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The preschool curriculum in the educational context of Montenegro¹

Abstract: Through an analysis of the various open and/or partially open types of curricula, their common orientation is noted: the education process is directed towards a child in the environment of interpersonal responsibility and the culture of dialogue. A child has both the need and the right to be an active participant in his/her development. Beginning with the humanistic and socio-constructivist paradigm guidelines, the official Montenegrin preschool educational curriculum is constituted. However, on a practical-performative level, the official programme obtains new meanings and context reification through operationalised goals and activities. The Montenegrin preschool teachers plan thematically, starting with the compulsory programme, the developmental age of the children/group, the actual events, the children's interests, the parents' proposals and the team agreements. The educators combine the programme objectives with the requirements of the context, children and adults, individualising activities while taking into account the coherence between the various forms of work and difficulty level. On the other hand, in practice, the traditional, fairly routinised programme script intertwines with the elements of open, flexible and individualised child-oriented approach. The overcapacity of preschools in the central and southern regions significantly complicates the position and rights of children to have appropriate space, free play, variety of interactional activities, active involvement of parents, availability of teaching aids and, consequently, the quality of individualised planning.

Keywords: preschool educational programmes, preschool institution, planning, child, quality.

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Introduction

Beginning with the theoretical and scientific paradigms as criteria frameworks for the interpretation and understanding of the key determinants of a quality preschool context, different pedagogical models of an educational programme (curriculum) and different institutional structures are identified. The socio-cultural, scientific-theoretical and implicit *images* of childhood necessarily determine the manner and procedure for creating and structuring the preschool system and curriculum (Bašić 2011, p. 19).

The quality of the work environment in a preschool institution is determined by different socio-cultural factors, existing in a wider social and a narrower local context, by different perspectives of educational and political institutes and by the participants themselves, that is, by the creators of the pedagogical process. The basic structural and process substance, which is the foundation of a qualitative framework of reference for a certain educational system, is made up of the curriculum as a pedagogical project or a document containing the objectives, conditions, resources and models for monitoring and evaluation (Matijević 2010, p. 391). The theoretical and scientific reference framework of the current preschool programme in Montenegro is based on the humanistic, socio-cultural paradigm with an active child and his/her strong innate potentials in its centre. Since the preschool institution contains features of the social and cultural environment and tradition, along with common pedagogical values and the image of a child and his/her expected welfare in a given context, it is possible to detect certain contradictory aspects between the official pedagogical concept and the traditional, indicative, behaviourally postulated paradigm of the pre-reform preschool model.

Therefore, the aim of this work is, on the one hand, to highlight the determinant paradigmatic objectives contained in the basic programme postulates and, on the other, to point out the ways in which the actual concept is applied in practice through the theoretical analysis of the current programme documents and the practice evaluation indicators. In the context of this objective, the first task is to review and analyse the current preschool programme—i.e. its justifications, developments and modifications that resulted in the version currently in place. The second task is to

examine and analyse the programme components or its sub-programmes (both the primary and specific ones) that make up the body of the primary programme. The third task relates to the ways in which the programme is translated into practice through the planning and working methods applied in the Montenegrin preschool institutions. The subsequent task focuses on the evaluation indicators of these methods and the consistency in the implementation of the programme principles and objectives in the preschool educational practice. Finally, the dimensions and mechanisms for assessing the quality of the educational process in the preschool institutions in Montenegro are discussed.

Preschool programs: general characteristics with an emphasis on the Montenegrin preschool model

Edita Slunjski (2006, p. 43) speaks of curriculum in a broad sense as a common, indicative summary of the principles underlying the educational process, while indicating that curriculum in a narrow sense implies the methods of the official programme implementation under concrete conditions in accordance with the specificities of the context. In curriculum theory, several curricular models are discussed: the open and closed curriculum, the hidden curriculum, the child and relationship centred curriculum, the subject curriculum, the spiral curriculum and many others (Matijević 2010, p. 391). Mirjana Pešić (1987) mentions the level of the prescribed and the range of the structured activities for children and preschool teachers as criteria for preschool curriculum classification. In that regard, she distinguishes between three different programme concepts. First, there is the model with a firmly established content of action in which knowledge is understood as cultural transmission, as was the case with the Montenegrin preschool programme during the 1985 to 2004 period (Knjiga promjena 2001, p. 82). Second, there is the programme that does not regulate the behaviour of its participants, while the third concept refers to the programme that combines detailed rules with the freedom to choose topics (Pešić 1987, p. 47). After some changes were made to the system and the new educational system reference concept was accepted in Montenegro at all stages, from preschool to university education (Knjiga promjena 2001), the *Programme Bases for Preschool Education* (Osnove programa ... 1998, hereafter *The Bases*²) was adopted as a framework for curricular development at the preschool institution level, as well as for the purpose of developing specialised, targeted and shorter programmes.

² This document was proposed by the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy of the Faculty of Philosophy at Belgrade University at the request of the Ministry of Education and Science of Montenegro (Knjiga promjena 2001), and it was the result of many years of positive experience gained through the implementation of the *Step by Step* programme, representing a frame for the elaboration of the *Programme for Areas of Activity in Preschool Education* (Program za područja aktivnosti ... 2004) in a single document.

The Bases (ibid.) contains assumptions about the nature of a child, about child development and learning, about the nature and function of preschool education, about the goals and principles of educational work and about the role of preschool teachers (ibid, p. 2). Along with *The Bases*, the *Programme for Areas of Activity in Preschool Education* was also adopted (Program za područja aktivnosti ... 2004³, 2007, hereafter the *Programme for Areas of Activity*). It is uniform for all age levels within the preschool system and structured by areas of activity, while separate chapters explain the following topics: *learning environment, cooperation with family, children with special needs* and *evaluation* (Program za područja... 2007, p. 3). In this way, a gradual transition from a closed curriculum and a dominant adult-centred approach to a new paradigm—the concept of open education that places the children`s activities ‘in the centre’ of a flexible, dynamic and multidimensional environment—was enabled. The basis of this adopted open curriculum contains the backbones of Dewey’s pragmatism, Piaget’s developmental cognitivist theories, Vigotsky’s socio-cultural theories and even Freire’s interpretive conceptions of learning and knowledge that centre around a dialogue and negotiation between the children and adults (Giroux 2013, p. 58). Hence, the preschool programme adopted in Montenegro was postulated as an indicative, framework programme, without a solid, detailed “content texture” that provides the creative, multi perspective participation of all stakeholders and takes into account their personal attitudes, knowledge, cultural identity and other peculiarities and diversities in a unique context (Hrvatić and Piršl 2007, p. 401).

Six years after the implementation of this model into the institutional preschool milieu in Montenegro, the *Programme for Areas of Activity* (Program za područja aktivnosti ... 2007) was modified and stratified into three units appropriate for the age specificities of children. This was done at the proposal of practitioners who experienced the transition as too demanding and not entirely congruent with their respective competencies and former professional experience. The current comprehensive preschool programme in Montenegro operates through two programme types:

1. The primary programme, made up of:
 - a) *the Care and Education Programme for Children Under Three Years* (Program njege ... 2011, hereafter the *Care Programme*),
 - b) *the Programme for the Areas of Activity in Preschool Education for Age Groups Three to Six* (Program za područja aktivnosti ... 2011, hereafter the *Program for Areas of Activity*),
 - c) *the Brief Programme for Preschools – Working with Children About to Enrol in Primary School* (Kraći program ... 2011, hereafter the *Brief Programme*),
 - d) *the Three-Hour Preschool Educational Programme* (Trosatni ... 2016, hereafter the *Three-Hour Programme*) and
 - e) *the Programme for English language* (Područje aktivnosti ... 2017);

³ The General Education Council endorsed the educational programme for preschool education in 2004.

2. The special programmes, made up of:

- a) the *Entrepreneurship Learning Within the Areas of Activity in Preschool Education for Age Groups Three to Six* (Preduzetničko učenje ... 2016, hereafter *Entrepreneurship Learning*) and
- b) the *Education for Sustainable Development Within the Areas of Activity in Preschool Education for Age Groups Three to Six* (Obrazovanje za ... 2015, hereafter the *Programme for Sustainable Development*).

Common to all of these programmes is that they are determined by indicative long-term goals (more on that below) and are open to interpretation and contextual elaboration, according to the age and needs of the children, teachers and all participants in the educational process, whereby the contents of the work with the children are not prescribed (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011, p. 5). The emphasis is placed on the process and joint learning of children and adults by trying out different ways through which to obtain a more efficient understanding of common situations and their own role in them (Miškeljin 2008, p. 194). Children, sort of like epistemologists, construct their model of the world and form their own experiences through an interaction within the “discourse“ and the “intersubjective exchanges“ in the community (Bruner 1996, p. 68). If the initial commitment of the preschool programme creators in Montenegro is compared to the concept of open education with results provided through official document/s, it may seem that there are contradictions between the planned intentions and the practice in reality. However, these are two complementary approaches: a goal-oriented approach that is necessary for the full understanding and implementation of particular individual, developmental and contextual requests, and the open-holistic approach that integrates all of these aspects within the full operation of the preschool curriculum (Capra 1998, p. 40). In the opening paragraphs of the officially approved preschool programme for kindergarten, it is pointed out that “in the concept of *open education*, learning or teaching programme is not given. The nature and quality of interaction are more significant factors of child development than some contents” (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011, p. 7). It can be said that preschool programmes (within a single framework curriculum) in Montenegro have the characteristics of an open, integrated, child- and relationship-centred educational model, which completely covers the context of a preschool institution and takes into account the environmental framework of the community and the multi-layered interaction among all the participants (Marjanovic 1987, p. 40). A child as a unique system and an indivisible, dynamic being with its own motivation to understand itself and others; it lives in a particular context and affects it, from which it also naturally receives multiplied, intertwined messages of culture, as well as from the pedagogical-psychological environment to which it belongs (Petrović-Sočo 2007).

The structure of preschool programmes in Montenegro

As noted in the previous chapter, the *Programme for Areas of Activity in Preschool Education* (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2004, 2007) is a uniform framework of reference aimed at all ages in the preschool context that operated through four primary and two special programmes.

For the crèche age in the *Care Programme* (Program njege ... 2011), the indicative guidance is given to preschool teachers on how to organise a responsive learning environment and how to choose the appropriate activities and teaching tools to support the children, taking into account their differences and specificities. The programme is structured into 10 more specific sections. The overall goal is pointed out at the very beginning of this document, and it is to “encourage the integral development of preschool children with creation of appropriate conditions and to encourage the development of skills and personality characteristics, broadening of experiences and building of knowledge about themselves, others and the world” (ibid., p. 7). Subsequently, the indicative long-term objectives are set by developmental domains. In a short chapter on planning, it is further recommended to focus on the children’s learning, interests and needs, starting with the idea of diversity and the individualisation of educational procedures in the context of tailor-made topics “thematic planning, with integrated learning, aligned with the needs and possibilities of learning at an early age, emphasizes life topics” (ibid., p. 37).

The *Programme for Areas of Activity* (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011) contains the overall objectives of preschool education, such as the “more open and more flexible programme for preschool children, possibility of individualization, respect for diversity and choices as opposed to group routines; improving cooperation with family and local community” (ibid., p. 7). The programme objectives, focused on cognitive, motor and affective development, are designed from the perspective of a child and divided into seven areas of activity (ibid., p. 9). For each of these areas, indicative objectives are set within three segments, implying three global spheres of child development and upbringing that are intertwined and mutually dependent: the self-discovery and self-mastery, the cultivation of relationships and the development of own knowledge about others, as well as discovering the world and developing knowledge about it.

The proposed activities are placed within three more complex units: the practical life activities (daily life activities), the specific activities (relevant to the nature of the field/area) and the complex activities that combine different areas (ibid., p. 10). This model is open to the particular context and is “suitable” for the diversity of the participants, but it is up to the practitioners—the preschool teachers—to make it usable in their professional and comprehensive support of the children, parents and, generally, of all the participants in both the immediate and wider community. A model that is based on the respect for diversity promotes an inclusive educational paradigm, thus it contributes to the welfare of all children and diversity is seen as both a value and an important pedagogical resource (Bouillet and Miškeljin 2017, p. 1265).

In the *Brief Programme* (Kraći program ... 2011), intended for children five to six years of age (i.e. a year before they enrol in primary school), the objectives for specific areas of activity are given using the same matrix as in the above-mentioned primary programme (ibid., p. 4).

The programmes discussed thus far clearly underline the importance of the children's own proactive action in a necessarily continuous and developmental relation to the context that supports the rights to participate, to act autonomously and to develop collaborative and participatory attitude in all participants. They specifically mark the role of family and community, as well as the role of the learning environment whose features should be dynamism, openness and flexibility. After all, planning and spatial design testify about the cultural and theoretical image of a child that is promoted by certain preschool institutions. The *Programme for Areas of Activity* (Program za področje aktivnosti ... 2011) has a special section devoted to the issue of working with children with special needs, including features of inclusive education and teaching methods for supporting gifted children (ibid., p. 45).

The *Three-Hour Programme* (Kraći program ... 2016), which is available to all children (who do not attend kindergarten regularly), provides objectives and methodological recommendations to preschool teachers for the proper implementation of thematic activities and contents from the above-mentioned areas (ibid., p. 4).

Special programmes are conceptually complementary to the primary programme. The *Programme for Sustainable Development* (Obrazovanje za ... 2015)⁴ represents a kind of supplement to the *Programme for Areas of Activity* (Program za področje aktivnosti ... 2011). It is goal-oriented and treats specific issues, especially the activities from the primary programme related to social interactions and exploring the world, and understanding and mastering the environment. The programme contains the appropriate methodological guidance to preschool teachers on how to implement activities and contents in the fields of healthy lifestyles, safety, concern for others, environment, consumption and savings. Particular focus is placed on these areas as they are in line with the new findings and current developments on both the global and local levels. Objectives are elaborated for each area, such as developing and adopting healthy lifestyles (Obrazovanje za ... 2015, p. 8), introducing rules for the safe use of computers, exploring the possibilities of donating and so on (ibid., p. 9).

The *Entrepreneurial Learning* (Preduzetničko učenje ... 2016), which is an umbrella document for all stages of education, focuses on the inclusion of entrepreneurial competencies in this educational segment in an age-appropriate manner for the purpose of a more efficient involvement of the children "in actions, both individually and with others. It also encourages them to take actions that will bring them individual and social long-term benefits" (ibid., p. 12). The programme is designed for children three to six years of age. It provides general goals, while the thematic units contain more concrete objectives such as: a child learns about various professions (ibid., p. 15); a child identifies ways and means of exercising its rights in

⁴ The *Programme for Entrepreneurial Learning* (Preduzetničko učenje ... 2016) is a result of the cooperation of the Bureau for Education Services and the Regional Environmental Centre's Office in Podgorica (ibid., p. 2).

terms of savings and consumption in relation to others, for example, in family (ibid., p.16). Finally, special programmes are a type of supplement to and an integral part of the *Programme for Areas of Activity* (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011), as well as components of a single set of programmes for sustainable development and entrepreneurial learning that are intended for the Montenegrin education continuum (primary and secondary schools) (see the website of the Bureau for Education Services of Montenegro).

The programme in process: planning

In the preschool institutions in Montenegro, the preschool teachers translate the official programme into practice through thematic planning (seldom, it is also done through project planning), starting with the programme objectives, principles (democracy and pluralism, programme openness, equal opportunity, balance, horizontal and vertical integration, cooperation with family and community, team planning and critical evaluation),⁵ developmental and chronological age of the children/group, actual events, children's interests, parents' proposals and discussions within the team (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011, pp. 6, 42). In the process of achieving the programme objectives within the thematic units, it is necessary to take into account the correlation between *the areas of activity* and between the developmental domains (Novović et al. 2015, p. 71). In the process of developing and elaborating on the topics, the preschool teachers begin with the objectives that will help the children discover/get to know themselves, master practical life activities, acquire habits and develop skills that will support them in gaining experiences and solving real-life problems (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011, p. 7). The practitioners have autonomy in selecting topics, materials, instruments, play activities and contents, and they are predominantly guided by the children's needs, contextual features, team judgements, and so on. Through continuous group discourse, either within a team in the kindergarten institution or outside of it—with parents—the preschool teachers select topics, discuss the implemented activities,

⁵ The principles of democracy and plurality refer to various programmes, theoretical models and approaches, various methods, the possibility of choosing the contents and activities and a more flexible organisation of space and time; the programme principles of openness, autonomy and professional responsibility of preschool teachers and preschool institutions takes into account the specifics of the environment, the children and parents, as well as the autonomy of the institution; the principles of equal opportunity and respect for diversity among children imply equal conditions for the optimum development of every child, the inclusion of children with special needs, taking into account the differences in relation to the social and cultural background; the principle of balance refers to the developmental characteristics of a child and the various aspects of a child's physical and mental development; the principle of horizontal integration links different areas of activity with the various aspects of child development; the principle of vertical integration includes the family and kindergarten, the relations between different ages and the relations between the kindergarten and primary school; the principle of team planning can be within a single institution or involve several institutions (i.e. between kindergartens and other institutions); the principle of critical assessment or evaluation can be applied on the level of planning of particular areas, contents and methods, at the level of rights and obligations of parents and at the level of everyday interactions in a kindergarten (Program za područje aktivnosti ... 2011, p. 6).

mark the current challenges in practice and again plan their next steps, but more expediently.

In terms of preschool institutions in Montenegro, the most frequent documents⁶ found in practice are thematic plans (which may refer to various time spans, although they are often identified with monthly plans), then, weekly and daily plans. (Novović et al. 2015, p. 72). The number of activities related to cooperation with the family and social environment depends on the parents' interest, the teachers' experience, the current topics and different situational circumstances (ibid., p. 73). In general, the preschool teachers approach the issue of goal setting in two ways: they start with the general, long-term goals and then determine the thematic operational objectives, selecting them from the programme and the life-context 'yarns.' General goals, as constants, represent the universal backbone of the integrated planning of the educational process for children of all ages, and some of these include the independence, maintenance and improvement of overall health, creativity and socialisation, the development of a positive self-image, the acquisition of knowledge, skills and so on. They are followed by concrete objectives that are more narrowly specified for individual programme areas of activity and embedded in a given thematic framework. As the ultimate level of operationalisation of the general/long-term curricular and programme objectives, the preschool teachers have the option of setting individual goals for the children that are justified through monitoring, observing, recording and selecting the elements that indicate their development and position them within the children portfolios (Novović et al. 2015).

From the formal programme to practice: the determinants of influence

The projection of the official programme depends, to a large extent, on the "implicit pedagogy", the preschool teachers, the education institutions and the wider environment. *Implicit or folk pedagogy* is, in fact, a contextual interpretation of the programme that reflects on the official and the hidden programme of a preschool institution through "silent exemplars" and messages (Bruner 1996, p. 65). There are many varied, unintended, unplanned and highly "tangible" impacts on the children's development and learning, such as the adopted cultural image of a child and the "desirable educational ideal," the values, space arrangements, quality and distinctiveness of communication and interaction in the group/kindergarten, the number and age of the children, the control modes of behaviour and the established rules of work in the group/kindergarten, etc. Apple and King (in Kroflič 1997, p. 10) emphasise the importance of the 'deep structures' of experience of a school/kindergarten in this context.

The developmental image of a child is woven into the protective attitude of adults and is based on different views of the socio-centric concept frames strictly prescribed institutions of support to children's needs "in emerging" (Pavlović

⁶ Documentation and records of the work: the work plan (annual, monthly and operational); the procedure log; the on child's development; documentation on previous research, conducted examinations, reports and the like (Zakon o predškolskom ... 2010, Article 21).

Breneselović 2015, p. 172). The concept of “the insufficient” childhood—i.e. the *deficit model* of a child who learns in didactically designed situations, under the protection of adults who “know, can, know how”—is identified in today’s preschool implicit context (Slunjski 2015, p. 104). Although a child is “highly appreciated” and his/her well-being is the guiding principle in both the family and society, the way of providing the quality support within the said protective model of childhood includes protection “according to taste” of the adults, devoid of intentionality, context and the peculiarities of human behaviour (Tadić 2016, p. 261). Nevertheless, in the hidden curriculum there are differences between the “serious” and leisure activities and contents, and children’s progress is measured with a quantum of reproduced contents. If the selected paradigm talks about a child endowed with resources, able to think, act and construct his/her own knowledge, ideas and concepts, it is obvious that more trust is needed and that the educational environment needs to be made more open and stimulating for activities and the learning, research and collaborative relationships of all participants through a unique process of exchange (Woodhead 2012, p. 39). The plurality of family structures is also a part of the social reality, which certainly and necessarily affects the ways in which the preschool environment can be organised and indirectly reflects in the practical interpretation of the curriculum in the teachers’ educational practice (Kovač Šebart and Kuhar 2015, p. 89). Therefore, the curriculum is not and cannot be a detailed composite of regulations, but “a pedagogical framework intended for parents, administration, preschool institutions, practitioners, indicating the values, ethos and basic requirements that should shape the educational practice and broadly define goals to be pursued in the key areas of development” (Bennett 2008, p. 47).

On the structural and process level of the work quality in preschool institutions, organisation of activities is also perceived, encompassing not only the programme framework, planning and arranging of the environment for work, play, learning and the interaction of children and adults but also of the usual rituals, such dining, developing personal hygiene habits and daily rest. The schedule of daily activities and rituals in preschool institutions illustrates substantially the culture of living the curriculum in practice. At a preschool institutional organisation, in the present atmosphere, the above-mentioned predictable rituals are carried out according to the established scheme and lead to hidden support of a “culture of pre-defined restrictions” (Elliott 1998, p. 135). Although the basic goals, built into the preschool concept frame of reference, place emphasis on the flexible, individualised, open curriculum that is appropriate for children and context (Program za področje aktivnosti ... 2011, p. 6), quite predictable ritualism of some activities in practice and “outside the framework” is recognised (Slunjski 2015, p. 10). The implicit conflict between the reference concept with an autonomous child in its centre and the procedural concept in the domain of building preschool practice quality is conditioned by the contextual circumstances (redundant groups, lack of staff), as well as by inherited patterns and ‘mental images’ (Senge 2003; Pavlović Breneselović 2015, p. 33).

The quality control mechanisms of preschool practice

A review of the quality assurance system in Montenegro

In the positivist view, the quality of a preschool system is measured accurately with structurally specific indicators, such as the number of children and teachers, the available space and didactic materials, as well as the level of implementation of the programme standards. Within the phenomenological approach, the procedural dimensions of this context are given primacy—i.e. “dynamism, multidimensionality, contextuality, participation—so that quality is perceived as a construct determined contextually, subjectively and by multiple perspectives and values” (Pavlović Breneselović 2015, p. 10).

Ljubica Marjanović Umek (2011) describes the model of evaluation/self-evaluation in the preschool context, in general, by specifying three crucial dimensions of quality: the structural (objective measures), the indirect (oriented to a subjective scale) and the process (describe the prescribed and implemented curriculum) (*ibid.*, p. 80).

In the Montenegro preschool context, keeping in mind the aforementioned defining of the quality of this segment, the structural indicators are evaluated in relation to the projected normative standards, e.g. the number of children per age group, the number of teachers and employees in general, the physical and technical conditions of the educational units (Strategija ... 2016, p. 22). The “indirect” dimension is investigated through competencies, primarily of the teaching staff, which are built first through the process of initial education and then through continual professional development. The process dimension of the preschool environment quality is assessed from the perspective of preschool and school supervision conducted by the Bureau for Education Services, as well as through internal evaluations and research projects.

The process of quality assurance is determined by the *General Law on Education* (Opšti zakon ... 2012, Article 17)⁷ and the *Regulation on Contents, Forms and Methods of Quality Assessment of Education in Institutions* (Pravilnik o sadržaju ... 2012, hereafter the *Regulation*). The *Regulation* (Pravilnik o sadržaju ... 2012) completely covers academic issues and confirms that a systematic focus in the preschool context is still missing.

In order to assess the quality of the educational process in the preschools and schools in the educational system of Montenegro, appropriate instruments for external and internal evaluation of these institutions are developed (Opšti zakon ... 2012, Art. 3, Art. 4, Art. 5). The Methodology for the External Evaluation of Educational Institutions (Metodologija ... 2010, hereafter the *Methodology*)⁸ is de-

⁷ Quality assessment of educational work performed by institutions (self-evaluation) is conducted each year in certain areas, and every two years as a whole process. Quality assessment of educational work of institutions is carried out at least once in four years, by the Centre for Vocational Education and the Bureau for Education Services (evaluation) (*ibid.*).

⁸ The publication about the methodology was built on the experience of the school supervisors with the intention of establishing clear and measurable quality standards (Naša škola 2010, p. 3).

veloped by experts from the Bureau for Education Services (hereafter the Bureau) and mainly corresponds to school conditions, although it is also applied to preschool institutions. The Methodology (2010) covers seven areas: (1) the quality of the institution's management and leadership, (2) the personnel, material, technical and security requirements of an institution (3) the ethos of the institutions, (4) the support that the institution provides for its students, (5) the institutional cooperation with the parents, other institutions and local environment, (6) the teaching and learning and (7) the students' achievements. The indicators in the given areas are the main determinants of quality and their value is determined by the so-called weight coefficients (from 1 to 10). The final score is given on a four-level scale (from unsatisfactory to very successful). For the preschool sector, some of the indicators are modified and/or added—for example, one indicator for the seventh area reads “the development of children and children's creativity” (ibid., p. 11). In the publication *How Good is Our School – Guidelines for School Self-Evaluation* (Kakva je naša škola ... 2012), which is created by experts from the Bureau, the same areas are marked, along with 108 possible documentation and evidence records that may be relevant sources for the analysis and self-evaluation of educational institutions, but there are no specificities related to kindergarten. This publication offers some tools for school and preschool teachers: questionnaires for each learning area, self-evaluation forms for institutions and action plans for the further development of educational institutions.⁹

The web page of the Bureau provides supervision reports on the quality of educational work in seven preschool institutions in Montenegro for the 2016/17 school year, with another two most recent reports for the 2017/18 school year (Izvještaj ... 2017). Reports that determine the quality of educational work are created by supervisors who monitor and evaluate the performance in preschool institutions every four years, in accordance with the above-mentioned Methodology (Metodologija ... 2010).¹⁰ The annual planning, the functioning of professional bodies, the internal evaluation, the realisation of the plan for quality improvement, the pedagogical and instructional work of the school director and his/her associates, the work of the School Board, the development programme and the management of educational records and documents are all assessed within the area that refers to the quality of management and leadership. Within the area of *ethos*, several indicators are highlighted: the promotion and role in community, the interpersonal relationships, the aesthetic arrangement of space, the interpersonal relations of teachers and children, the adherence to the house rules/policies and the effects of

⁹ According to the Regulations (2012), the internal quality assessment of educational work in an institution (self-evaluation) is performed by professional and other bodies in the institution in accordance with the statute and the annual work plan. The institution prepares a report on its internal quality assessment once every two years and submits it to the Bureau for Education Services. The institution identifies and decides on the priority areas for its self-evaluation, as defined in the Guidelines for Self-Evaluation of Schools (Odsjek za obezbjeđenje kvaliteta 2015, p. 20).

¹⁰ The Bureau for Education Services (BES), Department for Quality Assessment, initiates the process of regular institutional quality assessment, according to the annual plan, at least once every four years. Extraordinary assessment is performed upon the request of the Parents' Council or the Ministry of Education (Odsjek za obezbjeđenje kvaliteta 2015, p. 7).

incentive measures (Izveštaj ... 2017, p. 4). Preschool teachers and parents respond to survey questions and the report contains the supervising team's conclusions about the atmosphere in the focused environment (which is rather short and provides no significant qualitative information). The third area refers to the assessment of professional competencies and the professional development of the staff, to the spatial and technical conditions, computer equipment and teaching aids and materials (ibid., p. 3). The support that the institution provides to children is the next area of evaluation on a four-point-scale, from 'not satisfactory' to 'very successful.' Cooperation with the parents, the other institutions and the local community comprises the activities of the Parents' Council and those of cooperation with other institutions, local community (4) and parents (5). The sixth area in the Methodology (Metodologija...2010) relates to educational work. This area is structured appropriately for the preschool context and includes the organisation of activities, the achievement of activity objectives, the working conditions that may be affected by a preschool teacher, the preparations and planning of activities, the use of teaching aids and materials, the specialised programmes, the work of professional assets, the activities outside the kindergarten and the works of children (Izveštaj ... 2017, p. 9). The seventh area refers to the development of the children and their creativity. The supervisors assess these indicators by choosing one of the four options on the assessment scale (from 'very successfully' to 'not satisfactory') and provide brief explanatory arguments for the options selected,¹¹ making final recommendations in the end (ibid., p. 10). In the sections that depict the level of performance for these two indicators, the supervisors argue for their evaluation findings by referring to the work plans, photo-documentation, educational records, the children's folders that contain the results of art and music competitions, trade fairs, and so on (ibid., p. 13). The internal evaluation in the kindergarten is performed according to the Regulation (Pravilnik ... 2012) and the recommended Guidelines (Uputstvo 2012...) for the school self-evaluation (Kakva je naša škola ... 2012). It is projected by the institutional annual plan (and adjusted to kindergarten purposes).¹² At the end of a two-year period, the institution submits the report to the Bureau for Education Services (Pravilnik o sadržaju ... 2012). Finally, the preschool teachers themselves, in their feedback on the implemented topics (a kind of self-evaluation) and the evaluation of quality, record the children's achievements in relation to the projected programme objectives, as well as the parallel, supporting activities that naturally affect the quality of the educational process. Thereby, it can be determined:

¹¹ For example: the most visible progress in the socialisation skills, the cultural and hygiene habits and the self-help skills of the children (i.e. in partial independence from parents and teachers). "Since there is no information about children development monitoring conducted by specialists (external associates) and nurses, the supervisors' assessment is mainly descriptive" (Izveštaj ... 2017, p. 8).

¹² The *Guidance for School Self-Evaluation*, published in the brochure *How Good is Our School* (Kakva je naša škola ... 2012), contains instruments for self-evaluation conducted in accordance with the Methodology and a choice of quality indicators. These indicators are more particular thematic units given within the areas that specify the subject of monitoring in more detail (ibid., p. 13). For preschools, there are no separate guidelines but the preschool teachers adapt the existing ones.

- to what extent the programme goals and specific individual objectives are achieved;
- which aspects and areas show progress;
- whether new ideas, interests and unplanned events are encountered;
- whether various forms of work and methodical strategies are represented;
- what the role of parents and other adults/participants is;
- additional observations and comments (Leipzig and Lesh in Novović et al. 2015, p. 72).

Through the continuous monitoring and evaluation of educational work, through the use of different instruments (questionnaires for parents,¹³ checklists, different types of narrative and anecdotal notes, observation protocols, process videos, etc.), as well as through the completion of the pedagogical documentation and working logs, the preschool teachers have the opportunity to explore and reflect on their own practice and to improve their plans and teaching methods.

A brief review of the research on the quality of the preschool process in Montenegro

Within the project entitled *Effects of the Reform Changes on the Preschool Education Context in Montenegro*, a broad survey was conducted in 2012 and 2013 for the purpose of viewing and analysing the quality of education in the Montenegrin preschool institutions. The survey was a result of the cooperation between the University of Montenegro and the Ministry of Education of Montenegro. A number of instruments were applied, including the International Step by Step Association scale¹⁴ (Tankersley et al. 2002). This scale is particularly focused on the area of planning in preschool institutions. Through the observation of activities (99 educational groups and 198 preschool teachers) and a review of documentation (Table 1), empirical evidence is obtained regarding the manner and the specificities of the educational work planning in the current preschool practice, which implies various structural and procedural aspects of the curriculum currently in use (Mićanović and Novović 2015, p. 905). The researchers—a team of teachers from the University of Montenegro—were also the observers. The sample included respondents from all the three regions of Montenegro—central, northern and coastal (ibid., p. 905).

¹³ The preschool teachers choose the instruments by themselves and create new ones for their needs.

¹⁴ “ISSA - pedagogical standards” for quality teaching practice are developed as an extra tool that can help in the professional development of practitioners, providing examples of different practice levels—from one that is not child-directed to one that exemplifies high quality teaching that is focused on the child (Tankersley et al. 2012, p. 5).

INDICATORS OF PLANNING	PLANNING				
	Inadequate	Good Start	Quality practice	A step further	TOTAL
Preschool teacher					
uses systematic observation and other diverse, developmentally appropriate formative assessment tools that reflect the learning and development process and outcomes	7 7,1%	29 29,3%	52 52,5%	11 11,1%	99 100%
ensures that the assessment process is based on the strengths of a child and its individual needs and interests	8 8,1%	24 24,2%	56 56,6%	11 11,1%	99 100%
plans activities that are developmentally appropriate and based on the children`s interests	8 8,1%	28 28,3%	55 55,6%	8 8,1%	99 100%
creates a balance between the planned activities and the children-initiated activities, and finds different ways to support the children`s individual learning styles and pace	8 8,2%	32 32,7%	53 54,1%	5 5,1%	98 100%
makes a balance between self-directed learning, learning in small groups and learning in large groups when planning activities	8 8,2%	37 37,8%	47 48%	6 6,1%	98 100%
plans enough diverse activities to provide new challenges for the children and to keep them involved	6 6,1%	28 28,3%	57 57,6%	8 8,1%	99 100%
plans and implements activities that are flexible enough to take into account the changing circumstances, needs and interests of the children	8 8,1%	24 24,2%	58 58,6%	9 9,1%	99 100%
helps the children become skilled at self-assessment and decision-making about their own learning and behaviour based on clear and consistent criteria	14 14,4%	31 32,0%	48 49,5%	4 4,1%	97 100%
advises the children on how to evaluate the behaviour and performance of others	14 14,1%	39 39,4%	43 43,4%	3 3,0%	99 100%
shares information with family members regarding the children`s progress and interests and together with them creates short-term and long-term goals for their children	8 8,1%	50 50,5%	37 37,4%	4 4,0%	99 100%
involves relevant experts in the process of monitoring, assessment and planning whenever necessary	7 7,3%	45 46,9%	40 41,7%	4 4,2%	96 100%
summary results for the representation of all the indicators of planning	96 8,87%	367 33,91%	546 50,46%	73 6,74%	1082 100%

Table 1: The results of observation of the quality of planning in pre-school groups (Mićanović and Novović 2015, p. 905)

Most of the indicators (nine of 11) are found in the category of *quality practice*, while only two cases are in the category of *good start*. The largest cumulative number of indicators on research units is in the category of *quality practice* (50.46%). The resulting research image about the methods and effects of planning and curriculum development in the context of Montenegrin preschool education shows that the preschool teachers use systematic observation and other formative tools for a comprehensive assessment of the children`s needs. They functionally combine the programme objectives with the contextual requirements, the demands of the children and adults and they individualise the activities by taking into account

the balance between the different work types and difficulty levels, as well as the situational circumstances and the children's needs and interests. However, in a significant percentage (33.91%) of educational groups only some elements of the child-oriented approach are found—they are missing flexibility, comprehensiveness and individualised planning. In the planning process, the preschool teachers in these groups remain at the level of the framework and the typical, generally accepted model. Topics are taken over unimaginatively and developed deductively (as was the practice before!), without the authentic, contextually adapted participatory contribution towards child-oriented practice, process and context (Mićanović and Novović 2015, p. 907). The outlined challenges certainly influence the process' dimensions of quality preschool context in Montenegro.

Conclusion

In the educational milieu of Montenegro, the education programme concept is based on the humanistic, socio-constructivist and holistic paradigm, but in the practical-performative dimension it receives a somewhat different structural interpretation. The reasons for that can be found in the above-mentioned practical challenges, both the visible and the hidden ones, in the conditioning by experiential heritage, the preschool teachers' competencies and implicit views, as well as in the systemic attitude of the community towards this segment. In the preschool context, the teaching staff is still lacking the research-mindedness skills, so that the current practice still has an abundance of monotonous solutions regarding the selection of topics and its routines and daily rituals are predictable and uniformly distributed, with occasional involvement of parents who are more 'on the doorstep' than in the process itself. The age segregation of the programme objectives collides with the idea of naturally organised heterogeneous groups, in which the social interaction is the most meaningful way of learning. In the present circumstances, a certain inconsistency between the paradigmatic pedagogical concept and its practical application is reflected in the previously marked contradictions, at two levels. On a wider contextual plan, a systematic indolence can be recognised when it comes to determining more appropriate mechanisms for the assessment of quality in the preschool segment—i.e. the rather vague adaptation of school evaluation protocols for their use in preschool education, the lack of infrastructure, the lack of space and staff (more in Novović 2017). There also exists a conflict between the prescribed and the process, as well as contradictions in the educational-political actions in terms of respecting the main curriculum principles. On the internal, contextual level, the indicators of the social segregation of children and adults (especially parents) is 'read', as well as the implicit distinction between play and learning, the preference for external control of the children's behaviour, the inadequate involvement of participants from the preschool institutions and of all external, direct and indirect, participants (especially parents), the incongruence of the main pedagogical goals and documentation and the evidence that goes along with planning (Mićanović and Novović 2015).

Finally, looking at the actual programme in the Montenegrin preschool system, as well as at the mechanisms for its quality assessment, it may be noted that there is a lack of structured methodologies for monitoring and improving this sector. In view of the eminent paradigmatic references, it would be advisable to constitute the mechanisms for quality monitoring that focus on the nature of the preschool context and that respect the continuity between the major components of this process: the strategic and legal regulations, the programmes, the initial education and training of the staff, but also to “listen”, to carefully observe and monitor the children and to respect the parents and culture instead of examining the separate segments and the “schoolish” quality indicators.

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