Position of the Modern Teacher in Educational Theory and Practice

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Abstract

In ontogenetic development, the child is a unique and specific being. In addition to his/her personal biography, s/he is also defined by general social visions and values. Significant in this regard are Vygotsky's (1996) attempts to confirm the thesis on the close relationship between the cultural and historical context in which children live with someone, between the child and childhood, his/her activities, or the pace and the quality of progress.

New social studies of childhood (be they from a historical or social perspective) and the prevailing concept of childhood show that children's lives are shaped by the social and cultural expectations of adults. The image of childhood should not be dismissed as a critical period which represents narrow "windows" of time in which a specific part of the body is most sensitive to the absence of stimuli (deprivation) or the impact of the environment (enriched environment).

The paper will examine some of the contradictions and unacceptable tendencies that occur in the interpretation and implementation of a modern paradigm of early and preschool education, and education in the area of educational practice. In particular, the analysis will relate to the position of teachers in the process of children's activities from the perspective of their teaching and development. The evaluation of teachers' specific positioning within dynamic practical areas is a reflection of their current personal and professional competencies, as well as their overall professional habitus.

Key words: *early and preschool education; preschool curriculum; teacher.*

Introduction

The contemporary context of early and preschool education and upbringing is based on humanistic values and philosophical and pedagogical concepts that advocate

humans as a value in themselves. Humanist-oriented pedagogy (the humanist-emancipatory pedagogical paradigm) and pedagogy focused on human development include human self-formation and transformation, meeting individuals' needs, and creating balance between the individual and the social.

The child lives in concrete social, material, and organizational conditions that largely determine his/her position and define the more or less challenging conditions of growing up. The concept of childhood as a dynamic category and development at the same time considers the modern child from various (often contradictory) perspectives. The context in which children live, develop, and learn reflects the idea of the culture of childhood and is a significant agent of the construction of their identity.

Growing up depends on many external factors. The importance of the quality of daily activities, interaction with other children (different social experiences, cultural backgrounds, psychophysical specifics), and the quality and richness of communicational situations in which the child participates are determined by assumptions regarding his/her development. That is why it is necessary to take advantage of the benefits of institutional upbringing and education, which we associate with the following:

- positioning the child as the purpose of our action;
- the autonomy and emancipation of children, taking into consideration their social, cultural, and personal diversities;
- the holistic nature of the educational process;
- the competence approach in education.

The educational process is immanently a communicational (interpersonal and intrapersonal) process, which means it is realized within an interaction framework. There is no education without communication, which is very specific considering the area of its application. Educational communication is a developmental and interactive process of creating meaning and exchanging (the meaning of) messages between teachers and students with the aim of children's personal development (Mušanović & Lukaš, 2011). Different activities and various resources enable this type of exchange of meaning. Bratanić (1993) emphasizes the holistic nature of communication as one of the forms of the interaction process. She places special emphasis on one of the axioms of communication proposed by the famous communicologist Watzlawika, who claims that human relations always include the process of sending and receiving messages, and therefore always include communication.

The communication process is extremely complex and involves more than just the simple transfer of information between the sender and the recipient of the message. Beynon and Harfield (2007) note that communication takes place between two people or groups in which each participant can express his/her personal opinion, build new ideas in discussing the previous ones, and increase the amount of information about the central theme or solve problems that are associated with it. "In everyday conversations, teachers not only work with a child with what they say, but also the

manner in which they speak to them and, in general, how they behave towards the child" (Slunjski, 2001, p. 4).

The intensity and modality of interactions between the child and his/her social and material environment also determines the quality of his/her learning and development. In this dynamic and nonlinear transactional process, a synthesis of the child's individual forms occurs along with the teachers' level of understanding the educational process. Interpersonal social dialogue creates a dynamic and unpredictable curriculum, and is largely defined by the value orientation of the teacher.

An adult-centric approach, observable in often inefficient and long-term positions of kindergarten teachers (controller, instructor, etc.), is gradually replaced by approaches based on more child-oriented actions. Interpersonal relationships between the child and the teacher gain new quality and subtlety in their management and directing, while their use becomes a significant domain of the teacher's reflexive thinking. The impossibility of assuming a unified approach to defining the child's position during his/her activities and the development of his/her well-being represents a particular challenge for the modern teacher. Focusing on the child, understanding his/her perception of the world, and assuming his/her perspective represents a significant mobilizer for the child's activities. The level of reciprocity in initiating, conducting, and directing children's activities will determine their level of learning and the complexity of their social and cognitive actions.

There is a real risk (observed in current upbringing and educational practices) that some activities performed by kindergarten teachers might be downgraded or erased altogether. Some possible positions are understood and interpreted as partial, incomplete, and simplified. The best diameter is the role of an observer which teachers take on mechanically, not taking advantage of its multifunctional potential. By observing the child, the teacher acquires relevant knowledge about his/her needs, levels of development, and current competencies. This information will help the teacher plan the next steps and determine individualized zones of proximal development. From the perspective of their professional education and expertise, the role of the teachers as "guards or controllers" is not getting enough attention. Teachers' initial education assumes that their actions and positions are sophisticated and clearly goal-oriented. Each role has as much justification as it does a clear pedagogical framework (the purpose of the position with regard to the intention). In reviewing their own image of the child and what they expect from him/her, teachers should simultaneously have to critically analyse their own current positioning within educational practice, in order to support and stimulate children's development, and ensure all the social and material conditions necessary for their well-being.

Instead of being discarded or even taking on other roles necessary for the educational process, it is more pedagogically justifiable to document, analyse, and become aware of one's own viability and sustainability in various segments of educational practices. The social aspect of the educational environment demands an appreciation of children,

flexibility in one's behaviour towards them, close monitoring and understanding of children's activities, confidence in their creative abilities, and the creation of conditions for mutual interaction between children and adults.

The child develops his/her abilities within the context in which s/he lives and the possibilities s/he has. Childhood becomes an important stage in life, the foundation for high-quality growth and development.

> Instead of thinking about children as little people who gradually become adults, many world experts in child development suggest how we should think about them as complete and separate human beings. We have to, in fact, fully accept that children at every stage of their development have unique needs and skills, and their own voices that deserve to be heard with dignity and compassion. (Kolucki & Lemish, 2013, p. 4)

Jull describes the traditional relationship towards children as an attitude towards anti-social "half-beings" (1996) who have to be strongly influenced and manipulated by adults, and who must grow up and reach a certain age in order to be validated and considered equal. Furthermore, this approach assumes that knowledge is transferred from the adult to the child in the process of direct teaching. According to Petrović-Sočo (2009), focusing on knowledge rather than the child results in frontal forms of work, in the framework of which knowledge is transferred to children via teaching. In educational establishments, this approach typically manifests itself in organizing children's activities and at the same "motivating" all children to participate in them regardless of their individual abilities and interests. "The student is being observed as raw material, and through a specially prescribed strategy, s/he is transformed into a certain (defined) product" (Miljak, 1999, p. 18). According to the same author, teachers are sometimes "slaves" to a specific image of the child and offer students what they think might be attractive for them, primarily depending on their age.

The modern positioning of the teacher within educational practice comes from social-constructivist theory, which changed the pedagogical image of the child and the overall approach to educational work. In its core, social constructivism is a theory of learning, not teaching. In the child-oriented curriculum which stems from social constructivist theory, children learn through an active mechanism of knowledge. Unlike the previously dominant behavioural approaches which focus on teaching children, the modern humanistic-developmental concept of the curriculum puts the understanding and respect for the natural development of the child into the foreground (Petrović-Sočo, 2009). Compared to the traditional approach, the changed paradigm is seen in the reduction of the importance of planning the educational process and giving increasing attention to co-constructing the child-oriented curriculum and promoting activities with children which include monitoring, documenting, and reflecting (Petrović-Sočo, Slunjski, & Šagud, 2005).

The overall quality of the educational process is dependent on the personality of teachers or their implicit pedagogy. Implicit pedagogy is the "value orientation which

refers to all forms of social behaviour (individual-individual, individual-group, and individual and society), including the raising and education of children" (Babić, Irović, & Krstović, 1997, p. 556). A modern teacher, aware of the social and material dimensions of the educational environment, supports the level of quality of the child's learning and development. During the educational process, the teacher assumes multiple roles, acting as a "helper, an observer, a supplier, a planner, activator, a communicator, a manager, a router, and least of all direct leader" (Petrović-Sočo, 2009, p. 128). Regardless of their capabilities, modern teachers allow the construction of mutual actions. Unlike adult-centric approaches which have previously manifested themselves as inefficient and long-term, non-productive teacher roles (e.g., controller, instructor, etc.), the new role allows teachers to change the quality of their interpersonal relationships with the child. In this way, pre-planned activities which were organized and implemented by the teacher, are gradually replaced by activities directed towards the things children understand and find interesting. While adult-centric institutions fit adults' vision of the world, modern teachers strive to create a pedagogical environment which is suitable for joint learning and life of both children and adults (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). According to the research conducted by Beynona and Harfield (2007), children's actions, which adults often interpret as expressions of their curiosity, are based on intrapersonal processes or inner motivation, which, in turn, is dependent on children's interactions with their environment. Children internalize only those activities and ideas that are related to their immediate environment, which Beynona and Harfield (2007) call "stable knowledge", and which are related to social context. According to Bowers (2005), internalized constructs affect different aspects of personality, and, together with the system of knowledge, also affect the system of values.

By Understanding Their Role in the Educational Process, Teachers Achieve Professional Autonomy

The quality of the pedagogical environment, which includes a spatial, material, temporal, and social dimension (Petrović-Sočo, 2007), depends on the level of teachers' autonomy. Autonomy gives teachers the freedom and responsibility to adjust the educational process to the needs, abilities, and zones of actual and proximal development of children. An autonomous teacher organizes the educational environment and equipment so that they fit the current model of children's activities, allow reflection on children's activities, and create conditions for children's learning at the target level. In order to achieve this, the teacher needs to be qualified, and attempt to establish dialogue with children about their activities, carry out high-quality, dynamic social relationships, and co-construct kindergarten culture based on mutual respect between children and other teachers and professional associates. The modern teacher actively shares collaborative roles and is the agent of change (Šagud, 2007). The teacher is focused on the child and creates a pedagogical environment that allows children to participate.

Isenberg and Jalongo (1997) list the following five criteria that characterize quality spatial organization of the modern teacher:

(1) free movement of children in space;

(2) supporting children's activities without the teacher's direct interference;

(3) simultaneous children's activities;

(4) availability of materials in a space that is organized from the child's perspective;

(5) existence of a modern space that allows children's activities to develop without confrontations.

The success of the criteria listed above is predicated on the autonomy of teachers and their personality traits. Modern, autonomous teachers approach the child as an active explorer, and co-construct a social relationship and quality interaction between children, as well as between adults and children, in a pedagogical environment with spatial and material dimensions. High-quality social relationships allow the teacher, as an active researcher, to observe the activities of the child and support children's theories, as well as socially acceptable means of expressing their personal initiatives and perspectives. By observing, documenting, and reflecting on children's activities with other children, teachers, and professional associates, the modern teacher starts with a mutual respect and understanding of children, promotes collaboration with other children and adults, and creates the basis for a new theoretical level of knowledge, self-awareness, and reflection on educational practice through mutual cooperation. Seeing events in different ways helps create a "transforming dialogue" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 10). Such dialogue can transform relationships and therefore, in a way, professional and group identities as well (Rinaldi, 2006). Transformation means converting one of the values of understanding, opinions, forms, and meanings, to another. Through dialogue, the modern teacher changes and develops in both a cognitive and affective way. Olsson (2009) states that the development of teachers depends on how much they follow and understand children's activities. An excellent teacher understands that a child's approach to a given problem differs from his/her own and can change the environment by changing his/her perception and understanding of the child. In this way, the teacher changes the relationship and nature of communication with the child, which s/he models directly or indirectly. Through this dynamic process of pedagogical practice, the teacher focuses on the quality of the overall interaction relations, which are of great importance and almost crucial for the quality of the educational process. According to Rinaldi (2006, p. 63), it is important to not only "understand subjects but also their behaviour, the links that connect them, their ways of interaction, the areas in which they are situated and operating, the power that keeps them together and apart, and their constant change and transformation". In order to develop a more objective understanding of others, it is necessary to notice and understand "the links that connect them, their ways of interaction" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 31), which allows us to understand their behaviour. Furthermore, this presupposes understanding on an inner level, meaning that when observing others, we recognize and become aware of

the similarities and differences between us; that awareness then promotes objectivity of observation and understanding.

Equality of power among participants enables mutual development, while power dominance creates processes of control and stems from doubts of one's abilities and potentials. A mutual relationship between all participants in the educational process "affects the total environment in which children live and points to the educational potential of the institution of early education" (Petrović-Sočo, 2007, p. 97). Although the meaning of interaction between children and adults has previously been neglected, modern pedagogical theory and practice recognize the fact that the teacher's understanding and acceptance of children's activities enables the child to develop a practical understanding of social context. The modern teacher sub-constructs the educational process as an environment of both teachers and children, which is varied, dynamic, and flexible, and presents a prerequisite for high-quality social relations (Miljak, 2009).

All participants are expected to apply their theoretical (conceptual) knowledge in practice and be theorists in action because, as Šagud (2007, p. 7) points out, "the child's activities, the conditions in which they take place, the amount of their initiative and autonomy, and the overall social and emotional, intellectual and physical development in general depend on the teacher".

The Educational Process: Immanent Communication and Encounter between Children and Teachers

The nature of communication between teachers and children reveals their implicit pedagogy. Childhood is a space of mutual social construction of children and adults. When it comes to the expression and actual positioning of the child in the process of growing up, a higher or lower level of disharmony between the concept of childhood (the image of the child, the normative models of the child, and growing up) and childhood practices is possible. It is generally known that the child is the subject of his/her own development and a unique and self-actualizing agent whose explorations, and active and engaged nature present a strong generator of forward movement. The child's striving for autonomy creates possible ambiguities in the positioning of adults within the context of the child's life.

Early- and preschool- age children have limited interaction potential so the role of teachers (supported by rich and appropriate communication situations) is to help expand their repertoire of interaction strategies.

From a modern perspective, kindergartens are educational institutions aimed at creating a material and social environment that best suits children's needs. Therefore, as Ljubetić (2009) points out, increasing importance is being placed on the nature of communication in educational activities, its focus, and intentionality. The quality of teachers' communication during activities with children reveals their implicit pedagogy, dominated by a specific image of the child, which guides

their actions. Implicit teachers' attitudes (which they are often insufficiently aware of) towards children of early or preschool age can be decoded from their verbal (and especially non-verbal) communication with the child. General guidelines for successful communication should also be used while working with children. "Social interventions of teachers, structure, focus, and the frequency of communication situations demonstrates the (often hierarchical) positioning of different actors in the interaction episodes" (Šagud, 2015, p. 93). Slunjski (2008, p. 16) lists the characteristics and criteria of good communication, stating that it, among other things, takes place in a situation in which "the teacher does not claim, does not analyse, and does not underestimate a child's testimony, nor impose his/her own explanations. The teacher does not ask but rather discovers and explores together with the child". According to Bruner (1980), the teacher is the child's guide on the road to understanding and discovering the world that surrounds him/her.

Modern pedagogy encourages children to engage in stand-alone activities in a stimulating environment and interact with that environment. According to Šagud (2015), successful cooperation between the child and teacher on children's activities occurs when the teacher is there to subtly enrich the child's activities, thus creating a productive environment for learning and development. Spontaneous, natural learning is created by stimulating communication with the child's environment. Commenting on children's activities, explaining, evaluating, motivating, and showing enthusiasm that stems from the communication gives children feedback about the significance of the activities they are engaged in. As Slunjski (2008) points out, teachers adjust their communication to each child, depending on his/her perspective and level of development, precisely because a unified approach to learning is considered to be inappropriate:

> The involvement of teachers in children's activities definitely needs to be realized in a way that does not compromise the children's authorship of their own activities. In fact, even after the teacher's inclusion, children's activities should remain children's activities. Teachers' intervention that threatens the authorship of their activities is not desirable. (Slunjski, 2008, p. 97)

Successful communication is communication that directs the child towards a problem and its solution, creates spaces to engage in discussions with each individual child, and encourages them to actively listen. According to Vygotsky (1996), children who are taught together as part of a collective and work together to find solutions, over time develop the ability to independently overcome obstacles and solve various situations in which they might find themselves. They act by helping each other, finding solutions to problematic situations, and developing action strategies. In his social-constructivist theory, Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of culture and language, and claims that children need to understand, communicate, and explore in the context of the environment in which they grow up. Precisely because of these insights which suggest that the child learns most efficiently and most naturally in an environment

with other children and adults, kindergartens should promote the inclusion of children of different ages or heterogeneous groups of children. Children learn together in a natural way via various activities; they develop social skills, with each individual child performing his/her own role and contributing in his/her own way. Through his/her involvement in children's activities, the teacher can indirectly influence their learning and development in a significant way.

The teacher's attitude, belief in children, and expectations directly affect children's learning. Furthermore, the role of the teacher is to enrich the environment in order to motivate the child to learn and explore. "For educational practitioners it is believed to be the key to designing a learning environment which provides opportunities for active participation and the formation of knowledge and sense, based on personal experience, social negotiation, and mediation" (Babić, 2007, p. 225). A prerequisite for successful communication with children of early or preschool age is congruence in communication, the ability to clearly express meanings that are being transmitted during communication. Communication congruence refers to the meaning agreement between the sender and the receiver of the message – in this case, between teachers and children. Simply viewing the child as a reasonable creature and structuring communication in accordance with this image allows the development of his/her autonomy (Miljak, 1999).

Teacher communication that supports children's needs or potentials enriches the current context of their activities, supports their ideas, and encourages them to develop new ones. Identifying children's potentials and fostering an image of the child free of preconceptions about what s/he can become encourages the child to develop a positive self-image. In connection to this, Miljak (1999) stresses that the way adults communicate directly reflects their images or theories about the child. The support we give children builds their confidence. The same author says that only autonomous teachers can influence the development of autonomy in children, because such teachers provide the child with understanding and respect, and respect him/her as a conscious participant in communication.

Instead of a Conclusion

Traditional emphasis on keeping children's activities away from adults implies that children are alienated from their immediate interests, while priority is given to learning outcomes. In such a traditionally understood relationship between children and adults, the meaning of children's activities is placed outside children, into separated and de-contextualized learning and teaching sessions. Considering the position of adults in a child's life, two ends of one continuum are confronted: emancipation versus paternalism, freedom versus leading, self-initiating and self-organizing activities versus didacticism and instruments of direct instruction (so-called instructional pedagogy).

The current perception of the modern role of teachers is marked by uncertainty. Doubts regarding the relationship with children – whether it is better to lead them

or leave them to their own devices – is evident in both theory and practice. This is particularly pronounced in the complete shutdown of some roles (leading, instructing, guidance, etc.) and their characterization as traditional and outdated. Extinguishing and de-contextualizing individual roles can reduce the role adults play in the process of education to a dangerous degree. Rinaldi (2006) highlights the fact that the image of a competent child exists in cooperation with a teacher who supports, promotes, and guides his/her physical and social development.

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Pozicioniranje suvremenog odgojitelja u pedagogijskoj teoriji i praksi

Sažetak

U ontogenetskom razvoju dijete je jedinstveno i specifično biće, osim osobnom biografijom definirano i generalnim društvenim vizijama i vrijednostima. U tom smislu važno je stajalište Vygotskog (1996) kojim se nastoji potvrditi teza o tijesnoj povezanosti kulturno-povijesnog konteksta u kojem djeca žive s nekim, djetetu i djetinjstvu svojstvenim, aktivnostima ili tempom i kvalitetom napredovanja.

Nove socijalne studije djetinjstva (bilo da su iz povijesne ili društvene perspektive) i prevladavajući koncept djetinjstva pokazao je da živote djece oblikuju socijalna i kulturna očekivanja odraslih. Ne smije se zanemariti slika djetinjstva kao kritičkog razdoblja koje predstavlja uske "prozore" vremena u kojem je određeni dio tijela najosjetljiviji na odsustvo podražaja (deprivacija) ili na utjecaj iz okoline (obogaćena sredina).

U radu će se problematizirati neke kontradikcije i neprihvatljive tendencije koje se javljaju u interpretiranju i implementiranju suvremene paradigme ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja na područje pedagoške prakse. Analiza će se posebno odnositi na poziciju odgojitelja u procesu dječjih aktivnosti s aspekta djetetova učenja i razvoja. Procjena o konkretnom pozicioniranju unutar dinamičnog praktičnog područja odraz je aktualnih osobnih i stručnih kompetencija i cjelokupnog profesionalnog habitusa odgojitelja.

Ključne riječi: *odgojitelj; predškolski kurikul; rani i predškolski odgoj i obrazovanje.*