes, using working memory, and distinguishing phonemes. Bider Petelin presents the findings of her research study, which employed foreign and Slovenian tests that include variables related to reading. She adapted, extended, abridged, and updated them in order to test a sample of children from five to seven years of age on the development of pre-reading competences. The author concluded that, when tested on pre-reading competences, children were best at combining syllables into words and worst at using working memory (the test required them to repeat that last words from two to three sets of sentences). She also established a number of differences between boys and girls. On average, the boys were more successful on tests that measured the analysis of syllables, short-term auditory memory for digits, short-term auditory memory for sentences, short-term visual-spatial memory, rapid automatic naming, and recalling words when given a superordinate. On the other hand, the girls were statistically significantly more successful on tests that measured rhyme recognition, syllable synthesis, the recognition of the first phoneme, phonetic discrimination, phoneme analysis, removing a phoneme/syllable, short-term auditory memory when given visual support, short-term visual memory, and recalling words when given a phoneme.

The next author, **Vesna Podgornik**, presents the results of her empirical study on self-evaluation among educators in primary and secondary schools. She starts her article *Quality assessment and assurance in Slovenian schools through self-evaluation research* by defining the concepts evaluation and self-evaluation. She defines evaluation as a process of ascertaining to what degree and how we have achieved our planned goals by collecting evidence and reaching findings on the quality of programs, projects, services, organizations, and individuals' work. She describes self-evaluation as a reflection on the important aspects of educational work, leading to the assessment of the current work done by an educational institution, or as planned, systematic, structured, and constant attention that schools pay to the quality of their work. In her study, the author analyzed the attitudes of educators in Slovenian primary and secondary schools toward undertaking self-evaluation research. The majority of her respondents think that self-evaluation is important or very important to the occupation they have. Their views are importantly shaped by certain predictors, such as the educators'

attitudes toward the necessity of continuous professional development, their interest in research work and knowledge of how to carry out self-evaluation, as well as school managements' encouragement of teachers to carry out self-evaluation. In the last section of her article, Podgornik concludes that it would be important to introduce university students (future educators) to research and self-evaluation and to gaining research experiences during their undergraduate studies as well as during seminars, workshops, and lectures as part of their continuing in-service training.

**Aleksandra Grašič** and **Katja Jeznik** discuss *Quality assurance and quality development in vocational education and training*. The authors summarize the history of quality assurance in vocational education and training (VET) at European and national levels. They present the existing national reports on quality in VET and stress the currently topical method of assuring quality in educational institutions, the so-called peer-review method. They define the method as a form of external evaluation with the aim of supporting the reviewed institution in its quality assurance and development efforts. The authors emphasize that relevant literature defines the peer-review method as a form of external evaluation; however, the self-evaluation of the provider of education also has an important role in the peer review procedure. Participating in peer review is voluntary, and during the preparatory phase each school chooses which area it wishes to have reviewed. Grašič and Jeznik maintain that quality development should not strive only for the assessment of objectively testable and measurable learning outcomes, since they believe this would mean the marginalization of the development of social values, key competences, and the factors in the learning process that contribute to the development of the student's mature personality. Special attention should also be devoted to the students coming from less encouraging environments, immigrants, and to students whose previous negative experiences in the educational system often make them unsuccessful in the classical school form of education.

The penultimate contribution to this issue considers the quality of university education. The article *Students' attitudes on the quality of university teaching* was written by two authors from Croatia, **Snježana Dubovicki** and **Ines Banjari**. The authors state that the quality of university education is not only a research topic in the fields closely related to education; rather, it is also becoming part of interdisciplinary research and teaching internationally. According to the authors, ensuring the quality of university education is becoming a global trend and a priority of contemporary society. They present the results of their empirical research study on students' attitudes toward the quality of university teaching, the criteria that students use for the assessment, what elements affect the quality, and the differences among students from different faculties. The results they gathered demonstrate that the students' views of the conditions for ensuring and improving the quality of university teaching are most affected by the following factors: whether or not the program was a student's first choice, the ways in which study contents are presented, the frequency of the student's participation in courses, and positive social and emotional climates. They point out that the research has raised numerous additional questions that need careful further attention.

The thematic issue is closed by **Tanja Možina**'s article *Quality definitions and structural quality indicators in adult education*. The author begins by stating that understanding the concept of quality and its nature is important, since it is our conceptual starting point that defines what quality strategies we will develop, what quality models and indicators we will use, and what instruments we will need to measure quality. She also stresses that quality can never be fully defined in either its *absolute* or *potential*. Thus, any definition we offer can only be partial and we will never be able to define the absolute quality criterion. In other words, the quality of educational inputs, processes, results, and outcomes can only be inferred indirectly—from the measurable characteristics of the input, process, and output components of education. This very relativity of understanding the concept of quality, writes Možina, leads to the conclusion that the answers to the questions about what makes good-quality education and what quality we desire in adult education must be sought in democratic debates. These need to include different views and interests, which the author believes leads to considering different aspects of quality and enables us to approach quality in adult education comprehensively.

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