

OUTSIDE THE BOX: CHANGE – VARIOUS FORMS OF CONNECTING PRACTITIONERS IN THE PROCESS OF INTENSIVE KINDERGARTEN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This article describes the characteristics of the traditional, outdated educational practice in the early education institution followed by the ways in which a good quality, modern practice can evolve, as well as the achievements accomplished in some of our institutions. These achievements, as well as the processes that lie within them, are termed *Outside the box*. It is emphasized how the quality of the education development in an early and preschool institution is more concerned with the process than the result (especially not the permanent result), that is, it presents a developmental rather than a static category. In this sense, action research is highlighted as a particularly valuable “tool” for the development of educational practices and curriculum of early education. Action research enables the creation of a community of critical, self-reflective actors who can change the practice on a much wider scale than the individual, and gradually create a new, more human, and more democratic educational policy. The ultimate consequences of action research should be viewed in a much broader context than merely as a means of improving educational practice of certain institutions, that is, as creating a *professional learning community* whose participants connect and support each other in a continuous learning and professional development by strengthening their autonomy and emancipation.

There is a description of various forms of connecting practitioners who show interest and motivation for the introduction of new forms of work in order to provide each other with professional and emotional support. The Facebook group *Outside the Box* is mentioned as a form of linking practitioners for the purpose of discussion and exchange of professional experience and expertise, to which the next subchapter is devoted. This Facebook group was created with the intention of bringing together practitioners involved in the process of intensive kindergarten development through action research so as to enable an exchange of important information, research experiences, and insights which they gained in the process of developing practices. However, a growing number of interested practitioners from many different kindergartens gradually joined this group reaching a total number of 4,200 practitioners from different Croatian cities, as well as from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, the USA, Finland, Norway, and Australia.

Keywords; Action research, Facebook group, Kindergarten, *Outside the box*

Introduction

Outside the box illustrates the Croatian concept of connecting theoreticians and practitioners of early education on the path to seeking new opportunities for development of early childhood education and early education curriculum. It began as an attempt by the theorists at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Studies, University of Zagreb and two hundred associates from about ten Croatian kindergartens to explore and shape the educational practice so that it would be in line with contemporary pedagogical requirements stipulated in the Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education that entered into force in 2015. This document created the legal preconditions for the development of institutional education based on the plurality of pedagogical ideas and concepts whose backbone represents humanistic ideas and developmentally appropriate practices. However, domestic and world experiences testify to the fact that a new official document, even when it is based on very contemporary professional and scientific grounds, has very modest impact on the educational practice itself. The reason for this is that the traditional understanding of the child and childhood, as well as the traditional organization of the educational process that emerges from such an understanding, cannot easily and simply be abandoned or achieved through administrative procedures. Of the many traditionalisms that can be found in the practice of Croatian kindergartens, we will list only a few:

- practice of strict planning and management of children's activities in the educational institution
- practice of direct teaching of children with the content which they need to memorize and reproduce, and which is therefore easily measurable
- practice of parceling children's educational activities according to methodical areas and strictly defined time sequences (so-called “guided activities”)
- encouraging one-sided and one-dimensional thinking of children (supporting the expected response of children in joint activities with the preschool teachers) and

- a universal and unified educational approach (the criterion for choosing educational content is the chronological age of children rather than their personal and developmental characteristics or subjective preferences and needs).

Retaining these (and many other) traditionalism in the educational practice testifies to the fact that it is in fact not managed by “official concepts” even when it is prescribed by the state, i.e. the competent Ministry, but rather by the “personal concepts” of practitioners who are employees in the institution.

Action research

With this in mind, we conducted an action participatory research in about ten kindergartens so as to familiarize ourselves with and develop the educational practice and curriculum, as well as to provide support to those practitioners who want to step “outside the box.” In this process, our scientific-research activities included several directions.

The first of these was the development of the practitioners’ awareness that the quality of life, i.e. the education of the child, determines the entire context of his or her life inside the kindergarten. The context of a child’s life within a kindergarten institution is a complex interaction of various structural and cultural dimensions of the kindergarten, since the kindergarten is a complex living system or “a living organism” (Rinaldi, 2006). It is a pulsating, changeable, and interconnected world of rapid interaction in which the order originates naturally from chaos without the necessity of supervision (Roberts and Kleiner, 2003). Because of this, its functioning, i.e. the processes that occur in it, cannot be fully predicted or controlled. On the contrary, the modern educational process, i.e. the resulting curriculum, resembles “a forecast of possibilities within an arena of opportunities” (Rinaldi, according to Male, 2012). It resembles a journey to new and unknown places that change the child’s experience (Kalantzis et al, 2003). Such an understanding of the educational process is also the foundation of the development of an open development curriculum (Edwards et al., 1998, Slunjski, 2011). In that sense, the first direction of our “*outside the box*” journey was to develop the practitioners’ awareness about the unpredictability of the educational process and to provide support to the development of an open development curriculum.

The second direction involved abandoning the divisions of the educational process into activities aimed at stimulating specific aspects of child development (physical, emotional, social, intellectual, moral, creative, etc.) through separate activities. Instead, it was attempted to help the practitioners to create a wholesome understanding of the processes of nurturing, educating, and teaching children throughout every segment of the educational process. Also, efforts were made to empower them to abandon the idea of partitioning the process of teaching children into areas that, when it comes to school, belonged to certain subjects (Croatian, Mathematics, Science, etc.). This direction of work with practitioners was based on the inauguration of contemporary understanding of children’s learning (Petrović-Sočo, 2007; Tarini, 2008; White, 2008; Miljak, 2009), which emphasizes that the quality of children’s learning corresponds to the quality of their everyday life in the kindergarten, i.e. that it is not limited to parceled-out and segmented teaching of children according to certain contents. At the same time, these concepts were the foundation for the development of an integrated curriculum that takes into account all areas of the child's development in a uniform manner, which would fit the nature of the child and his or her learning (Bredenkamp, 1996). In that sense, “*outside the box*” refers to the development of a holistic understanding of the educational process as the basis for designing a curriculum that has integrated characteristics.

The third direction of our activity referred to abandoning traditional education that is characterized by understanding knowledge as something static, which can be transmitted to children in predictable ways. Instead, it was attempted to promote the idea of creating, i.e. constructing knowledge, which in itself represents a personal, subjective, and authentic construction by the person who learns (Malaguzzi, 1998, Bascia and Hargreaves, 2000, Vygotsky, according to Berk and Winsler, 1995). The way in which a child constructs his or her knowledge depends on his or her prediction and many other individual distinctions, the way in which he or she interprets a particular learning experience and the contextual characteristics in which that learning takes place. The correct way of teaching younger children is not by means of a lecture or a verbal lesson (Bredenkamp, 1996), since younger children learn to participate actively, i.e. by creating and collaborating with others (Bredenkamp, 1996, Rinaldi, 2006, Penn, 2008). The understanding of knowledge as a dynamic and developmental category that is continually evolving, constructing, and reconstructing is the foundation for the

development of a constructivist, i.e. a co-constructivist curriculum (Miljak, 2007, Slunjski, 2006, 2015, Rinaldi, 2006, Malaguzzi, 1998), and is also the third direction of our “*outside the box*” journey.

The fourth direction of our research focused on examining the existing practice in terms of promoting autonomy and emancipation of children as opposed to child manipulation in the organization of the educational process. Our activities in this part of research focused most on overcoming the traditional position of the child in the kindergarten, which is passive, receptive, and in many respects disempowered. Rather, we have endeavored to strengthen the preschool teachers to encourage independent and critical thinking in children, i.e. to encourage their autonomy as a prerequisite for responsible behavioral development. The reason for this is that an important goal of education is to create autonomous, i.e. respectful relationships that allow children to evaluate things from different perspectives and learn to act independently. In an educational process aimed at respecting the rights and individual freedoms of the child, it is possible to expect the development of those qualities that are necessary for a free, actively creative, and responsible life of the child. This requires a respectful and equal relationship between all participants in the educational process and it focuses on the development of the personality of the child with an emphasis on self-reliance. This understanding of the educational process and the repositioning of the child in it represented the underpinning of the development of a humanist-oriented curriculum (Stenhouse, 1975, Malaguzzi, 1998). This was the fourth direction of our attempt to establish “*outside the box*” practices, i.e. converting the kindergarten into a place where children are not obedient objects but rather equal participants in the process of mutual learning with other children and adults.

Throughout the entire research we observed a noticeable increase in the interest of a larger number of practitioners for the direction in which the educational practice is being developed as well as for the accomplishments that are being achieved. In this respect, they began to express their interest in an active engagement in this process. So we started looking for opportunities for a greater number of connections between the practitioners and for building strong learning communities that would enhance their motivation and further boost their professional learning. We considered this to be important because we have repeatedly assured that achieving good practice does not mean one-time fixing of problems that prevent its development or make it more difficult to develop than to provide the preschool teachers with the tools to continuously recognize and remove problems. In that respect, we have tried to encourage the connection of practitioners since we are convinced that they can change the practice to a much greater scale than the individual, i.e. they can gradually create a new, more humane and more democratic educational policy. In this context, the general direction of our research, which we have painted metaphorically as “*outside the box*,” was to encourage the preschool teachers to move from a lack of freedom and restraint toward freedom, autonomy, equality, co-operation, and promotion of democracy.

Facebook group «*Outside the box*»

Over time, the number of practitioners involved in direct and many indirect ways of the research process and improvement of educational practices and curricula grew. In this regard, as a particularly innovative form of connecting preschool teachers and other professional kindergarten teachers, it is important to highlight the Facebook group “*Outside the Box*.” This group was actually created with the aim of gathering practitioners who participate in intensive career development processes through action research, which enable them to exchange important information, their research experiences, and the insights they have gained in the process of developing the practice. Most of these experiences and insights are described in the research *Outside the Box* from 2015 and *Outside the Box 2: Change* from 2016 (Slunjski, 2015, 2016). Thus, the Facebook group gradually included an increasing number of practitioners from many different kindergartens, so that the total number of its members reached 4,900. In addition to members from the Republic of Croatia, colleagues from Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, and even some from the USA, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, and Australia joined the group as well.

Although this is a completely unconventional form of connecting practitioners based on their common interest, this being the development of educational practices and the curriculum of kindergartens, it can still be stated that it provides a certain form of their professional learning. Especially considering the fact that the number of opportunities for participation of preschool teachers of different kindergartens in the Republic of Croatia in an organized professional training program is very small, and in particular in those programs that have

a lasting character, which enables them to discuss everyday problems arising from their practice and which are organized to develop their research and reflexive competences.

Conclusion

The potential for professional development of practitioners through Facebook groups is considerably weaker than through direct contact that is intended for a common analysis of the existing practice and development of better practices. However, practitioners in this group could strengthen their motivation and have the opportunity to somehow sense the “pulse” of kindergartens with high-developed practice and, as far as possible, be “infected” with ideas that characterize the contemporary curriculum.

At the same time, this group also showed that the current level of kindergarten development in the Republic of Croatia is very different, just as the level of professional development of individual practitioners within those kindergarten is very different since preschool teachers understand and interpret the notion of quality of educational practice and curriculum very differently as well as perceive and interpret the problems that arise on the path of this development differently, not to mention that the problems in different kindergartens also greatly differ. But most members of the group share a common acceptance of the idea of joint and collaborative learning that can lead to the release of personal and institutional constraints that reduce the possibility of practicing legitimate human and democratic values.

That is why the ultimate consequence of the research that we undertook is much broader than the improvement of the educational curriculum and the kindergarten curriculum that were directly involved in it. Much greater contribution is seen in building the capacity of individuals and institutions, and creating a professional learning community (Leithwood et al., 2009) whose participants connect and support each other in continuous learning and professional development based on strengthening their autonomy and emancipation. Or, in other words, the empowerment of practitioners to actively, i.e. thoughtfully collaboratively join the idea of developing an “outside the box” practice that needs to be better, more humane, and more democratic.

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