



Elements of Adult-Centrism in the Educational Practice of Kindergartens

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Abstract: The quality of educational work with children is determined by understanding children and the quality of communication and relationships with children. In kindergarten practice, there are often elements of adult-centric practice, focused on adults instead of children. These elements are noticeable at the level of planning and implementation of educational activities, shaping the spatial and material context of kindergartens, understanding the role of teachers in educational activities with children and analyzing educational activities. They reduce or prevent opportunities for the development of participatory practice, i.e. they prevent children from enjoying their participation rights in the selection of activities, the manner of participating in activities, the duration of activities, the selection of partners (teammates) and the like. Or in other words, they thwart their opportunity to co-construct the curriculum, which is characteristic of modern preschool curricula. Teachers are trained in different ways to recognize the elements of adult-centrism in educational work. However, their willingness to recognize these elements also depends on the kindergarten where they work, i.e. on the culture within the kindergarten. Kindergartens that carry out continuous, exploratory, reflective, discussion-oriented professional development of teachers are much less adult-centric than kindergartens that do not have such training. The paper presents qualitative research carried out in kindergartens where professional student practice is performed.

Keywords: Adult-centrism, educational practice, participation rights, teacher

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational work with children is complex and multi-layered, and its quality largely depends on the quality of relationships and mutual understanding of the subjects participating in the process. Compared to adults, children have different experiences, understandings, perceptions and ways of communicating, but also a different status and different rights. These rights are often minimized, which leads to greater or lesser disenfranchisement of children, which can be considered a consequence of ageist society. It does not recognize children as persons whose words should mean something or who should have an influence on their own lives because, given their age, they are usually at the bottom of the hierarchy (Abood, 2009). Such an approach is sometimes called **adultism** and **adult-centrism** and is described as the tendency of adults to look at children and their problems from the biased perspective of adults, thus creating obstacles to effective practice with children (Petr, 1992).

1.1. Literature review

The essence of **adult-centrism** is insufficient respect for children, i.e. younger people, because they are considered less important and inferior to adults (Bell, 2003). For this reason, they are not taken seriously and are not included in decision-making in the community where they live. Something can be considered **adult-centrism** if it involves a consistent pattern of disrespecting children that can result in undermining their self-confidence and self-esteem, developing feelings of worthlessness, increasing feelings of powerlessness, experiencing not being taken seriously, growing negative self-concept, increasing destructive and self-destructive behavior, and feeling unloved, or undesired (Bell, *ibid*). In a society that advocates freedom and democracy, Meredith (2009) points out, oppressive treatment of children is unacceptable and unforgivable. Such behavior during the educational process is recognizable by seeing children as passive objects that are subject to the authority and control of

adults. In order to deviate from it, Meredith (2009) points out, it is necessary to adopt the philosophy that children can and should become participative members of the community who have their own dignity, because it is precisely opportunities for active participation that preserve the child's dignity (Chawla, 2001). Today, almost all over the world, it is emphasized that children are considered equal citizens of the community, which is why numerous governments have adopted strategies necessary to "respect the needs of young people for space, autonomy and meaningful participation" (Abood, 2009, 5). Children's participation is also regulated by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* from 1989, which defines children as active participants in their lives and environment and as protagonists of their own rights. However, the formal acceptance of the *Convention* in itself does not remove the **protectionist approach to children**, which is still dominant and has different forms and different intensities. The **protectionist approach to children** significantly inhibits the opportunities for the development of children's autonomy. This approach is the result of the perception of children as vulnerable subjects who primarily need protection because they are recognized only as "citizens in the future" or "adults in the making" (Torres 2009), which largely ignores the current position and opportunities of children in their family, kindergarten or school community. Such an understanding of children results in practices that encourage children's passivity and non-engagement and prevent them from developing their civic (and other) competencies and gaining the experience of democratic living. Such practices are difficult to abandon because they find their justification in a multitude of different arguments based on established patterns of dominance and control of adults over children.

Gleeson and Sipe (2006) claim that the perception of a child as a vulnerable being encourages adults to exaggerate the risks of various situations and activities of children over which they have no control and thus ensures legitimacy of their interventions that often violate the basic rights and dignity of children. These interventions and overall practice reflect the fundamental belief that adults have the moral authority to control children (Delgado, according to Abood 2009) due to their inherent belief that by being adults they are the ultimate experts on children and their abilities, which gives them the right to act on children without their consent (Bell, according to Abood 2009).

An adult-centric and protectionist approach is most often the result of a limited understanding of children, which results in the denial of various children's rights, including the children's right to participation. Children's right to participation includes their right to express their perspective, the right to be heard in matters that concern them, and the right to have their opinions and perspectives taken seriously. Some studies (e.g. Pettersson, 2014) show that the level of participation and influence of children coincides to a significant extent with the level of their **freedom**. This freedom requires an adult's non-controlling approach and giving up any form of manipulation over children. In the aforementioned study, Pettersson (ibid.) states that adults often declaratively advocate children's participation but limit it only to certain areas or to certain situations. However, children do not always remain in the positions assigned to them in terms of the right to participation. Instead, they often seek and find ways to break the established boundaries.

The idea of the need and value of children's active participation in different cultures varies (Kjørholt, 2004); therefore, the opportunities for their participation in democratic decision-making that concern them also vary. Different cultures are not only the cultures of certain countries, but also the culture of each educational institution and even each educational group. Each kindergarten has its own specific culture, i.e. its authentic "blood chart" that determines what is possible in its practice at a certain moment and what is considered acceptable. Modern preschool curricula, including the NCECEC (National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care) (2015), which entered into force in the Republic of Croatia in 2015, emphasize the importance of active participation of children in the planning, design and even evaluation of the educational process and curriculum.

In practice, children's participation is often reduced to encouraging children to express their views, which is then equated with Lindgren and Halldén's participatory practice (according to Pettersson, 2014). However, there is a long and demanding road from encouraging children to express their opinions to truly understanding children and their points of view, and an even longer one to a practice in which their points of view are taken into account. In the practices of many kindergartens, children are asked for their opinion only formally, thus ending their participation rights (Slunjski, 2020). A good understanding of children is not a self-evident category, i.e. a skill that adults possess simply by being adults, not even if they are professional teachers. It is a skill that requires effort to achieve and

for which it is necessary to develop certain tools that proponents of the Reggio philosophy call *Listening to the Child* (Edwards et al., 1998; Malaguzzi, 1998; Gandini, 1998; Rinaldi, 2002 and others). Under *Listening to the Child* they mean the active engagement of the teacher in achieving a good understanding of the interests, individually different developmental needs and opportunities of the child, the child's cognitive strategies and learning styles, intelligence profile, existing knowledge and understanding, modalities and quality of communication with others, creative and other potentials, etc. The educational procedures of teachers and curricula based on a good understanding of the child are not focused on learning content but on the children themselves, and those that start from the child and are only "framed" by the teacher are considered the best. This is how the Reggio curriculum is determined (Edwards et al., 1998; Malaguzzi, 1998; Gandini, 1998; Rinaldi, 2002 and others). The curriculum understood in this way puts the child and their participation and other rights in the foreground, particularly stressing the role of the teacher that refers to their willingness to ensure these rights to the child on a daily basis. The child's participation rights represent the basis for planning the educational environment for the development of activities, where children have the greatest influence on its shaping. Therefore, the central competence of the teacher in the design of the *Reggio curriculum* is considered to be their ability to *listen to the child* with quality.

The level of children's participation can change, i.e. grow according to the level of democratization of the entire educational process that an individual teacher or kindergarten manages to achieve at a certain moment. However, within a kindergarten or educational group, many different and often contradictory things can be considered as children's participation. In this sense, different levels of children's participation are brought under the same common denominator. Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan (according to Pettersson, 2014) claim that children's participation is sometimes interpreted only as their presence in an activity, other times as their active participation in an activity that, however, was decided by the teacher, while sometimes participation necessarily implies the influence of children to decide on the activity itself, i.e. the educational process. The mentioned authors do not consider presence, participation and influence to be equivalent terms, pointing out that participation includes presence, but none of these by themselves imply influence. Emilson and Johansson (2009) highlight three values associated with democracy in the communication between teachers and children: participation, influence and negotiation.

The possibilities of children influencing the shaping of the educational process and curriculum could be considered one of the most relevant criteria for the comparative analysis of the official curricula of certain countries, i.e. the analysis of the quality of their educational practice. In the most developed practices, children become co-creators of the educational process and co-constructors of the curriculum (Slunjski, 2011). In this context, children in kindergarten have the opportunity to enjoy their participation rights but also to contribute to the development of the quality of educational practice and curriculum. They are not only capable of understanding the environment (e.g. kindergarten) in which they live, but they are even more capable than adults. They can better understand the extent to which this environment is a function of children's lives because they know their own, specific needs best (Abood, 2009). In the segment of ensuring the participation rights of children, specially developed practices were achieved in the world-famous Italian Reggio curriculum (Edwards et al., 1998, Malaguzzi, 1998; Rinaldi, 2006; Edwards, 2012; Hawkins, 2012) and the New Zealand TeWhariki curriculum (TeWhariki, Ministry of Education, 2017; Carr, 2005, 2011).

Understanding and abandoning adult-centric practices cannot be achieved without thoroughly questioning the relationships and the redistribution of power in adult-child relationships, i.e. repositioning the authority of adults. This can be a big problem because it is established in our culture that power mainly belongs to adults, while children only have as much power as the adults are willing to "give" them. And related to that, the concepts of education, socialization and the like, tacitly start from the inequality and asymmetry of the adult-child relationship, where the former is most often understood as a subject, teacher, manager, and the latter as an object, product or result of that process. In order to overcome this problem, Nenadić (2011, 22-23) points out, "it is necessary to study the world of childhood not only as a product of socialization and learning from adults, but also as an autonomous sociocultural reality, a kind of subculture that has its own language, structure, functions, even traditions". In this sense, the said author points out, the adult's task is "to feel the world of a child from the inside, because children live in the world of adults but according to their own laws, as asylum seekers or as in a reserve." (ibid., 23). Adults should, therefore, redirect their pedagogical

authority from what they "should do" with a child in the process of upbringing, towards discovering, understanding and supporting what the child is in their essence, with the awareness that the quality of this support depends more on how adults understand the child, than how the child understands them.

2. METHODOLOGY

During the research, we wanted to establish to what extent and in what ways the elements of adult-centrism are represented in the educational practice of kindergartens, to what extent teachers are trained to recognize adult-centric features of practice in their educational work, and whether adult-centrism is a dominant feature of the institution or the work of an individual teacher. In this sense, we asked three research questions:

Research questions:

1. Are there elements of adult-centrism in the educational practice of kindergartens and what are its most common forms?
2. To what extent are teachers trained to recognize the adult-centric characteristics of their educational work?
3. Is adult-centrism a predominant characteristic of kindergarten culture or the practice of an individual teacher?

To obtain answers to the research questions, we adopted a qualitative methodology, and we used direct observation of the educational practice, analysis of their notes (daily evaluations) and joint discussions with teachers to analyze the recordings of educational activities. We directly observed the educational practice during the morning hours and recorded certain segments of the educational process with a video camera and analyzed them in joint meetings with the teachers, which we held once a week. We used the teachers' diaries, in which they record their daily observations and evaluation of educational activities, in order to gain insight into the way in which they themselves interpret their work in relation to other employees of the same institution. And finally, how their analyses, i.e. evaluations, are related to the way they reflect and shape the educational process.

3 kindergartens and 24 teachers were involved in the research. The selected kindergartens differ in the quality of educational practice, which we were previously familiar with, because they are where students from the Department of Pedagogy of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb perform their student practice.

3. FINDINGS / RESULTS

During the research we established:

1. Adult-centric practice is present and has several typical manifestations in the kindergartens included in the research.
2. Teachers' ability to recognize adult-centric characteristics of educational work varies greatly, individually and at the kindergarten level.
3. Teachers' ability to recognize adult-centric characteristics of educational work varies greatly, individually and at the kindergarten level.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the direct observation of teachers in educational activities with children, we observed different examples of adult-centric practice. It is more pronounced in some kindergartens and with some teachers and less pronounced with others. However, where it exists, it is noticeable at the level of planning and implementation of educational activities, shaping the spatial and material context of kindergartens, understanding the role of teachers in educational activities with children, and analyzing educational activities. In other words, in all segments of their educational practice (Table 1).

Table1. Elements of adult-centrism in different segments of educational practice

No.	Segments of the educational practice	Elements of adult-centrism
1.	Planning and carrying out educational activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Minimizing the influence of children on the selection of content and development of activities (the teacher plans the children's activities) *Uniformity of children's activities (the teacher methodically shapes children's activities in a stereotypical way) *Physical uniforming of children (during the activity everyone wears a hat or a paper flower) *Disregarding children's expressive capacities (the teacher shows children how to draw, act) *A lot of uniforming (the result of all children's activities is the same) *Not paying enough attention to understand the meaning that activities have for children, always analyzed from an adult's perspective *Insufficient understanding of the value of children's self-organized activities (overestimating the direct management of children's activities by teachers)
	Shaping the spatial-material context of the kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Scarce and restrictive spatial and material environment (lack of materials for play and learning) *Inaccessibility of materials to children (the teacher decides which materials the children can use) *Existence of a large, empty space in the center of the room (intended to work with all children at the same time) *Excessively didactic activity materials (neglecting materials for free play and other self-organized activities of children)
	Understanding the role of the teacher in educational activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Plenty of direct teaching of content to children (focused on memorization and reproduction) *Dominant frontal form of work (neglecting interactions and discussions between children) *Teacher's dominance (communication with children from a position of power and unequal relations) *Imposing one-dimensional ways of thinking on children and insisting on "correct" answers (insensitivity to different perspectives of children)
	Teacher's observations and the evaluation of educational activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Observations and analysis are often focused on the content and result of the activity and not the process and quality of the children's experience (e.g. "We planted plants", "We learned a song", "We baked bread") *Emphasized infantilization of children in the description of their activities, for example ("Little chefs", "Little painters") *Identifying one's own emotional experience with the children's experience (e.g. "We enjoyed ourselves today", "They were delighted") *Analysis of children's activities is often written in the plural (insensitivity to the individual contribution of children)

Considering the above, we conclude that elements of adult-centric practice can be present at the level of planning and implementation of educational activities, shaping the spatial and material context of kindergartens, understanding the role of teachers in educational activities with children and analyzing educational activities.

The analysis of notes with teachers' observations about the quality of educational activities (Table 2) and the analysis of videos from their educational practice (Table 3) showed that they interpret certain activities very differently, even when they are employed in the same kindergarten and even in the same educational group. In other words, they show a completely different willingness to recognize the elements of adult-centric practice in educational work. We have noticed that the quality of the teachers' notes and evaluation is also recognizable by whether they use photo-records, in what function they use them and how they interpret them later. A higher level of quality is recognizable by the photo-records that show the way in which children participate in activities and indicate the possible benefits of these activities for children. Lower-quality photo-records mostly have only a decorative meaning and focus on the fact that the children are doing something, as a testimony of the fact that they are working at all.

Table 2. Analysis of teachers' notes on educational activities with children in joint discussions with teachers

No.	Teacher's note	Interpretation of the teacher's note (T) from kindergartens A, B and C (KA, KB and KC)
1.	"Today we worked hard."	<p>T1-KA: "This note indicates that the teacher has a poor understanding of the activity carried out with the children. Children do not enter the activity or engage in it because they are "hardworking" in the sense that adults understand "being hardworking", which is to persist in something that requires a certain sacrifice or effort in order to achieve a previously set goal."</p> <p>T2-KA: "Participation in activities for children represents fulfillment and not renunciation. The meaning of activities for children is in the process itself and not in the result to which the activity should lead."</p> <p>T4-KC: "Nowhere does the teacher describe what the children did, what meaning the activity had for them, what they thought, whether they cooperated with each other, etc. Their general and imprecise praise of the children means that the children participated in that activity (more or less formally, more or less engaged, more or less motivated)."</p>
2.	„We planted today”.	<p>T4-KC: The note is stated in the plural, in the first person plural, which speaks of insufficient dedication of the teacher to each child individually, i.e. to their individually different needs, interests and ways of participating in the activity.</p> <p>T5-KC: The teacher is dedicated to the ecological education of children, which is positive and educationally valuable.</p> <p>T11-KB: A general and collective observation actually means that the children achieved the previously outlined plan of the teacher, which the teacher subsequently identified with the activity carried out.</p>
3.	"The children really enjoyed the activity."	<p>T7-KA: The note reflects a general impression, based on the teacher's intention and not on careful observation and good understanding of the children. The note does not reveal what the children did, how long the activity lasted, or how many children participated in the activity. It is difficult, and rather pretentious, to conclude that everyone enjoyed themselves.</p> <p>T8-KC: The teacher generalizes the children's experiences instead of describing them concretely and individually.</p> <p>T9-KB: The teacher considers positive emotions of children in activities as important.</p>
4.	"The children used various stones of white gray tones with interesting designs and produced strings and compositions".*	<p>T10-KA The teacher understands the value of open materials that allow children to vary the ways of arranging them, i.e. to rearrange them continuously. The process of creation is important to the teacher, not the final result of the activity.</p> <p>T11-KB The activity is very interesting.</p>

*This teacher's note was accompanied by photographs of the activity.

By analyzing the recordings of the joint discussion with teachers (appendix 2), we noticed that teachers interpret educational activities with children differently. However, Kindergarten A teachers interpret educational activities differently and are differently sensitive to recognizing adult-centric elements of the practice. In Kindergarten B, teachers interpret the quality of educational activities similarly, with the majority not recognizing the elements of adult-centric practice, even though it is abundantly present in their kindergarten. In Kindergarten C, teachers interpret educational activities similarly, expressing a great sensitivity for recognizing elements of adult-centric practice.

Table3. Analysis of recordings of educational activities

Type of activity and children's age	Interpretations of teachers' recordings (from kindergartens A, B and C)
Children's research activity with vegetables, managed by the teacher (children aged 4-5 years)	<p>T14-KA: "The teacher is focused on "processing the content" and not on the children and their interests. The activity itself seems stereotypical and predictable."</p> <p>T2-KA: "The activity is methodically structured in a way that is typical for a school and not a kindergarten (introductory part, elaboration of the topic, main part, final part)."</p> <p>T13-KB: "The activity is well thought out and structured. It has great educational value."</p>
Children's art activity on the topic of vegetables, managed by the teacher (children aged 4-5 years)	<p>T2-KA: "Children's crafts are similar and contain many uniform representations of vegetables."</p> <p>T5-KC: "Children demonstrated creativity and well-developed grapho-motoric skills."</p> <p>T9-KB: "Children presented the given plant beautifully."</p> <p>T13-KC: "The incentive for artistic activity, as well as the offered technique, are adapted to the children's chronological age."</p>
Didactic play for the development of mathematical skills, managed by the teacher (children aged 4-6 years)	<p>T11-KB: "Children use the offered material in accordance with their chronological age."</p> <p>T5-KC: "The children played nicely and learned many new things."</p> <p>T2-KA: "The activity was not in line with the children's various developmental levels."</p>

The research showed that kindergarten teachers interpret educational activities in very different ways and that their willingness to recognize elements of adult-centric practice (in their own and others') educational work is different. In Kindergarten A, teachers interpret educational activities in a similar way and show a high level of readiness to recognize elements of adult-centrism. In that kindergarten, the elements of adult-centrism are significantly less present in the educational work with children. In Kindergarten B, teachers interpret educational activities in a similar way, but show an extremely low level of readiness to recognize elements of adult-centrism. In Kindergarten C, there are big differences in the willingness of teachers to recognize adult-centered practices.

A comparison of the different segments of the practice of a certain teacher showed a fair degree of uniformity. It has been shown that there is a great connection between the way a certain teacher plans and implements educational activities, shapes the spatial and material context of the kindergarten, understands their own role in educational activities with children and analyzes educational activities. Teachers who manage to overcome adult-centric practice usually succeed in all segments of their work. On the other hand, teachers who fail to overcome certain elements of adult-centrism in their practice, usually cannot overcome all other elements of such practice either. However, the research showed that they are more prominent among some teachers of Kindergarten C, present among almost all teachers of Kindergarten B, and least present in the practice of teachers of Kindergarten A. From this, we draw the conclusion that in terms of adult-centeredness there are individual differences from teacher to teacher, but also that the kindergarten itself has an influence on the existence, i.e., the frequency of occurrence of elements of adult-centric practice. The non-uniformity of the practice of teachers in the same kindergarten is related to the culture of the kindergarten, and in particular to the

quality of their professional development, which is visible in kindergartens B and C. In kindergarten A, where systematic, research and reflective professional development is nurtured, and where teachers regularly discuss their educational work, the differences in the practice of individual teachers are significantly smaller, as is the presence of elements of adult-centric practice.

5. CONCLUSION

Adult-centric features of educational practice have different manifestations, but they are most pronounced in the segment of planning and implementation of educational activities, shaping the spatial and material context of kindergartens, understanding the role of teachers in educational activities with children and analysis of educational activities. Teachers who manage to overcome adult-centric practice usually succeed in all segments of their work. On the other hand, teachers who fail to overcome certain elements of adult-centrism in their practice, usually cannot overcome all other segments of adult-centrism either.

Teachers are not equally qualified to recognize the adult-centric features of their own educational practice, which means that they are not equally ready to deconstruct, i.e. change, such practice. This is because the teacher can change, i.e. improve, only those segments of their own practice that they recognize and interpret as low-quality. There is considerable unevenness in the practices of teachers within the same kindergarten, which indicates the need to empower teachers to discuss their educational work and to build a common vision of kindergarten development in the direction that leads to the elimination of adult-centrism. The quality of the kindergarten which demonstrated higher quality in all segments of educational practice than the other two kindergartens, testifies to exactly this.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The professional development of teachers in kindergarten which demonstrated higher quality in all segments of educational practice is to the greatest extent focused on the continuity of joint analyses of teachers' work, i.e. on the culture of discussing educational practice and on the continuity of improvement of that practice. This indicates the need to empower teachers to discuss their educational work and to build a common vision of kindergarten development in the direction that leads to the elimination of adult-centrism. In other words, to orient themselves to better forms of professional training that will enable them to jointly develop child-oriented educational practice.

7. LIMITATIONS

The potential for the development of new competences by the teacher in this sense, is mostly determined by their readiness to question and discuss their own opinions, understanding and perspectives with colleagues. The level of the teacher's competences is also subject to change, i.e., it can be developed through certain types of professional education aimed at developing research and reflective abilities.

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