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WHAT IS KINDERGARTEN FOR? THE PURPOSE OF EARLY EDUCATION PERCEIVED BY PRESCHOOL CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS

Abstract

Quality of early education is a two-dimensional concept, and it refers to structural quality and process quality. While the structural quality is concerned about materials and organization of activities, daily routines, adult – child ratio, and life-long learning of preschool teachers, the process quality puts an emphasis on adult-child interaction, peer interaction, and program orientation of early education. To find out which dimension is more desirable for preschoolers and their parents, a survey was conducted among preschool children and their parents in Osijek-Baranya county. Overall 37 preschool children (17 boys and 20 girls, average age 6 years) and 37 parents (35 mothers, and 2 fathers, average age 35 years) participated: children were interviewed, and parents were given questionnaires. Qualitative analysis revealed the presence of discrepancies between preschoolers and their parents, i.e. adults are mostly oriented towards structural dimension, especially routines such as feeding, sleeping, safety etc., and preschoolers are focused on processes, especially peer interaction. When parents assess processes in preschool, they are more concerned about adult-child interaction and relationship with preschool teachers, followed by peer-interaction. Quite the opposite from their parents, children are oriented toward peer interaction, and they perceive relationships with adults as form of control and outside regulation, and less important for them. This indicates that preschool teachers are in-between these perceptions and expectations, suggesting that the quality of early education has many standpoints from which it can be observed.

Key words: quality of early education, parental expectations, adults-children relationships, peer interaction, preschool teachers’ roles
INTRODUCTION

Although present over 4 decades, preschool education and kindergartens still draw attention of scholars and practitioners, when it comes to its purpose. When speaking about preschool education and its main purpose, Bahle (2009) argues that its main goal is primarily oriented towards the needs of parents, as a support service during everyday life, especially work. Due to its orientation towards parents, preschool education is seen as a question of quality of family life in generally, and less as a question of a right of children, or as a question of quality of education.

When it comes to quality in education, it is often scrutinized within two main dimensions: (1) processes i.e. interaction and activities, especially learning and teaching, and (2) structure, i.e. number of enrolled children, adult-child ratio, program structure, formal level of education of preschool teachers, and materials (Espinoza, 2002; Mashburn i Pianta, 2007). The question is, which dimension has more significance for quality of experience of children? To answer this question, Mashburn and Pianta (2007) conducted a survey and found out that there are differences between parents’ and preschool teachers’ perceptions of quality of early education: preschool teachers interpret quality in terms of curriculum and organization (time schedules, materials, space and furniture, and overall quality of pedagogical environment), while parents interpreted quality merely as the location of kindergarten (whereas is kindergarten in the nearby of their home or work place), and flexible opening hours. The general conclusion of these authors is that quality has different indicators, varying from perspectives. Similarly, Pramling Samuelsson and Pramling (2008) found that perception of early education quality is indeed under the influence of a particular perspective. For instance, parents are oriented towards learning, while the role of play is vague to them, and preschool teachers are more oriented towards play and its pedagogical potentials for learning (ibid. ). However, Olson and Hyson (2005), stress that parents’ perceptions and expectations depend on the leading significant life circumstances of the particular family. I.e. there is no unique model of family support, and preschool teachers should be prepared for various expectations from parents. Researching parental expectations, Somer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide (2010) found that parents of three-year old’s expect that preschool teachers teach their children autonomy, and to support them during self-regulation. This suggests that parents are aware of the long term benefits of early education. Due to this expectation, parents wish for high-quality kindergartens, where preschool teachers can meet their children’s needs.

As far as childrens expectations are concerned, there is absence of continuous research with young children. However, some authors (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Cunningam et al., 2004; Alanen, Brooker and Mayall, 2015) have researched children’s expectations and perspectives. For instance, Cunningham et al. (2004) has interviewed three and four-years olds, and found out that children expect more time for play and exploration activities, and freedom to choose partners for these activities. Similarly, Alanen, Brooker and Mayall (2015) found children wished less adult control over them, which adults interpret as care for children. These findings
suggest a dual nature of expectations when it comes to parents and children. Children’s perspective is oriented towards non-structured activities such as play, exploration of immediate surrounding, and freedom to organize activities (especially play) in accordance to their own wishes, and not in accordance to a time schedule in classrooms. In that context, preschool teachers should practice non-directive involvement. However, parents expect a higher level of structure in learning, suggesting that preschool teachers should be involved in a more directive manner. From their point of view, it is a prerequisite of long-term benefits of early education. So, how should preschool teachers structure their practice – should they be oriented more towards children’s expectations or towards parents’ expectations? The answer is given by Moss and Petrie (2002), who explain that kindergartens are spaces, not places or services for children. As they state, services are providing fragmented activities due to limited resources (time and materials), so activities in services are mostly directed into a small number of aspects of everyday life such as teaching self-service and learning specific every-day skills. Children’s spaces, as Moss and Petrie (2002) vividly describe, are environments in which children construct interpersonal relations (social space), crate values and culture (cultural space), and exchange perspectives (discursive space). In children’s spaces, the emphasis is on reciprocal actions of children, and therefore preschool teachers and parents should support children efforts to actively participate in classrooms.

Findings in literature suggest that the perception of early education quality depends on personal experiences, expectations, needs and one’s interpretations of indicators of quality. Since expectations and perspectives of children and adults are different, and in accordance to preschool teachers’ positions of “in-betweeners”, it is important to find out more about dimensions of early education quality from the perspective of adults and children.

METHODS

Participants

Overall 37 parents and 37 preschool children participated (17 boys and 20 girls). In average, parents were 35 years old (min=27; max=44), and children were 6-years-olds (min=4; max=7). Children were interviewed, for which parents gave written permission. As far as the formal level of parents’ education is concerned, 65% had high school diplomas, 8,1% bachelor degree and 27% master degree. There were 30% of unemployed parents, 16% parents had part-time jobs, and 54% had full-time jobs. Both, rural and urban areas were included in this survey: 54% parents were living in rural areas, and 46% parent were living in urban areas.
Instrument

Parents were given a questionnaire which consisted of three parts: socio-demographic data, parental perception of purpose of kindergartens, and parental assessments of cooperation with preschool teachers. The Cronbach alpha for the questionnaire was .70. Children were interviewed with a structured interview. Their answers were recorded and later coded.

The goal of survey

The goal of this survey was to get an insight into views of parents and children regarding kindergarten. The main purpose was to find out whether there are differences in expectations of parents and children.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Parental perceptions of purpose of kindergartens

Parents suggest that the main reason for enrolling their children in early education is full time employment of both parents (21.6%), socialization (27%), and provision for school (10.8%). It is interesting, when talking about socialization, parents explain and describe particular behaviors such as independence during meals, toilette-training, etc., not as peer interaction. It looks like they don’t see socialization as a process of constructing relationships with others, yet merely as self-independence for everyday (biological) living.

Parents stress the learning as the main purpose of kindergarten (48.6%), following by protection and safeguarding of children (29.7%), and fun (21.6%). This suggest that parents are dominantly oriented towards educational aspect of kindergartens.

Next, parents were given several statements about kindergarten, and parents were assessing their level of agreement in a 6-point Likert scale (1=fully don’t agree; 2=mostly don’t agree; 3=partially don’t agree; 4=partially agree; 5=mostly agree; 6=fully agree). There was not a neutral value, so parents had to take either more positive or more negative orientation.
Table 1. Parent’s assessments about kindergartens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Fully disagree</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Fully agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to kindergarten, the most important thing is to keep my child at safe place, and well protected.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I come to kindergarten, I want to know if my child had its meal and sleep.</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to know everything that happens to my child in kindergarten.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When my child mentions friends from kindergarten, I know these children.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know other parents and I am in contact with them.</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how preschool teachers work and I know their competences.</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand how kindergarten is organized and how it functions.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know the themes and activities in which my child participate daily.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The information about my child provided by preschool teacher on my way out from kindergarten is sufficient.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship between my child and preschool teacher is more important than its relationship with peers.</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Parents’ assessments suggested that parents prefer safety, followed by pedagogical activities and quality of relationships with adults and peers. In most cases parents know and understand how kindergarten is organized and how it functions. Also, they see relationships with adults as more important than the quality of peer interaction. This suggests that parents perceive kindergarten as safe place built upon trust between parents and preschool teachers.

Further, parents assessed their personal involvement in the kindergarten activities and processes.
Table 2. Parental assessment of own involvement in kindergarten

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Each day</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely, almost never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I talk with my child about kindergarten activities and experiences.</td>
<td><strong>91.9</strong></td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I follow pedagogical activities in the classroom.</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td><strong>59.5</strong></td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I talk with preschool teacher about my child.</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td><strong>67.6</strong></td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I exchange ideas and experiences with preschool teacher.</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td><strong>56.8</strong></td>
<td>21.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As parents suggest, they talk with their children about kindergarten activities and experiences on a daily basis. Also, they follow pedagogical activities, talk to preschool teachers about their children, and exchange ideas and experiences from time to time. Interestingly, 21.6% of parents rarely, almost never, exchange ideas and experiences, and 16.2% of parents claim they almost never follow pedagogical activities in classroom. It means that some parents don’t feel the need to construct a dialogue with preschool teachers and don’t need to be more involved into their children’s social life, making it more difficult for preschool teacher to establish partnership with parents.

As far as extra-curricular activities are concerned, a majority of parents don’t have the needs for additional services in kindergarten (46%). Yet, some parents expressed the need for workshops for positive parenting (16.2%), additional professional support from a speech therapist, special education teacher and psychologist (5.4%), and 32.4% of parents would like free-of-charge sports activities (which in Croatia parents usually pay around 15 euros/month). Although parents were given an opportunity to express their own views and needs regarding additional support and activities in kindergarten, they were focused on expenses. It looks like kindergarten service is still too expensive for them, reflecting a low economic status of families in Croatia. In that context, parents were asked to answer about their obligations towards kindergarten and preschool teachers. Parents see their obligations mostly as financial, i.e regular payment for service, and least as involvement in educational activities in kindergarten.

*Children's perception of purpose of kindergartens*

Children were interviewed during April 2016. The questions were divided into three categories: emotional experiences of kindergarten, perspectives on activities in kindergarten, and perspectives on interpersonal relations in classrooms.

As far as the emotional context of kindergarten is concerned, children are pleased with kindergarten, and all of them like to go to the kindergarten. The reasons
why they like to go to the kindergarten are: fun and play (43.2%), positive emotional relationships with peers (24.3%), sense of welcome in classroom and good relationship with preschool teachers (18.9%), and toys and other didactic materials in classrooms (13.5%). Children’s responses suggest that they are oriented towards the processual dimension of quality, i.e. activities and emotional relationships with others.

When asked about preferred activities in classrooms, children particularly like physical activities (outdoors and indoors), building blocks and construction games (Lego), and symbolic play with peers. Interestingly, whenever they described the type of activity, they said the names of the other involved players, i.e. with whom they play. It could be said that children are sharing the activities, rather than solely conducting activities.

When asked about dislikes in kindergarten, children don’t like conflicts and exclusion (13.5%), academic activities such as (pre)reading and (pre)writing exercises (18.9%), tiding up classroom after play (8.1%), and afternoon nap (13.5%).

Also, children were asked to describe the preschool teachers’ main task in classroom. According to children, preschool teachers’ obligations are: helping and assisting children during the peer interaction (43.2%), caring and safeguarding (21.6%), teaching (13.5%), monitoring and regulation of children’s behaviors (13.5%). As it can be seen, a majority of children perceive preschool teachers as assistants and helpers during the peer interaction, suggesting that children trust their teachers, and rely on them.

At the end, children were given an opportunity to recommend to their teachers what to do more often. Answers were: be involved more often in children play (62.1%), to teach something new and to conduct experiments together with children (21.6%), to buy some new toys and games (8.1%), and to get some rest or to go on vacation (8.1%). The most desirable activity is involvement in play, which is in Croatia rarely possible due to inadequate adult-child ratio, and classroom routines based upon traditional curriculum. Although the National curriculum for early and preschool education (MZO, 2014) emphasizes the need for experimental learning in the classroom, and self-actualization of children as long-term outcome, the politics at the local levels are preventing such goals with low material investments. Thus, policy makers and stakeholders at the local levels should reconsider their responsibilities and competencies when it comes to early and preschool education.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative analysis revealed some differences in perception of purpose of kindergartens perceived by parents and their children. Parents see kindergartens as places of protection and safeguarding, and less as place where peer relationships are constructed. Opposite of that, children perceive kindergartens as places where
peer interaction is constructed, and as places of fun and play. Basically, children don’t care much about routines such as feeding and sleep, they even dislike like them. It is understandable due to social roles defined by biological processes, i.e. adults’ care for children is pillar for child’s well-being. The younger the child is, the routine care activities are more present.

Results showed that children and parents differ in the perception of the purpose of kindergartens. Parents are oriented towards care and routines, which belongs to the structural dimension of educational quality. On the other hand, children are oriented towards peer interaction, which belongs to the processual dimension of quality of early education. These findings indicate the presence of preschool teachers’ multidimensional actions: they have to balance between social and individual expectations, which sometimes can be very demanding and stressful. The key to achieve both, and to fulfill these expectations as much as possible, is preschool teachers’ continuous reflection and self-reflection upon relations between their own practice and their own expectations. I.e. preschool teachers are key to the quality of early education, regardless of formal organization and material condition of a particular classroom.

Literature:


