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Concern for the effectiveness of preschool education or “soft engineering” of the workforce of the future?¹

Abstract: The authors highlight that – together with the international studies which assess children’s and adolescents’ knowledge and skills – policies and ideas in the field of preschool education are increasingly focusing on the effectiveness and “profitability” that preschool education has for the development of “human capital” and the labour market. Thus, preschool education has been foregrounding the development of cognitive, social and emotional skills, which are the bases for children’s subsequent school and labour market achievements. The authors present the findings of some of the authors who examine the issues in Nordic countries. These authors emphasize that preschool educational processes give particular importance to preparing children for school, which jeopardizes scholarizing them. Moreover, preschool educational practice focuses primarily on children’s learning outcomes, especially on the development of the skills that might be useful later in their lives – when they attend school or when they are employed. In the second part of the article the authors analyse the other articles from this issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies*, whose authors from the region of former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia) write about the curricular and systemic solutions of preschool education quality assessment and assurance at the process level.

Keywords: effectiveness, process quality, children’s achievements, learning outcomes, scholarization of preschools, Baby Pisa

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Introduction

Assuring quality in education at the systemic level has been a central topic on the global education agenda since the late 1980s (OZN 2015). Messages about the importance of education for a well-regulated and successful economy (UN 2002) and as a means of enabling countries to successfully face challenges in global markets (UNESCO 2002) have also been almost constantly at the forefront of discussion. In the policies of EU countries, systemic quality assurance, which primarily related to schools, initially focused only marginally on the area of preschool education. This focus later become increasingly explicit and direct, with the result that today systemic solutions for assuring and increasing the quality of preschool education (European Commission 2015, p. 10) are to a significant extent established in relation to the effectiveness of that education, which is reflected in children's learning outcomes² as they

² Learning outcomes are usually defined as statements of what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand at the end of a learning sequence. The term is used in the context of education programmes, learning and teaching, and the goals or standards of knowledge that learners are expected to attain, as assessed by means of grades or in some other way. Criteria are also formulated to assess learning outcomes in external or international tests and surveys. Under the current preschool curriculum, on the other hand, there is no normative definition of the standards of knowledge that kindergarten children are supposed to achieve. Children in kindergartens are not "taught" in the way they are at school. The term "learning outcomes" is also used for the concept of lifelong learning, which is based on the assumption that it is not important how an individual achieves expected learning outcomes, but rather how he or she is able to demonstrate them (and adequately measure them), in other words in the context of outcomes in various areas of life (Štefanc 2011, p. 11). Another term used is "learning achievements", for which it is possible to design descriptive standards, where the descriptor for the lowest number of points or the lowest passing mark represents the minimum standard (Ilc Rutar 2012, p. 17). Descriptors or descriptive standards can thus be used to define the quality of the demonstration of a specific aspect of knowledge or skill at individual levels (from the optimum standard to the minimum standard) (Ilc Rutar 2012a, p. 113). For kindergartens, this would mean that in order to monitor the quality of children's (learning) achievements, teachers would require defined standards for an individual area of children's development and learning, with the help of which they would be able to monitor the achievements of an individual child. Hassan Mas'ud Dahar (in Winarso 2016, p. 21) defines a learning achievement as "what has to be created; the results of a job . . . obtained with tenacity." Slameto (ibid.) emphasises that learning is a process in which an individual attempts to change their behaviour in interaction with their environment, while a learning achievement is the actual change that takes place in the individual in this process. Nur Kencana (ibid.) defines a learning achievement as the results achieved by an individual child as the consequence of the changes that have occurred in the individual as the result of learning. "Learning achievements" are

continue their education, and with regard to life outcomes in adulthood (cf. Guerin 2013).

Policymakers appear to accept that countries are increasingly competing “on the basis of their talent and human capital” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012, p. 31). On the one hand they see preschool education as an opportunity to reduce those differences between children that are the consequence of them living in different environments, and to achieve higher levels of formal education in children from disadvantaged environments, while on the other they understand preschool education as a factor that offers increased opportunities to reduce deficits and strengthen the economy (Heckman 2012, p. 1). Investing in preschool education is therefore understood as an investment in people “as early in life as possible” (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012, p. 31), that brings the “highest return on investment for individuals, particularly the most disadvantaged, throughout the entire process of lifelong learning” (Heckman 2012, p. 1; cf. also Guerin 2013, p. 6; Barnett and Nores 2015, pp. 75–76).³ It also generates “the highest medium and long-term returns for public budgets” (Education and Culture DG 2008, p. 1).⁴

This is the basis on which EU member states adopt systemic preschool education solutions that represent “value for money” from the economic point of view (OECD 2012, p. 1; cf. also OECD 2013, European Commission 2015). This means that they must be comparably effective both with regard to the time that children spend in preschool education and with regard to their later learning outcomes at school, particularly in external testing and comparative international assessments of knowledge (e.g. TIMSS, PISA, PIRLS) (cf. OECD 1999, European Commission 2015, Ministry of Education 2017, p. 8; OECD 2017, p. 10; Skopek et al. 2017, pp. 299–300). As the economists Yusuf Emre Akgunduz and Thomas van Huizen (2016) have pointed out, these results tell us a great deal about the “long-term results of investment in human capital . . . and individuals’ labour market outcomes” (ibid., p. 1). They also show what learning outcomes and other long-term life outcomes for students can be “fostered” by investment in preschool education at the national level (ibid., p. 2).

therefore “visible” in the behaviour of an individual child, in the development of the abilities and various skills that are the result or outcome of children’s learning. In view of these definitions – particularly that of “learning achievements” – the question this raises itself of what teachers in kindergartens in Slovenia will be monitoring when, as part of the quality assurance process at the systemic level they, monitor children’s achievements in the area of learning and teaching (more on this in the article by Kovač Šebart and Hočevar in this issue of *Sodobna pedagogika*).

³ For children from marginal groups, attending a kindergarten enables a “better entry to life” – above all as regards preparation of the school and success in later education, since a larger proportion of those who attend kindergarten reach the tertiary level of education than those who do not (Guerin 2013, p. 17; Heckman 2012, p. 25), while their future productivity is also better (Barnett and Nores 2015, p. 76).

⁴ Investment in [preschool education] has significant implications for future government budgets, both at the national and the state and local levels. Higher tax revenues also flow into government coffers because of increasing taxes paid by participating children and their parents (Lynch and Vaghul 2015, p. 9).

Results of empirical studies justifying investment in “human capital“

In the context of the view of the effectiveness of preschool education presented here, it is no surprise to learn that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has recently published a call for tenders for an *International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS)* (OECD 2018).⁵ The *IELS* recognises that the first five years of children’s lives are crucial to their development.⁶ During this period, children learn at a faster rate than at any other time in their lives, developing basic cognitive and socio-emotional skills⁷ that are fundamental for their future achievements in school and later on as adults. These skills also affect how individuals cope with future successes and setbacks, professionally and in their personal lives (OECD 2017, p. 6).

For this reason, the *IELS* will look at the early learning outcomes and development of children enrolled in preschool education programmes across a wide scope of domains, including cognitive, social and emotional skills (ibid., p. 14). Children will be assessed in the early learning domains of emergent literacy,⁸ emergent numeracy,⁹ self-regulation¹⁰ or self-awareness with an emphasis on locus of control,¹¹ executive function¹²

⁵ Some authors (e.g. Goddard 2017; Ochshorn 2017) and organisations (e.g. ACEI; UCL) refer to the study as “Baby Pisa” for short.

⁶ The *IELS* will sample at least 3,000 children aged between 5 and 5.5 years in at least 200 settings per country and with up to 15 children per setting. The children will carry out for 15-minute one-to-one assessments over two days (Goddard 2017). The study will begin in autumn 2018 and its results are expected to be presented in 2019 (OECD 2018).

⁷ The OECD documents and other documents covered in this text refer frequently to “skills”, “abilities” and “capabilities”. An individual acquires skills in the course of the learning process. Skills also include knowledge of whatever the subject of the skill is. Abilities and capabilities, meanwhile, are defined as the set of individual characteristics that potentially enable an individual to be successful in a given activity without previous exercise. The sources we quote also frequently refer to “knowledge and skills” together, in this way highlighting knowledge that is not only connected to a concrete skill and that is incorporated in the latter.

⁸ Emergent literacy refers to children’s knowledge of print, letters and sounds, which will help them to learn to decode and read for meaning, building upon oral language skills (OECD 2015, p. 19).

⁹ Numeracy is the ability to reason and apply simple numerical concepts. It comprises the ability to identify and understand numbers as well as computational skills, i.e. the ability to count and to perform simple arithmetical operations such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and compare numerical magnitudes (ibid.).

¹⁰ Self-regulation generally encompasses self-control, grit, self-management and conscientiousness. These abilities enable children to persist in achieving goals and to regulate their behaviour. The latter manifests through inhibiting impulsive behaviours and delaying gratification (Mischel et al. 1989, as quoted in ibid, p. 19). As well as achieving tasks, children with such abilities are more able to operate effectively in groups than children with poor behaviour regulation (OECD 2015, p.19).

¹¹ Self-awareness refers to children’s own beliefs about whether they possess the ability to complete tasks, and encompasses aspects such as self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy and locus of control (John and De Fruyt 2015, quoted in ibid., p. 20).

¹² Executive function focuses on the ability of children to regulate attention, including controlling reactions to new stimuli. The capacity to regulate attention is understood as a developmental precursor for the broader domain of self-regulation (Barkley 1997 quoted in ibid., p. 20). Executive function additionally provides information on working memory and planning, which are also associated with later academic development (OECD 2015, p. 20).

and social skills.¹³ These domains are recognised¹⁴ as predictors of later academic and other life outcomes. The *IELS* will encompass the collection of “robust empirical information and in-depth insights on children’s learning development at a critical age” (OECD 2017, p. 14). The study will also give policymakers insight into what preschool education practices equip children with the skills they will need in the labour market and in life (Williamson 2018, p. 4). This will establish a basis for directing educational practice in preschool education towards the development of “suitable” i.e. effective skills. Frank Furedi (2016) calls this “soft social engineering” that is devoted to “altering the behaviour of schoolchildren” (ibid., p. 149) in order to “help them deal with a complex, changing environment” (ibid., p. 145), in which it is not “what people know” that is important (in the sense of knowledge as a value in itself), but the possession of the mental capacity to “adapt and respond to new circumstances” (ibid., p. 49).

The aim of the study becomes understandable if we compare it to two other OECD studies that include studying the knowledge and skills of children or adolescents. In 2015 the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* (OECD 2018a) assessed and measured three sets of skills – problem-solving, cooperation and social skills – for the first time (alongside knowledge of biology, geography, physics, chemistry and mathematics) (Williamson 2018). Cooperative skills (cf. footnotes 10 and 13) and social skills (cf. footnote 13) will also be measured and assessed by the *IELS*. A new international study, the *Study on Social and Emotional Skills or SSES* (OECD 2018b),¹⁵ set to begin in autumn 2018, with the first results due in 2020 (OECD 2017, p. 9), will, says the OECD (2017), facilitate understanding of the dynamics of development of social and emotional skills and their impact on socio-economic outcomes in the lives of individuals.¹⁶ This study, like the *IELS*, will measure and assess skills such as cooperation, self-regulation and self-management

¹³ Social skills include prosocial behaviour, agreeableness, sociability and empathy. Social skills are those skills involved in interacting with others and maintaining positive relationships with others. In particular, collaboration requires the ability to take the perspective of another, to demonstrate prosocial behaviour (i.e. showing kindness, sharing, cooperation, and respect for others), agreeableness and empathy (ibid.).

¹⁴ The domains adopted for this study were proposed by the UCL Institute of Education. Children’s abilities and skills in these domains will be measured/assessed using indirect and direct assessment methods. Children’s emergent literacy, emergent numeracy, self-regulation and empathy will be assessed directly, with children using tablets to complete tasks based on simple and fun stories and games. Children’s cognitive and socio-emotional and social skills will be assessed indirectly by teachers and parents through questionnaires (OECD 2017, p. 17).

¹⁵ The study will take a single snapshot of two cohorts of primary and secondary school students, at ages 10 and 15. The OECD aims to use the study to build on the findings of PISA.

¹⁶ The SSES will study the “Big Five” domains: openness to experience (open-mindedness), conscientiousness (task performance), emotional stability (emotional regulation), extroversion (engaging with others) agreeableness (collaboration). Each of the categories encompasses a cluster of mutually related social and emotional skills. For example, task performance includes achievement orientation, reliability, self-control and persistence. Emotional regulation includes resistance to stress, optimism and controller feelings. Collaboration also includes empathy and trust. Open-mindedness includes curiosity, tolerance and creativity. Engaging with others includes sociability, assertiveness and energy. The study will also measure and assess compound skills such as critical thinking, metacognition and self-efficacy.

(cf. footnotes 10–13). The authors believe that these skills are significantly linked to academic and other social outcomes. Among other things, they affect individuals' entry to and participation in the labour market and the general quality of their lives (ibid.).¹⁷ These skills are also considered a “major driving force of growth through their effect on labour productivity” (OECD 2013a). They are essential for young people to enter the labour market, access good-quality jobs and embark on successful careers. They are also crucial for adults “to keep abreast of technological developments and maintain their employability in a rapidly changing and inter-dependent world” (ibid.).

The three studies – *PISA* (OECD 2018a), *SSES* (OECD 2018b) and *IELS* (OECD 2018) – will thus look at learning outcomes and the noncognitive aspects of learning. The results of the studies will therefore enable a comparison of the knowledge, personality characteristics and skills of children and adolescents that affect the lifelong learning and life outcomes of adults at the global level, above all in the labour market (OECD 2017, p. 9). On this basis, countries will be able to formulate reflections on educational practices that will produce resourceful individuals capable of working well with others and taking personal and collective responsibility for the life of society (OECD 2017a, p. 1). These reflections are therefore consistent with the aims of social development policymakers at the level of the OECD, which recommends “investing in people and places, supporting business dynamism, and creating more inclusive labour markets” and in this way laying “foundations for more sustainable growth” and productivity (OECD 2018c, p. 1). They are also in line with the aims of the European Commission (2010), which wishes to increase the effectiveness of member states' education systems and make it easier for young people to enter the labour market and “ensure smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” (ibid., p. 5).

With the design of the *IELS*, the OECD is following the objectives it set itself in 2012, namely to collect information on early learning in individual countries that will enable an improvement in preschool education programmes and lead to better performance at the global level (OECD 2012, p. 7; OECD 2017, p. 6); in time, this information will enable a comparison between early learning outcomes “and those at age 15, as measured by *PISA*”¹⁸ and their interpretation “in the light of information from the *IELS*” (OECD 2015, p. 103; cf. also OECD 2015, p. 55). Countries included in the study will have “earlier and more specific indications” that will enable reflection on “how to lift the skills and capabilities of their young people” (OECD 2017, p. 14).

It should be emphasised here that the *IELS* will measure personality characteristics and skills that are important indicators of children's later academic and

¹⁷ More on this in OECD 2014, OECD 2015a and OECD 2017a.

¹⁸ When reflecting on “Baby PISA” and linking the findings, we should not overlook the fact, underlined by the OECD (1999), that PISA measures the “the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society and the successful participation of the individual in the labour market” (ibid., p.-c0) 7).

other life achievements.¹⁹ A problem pointed out in this connection by some authors (cf. Blossfeld et al. 2017) is that a situation is being established in which the focus of education becomes the formation of individuals who are adapted in terms of personality and skills to the dominant social conditions, which above all encourages the development of abilities and skills that are geared towards the labour market (cf. Krnjaja and Pavlović Breneselović 2017).

The devisers of the *IELS* underline the fact that countries will also be able to exchange “best practices” in preschool education, while the collected data will show “what systemic solutions are most effective in preschool education, in what areas and for what groups of children” (OECD 2018, Goddard 2018). This will facilitate insight into what preschool education can achieve at the level of children’s learning outcomes and what factors are connected with these results (OECD 2015, p. 103). It will also be possible to seek, on this basis, answers to the question of “how to improve the effectiveness, equity and efficiency [in terms of use of resources invested] of . . . preschool education systems” (OECD 2015, p. 96). Studying the results of all three studies mentioned will serve as a basis for connecting findings on children’s performance across the entire education vertical, enabling comparisons of data (Williamson 2017, pp. 4–5) and an assessment of how successful investment in people is (has been) at an individual level of education (OECD 2009, p. 2), in other words how much “added value” this investment has brought as regards human capital.

The OECD website states that “the Study is not an assessment of school readiness” and that “the Study is focused on children’s longer-term outcomes in a wide scope of life domains” (OECD 2018). At the same time, however, the devisers of the study emphasise that “the information from this study will also assist decision-makers to better understand the further contribution that their preschool education systems can make for improving children’s learning, in relation to the possible further contribution that early primary schooling can make” (OECD 2015, p. 103). In the United States of America, for example, participation in the *IELS* is justified with the argument that it “helps countries to better understand how their preschool education systems prepare children for primary school”²⁰ (National

¹⁹ Among other things it will measure self-management, conscientiousness, persistence in achieving goals and the ability to regulate attention (OECD 2017, str. 14). The devisers of the SSES emphasise that it will also provide decision-makers with insight into what preschool education practices equip children with the skills that they will need in the labour market and in life. The SSES will also measure those personality characteristics and abilities that, according to the devisers of the study, are significantly connected to academic progress and also affect a range of social outcomes, including individuals’ inclusion and participation in the labour market and the general quality of their lives.

²⁰ More telling than the reference to gaining better insight into the preparation of children for school in an individual country (which taken out of context does not necessarily refer to the focus of the educational process on the child’s “academic readiness”), is the selection of countries that will take part in the *IELS*. These are: England, the United States of America (USA) and Estonia (Roberts 2018). The first two of these countries have a separate system of kindergartens. In England, children under the age of three attend day nurseries with a focus on childcare, attend playgroups or are looked

Center for Education Statistics,²¹ year unknown). Since the effectiveness of preschool education is at the same time measured by learning outcomes that include the knowledge and, above all, the skills that children need in their further schooling and (professional) life, some authors (Otterstad and Braathe 2016; Paananen et al. 2015; Paananen 2017; Vallberg Roth 2014) warn that highlighting these dimensions leads to a “schoolification” of preschool education; kindergarten classes are formed through “homogeneous grouping by age” (Otterstad and Braathe 2016, p. 3027), attention is focused on “academic” contents (Paananen 2017; Otterstad and Braathe 2016, p. 3028);²² didactic approaches are adopted “in which active teaching by the

after at home or by members of their extended family. All three- and four-year olds are entitled to 570 hours of free preschool education annually, in kindergartens “where the emphasis is on learning and preparing children for school” (Bela knjiga ... 2011, p. 78). In the foreground here are the cognitive aspects of the child’s development and learning, which ready children for school and prepare them for more formal learning (Wall et al. 2015, p. 7; Whitebread et al. 2017). In most cases children attend kindergarten for 15 hours a week over a period of 38 weeks. Two-year-old children from disadvantaged families have the same entitlement. Most children are admitted to the reception class of a primary school in the September after their fourth birthday (Eurydice 2017). In the USA, the solutions adopted for children under three are similar to those in England. After their third birthday children can enrol in a public preschool (pre-kindergarten) programme. At the age of five they enrol in a kindergarten for a year in preparation for compulsory primary school (kindergarten is the first year of formal schooling in the USA) (OECD 2006). Estonia has two parallel systems of pre-school education – crèches/day care facilities (for children up to the age of three) and combined day care/kindergartens (for children from birth up to the age of seven). Parents of children under the age of three can choose which type of facility to enrol their children in, while for children over the age of three a kindergarten is the only option. Before starting school, a child’s readiness for school is assessed by the kindergarten, which then issues a school readiness card (Republic of Estonia 2014). Assessment of readiness for school can involve asking the child to read a short text, to write something, to perform a mental calculation and to answer a teacher’s questions (Kingisepp and Luure 2010, p. 17). Parents submit the child’s school readiness card to the school where the child is to be enrolled in compulsory education (Republic of Estonia 2014). As can be understood from this brief presentation of the organisation of preschool education systems in the countries that will be included first in the *IELS*, the study will focus on children attending preparation for school programmes (England and the USA) or in which the preparation of children for school is in the foreground (Estonia). As we have shown, the purpose of the *IELS* is to show countries what the most effective preschool education practices are; it appears from the first set of countries to be included in the study, however, that the solutions that will be studied are those of preparation for school programmes that are primarily connected to “mastering academic skills” (Bela knjiga ... 2011, p. 84). In the PISA 2015 survey, for example, Estonian 15-year-olds were among the best in the world in biology, geography, physics and chemistry – first in Europe and third on the global scale. In mathematics they were second in Europe and ninth in the world. The USA has poorer results in all areas, but is nevertheless above the OECD average, while data are not available for England because they are included in data for the United Kingdom (Estonian World 2018).

²¹ The National Center for Education Statistics is part of the US Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences.

²² Authors warn that practices that we find in schools are being established in kindergartens (cf. Gaunt 2017). That preparation for school is objectively and, notwithstanding other possible concepts, increasingly understood as a focus of a kindergarten on “the child’s academic readiness . . . for school” (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2006, p. 33). Although we do not overlook the importance that kindergartens have in preparation for school – since objectively speaking a school cannot fully “adapt to each individual child and his or her individual particularities, but builds on a certain level of adaptation of the individual (from the point of view of physical, cognitive and social development) to the requirements of curricula or the school, which at the initial level is involved above all in the development of academic skills” (ibid.) – we nevertheless reject the understanding of preparation for school that is implied in the context described earlier. More acceptable than this is the concept of a child’s readiness for learning,

teacher takes the central role” (ibid., p. 3028; cf. also Vallberg Roth 2014), and decision-makers call for “more distinct learning goals, preparation for assessing/testing all children from 3 years of age” (ibid., p. 3029).

Rianne Mahon (2016) states that “preparation for school” is the primary interest of the OECD and of the proposed study, which serves to “foster the development of human capital as a basis for labour market success” (ibid., p. 239). Other critics (Moss et al. 2016, Pence 2017) also draw attention to the instrumental purpose of the study and point out that it neglects to take a holistic view of the child, since its devisers highlight above all the study of children’s learning outcomes.

The *IELS* will complete the circle: as far as policy is concerned, the focus will be on the justifiability of investment in preschool education and the “return” on this investment as regards the development of “human capital” or the labour market. The latter will also be measured at successive stages of education through the results obtained by children in international and external tests of their knowledge and skills in connection with length of time spent in preschool education and other life outcomes. At the same time the study will enable policymakers to assess the rationality of expenditure on preschool education. Demands to reduce preschool education expenditure in one country could be prompted by the finding, for example, that in other countries with lower preschool education expenditure children enrolled in preschool education programmes nevertheless develop those cognitive, social and emotional skills that are the basis for their later achievements in education and in adulthood and achieve comparable or better learning outcomes in international tests of knowledge and skills.

The IMF’s 2015 recommendation with regard to kindergartens in Slovenia, which suggests that the number of kindergarten teachers could be reduced without negatively affecting children’s learning outcomes, may be understood in this same context (International Monetary Fund 2015, p. 14).²³ This suggestion from the

which according to R. Watson (1996, as quoted in ibid., p. 32) means in each case a correspondence between a child’s cognitive abilities and the requirements of formal, intentional education and learning (cf. Marjanovič Umek et al. 2006, pp. 32–33). L. Marjanovič Umek (ibid.) emphasises that for the intentional education of preschool children it is important to be aware that a preschool child learns differently from a school-age child, and therefore advocates different activities and different methods and forms of educational work based on the zone of proximal development. These are adapted to the child himself or herself, while the teacher plans and implements the educational process in accordance with the social context and the child’s capabilities (in this context the author uses the expression “teaching”) (ibid.). Notwithstanding the clear warning not to equate teaching in schools with teaching in kindergartens, we will substitute the phrase “teaching in kindergartens” with the phrase “systematic learning by the child in a planned educational process”, which is tied to the gap between the child’s current knowledge or skills and his or her potential progress. No reflection on education in kindergartens can ignore the influence of the kindergarten on children’s later performance in schools, since the ability to access abstract knowledge is the basis of an individual’s autonomy. Naturally one cannot overlook the compensatory role of the kindergarten, particularly in the case of children from less supportive environments. This does not mean, however, that preschool education should be focused above all on learning outcomes at kindergarten, learning outcomes in later schooling and success in the labour market.

²³ We should point out, however, that Slovenia does not submit data on student–teacher ratios in kindergarten classes to international organisations (e.g. OECD, Eurydice) in such a way as to take into account the fact that the calculated averages apply to six hours of kindergarten for children in the first

IMF could easily become an argument for decision-makers who wish to reduce the financial impact of preschool education on the budget while not understanding or not caring that this could negatively affect the structural quality of preschool education and, consequently, the quality of the preschool education process. This is confirmed by the contents of the OECD's call for tenders regarding the *IELS*, where we read that studies of the relationship between structural factors of quality in preschool education and children's development do not conclusively demonstrate that such factors play a part in determining the quality and effectiveness of preschool education (and with them children's well-being) (ibid, p. 95). Which is only a step away from an interpretation suggesting that a state could design and maintain an effective system of preschool education that will contribute the desired added value to learning outcomes in tests of knowledge and (economic) success in life with less-qualified teachers, larger class sizes and a higher student-teacher ratio.

The presented scheme and, consequently, the practice of quality assurance in preschool education therefore result in expectations of the formation of individuals who will find their place in the labour market and adopt everything that the market brings with it (flexibility, competitiveness, etc.). The door is open to the "homogenisation . . . [and] effective management" of preschool education (Soler and Miller 2003, p. 60). Knowledge and skills (social, emotional, etc.) are listed here in the sense of their instrumental usefulness, utilitarian sense of a tool which the individual needs in the process of adaptation to the labour market.

Policies for assuring quality thus do not reflect (or are not interested in reflecting) the fact that the formative process and the effect of preschool education are different when the key goals are the holistic development of the child and the education of a subject capable of critical judgement and behaviour, where knowledge is reflected as something inherently valuable that does not always have direct useful value but is a condition for the individual's understanding of the world and a condition of his or her freedom and autonomy (cf. Egan 2009, Gauchet 2011, Kovač Šebart 2015, Furedi 2016). Freedom and autonomy are not given to the individual, they require an educational process in which the child gains increasing self-control and becomes a civilised being in a wide range of senses, from simple politeness to the most complex reflection. The goal of education and care in those preschool education institutions that set themselves the goal of optimal development and the formation of an autonomous individual would have to be, as Claudine Leleux (1997) points out, that the latter transcends his or her particularity and reaches a level of universality and a capacity for critical thinking that follows the general rules of argumentation and is expressly connected to understanding of abstraction and abstract value. This should also be the guiding principle when thinking about solutions that will lead to a high-quality system of education and care from the preschool level upwards.

age group and just four hours for children in the second age group, while children actually remain at kindergarten for on average nine or more hours a day. In the remaining hours there is only one adult in the class with all the children (of whom there can be up to 14 or up to 24, depending on the age group (Kovač Šebart et al. 2017, p. 97).

Return on investment, efficiency and rationality are becoming the guiding principle of preschool education policy

Warnings about the effects of policies that focus on the “return on investment” of preschool education for the development of “human capital” or the labour market are proffered by authors (Campbell-Barr and *Nygård* 2014; Vallberg Roth 2014; Paananen et al. 2015; Otterstad and Braathe 2016) who have analysed the situation in preschool education in Nordic countries²⁴ (which have a comparable system of preschool education to Slovenia’s). Concerning Norway, for example, Ann Merete Otterstad and Hans *Jørgen* Braathe (2016) say that it is possible to identify, in documents and preschool education policy but also in educational practice in preschool institutions, changes regarding understanding of the role of preschool education in society. Interviews conducted by the authors with teachers in two focus groups²⁵ confirmed the theses they had formulated on the basis of analysis of documents: they note that despite the social pedagogical starting points of the conception of preschool education that are traditional for Norway, the attention of teachers is in practice oriented (or re-oriented) towards economic standards and those indicators of preschool education quality that directly regard standards of knowledge and children’s learning outcomes. This can be seen from the reorganisation of space and time in preschool education institutions in a way that enables teachers to evaluate children’s learning outcomes and monitor the learning of an individual child. In Norwegian preschool education institutions, the authors observe, children’s readiness for school is moving into the foreground – in contrast to the past, when little attention was devoted to this aspect (*ibid.*, p. 82) – and thus increasing the danger of “schoolification” of preschool education (*ibid.*, pp. 93–94).

At this point we merely point out that attention was drawn to the problem of schoolification of preschool education in Slovenia in the *White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia* (Bela knjiga ... 1995). In the period before the formulation of conceptual solutions and the systemic solutions based on them (cf. *Zakon o organizaciji ... 1996*, *Zakon o vrtcih 1996*) and the creation of a *Preschool curriculum* (cf. *Kurikulum ... 1999*), the most important task of kindergartens in Slovenia was to prepare children for school (more on this in the article by Hočevar and Kovač Šebart in this issue of *Sodobna pedagogika*). The new concept of preschool education rejected such a central function for the kindergarten (cf. Kovač Šebart 2002). The devisers of the concept evaluated changes in curriculum planning and at the same time rejected the programme of preparation for school in the year before children are due to start compulsory education. They built on the hypothesis that “preparation for school must be incorporated into overall institutional preschool education, so preschool programmes should correspond to children’s stage of development and not merely be preparation for the next stage of schooling” (Bela knjiga ... 1995, p. 95). At the same time the solutions follow the argument that such a programme

²⁴ Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

²⁵ Two focus groups of preschool teachers were included in the study. One group consisted of six teachers from an urban environment and the other of 9 teachers from a rural environment (*ibid.*, p. 84).

is unnecessary if the school (educational programme, methods of work, organisation of life in the school) is adjusted to the child, in other words if it takes into account the age at which the child starts school (Marjanovič Umek 1992, p. 10). The systemic solutions for preschool education, conceived in parallel with solutions involving the earlier start of compulsory schooling at the age of six, saw the kindergarten as an institution that provides children with a suitable environment and conditions for a safe and healthy childhood and the optimal development of their physical and mental abilities, and contributes to raising children's quality of life and improving the quality of family life (Bela knjiga ... 1995, p. 43 and p. 37). The view was adopted that educational work in kindergartens should derive from the realisation that children comprehend and understand the world holistically, that they develop and learn in connection with their social and physical environment, that through interaction with their peers at kindergarten they develop their own sociability and individuality and encounter a world that is differently structured from the world of the family. An orientation towards the development of children's achieved and potential abilities and skills and the achievement of an optimal relationship between them became important (ibid, p. 51). This concept of preschool education, which is contained in the *Preschool curriculum* (Kurikulum za... 1999), is still formally followed today in Slovenia.

The ideals that are (were) the basis of preschool education are being supplanted by economic imperatives

Maiju Paananen et al. (2015), Verity Campbell-Barr and Mikael Nygård (2014) warn that in Finland the ideals that are the basis of preschool education are being supplanted by economic imperatives. Paananen (2017) carried out an analysis of international and Finnish national documents concerning preschool education and supplemented her analysis with an empirical study²⁶ at three kindergartens in one of the larger Finnish municipalities. She finds that measuring tools, which she calls "management tools", are already being used in individual local communities in order to assess the effectiveness of kindergartens on a monthly basis and reward teachers assessed as "effective", which has not been the practice in Finland before now (ibid., p. 59). As a result of this clear focus on children's learning outcomes and their future, everyday educational practice in kindergartens is changing, warns the author, since teachers are following demands to prepare children for school (ibid., p. 78).

The findings of the comparative analysis carried out by Ann-Christine Vallberg Roth (2014) also show that changes are observable in preschool education in all Nordic countries in the context of the knowledge economy.²⁷ The traditional conceptualisation of preschool education is being replaced by a primary

²⁶ She analysed 118 individual children's education plans and 13 teachers' diaries in which the daily educational process in the kindergarten was recorded, and interviewed 13 teachers (ibid., p. 35).

²⁷ In the globalised knowledge economy there is a sharper focus on efficiency and assessments which are increasingly being formalised including in preschool education (Vallberg Roth 2014, p. 2).

focus on children's learning outcomes (*ibid.*, p. 4). There is a clear trend or shift from an educational process focused on play, learning and care to one that is focused on learning and knowing, and to evaluation of the effects of preschool education that are connected to the idea of lifelong learning (*ibid.*, p. 5). preschool education should thus be primarily understood (in terms of both scope and quality) as a substantive basis for compulsory schooling and as a basis for "post-school" entry into working life; it should also be a basis that ensures that when children grow up, they constantly renew their knowledge and develop the skills they will need at work, wherever they are employed (industry, service organisations and activities, etc.) (Demirel 2009, p. 1712); this will make it easier for them to adapt to the demands of the world of business, in other words the world that brings profit (Otterstad and Braathe 2010, p. 3025).

In the Nordic countries, writes Vallberg Roth (2014), a tendency towards the introduction of contents that prepare children for school may be observed, where the emphasis is on stimulating their cognitive development and assessing their knowledge and skills with the help of predetermined and age-normed learning outcomes (*ibid.*, p. 25). While Norway, for example, carries out language screening of three-year-olds using standardised assessment criteria (*ibid.*, p. 23), Denmark is introducing testing and an orientation of the educational process towards the development of skills (such as key competences). The author (*ibid.*, p. 14) warns that monitoring the learning outcomes of an individual child leads to the schoolification of preschools, in which educational work and its content are structured in the same way as in schools, while preschool teachers, because they feel "learning pressure" (*ibid.*, p. 5) introduce a school-style method of work and teach the children in a context of individual subject areas. The contents they teach are adapted to what the children will need at school and in life, warns the author (*ibid.*, pp. 16–26). She adds that a model of preschool education is being established that places the learning outcomes of the child in individual subject areas (e.g. mathematics, language) in the foreground (*ibid.*, p. 4), and that narrowing the process of preschool education to teaching measurable knowledge and skills means neglecting the process of forming individuals who are capable of critical reflection (*ibid.*, p. 26). Analysis of changes in preschool education in Nordic countries, notes the author, shows that the concept of preschool education as an "investment in the future" is gaining ground – a concept in which "what is considered important is that children gain skills that will be useful later in life while they are at school or in the workplace" (*ibid.*, p. 23).

The target of the criticisms presented in the introduction regarding the focus on the effectiveness of preschool education is becoming clear: the stated aims of the policy resonate with the public and become the guiding principle for the funding of preschool education and when it comes to seeking systemic solutions – and perhaps also when it comes to rewarding "effective" preschools and preschool teachers, as Maiju Paananen (2017) warns in the case of Finland. All this has an enormous impact on educational practice in preschool education, which begins to focus on children's learning outcomes and preparing them for school.

Preschool education quality assurance policies in the countries of the former Yugoslavia

In this thematic issue of *Sodobna pedagogika*, authors from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia and Serbia analyse systemic solutions for assuring quality in preschool education at the process level in the states of the former Yugoslavia.

We agreed that the analysis for each individual state should include a presentation of the preschool education curriculum or programmes, which in most cases appears in the introduction. This is followed by a presentation of the established concepts or models of quality assurance. The articles also include the findings of studies carried out in the countries in question regarding the process quality of preschool education institutions.

Concepts contained in preschool curricula or preschool education programmes

It is evident from the articles that new preschool education curricula or programmes have been developed in each of the countries in question since their attainment of independence.

In BiH, write **Dženeta Camović, Jasmina Bećirović-Karabegović and Hašima Čurak**, the fundamental principles and aims of preschool education are defined in the *Framework Law on Preschool Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Okvirni zakon... 2007) and the *Common Core of Integrated Development Programmes for Work in Preschool Institutions* (Sporazum o zajedničkoj jezgri ... 2009, hereinafter: *Common Core*). These are the two documents that set the framework for designing preschool education programmes in the country's various entities and cantons. The *Common Core* (2009) serves as a basis for the design of preschool education programmes in all public and private preschool education institutions. At the same time, it is the institutions themselves that plan and implement the content of their educational work in accordance with the specific needs of the institution and the local community. Under the *Common Core* (2009), preschool education programmes in BiH are structured in four areas of children's development: physical development; socio-emotional and personality development; cognitive development and language skills; development of communication and creativity. Children's development and learning outcomes are defined each year for all areas of development and for every year of a child's age. The authors point out that because of the lack of uniformity in the planning and implementation of educational work in the country, there is a need to develop a framework national curriculum that clearly defines the role of teachers in children's development and learning and sets out the principles of planning educational work and the relationship between kindergartens and parents. They also emphasise that BiH needs to formulate common guidelines for teachers to follow in the implementation of educational practice that is focused on the achievement and monitoring of children's development and learning outcomes.

In Montenegro we have been seeing conceptual shifts in the design of preschool education programmes ever since independence. **Tatjana L. Novović** points out that for a few years after independence, the country continued to implement an preschool education programme based on a combination of a learning goals based strategy and a subject based strategy for planning educational work. Between 2004 and 2010 a single *Preschool education Activity Areas Programme* was implemented for all children from the end of parental leave until school entry, based on the “open curriculum” paradigm. This was designed to place the child at the centre of the education process. The programme defined the general objectives of preschool education and emphasised the fluidity, flexibility, dynamism and multidimensionality of the educational process, building on the requirement for constant adaptation of the educational process to the children themselves. After six years of implementation, this programme was modified because preschool teachers felt that the existing programme was too demanding and incompatible with their previous experience, knowledge and training. New preschool education programmes were designed and adopted, and subsequently operationalised in several primary and special programmes. The primary programmes include, for example, the Activity Area – English Language programme (Područje aktivnosti – engleski jezik 2017), while the special programmes include Learning for Entrepreneurship as part of the preschool education activity area for children aged 3–6 (Preduzetničko učenje ... 2016) and Education for Sustainable Development as part of the preschool education activity area for children aged 3–6 (Obrazovanje za održivi razvoj ... 2015). The latter are implemented in the context of primary programmes for children aged 3–6. It seems that with these two programmes Montenegro has introduced to its preschool education system a set of contents relating to knowledge, skills, views and values that respond to lifelong learning and labour market needs and follow the orientations discussed in the first part of this article.

Croatia, write **Jasminka Zloковиć and Diana Nenadić-Bilan**, has adopted the concept of the open curriculum. *The National Curriculum of Early Childhood Education and Care* (Nacionalni kurikulum ... 2014, hereinafter: *National Curriculum*) emphasises the importance of initiative and children’s activities and defines the principles and goals of preschool education. Under this document, educational work is based on respecting the abilities, needs and interests of children, on respecting the suggestions and initiatives of the children themselves, on their participation, etc., so the organisation of the educational process, note the authors, is flexible and adapted to the needs and interests of children.

The document highlights the two goals of preschool education: ensuring children’s well-being and overall development, education and learning, and developing their competences. It promotes eight key competences that are developed by preschool education institutions, including learning to learn and sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, which, as already noted, are among the key competences required by the global labour market.

In 2016 Croatia amended the *National Curriculum* (2014) so that in the year before school entry three hours a day are dedicated to preparing children for school,

a solution which in the authors' opinion does not lead to the "schoolification" of preschool education.

At the time of preparation of this thematic issue, Serbia is in the process of adopting new programmatic solutions for preschool education that reflect an entirely different conception of the field. For this reason the article by **Dragana Pavlović Breneselović and Živka Krnjaja** differs slightly from the other articles in terms of the methodology employed. A final report on the project in which the *Starting Points of the Preschool Education Programme* (Osnove programa ... 2018; hereinafter: Starting Points) were formulated and piloted is currently being drawn up, and the *Starting Points* (2018) are awaiting approval by the competent ministry.²⁸ This being the case, we agree with the authors, who were also the experts responsible for the project, that they would present the essential features of the new programme and only touch briefly on the programmatic solutions and systemic quality assurance solutions currently in use insofar as they judge this to be necessary for understanding of the proposed conceptual changes. The new programme (unlike the preschool education programmes currently in force in Slovenia – for more on this see Krnjaja and Pavlović Breneselović 2017) is conceived openly: it defines theoretical and value-based starting points that establish the figure of the child, understanding of how children learn and the role of adults in children's learning. The design of the programme emphasises the importance of the environment in which the educational process takes place and the importance of a dynamic educational process in which the child plays an active part. It proceeds from the assumption that preschool education in the preschool environment is important for children because of the effects it has on their learning, and not because of "expected" outcomes that are in line with predetermined norms.

Mojca Kovač Šebart and Andreja Hočevar analyse the *Preschool curriculum* (Kurikulum za... 1999) in Slovenia. It is based on a learning goals and process development strategy of curriculum planning – since the devisers of solutions in Slovenia wanted to avoid precisely defined contents set out in education programmes and clearly oriented towards the child's cognitive development and the mastery of "academic" skills – something that was leading to the "schoolification" of kindergartens. They also wished to avoid the weaknesses inherent in an open curriculum. For this reason they decided to combine two curriculum planning strategies, as a safeguard against the conceptual weaknesses of each individual strategy. The document sets out the general goals and principles of preschool education, which orient teachers towards the ongoing formulation of operational goals, in which they take into account children's interests and needs. Curriculum planning thus focuses on the process and not on the effect, which concerns the realisation of precisely set and operationalised curriculum objectives in the form of children's learning outcomes or achievements in the educational process. In this way, Slovenia should avoid the danger of preschool education provision in kindergartens focusing too much on

²⁸ The draft *Starting Points* (2018) came about as a collaboration between the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Arts, Serbia's Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the Institute for the Improvement of Education (ZUOV), UNICEF and practitioners from three kindergartens in which the draft programme was piloted.

preparing children for school, and also the danger that, as a result of the openness of curriculum content and goals, preschool education provision in kindergartens might become ill-considered, poorly planned and poorly implemented, and dependent on the abilities of the individual teacher, which is unfair to the children enrolled in different classes of public kindergartens around the country.

Quality assurance in preschool education in the countries of the former Yugoslavia

BiH established the Agency for Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education in 2007. Quality assurance in preschool education was entrusted to this Agency, which proceeded to formulate *Quality Standards for the Work of Preschool Teachers, Educators and Head Teachers in Preschool Education* (Standardi kvalitete ... 2011). This document includes quality indicators grouped into thematic units and aids for external evaluation and self-evaluation, where the latter takes place via self-reflection on the part of preschool teachers and documentation of the pedagogical process. It also defines indicators regarding the process level of quality in kindergartens and emphasises the importance of focusing the educational process on the child, who constructs and develops knowledge and understanding through active participation in the educational process (via direct learning experiences and spontaneous learning rather than through teaching by the teacher). The findings of monitoring of preschool education institutions do not indicate, the authors point out, that a perceptible shift has occurred in programmes and in practice from the traditional emphasis on teaching to active cooperation and spontaneous learning on the part of children.

Quality assurance in preschool education is prescribed by law in Montenegro, but the implementation of external and internal evaluations of quality is regulated by special rules focusing on schools, while kindergartens are entirely neglected: the provisions do not establish a difference between kindergartens and schools which the process of assuring the quality of the preschool education is supposed to follow. The quality assurance model is prescribed by a document called *Methodology of External Evaluation of Education and Care in Educational Institutions* (Metodologija ... 2010), prepared by experts from the Institute of Education. Assuring quality in preschool education institutions takes place in the fields of learning and teaching and students' (children's) achievements, where there are only two quality indicators in the latter field (child's development and child's creativity), whereas there are seven indicators for the school. Inspectors from the Institute of Education rank them on a scale ranging from very successful to unsuccessful. Self-evaluation of preschool education institutions is conceived in a similar way: 108 quality indicators have been formulated, which are the same for kindergartens and schools.

Teachers/preschool teachers have at their disposal a questionnaire for assessment of different fields of learning, a form for self-evaluation of the institution and a form for formulation of an action plan for the development of educational work. Preschool teachers, met the author, self-evaluate educational work in kindergartens and plan improvements by continuously monitoring and assessing their work with

the help of various tools (questionnaires for parents, checklists, narrative and anecdotal accounts, protocols for observing the educational process, video reports, etc.) and also through analysis of pedagogical documentation and work diaries. The author states that a conflict exists in Montenegro between the paradigmatic concepts contained in preschool education programmes and their implementation. She warns that preschool education needs an independent quality assurance model.

In Croatia external and internal evaluation of the quality of preschool education institutions is established at the systemic level. Common indicators have been formulated, while at the same time every preschool education institution formulates its own quality indicators. External evaluation is conducted by the National Centre for the External Evaluation of Education (Nacionalni centar za vanjsko vrednovanje obrazovanja) while self-evaluation takes place in institutions in accordance with a methodology published in two manuals. Process quality is identified through self-evaluation of the educational process and implementation of the curriculum. After completing self-evaluation, every institution also prepares the development plan. Authors Jasminka Zloković and Diana Nenadić-Bilan consider the preschool education quality assurance model implemented in Croatia to be adequate from the professional point of view.

In contrast to the other countries covered in this issue, the authors of the article on Serbia reject the quantitative measurement of quality of preschool education and argue in favour of the need for collaborative evaluation. This concept is in line with the theoretical reflection is contained in the *Starting Points* (Osnove programa ... 2018). Everyone involved with the educational process in a kindergarten takes part in the evaluation of quality: teachers, children, parents, the local community, the competent ministry and public institutions in the field of education and care. The authors draw attention to the importance of dialogue among all stakeholders on what is taking place in the educational process, while the assessment of the quality of the process is established as a reflection on the entire context in which preschool education takes place, and in relation to the key values which kindergartens should be following on the basis of the adopted *Starting Points* (Osnove programa ... 2018). They emphasise that in order to build the quality of preschool education, the common establishment of meanings among the various participants in the educational process is essential, as is democratic cooperation among them, since quality is a concept that is subjective and plural, that embraces multiple perspectives and that is informed by values, and is therefore dependent on the given context.

The concept of preschool education quality assurance presented in the article by the authors differs completely from the model currently in use in Serbia. The latter is prescribed by means of rules and is based on external evaluation and self-evaluation, where standards and quality indicators are the same for both types of evaluation. The authors underlined that self-evaluation conceived in this way leads to an adaptation of educational practice to existing norms and does not allow teachers to reflect on educational work, while research findings show that a majority of teachers consider external evaluation to be a merely formal process that does not lead to an improvement of educational practice.

In Slovenia the implementation of self-evaluation in kindergartens has since 2019 prescribed by the *Act Amending the Organisation and Financing of Education Act* (Zakon o organizaciji ... 2008), but there is no legally prescribed model of self-evaluation by which kindergartens are supposed to assure quality. The authors of the text present the model of quality assurance for kindergartens that was formulated between 2000 and 2002 and tested between 2003 and 2005. This model was based on precise knowledge of the concept written into the *Preschool curriculum* (Kurikulum za ... 1999). Political decision-makers did not support its further development and introduction in kindergartens and instead directed funding towards the development of a new “common model” of quality assessment for the entire education and care vertical. As a result – just as in Montenegro – there is no separate quality assurance model in place for kindergartens that would tie quality assurance to the specific factors by which these institutions are distinguished from schools. A central place in the common model of self-evaluation is reserved for the area of *learning and teaching* and children’s *achievements*, which is not consistent with the concept contained in the applicable *Preschool curriculum* (ibid.). At the time of writing, standards and quality indicators are also being developed for the area *learning and teaching* (sub-areas: *students’ achievements* or *children’s development and learning*) in kindergartens. They have not yet been published, even though the quality model should have been gradually introduced to kindergartens beginning in September 2018. On the basis of the terminology in the definitions and solutions that we find in accessible documents relating to the common model of quality assurance, it appears that we are dealing with a structural shift at the level of solutions that follows the international trends described an introductory part of this text.

Conclusion

We find that in all the countries concerned, programmatic or curriculum documents exist at the national level, and that educational work in kindergartens or preschool institutions takes place in accordance with these documents. They are conceived differently: they follow open curriculum solutions in Croatia and, for a certain brief period, in Montenegro; in Serbia, too, the proposed new programme is conceived in this way; the programme is currently used in Montenegro, BiH and Serbia are more structured. Slovenia has opted for a middle path: the *Preschool curriculum* (Kurikulum za ... 1999) is a partially structured document. As regards some of the tendencies in preschool education that we analysed in the first part of the text, these are slowly gaining a substantive place in preschool education curricula or programmes. The skills or competences demanded by the labour market are already explicitly included in the preschool education programme in Montenegro and in the curriculum in Croatia, while the preparation of preschool children for school is part of the preschool education systems in BiH, Montenegro and Serbia and included in the curriculum in Croatia. In all the countries covered, formerly prescribed quality assurance mechanisms exist. Quality assurance models have been developed for

preschool education and standards or indicators of quality in preschool education have been defined. In Montenegro, as apparently also in Slovenia, the quality assurance model is conceived for schools (rather than for preschool institutions). In both BiH and Montenegro, preschool education quality indicators are defined by children's outcomes or achievements in individual areas of development and learning. As presented by the authors in this issue, Croatia and Serbia (the latter in draft documents) do not follow the logic of preschool education quality assurance that is primarily interested in effectiveness at the level of children's outcomes or achievements and learning outcomes in further schooling, but instead are focused above all on the "establishment of common meanings" among all participants in the educational process with regard to how to "build" a high-quality preschool education institution that will create conditions for children's well-being, learning and development.

Two thematic issues of *Sodobna pedagogika* (the present issue and issue number 3 in 2017) have now been dedicated to an analysis that offers readers a fairly clear picture of current developments in the preschool education field in the states of the former Yugoslavia. The authors of the articles in these two issues have analysed the structural and process quality of kindergartens or preschool education institutions in these countries and identified trends in preschool education in this part of Europe. In doing so, we have established an intensive and fruitful professional collaboration among the authors involved, which will certainly not end with the articles contained in this issue.

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