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THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Abstract

The paper addresses Serbian preschool education Curriculum Framework as one of dimensions of the preschool education quality. The first part of paper deals with the importance of preschool education worldwide as a social responsibility and its accountability in education policy. The second part provides the evaluation of the preschool education curriculum framework based on the analyses of the internal inter-connection of the documents content. The analysis used the criteria identified as the indicators of the quality of preschool education worldwide. The results show the discord between preschool education curriculum framework in Serbia and the characteristics of high quality contemporary preschool education programs. Therefore, an initial step in the recommendations for the reconsideration of the quality of the preschool education curriculum framework would be reaching consensus on the values and theories underpinning preschool education.

Key words: quality of the preschool education curriculum framework, cross-national curriculum analysis, purpose of preschool education

Introduction

The education policies recognize the preschool education curriculum framework as an important dimension of preschool education quality (Bennett, 2008; OECD, 2006). In Bennett's study on the indicators of the preschool education quality, curriculum framework is among the fifteen presented indicators (Bennett, 2008).

The relevant literature (Bennett, 2008; Bertrand, 2007; Bertrand & Pascal, 2002; OECD, 2004; Oberhuemer, 2005; Taguma et al, 2012) gives the following reasons for paying particular attention to the preschool education curriculum frameworks in today's world:

- Contribution to recognizing early childhood as the foundation of lifelong learning and an important resource for the development of a learning society;
- They are viewed as the necessary measure on the national level and as the indicator of the public responsibility for the entire education system;
- They become the framework for the quality and equality in fulfilling each child's right to education and within the education;
- They are a precondition to ensure the continuity in preschool and school education;
- They are the framework for the development and realization of the programs in practice;
- They contribute to sharing common goals and understanding of preschool education among the different stakeholders;
- They point out the importance of organizing preschool education in line with neuroscience research.

The Serbian National Preschool Education Curriculum Framework was adopted in 2006 (Ministry of Education and Sports of the Republic of Serbia, 2006). The document on the Preschool Education Curriculum Framework consists of three parts: The Curriculum Framework of care and education of children aged between 6 months and 3 years; The Curriculum Framework of education of children between 3 years and the beginning of school preparation; the school preparation program. This paper analyses the Curriculum Framework for children aged between 3 years until the age of the enrolment into the school preparation program. It has two program documents: Model A and Model B.

Methodology

We have used the method of content analysis. The content of Model A and Model B were used to analyse internal inter-connection within these documents. The analysis was done according to the categories determined in the analysis of the seventeen (17) preschool education curricula frameworks in the study “Analysis of Curriculum/Learning Frameworks for the Early Years (Birth to Age 8)” which gives the key dimensions of preschool education curricula quality (Wilks et al, 2008). Given the length of this paper, we present only some segments of analysis grouped in the four categories with two analysis criteria in each of them:

1. Understanding that the picture of a child influences the relations with that child and the kind of experience we provide for children (child as the right bearer; child as powerful and competent);
2. Understanding the nature of child development and learning (oriented to wellbeing, belonging and building relations; the environment stimulating inquiry based learning);
3. Understanding the importance of collaboration and partnership (empowering children, family and community; preschool teacher as a co-constructor in learning);
4. Understanding the relation of learning and teaching (intertwining learning, teaching and assessment; quality of preschool teacher work). The units of analysis were the larger text units expressing one characteristic, statement or value attitude.

Data Analysis and Discussion

1. Picture of a child

Child as the rights holder. In high quality programs, the child is accepted as the rights holder. The articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child particularly stipulate – child has right to its own opinion and the right to be involved in making decisions on the issues important in his/her education. The Convention also clearly stipulates the responsibility of adults in supporting children to fulfil their rights and learn about the rights of others. The quality programs operationalize the ways of listening to the children and the ways of aligning daily kindergarten practice with listening to children, their choices, participation and decisions (McLachlan et al, 2010). The data analysis shows that Model A focuses more on the developmental needs than on child rights. In this model, the child has only partial and particular rights determined by the developmental and individual

needs and interests reduced to a free choice of offered activities, materials and tasks s/he can master (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 36).

The text of Model B states only 'the rights of a child to the adequate care, protection and quality education' without their further elaboration in the program (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 45). Model B sees the child as a being in the process of reaching the rights to something at an older age.

Child as powerful and competent. The quality programs (e.g. TeWariki; Aistear; Being, belonging, becoming; The Practice of Relationships;...) see the child as powerful and competent according to his/her capacities comprised of his/her strengths and developmental supports. The Serbian Curriculum Framework models do not share such a view of the child's power and competence. Data show that Model A determines child power on the basis of his/her developmental characteristics, needs and limitation, i.e. 'modest logical analytical apparatus; perceptive focus on the context; difficulties with abstracting...' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 26).

Model B views a child as powerless and in a deficit regarding the mature personality of a human being having all preconditions for the development of a mature human personality, a being yet to become 'a personality with permanent characteristics' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 50).

2. Understanding the nature of child's development and learning

Focus on wellbeing, belonging and building relationships. The reasons why the quality programs address the concept of wellbeing lie on a holistic perception of a child and an understanding of learning as the social process in which it is important that child feels secure, accepted by adults and peers and supported in developing peer identity and belonging to the community. In the programs assessed as the quality ones, a child is viewed from the socio-cultural approach which puts forth the importance of the relationships and the environment as the integral part of the development. Here, the environment is not seen as opposite to or outside development (Krnjaja & Pavlović Breneselović, 2013). Both models of Serbian Curriculum Framework view the child through the separated developmental aspects while the environment is seen as a stimulating environment 'in front of' a child to support and strengthen him/her (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 26).

A quality of the all stakeholders' relationships (preschool teachers, children, family, local community) is seen as the intertwining of learning as a leading dimension of the program quality (MacNaughton, 2003; Wilks et al, 2008). Model A gives a controversial understanding of relationships. While it defines kindergarten as 'an open system with partnership relationships in education' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 35), at the same time it keeps the approach of teachers' observation and assessment of a child. This emphasises the teacher's expert position and puts in doubt power sharing with the child and family. Model B, educating children until their enrolment in a preparatory preschool program speaks about the relationships within the traditional understanding of a preschool institution as a 'factor of social education' while the relations between children, teachers and parents are concretized through the 'permanent tasks' of teachers toward parents and children which also reflects the traditional way of communication (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 45).

Building learning environment through exploration, engagement, uncertainty, problem solving, practical and life experiences. Quality curricula emphasize and

operationalize the concept of a stimulating environment in which learning happens through participation. Stimulating environment is understood as 'the third teacher'. It does not involve only the environment as indoor and outdoor space and equipment, but also flexible time schedules and a high quality of relationships like partnerships and collaboration (Wilks et al, 2008).

Model A and Model B of the curriculum framework do not consider outdoor space as an equally important place for children's learning. These models also do not speak about the principles of planning and organizing outdoor space.

In the Model A, the environment is viewed within the conception of kindergarten as 'an open system in which the kindergarten is a meeting place of children and adults and a place of connecting mutual life experience' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 23). Model B speaks more about the teachers' orientation to the child and activities than about the environment (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 43).

3. Understanding the importance of collaboration and partnership

Empowering children, family and community. Quality curricula frameworks pay particular attention to the issues of partnerships with family and local community and empowering teachers to develop community of practice (Moss, 2007).

Model A of Curriculum Framework views the partnership with family and community as one of the dimensions of the curriculum openness but with several controversies. The document states that a family is also the 'service user' and emphasizes 'supplementing family education' as one of the functions of preschool education (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 23), which both do not assume collaboration and partnership with family. The cooperation with local community is reduced to the forms of cooperation 'based on the mapping children and parents' needs' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 24), instead of concretizing the environment as the learning context in accordance with understanding the open system. Model B does not provide a clear concept of collaboration with family, spreading from the preschool institution expert role to the relationships characteristic for an open system which is incoherent with the academic orientation of this model.

The quality curricula value the cultural diversities and inter-culturality as the wealth of learning situations (Ministry of Education New Zealand, 1996). Quality curricula are 'open' for children from marginalized groups, children with developmental difficulties, disabilities, children from diverse cultural communities. The standard of the program is diversity itself. Model A views the diversity within the preschool institution functions, as placing the accent on the preventive and compensatory function of the preschool curricula in 'protecting children with developmental difficulties and those from the vulnerable groups' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14). The program gives the recommendations for the necessity of integrating 'special needs children' (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 14). Model B mainly takes age capabilities as differences, while accepting diversities in developing the program is reduced to the content of certain activities with children. The attitude toward the cultural diversities in the Curriculum Framework models reflects respect for the cultural diversities only at the level of certain contents and activities. There is no mention of inter-culturality, appreciation of different languages and cultural practices.

View of the preschool teacher as the participant and co-creator in learning. Quality preschool education curricula view the teacher in a role of participant in the

co-construction of meaning and the initiator and participant of quality interactions and relationships.

Model A sees the preschool teacher as an assistant who creates conditions, monitors and participates in learning only if children ask him/her for it. The teacher's focus on preparing the conditions, monitoring children's discoveries and learning corresponds to the developmentally appropriate practice in which a teacher is an expert who observes, evaluates children's learning and provides help if children ask for it. Model B sees the preschool teacher as the professional who encourages and directs children by pre-planned program contents. This reflects the relationships characteristic for the traditional, academic approach to learning and teaching.

4. Understanding the relation between learning and teaching

Intertwining of learning, teaching and evaluation. The quality curricula focus on a holistic approach to learning. Learning situations are not seen as the isolated situations of 'concentrated' learning related to life situations in which children learn (Arthur et al, 2012). Furthermore, the development of quality curricula is based on the participatory evaluation of the adults and children which not only strengthens their reflexive capacities on own learning but is primarily seen as the area of common understanding of learning process and the curricula re-consideration.

Model A presents learning, teaching and evaluation in a spiral cycle so that they follow from each other as the mutually agreed activities of children and teachers and as an integral part of the planned and spontaneous situations in the kindergarten. However, the curriculum inconsistency ensues from reducing documenting to the evaluation of children's learning and development rather than the process of developing the program as a whole. Model B gives priority to a preschool teacher's plan on guiding the development of a child's cognitive structures which the teacher consistently realizes through the system of activities. A controversial relationship between teaching and evaluation is reflected in the teacher's task to assess the educational work on the basis of each child's progress (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 55). Thus, the responsibility for children's progress is not placed in the way of making and implementing the teacher's plan but in the child him/herself.

The quality curricula integrate the development of multi-literacy (linguistic, mathematic, digital) through active research, exploring and problem solving during play, planned learning situations and routines. Besides integrated learning, quality curricula approach multi-literacy as an integral part of the community to which a child belongs.

Model A has a controversial attitude toward mathematic and linguistic literacy. It simultaneously treats them as separate activities or education areas and as elements of integrated learning in the projects. Model B presents mathematical and linguistic literacy as separated activities. Neither of models mentions the multi-literacy concept or speaks about the relevance of digital literacy for the child's experience in the contemporary world.

Understanding the quality of preschool teachers' work as a key dimension in program development. The quality of curriculum depends on the way the teachers understand and realize it. Therefore, the quality curricula speak to the preschool teachers and see them as the leading figures in developing the authentic programs with children and parents.

Model A sees the preschool teacher as the program creator, researcher and reflexive practitioner and pays particular attention to the meaning of reflexive practice (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 40). A preschool teacher is expected to critically examine the curriculum and adjust the conceptual recommendation to the concrete conditions in which the curriculum is implemented. Model B requires preschool teachers to realize goals, tasks and requirements given in the curriculum by choosing the order or sequence in which they will be realized. Model B of the preparatory preschool program views the preschool teacher as an implementer of the methodical steps in developing a child's readiness for regular schooling.

Conclusions

The analysis of Preschool Curriculum Framework, Models A and B, show that although these models are the part of the same curriculum framework they are written as separate entities which are:

- *In discord in relating the approach to preschool education.* Model A is based on the child-centered developmental psychological orientation while Model B focuses on the academic orientation of the curriculum directed to knowledge acquisition and the development of cognitive capabilities. The two different conceptions of preschool education in the Curriculum Framework reflect the lack of coordination in the national approach to preschool education which results in no clear foundation for the initial education of preschool teachers and their professional development and for the conceptualization of preschool education institutions' quality and organization.
- *Insufficiently coordinated with the criteria of the worldwide quality preschool education curricula.* The characteristics of the quality worldwide curricula ensuing from the socio-constructivist orientation and the contemporary understanding of childhood sociology, post-modernism and post-structuralism are not taken into account in the Serbian preschool education curriculum frameworks.

The reconsideration of the Serbian preschool education Curriculum Framework quality primarily calls for achieving the social consensus on the value based and theoretical approach towards preschool education. Adopting a curriculum framework based on the quality programs' criteria should be based on the joint engagement of researchers, practitioners, and policy decision makers in reconsideration of the current preschool education in Serbia and on further research of preschool education policies and practices worldwide.

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