

László Varga Ed.

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

## International Research Report



**UNIVERSITY OF WEST HUNGARY  
BENEDEK ELEK FACULTY OF PEDAGOGY  
SOPRON, HUNGARY**

**László Varga Ed.**

**Early Childhood Education  
International Research Report**

University of West Hungary  
Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy  
Sopron, Hungary





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## **INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH**

**2013 – 2015**

### **THE CHILD'S VISION ON THE WORLD IN THE MIRROR OF CHILDREN'S CULTURE**

Interpretation and understanding the first years of human life, early childhood and childhood have undergone paradigmatic changes in the last few years. The latest national and international researches emphasize childhood as a key factor in the course of life of the individual. Developing and educating children is crucial for the progress of a nation and the development of the economy, since only happy, well-balanced, talented children are able to build a prospering and sustainable society. In case the investment in children and families happens in a bright way, the next generation will surely pay it back. Looking at our children from a wide perspective we can say that they are the citizens, workers, parents of tomorrow, the founders of the society of the future and the basis of the development of the economy. Intelligent investment is a kind of key in establishing a happy life, so there is an unlimited chance and extreme responsibility on our shoulders, since early years last forever. It is therefore vitally important that student teachers have very high quality initial teacher education, supported by well-educated and knowledgeable lecturers and pedagogues. It is also important that qualified teachers and other adults working with our youngest children have access to, and opportunities for continual professional development throughout their career. Having highly qualified teachers for young children is vital as the early years are such an important stage of children's development and pave the way for all future learning.

Children's culture is always dual, that is the cultural environment in which the children live intertwines with the culture that they create around themselves. To understand this dual culture it is fundamental to understand and accept the world created by children and then to comprehend the content communicated by the world of the adults. The research is based upon this approach.



On the one hand, we intend to explore and analyse the channels communicating culture for children and the world vision that is depicted through these. On the other hand, we are to investigate how children view the world through this culture and these channels. The major question is whether the children's culture offered by the society intercept or is in harmony with the children's world vision. The major problems addressed by the research of the dual nature of children's culture focus on the cultural environment in which children live and the culture created by children.

This international research is an outstandingly rare and a cutting edge international examination facilitating the understanding and acceptance of the world created by children for teachers, parents and for the training professionals. Besides this, the results may also cast light on the adult world communicated by the channels studied. By means of investigating and presenting the world vision constructed by children and the values communicated to children through different channels, this international research will provide educational sciences with loads of new information and data whereas it will also modify and/or complement the content of nursery school teacher and early childhood educator trainings as well as the innovation of early childhood educational facilities.

I would like to express my very special thanks to my colleagues, Réka Zsámboki and László Katona for their excellent work and professional assistance during the project. My sincere and heartfelt thanks also go to the participants of this international research.

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## CHILDREN'S VISION ON THE WORLD IN THE MIRROR OF CHILDREN'S CULTURE

translation by LÁSZLÓ KATONA<sup>3</sup>

### **Rationale of the research**

A child's healthy development is a crucial factor in the growth of a nation and for the improvement of the nation's economy in view of the fact that a prospering and long sustainable society can only be maintained if 'its' children are well-balanced and armed with appropriate skills. Smart investment into the upcoming generation always pays off. The failure to ensure the necessities for the construction of a healthy and productive life might put our future and security at jeopardy. Early years teachers and educators are supported by a numerous amount of data based on scientific research into the early years of child development so as to be able to exploit all the possibilities of building up a firm, well-balanced society the most efficiently (Bruer, 1999).

It is indeed crucial that early childhood experts be required to understand the subtleties and significance of the developmental processes of the early years and the effects that childhood and early childhood development have on adult life and on every walk of life. Educators must show a proper command of scientific knowledge, or that of the factors defining early childhood development and improvement, and that of the connections between early childhood brain development and human development while they should also be familiar with the state of the art findings of neuroscience on the early years brain development (Sousa, 2011).

The quality of our lives depends on the relationship that we develop between us and the surrounding environment. Therefore, emotional intelligence issues are to be addressed in early childhood education as well. The establishment of proper social competencies and cognitive skills take place in early childhood, however, emotional intelligence is still an important factor to be detailed (Goleman, 1997).

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In the research paper the discussion will point to the connections between emotions, love, early childhood and to the effects of early years' stress on adult life. It also offers insight into an educational theory, i.e. constructivism, which has absolutely different views on learning theories from its predecessors. The significance of constructivism in early years lies in the fact that all early years teachers should be aware of the learning mechanism that enables children to construct 'themselves' and their system of knowledge. They are also advised to have an insight into the nature and process of early childhood development and learning and to understand the neural, emotional and social backgrounds of the learning processes (Charlesworth, 2013). As childhood is the age of experience when the capability to act is high, and it is also the age of the establishment of competencies, the understanding of early childhood learning is a fundamental factor. Early years teachers are supposed to help children in this most sensitive period of their lives to construct 'themselves' and to be able to see the world with their own eyes.

### **Learning theories in constructivism**

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new theory of knowledge was introduced, namely constructivism, the educational paradigm of which suggests that education should focus on the child as a learner and the child's world inside. The founder of this educational philosophy was a Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget who claimed that recognition is the internalisation of the real world outside by experience, and that knowledge is a system responding to and interacting with the environment as a result of active experience. Piaget (1970) suggests that knowledge is the outcome of the constructive function of the brain. It is the interaction between the inner world that is the cognitive system and the external world that is the experience.

Piaget's apprentice Seymour Papert further elaborated the idea of constructivism (Papert, 1988) by suggesting that children should build up their own cognitive structures and that learning should happen without teaching. Papert claims that children's motivation to learn and experience is mostly natural, they are intrinsically interested in their environment and the continuous observation of their surrounding environment is one of their major characteristics. The underlying unnoticed learning or recognition is exploratory and sensory dominated and often non-verbal, and controlled by the children themselves. This suggests that the construing, creating and structuring mind of a child becomes the centre of attention instead of the cognitive processes. Learning takes place in the active, cognitive mind and it is being built on

the already existing knowledge and on the continually expanding brain structures which are defined by literature as a mental map or world model (Cséfalvay, 1990). The freshly constructed knowledge, experience, skill will build into the structure created by the child consequently it becomes an internal part of the child with some personal hints and quality. Knowledge is thus not created by the teacher, who only facilitates the young children to construct their own structures, or at least they create the optimal environment to ensure the effective internal construction. This paradigm claims that teachers have a major role in exploring the prior knowledge (Nahalka, 2002) of children and in providing a supportive learning environment. Considering the role of teachers or educators in the constructivist theory one might come to Maria Montessori's motto, i.e. "Help me to do alone." (Montessori, 1936). The regular and traditional teaching-learning paradigm is considered to be cheaper, more elaborated, more sustainable, the knowledge is more easily gained. On the other hand, the constructivist learning-teaching paradigm is more expensive, it requires more preparation on behalf of the teacher, knowledge is sometimes delayed to form, moreover, this learning theory is not fully elaborated in a broader sense.

### **Early childhood brain development**

An earlier (Pléh, 2003) scientific concept implied that the development of human brain was linear. Today it is known that there are sensitive periods during the development of the brain, and the most important period of all is the early childhood. When a child is born, the whole set of nerve cells is present in the brain, which means a set of 100 milliard nerve cells. The mess of the newborn's brain is only a quarter of the mess of an adult's brain, and at birth the networking starts and the nervous system begins to form. The fact that at birth a nerve cell has got 2500 connections (synapses) and then by the end of age 2 the same cell has 15000 connections clearly demonstrates how fast this growth is (Shore, 1997). The synaptic system shows extreme development in the first two years. According to neuroscientists (Ádám, 2004) the building up of the cerebral structure and network is principally stimulated by love, and stimulating environment and the experience. The cell delivering stimuli at the same time develops branched projections (dendrites, the magical trees of the mind) towards one another (Diamond and Hopson, 1999), so the network is continually forming. Each time the information runs through the nerve cell, the electrochemical effects strengthen the connections between the neurons, so the network grows. This is a very significant reason supporting the idea that a child needs an environment rich in stimuli and constant attention

and care. The non-used or superfluous synapses will keep demolishing after the third year during the stabilisation of the network system. The overall build-up of the cerebral structure is a long process which starts before birth and goes on until becoming biologically adult. It is now known that the first three years mean the most important period to establish the neural connections, this is the time when 700 new connections are established in one second<sup>4</sup>.

Kluge (2003) suggests that early years teachers and educators should understand the responsibilities of their job, as the development of cerebral structure plays a firm but fragile at the same time role in the formation of future skills and behaviour patterns. The brains build up hierarchically from bottom to top, and by time more and more complex cerebral structures, and networks are built up on simpler networks and skills. Loving care, adequate feeding and the experiences mutually form the developing brain's network system. Children often make an effort to establish connections with the adults around, who cannot avoid responding to them especially in the early years. It is important to re-emphasize the fact that the cognitive, emotional and social skills of a child are in inextricable relation to one another, and this way both our bodily and spiritual health are connected to each other throughout our whole life, and we cannot develop any of those separately in isolation. Unfortunately, as time passes by cerebral plasticity and the ability to change our behaviour constantly decrease. The brain is remarkably adaptive during its overall lifespan; however, if done in the right time, its forming can be more effective and efficient for the individual and thus for the society as well (Hámori, 2005).

### **Children's vision and children's culture**

The idea of children's vision is a specific question of children's thinking addressing the different explanatory principles of world phenomena and their causes according to Piaget (1970). Children aged 3-7 years have a unique vision on the world, which is influenced by their own desires, judgments, fantasies, and others' opinion, while the culture transmitted by the close and further environment around the children is in interaction with the formation of their vision on the world.

This process will lead to the fact that the below specified factors of vision will be detectable in the children's culture as well (Ranschburg, 2014)

Magical thinking (desire driven thinking) which is accompanied by the omnipotence which is the feeling of being almighty.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>

Egocentric thinking (self-centred thinking) which means that all the events are related and compared/contrasted with the children themselves.

Animism in thinking refers to the idea that everything comes to be alive in a child's thoughts and that objects will have desires and emotions as well.

Artificialism in children's thinking claims that everything was created by a human being who also operates everything.

Finalism in children's thinking implies the idea that all children have specific goals and aims that they try to achieve.

Childhood realism may involve the intermingling of dreams with reality, which in some cases might manifest in lies which are not intentional lies, only fantasies that the child desires to experience.

According to Piaget (1970) the afore described traits will necessarily come to surface to a certain level in every child's case. He also claims that children's thinking develops spontaneously according to intrinsic laws and the environment (the adults) will not affect this development.

## **The research**

This research was carried out in 2014 with subjects of 97 parents, 94 kindergarten teacher, and 107 full time kindergarten teacher trainees (BA) of the Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of West Hungary. In our research we explored the characteristics of cultural environment in which children grow up. Our research posed and aimed to answer questions of epistemological origin, which promoted the understanding of the way parents, kindergarten teachers and trainees addressed in this research think about the idea of children's culture, its content and elements, about the role of cultural media in transmitting values. The research also casts light on the leisure time and cultural activities that families of the research are engaged in.

## The sample

The subjects of this research are summarised in the below chart.

SUBJECTS	NUMBER	GENDER	AVERAGE AGE
Kindergarten teacher	94	Female	45
Kindergarten teacher trainee (BA)	107	Female	20,5
Parents	97	Female (91) Male (6)	35

## Methods of the research

### The questionnaire

The research was carried out by a complex, written questionnaire. The questionnaire was comprised of three question clusters. The first cluster aimed at collecting data and background information of the research subjects (gender, age, location) so as to offer a demographic overview of the research. The second cluster explored the subjects' personal views and thoughts on children and children's culture by using the method of word association test. The third cluster investigated the subjects' cultural activities and their opinion about cultural activities that they found important for children. The questions posed attempted to explore the subjects' opinion about the role of cultural media<sup>5</sup> in transmitting values. This paper focuses on the second cluster and the third cluster (questions III/IV and VI/VII).

### Second Cluster – the word association test

The word association test is a research method in psycholinguistics. It is most often used to map the lexical access processes and the representations of meaning. By the help of this method the mental image of the subjects on various concepts can be properly explored, moreover, the mental lexicon can also be mapped this way. This test also offers some insight into the structure and content of the subjects' vocabulary. (Gósy, 2005)

Word association tests open doors to the world of thoughts of the subjects by allowing others to map the mental images (cf. Gósy-Kovács, 2001). Just as we have unique personality, each individual possesses a structurally different, unique mental lexicon, however, there are some retrieval words that will activate words in the same semantic field. For example for the retrieval word “*knife*”, our mental lexicon will most often activate words such as “*spoon*”,

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<sup>5</sup> On the basis of our pilot research we found it necessary to label what these cultural media are in advance in the questionnaire: children's programmes on TV, theatre, puppetry, the Internet, PC programmes for children, kindergarten, family

“*fork*”, or even “*scissors*”. On the other hand, some individual activations may occur, which represent individual emotions, attitudes, or cultural, geographical, literary, political, historical, musical etc. realias. (Lengyel, 2008) This may mean that word association tests also depicts the individuals’ attitude towards the given objects/concept represented by the retrieval word. This is one of the major reasons why word association can be a research method of investigations into the personality and attitudes, and not simple a tool for linguistic research.

The analysis of the mental words collected can be carried out quantitatively and qualitatively at the same time. In the course of the quantitative analysis the number of mental words and numeric aspects are considered, while the qualitative analysis focuses on the linguistic characteristics of the mental words (structure, phonetics, semantics, morphology). The relationships and connection amongst the mental words might also carry significant pieces of information, this might also be important to be investigated (phonetic, semantic or structural association strategy). (Gósy, 2005)

For the present research the method of free word association test was applied. The task of the research subjects was to write down the first 5 words that occurred to them at the very moment they saw the retrieval word. Two words were given separately, namely CHILD and CHILDREN’S CULTURE. This time no response time was recorded and the word categorization was not completed, as for the present research semantics was the only significant factor for analysis and comparison.

Mental words can be further classified into individual responses and non-individual responses. Mental words that are only mentioned once are considered to be individual. These are usually of personal origin and they may stand for some realia. The non-individual responses can be grouped and they represent the scheme or image that the subjects more probably have on the retrieval word.

### **The third cluster**

This cluster includes question III, IV, V, VI, VII and here the focus was to find what cultural activities the subjects tended to choose, however, it was an underlying aim to map what the subjects thought of the cultural activities preferred by children. Definitions on cultures can basically be classified according to two categories. The first category approaches culture as a system of symbols used by the individuals to interpret the world around them and through which they can get in touch.<sup>6</sup> The other approach claims that culture is strongly bonded to exact activities in the course of which an artistic and aesthetic value and artefact is produced.

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<sup>6</sup> values, norm, beliefs, societal rules, language, modes of speech, behaviour norm, objects with symbolic meaning



(Eliot, 2003; Wessely, 2003) This latter suggests that fine and performing arts represent culture. From a societal perspective an activity is considered to be cultural during which any kind of artistic product is received or consumed. For data analysis this paper considers the activity based concept to be relevant and applicable. This category is, however, further divided according to the nature of the activity; therefore subcategories can be labelled such as high/elite culture or everyday/mass/popular, art, academic, religious/traditional or modern culture. From the above list the traditional and modern branches will be used during analysis, as the data collected convey no information on what sort of artistic product was consumed while the expression “traditional” and “modern” are more neutral in terms of value orientation.

Children’s culture comprises the material, objective, spiritual values (phenomena, institutions, spaces and communicational mechanisms etc.) of human culture which are interesting for the children, or are made for them, or organised for them, or even organised and arranged by the children for themselves. These are in any case activated by the children to serve their interests, development or their own daily joy. (Bús, 2013)

Play is a principal element in children’s culture, although from a traditional point of view play is closely arts related, implying that arts are an integral part of children’s culture, mostly those pieces of arts and communicational forms which address the children themselves (singing, music and dance, children’s drawings, visual artefacts, object artefacts, literature for children, or literature adapted for children, drama, dramatic folk traditions, theatre and puppetry performances, photo, film, TV, interactive computers and the Internet). (Bús, 2013).

Question VI and VII focused on various ICTs as cultural activities, and their effects on our views on child development and learning, while attempted to find the role of ICT in the tradition transmission and re-creation.

## Results

### Results of the word association test

In this section of the research the following data were collected:

<b>CHILD</b>	<b>Mental words (pcs)</b>	<b>Individual responses (pcs)</b>	<b>Non-individual responses (pcs)</b>
Kindergarten teacher	472	121	351
Kindergarten teacher (BA)	596	121	475
Parent	488	136	352
Total	1556	380	1176

<b>CHILDREN'S CULTURE</b>	<b>Mental words (pcs)</b>	<b>Individual responses (pcs)</b>	<b>Non-individual responses (pcs)</b>
Kindergarten teacher	476	141	335
Kindergarten teacher (BA)	505	152	353
Parent	480	136	344
Total	1461	431	1030

The first 5 most frequent response by the kindergarten teachers:

<b>CHILD – responses by kindergarten teachers</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mental word</b>
1.	53	love
2.	47	play/toy
3.	16	tale
	16	happiness
4.	12	care
5.	11	security
	11	family
	11	cheerfulness

<b>CHILDREN'S CULTURE – responses by kindergarten teachers</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mental word</b>
1.	46	tale
2.	23	puppet theatre
	23	poem
3.	17	music
4.	16	play/toy
	16	dance
5.	15	theatre

The first 5 most frequent response by parents:

<b>CHILD – responses by parents</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mental word</b>
1.	49	love
2.	36	play/toy
3.	19	responsibility
4.	18	happiness
5.	17	joy

<b>CHILDREN'S CULTURE – responses by parents</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mental word</b>
1.	42	tale
2.	29	puppet theatre
3.	28	music
4.	18	play/toy
	18	theatre
	18	dance
5.	12	music
	12	cinema

The first 5 most frequent response by the kindergarten teacher trainees:

<b>CHILD – responses by kindergarten teacher trainees</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mental word</b>
1.	56	play/toy
2.	45	love
3.	23	cheerfulness
4.	18	kindergarten
	18	joy
5.	16	happiness

<b>CHILDREN'S CULTURE – responses by kindergarten teacher trainees</b>		
<b>Rank</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Mental word</b>
1.	32	tale
2.	31	puppet theatre
3.	17	drinking
4.	14	dance
5.	13	poems
	13	music

### **Results of the third cluster**

Based on the answers given to **QUESTION III** (preferred cultural activities) 12 categories can be differentiated. Out of these 9 categories were present (with slight differences in rate) in all three groups (teachers, parents and trainees)<sup>7</sup>.

Based on our research principles set above out of these 12 categories going to theatre, reading, classical music, popular music, going to museums and going to exhibitions were considered to be traditional cultural activities, while going to the cinema, dance, popular music, creative activity, self-education and the Internet were labelled as modern cultural activities<sup>8</sup>.

Besides the afore detailed activities there are some free time activities in the course of which there is no reception of artefacts, although together with some other cultural activities they play an important role in our lifestyle as recreational activities. Such activities are doing sports, going to sports events, do-it-yourself, trekking (Dudás and Hunyadi, 2005). This is the reason why outing as a sports activity was separated from the other activities throughout the analysis.

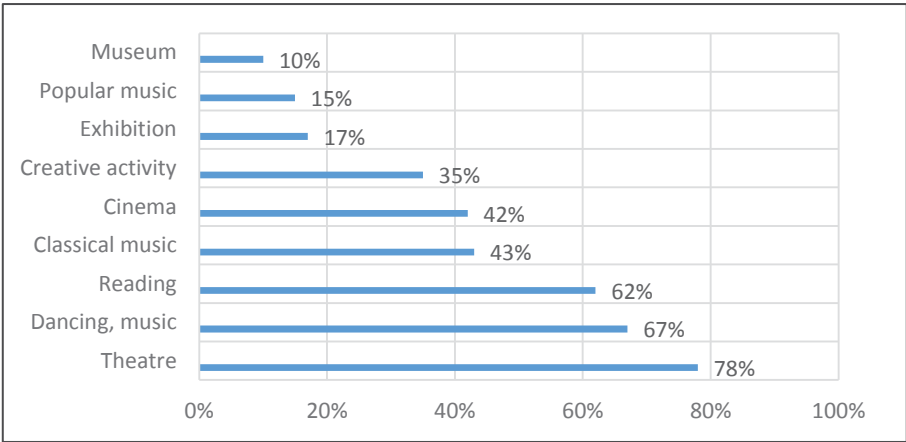
### **Kindergarten teacher trainees**

Chart 1 demonstrates the activities that the kindergarten teacher trainees prefer. The most preferred activity is going to theatre (78%), dancing and listening to music (67%) and reading (62%). These are followed by listening to classical music (43%), going to cinema (42 %) and

<sup>7</sup>These nine categories are: going to the theatre, reading, listening to classical music, listening to popular music, dancing, going to the cinema, creative activities, going to museums and going to exhibitions. The three remaining categories (self-education, the Internet, outing-sport) are not present by all three groups of subjects interviewed.

<sup>8</sup> According to the research conducted by Csepeli György (2010) individual routines of using the Internet are related to the cultural habits, therefore, we considered the Internet as modern cultural activity. 70 % of the mass culture uses the Internet, 86 % of the culturally rich layers. In high culture 45 % of people do not use the Internet.

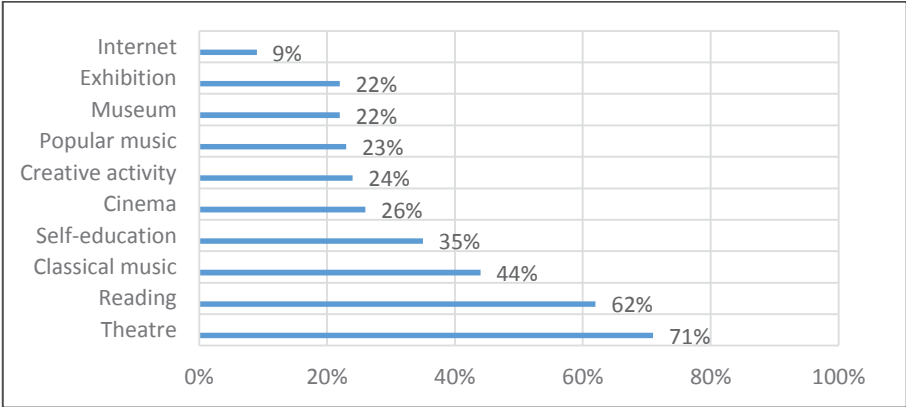
the creative activities (35%). Going to museum and to exhibitions are less frequently mentioned (27%), the same refers to programmes of popular music (15%).



**Chart 1: Preferred cultural activities by teacher trainees (n=107)**

**Kindergarten teachers**

Chart 2 demonstrates the preferred cultural activities by kindergarten teachers. In their case going to theatre is the leading activity (71%), which is similarly to the students followed by reading (62%) and listening to classical music (44%).



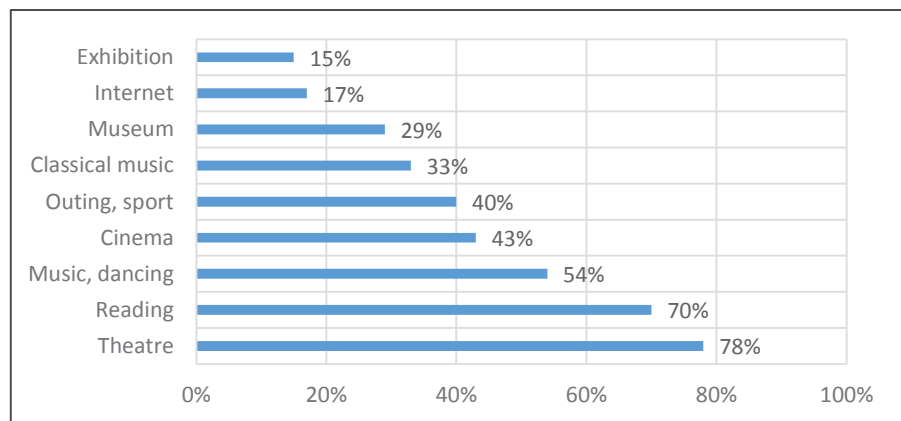
**Chart 2: Preferred cultural activities by kindergarten teachers (n=94)**

A transparent difference between the kindergarten teachers and the kindergarten teacher trainees is that self-education is important and a preferred cultural activity in the case of teachers only. There is also a significant raise in the rate of going to museums and exhibitions in the case of teachers. The cumulative results of going to museums and exhibitions show that these two activities make up 44 % together, and this is very close to the third ranking item, listening to classical music. Another interesting result is that creative activities are also mentioned in this group of subjects as well, however, dancing seems to be an absolutely no

choice, although kindergarten teachers are supposedly working with folkdance. The use of the Internet appeared as a new category in the case of teachers, while it was more applicable for students some years ago.

## Parents

Chart 3 illustrates the activities that the parents preferred.



**Chart 3: Preferred cultural activities by parents (n=97)**

In harmony with the previous two groups, the most preferred cultural activities by parents are the theatre (78%), reading (70%) and music and dancing (54%). The fourth in line is going to theatre (43%). The cumulative result of going to museums and to exhibitions is 44 %. Classical music related cultural activities show a decreasing tendency compared to the other groups (33%). However, 40 % of the subjects outlined an activity which is not to be listed in either of the categories, these are summarised in an entirely new category (outing, sport). Using the Internet also appears in this group, but not more than 17 %.

After the comparative analysis of the groups addressed, the following conclusion can be drawn: the spectrum of cultural activities chosen by trainees, kindergarten teachers, and parents is wide and colourful, responses allowed to differentiate 12 activity categories.

According to the data analyzed the subjects preferred the traditional cultural activities out of which two were present at the first three options by all three groups, namely going to theatre and reading. Listening to classical music as a traditional cultural activity was more preferred by the teachers and teacher trainees, while parents showed only a slight interest. Going to museum and to exhibitions was less popular with the trainees (27%) than with the teachers and parents. Visiting museums and art galleries may become a fundamental activity for the trainees later on considering that teachers have the role of setting examples.

Amongst the modern cultural activities teacher trainees and parents highlighted dancing and music, while the teachers brought in self-education as a new category. Self-education may represent professional devotion and the sense of responsibility at the same time. It may seem to be unfortunate that this factor was not even mentioned by either the parents or the trainees. Going to the cinema was a preferred factor by all three groups, and like dancing it represented a high rate (approx. 40 %) of the responses by the trainees and the parents; however, only 26 % of the teachers preferred it. The difference in the popularity of going to the cinema and that of dancing may derive from age specific characteristics or from difference in the generations; on the other hand, it can also point to the variety in the subjects' cultural orientation. Another appealing finding is that only the 15 % of the youngest subjects (the trainees) chose popular music out of the modern cultural activities, while the Internet was not amongst the preferred cultural activities in this group. Trainees, however, preferred dancing at a high rate (67 %) and together with it music was also mentioned at most cases. It is to be assumed that they included listening to popular music in this category. Considering this assumption it is apparent that students' preferences are related to popular culture.

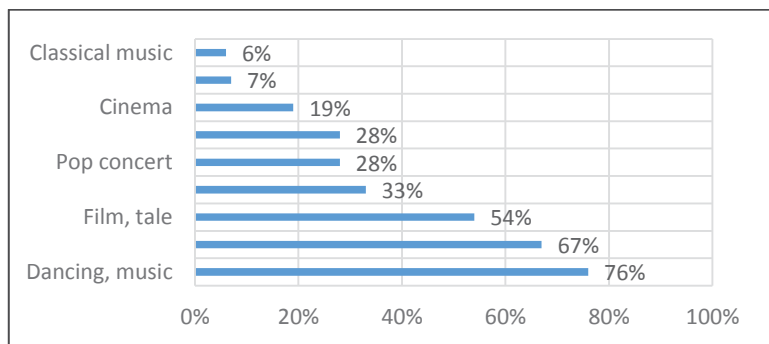
There may be an explanation for the fact that trainees did not mention the Internet as a cultural activity. It may be simply that it was not listed, as the question was an open question where the subjects were free to name their own preferred activities. We suggest that the trainees who belong to the digital generation did not mainly think of the Internet as a source of cultural activity, for them it is rather a tool for their everyday life, which is available 24 hours a day via their appliances (smart phone, tablet, notebook etc.) and which serves mainly practical purposes (gaining information and data, communication). We suggest that the daily use of the Internet, however, may become a culture forming force.

In **QUESTION IV** kindergarten teachers, teacher trainees and parents were asked what they thought of the preferences of the kindergarten aged children based on their own experience and assumption.

As seen in Chart 4 teacher trainees assumed that the first three preferred cultural activities by children were dancing, music (76 %), puppet theatre (67 %) and films and tales (54%), the only traditional one of them is puppet theatre.<sup>9</sup> Going to museum and listening to classical music are both traditional cultural activities which were only chosen by 7 % and 6 % of the subjects.

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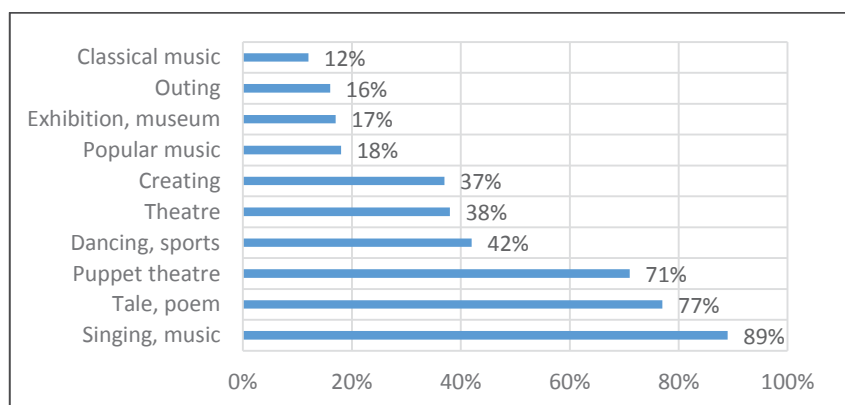
<sup>9</sup> Puppetry is one of the most ancient forms of theatre which were enriched by new traditions throughout the ages. Various legends and religious myths were represented with magical and mystical puppets through Africa, China and India in the IV. century BC. (Tarbay and Hives, 1990)



**Chart 4: Kindergarten age children's cultural activities based on teacher trainees' assumption (n=107)**

According to the trainees asked the kindergarten aged children prefer the modern cultural activities, the most highlighted of which are dancing and music, films and tales. 28 % of the responses were related to outings, and pop concert and 19 % were related to cinema.

On the basis of the responses of kindergarten teachers, the children's most preferred cultural activities were singing, music (89%), tale and poem (77%) and the puppet theatre (71%). Out of these the activities connected to tale, poem and puppet theatre could be regarded as traditional. More than one third of the respondents highlighted theatre as a traditional cultural activity.



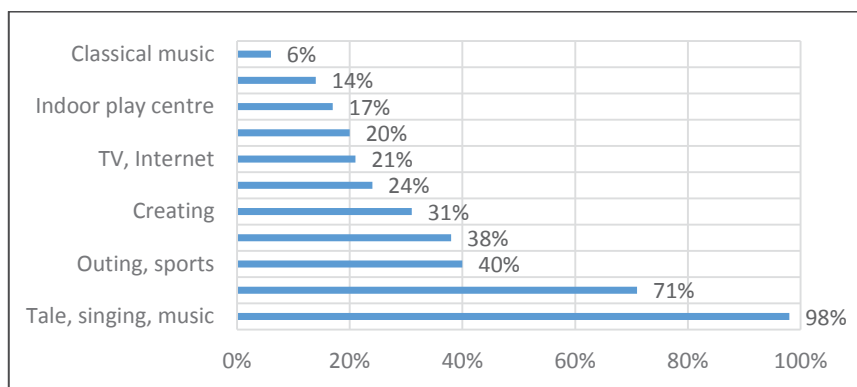
**Chart 5: Kindergarten age children's cultural activities based on kindergarten teachers' assumption (n=94)**

As transparent from chart 5, the rate of traditional cultural activities such as listening to classical music, going to museums and exhibitions was very low just as in the case of teacher trainees (12 % or 17%). An appealing finding here was that 42 % of teachers suggested that children preferred dancing and sports, and 16 % suggested outing as a preferred activity. Based on professional literature these sorts of activities can be regarded as free time activities,



however, the concept of recreation<sup>10</sup> as the culture of spending free time makes it reasonable to list these activities on our list here.

The parents' responses (chart 6) were in harmony with the teachers and the trainees as they listed tale, singing and music (98%) and puppet theatre (71%) as the most preferred activities of children. Listening to classical music and going to exhibitions were selected in extremely low ratio (6% and 14%). Parents opted for more recreation based activities such as outing and sports which were selected by 40 % of the respondents. There were two items on the list of preferred activities assumed by parents not present in the previous two groups, namely the TV and the Internet (21%).



**Chart 6: Kindergarten age children's cultural activities based on parents' assumption (n=98)**

It is our finding on the basis of the comparison of the responses given by teachers, trainees and the parents that children are mainly interested in the modern cultural activities, and in all three cases the rate of activities related to dancing, singing, music and tale are relatively high. Outing and similar sports activities are only highlighted by the parents.

In **QUESTION V-VI-VII** the subjects were allowed to write as many answers as they wanted, consequently the samples will not be analysed separately, the cumulated sum is displayed.

**QUESTION V** was aimed to investigate the transmitting of values through various media related to children's culture. The responses are demonstrated in chart 7. As seen below, three media (theatre/puppet theatre, kindergarten, family) were considered to be fully positive as far as the transmitting of values were concerned.

It was also a major goal of this present research to find what values were carried and transmitted by the media of children's culture according to kindergarten teachers, teacher

<sup>10</sup> All cultural, social, playful free time activities done in terms of active relaxation to ease tension and fatigue caused by daily work, to restore and enhance mental performance are considered to be recreation. (Szabó, 2006)

trainees and parents. The research addressed culture transmitting media including children’s programmes on TV, theatre, puppet theatre, the Internet, computer games for children, the kindergarten, and the subjects’ family by question V. After the quantitative analysis of the responses of subjects we found that a general division of values might make it easier to categorize and analyze the responses. Categories of values illustrated in chart 7 were selected along the values related to one field of societal existence (life values, values attached to personality, to morality, to politics, to lifestyle, to economics, to knowledge and to aesthetics). The answers collected made it necessary to include two more categories “does not transmit values” and “conveys negative or destructive contents”, as many of the respondents expressed negative feelings for these media especially in the case of TV programmes, computer games and of the Internet.

	Does not transmit values	conveys negative or destructive contents	conveys knowledge related values	conveys morality related values	conveys aesthetics related values	conveys life values
TV programmes for children	37%	43%	42%	34%	24%	0%
Theatre/puppet theatre	0%	0%	18%	39%	43%	0%
Internet	54%	43%	78%	5%	17%	0%
Computer games	24%	35%	72%	2%	20%	14%
Kindergarten	0%	0%	15%	69%	9%	6%
Family	0%	0%	12%	75%	2%	13%

As apparent from the answers, kindergarten and family play a major role in transmitting values related to morality (69% and 75%) which are determining in the course of the personal development of children. The importance of theatre and puppet theatre in transmitting aesthetic values and values related to morality are not to be doubted (43% and 39%)

The responses given to TV programmes, computer games and the Internet suggest that these media do not transmit values. The highest ratio occurred in the case of the Internet (54%). The responses to this question suggested very controversial ideas, namely that the use of world wide web was not characteristic of a kindergarten aged child, however, other responses in the chart suggested that the vast majority of the respondents (78%) thought that

the Internet transmitted values related to knowledge. 43 % of the respondents thought that TV programmes for children conveys destructive contents which should not be labelled as values. 35 % of the respondents considered computer games to be the same. These data again highlights the yet controversial judgement of the Internet as value transmitting media. One explanation for that might be that the scientific or professional press often have contradictory contents on the digital environment, on the role of different ICT appliances, which divide and contradict the general public. The other possible explanation is that people in general are still reluctant to use these electronic devices and they often consider the digitalised world as a hostile territory.

Considering the ratio of some value categories it is to be claimed that values related to knowledge are considered to be transmitted by the Internet and computer games for children (78% and 72%), however, these media only slightly convey aesthetic values (17% and 20%) and they hardly ever convey morality related values (5% and 2%).

The data suggesting the transmission of life values only appear in three media (kindergarten, family and computer games for children). It is not surprising that the subjects chose these, what is surprising about these results is the low amount of responses given to these media. The highest amount of responses related to the transmission of life values were given to the computer games for children (14 %) and this suggests that vital values such as the development of reflexes and of fine motor skills, and of the movement can be achieved by computer games properly. One explanation for that might be the increasing amount of movement controlled computer games.

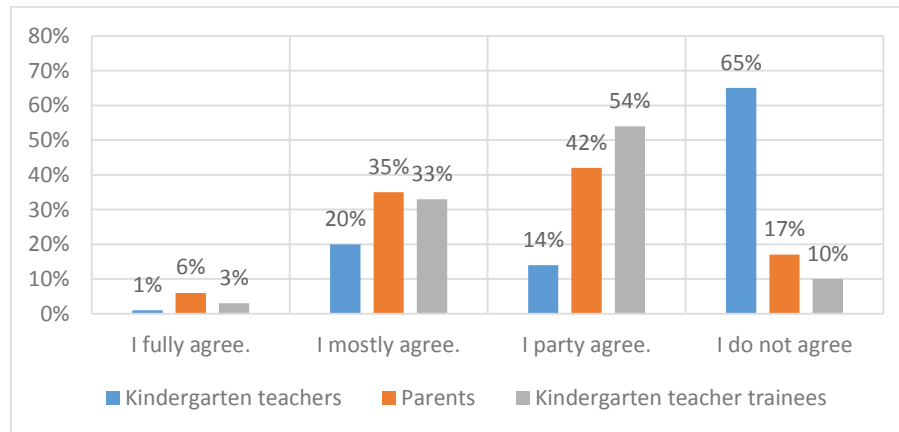
The number of responses to the clue that the TV programmes for children transmitted values related to knowledge and that these might have negative and destructive effects were approximately close to each other (42% and 43%). Therefore, the consideration of TV as a value transmitting medium leads to controversy (just like the Internet), which is not an unexpected finding as the debate on the advantages and disadvantages of TV has been going on among the professional and public spheres for decades, and this affects the judgement of the different societal groups.<sup>11</sup>

**QUESTION VI** also focuses on this problem by 4 statements. The subjects could express their agreement or disagreement with the statements on a scale of 1 to 4.

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<sup>11</sup> There are some considerations stating that “TV is the benefactor of humanity” or “it is the nurse for children, the school for the youth, amusement for the adults, and company for the elderly” or it can also offer “rest and information for the masses” but is also “the corruptor of humanity” or “the bubble gum of the eye and soul” or simply it is a “fool’s box” (Kiss, 2004).

The first statement was about the judgement of ICT technologies in terms of cultural activities. As demonstrated in Chart 8 the number of fully agreeing subjects was extremely low (1%, 6%, or 3%).



**Chart 8: The extent of agreement to the statement of “the use of ICT is a cultural activity” (n=298)**

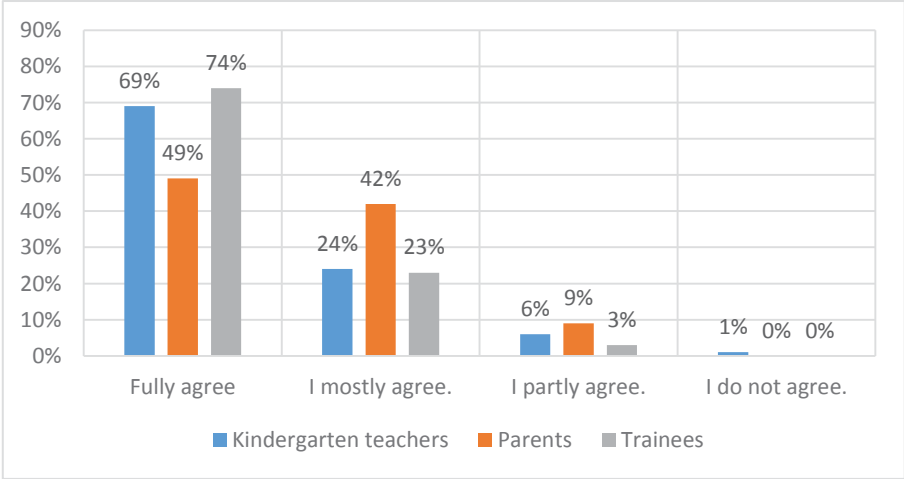
One third of the subjects mostly agreed with the statements. Parents and trainees, however, only partly agreed with the statement. Kindergarten teachers mostly disagreed, 65 % of them responded that ICT technologies should not be considered as cultural activities.

The above chart supports on the one hand what the literature reads on computers and the Internet as modern cultural activities, because they convey and communicate human culture, and on the other hand, we shall refer to our research data suggesting that these technologies and gadgets are part of children’s and their family’s daily life, and that these have a strong effect on the formation and creation of culture through games, tales and digital drawings. 9 % of the kindergarten teachers mentioned the Internet as a preferred cultural activity. The responses of teachers regarding the preferred activities by children might suggest a misleading image as neither the TV, nor the computer nor the Internet were mentioned as a preferred cultural activity while present days’ kindergarten children represent the latest members of the digital generation of our society.

The responses given by the trainees reflect low diversity among the four possibilities. 33 % of the trainees mostly, while 54 % of the trainees partly agree with the statement. Only a slight number of the subjects chose the answer “I fully agree.”. This might strengthen the afore mentioned idea that trainees belonging to the digital generation do not entirely consider ICT and their use a cultural activity, they rather regard them as tools and props for their everyday existence. Despite this fact ICT’s culture forming effect is of high significance even though the young generation will not easily become aware of this (ICT’s effects on social

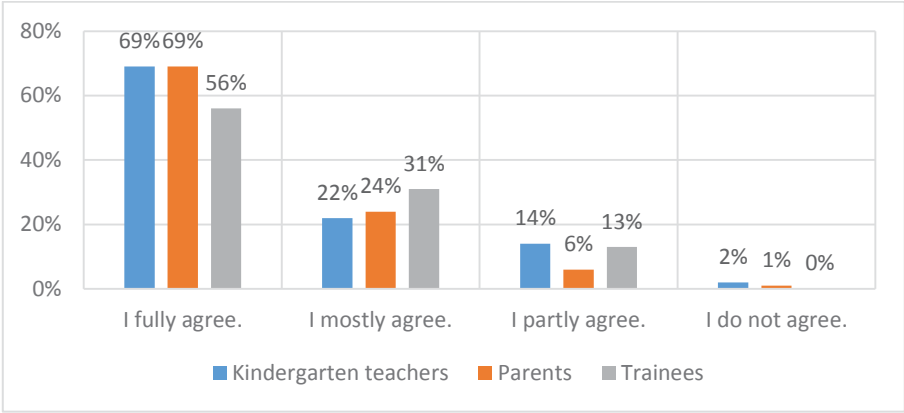
relationships, communication, use of language, the streaming of information and data etc. and the consequences of these).

The second statement referred to the transmission and demise of culture and targeted to explore the dominance of adults in culture forming. Chart 9 suggests that the majority of the subjects (69%, 49%, 74%) think that the role of adults is determining in the transmission of culture to children.



**Chart 9: The extent of agreement to the statement of “Adults transmit and demise culture to the children” (n=298)**

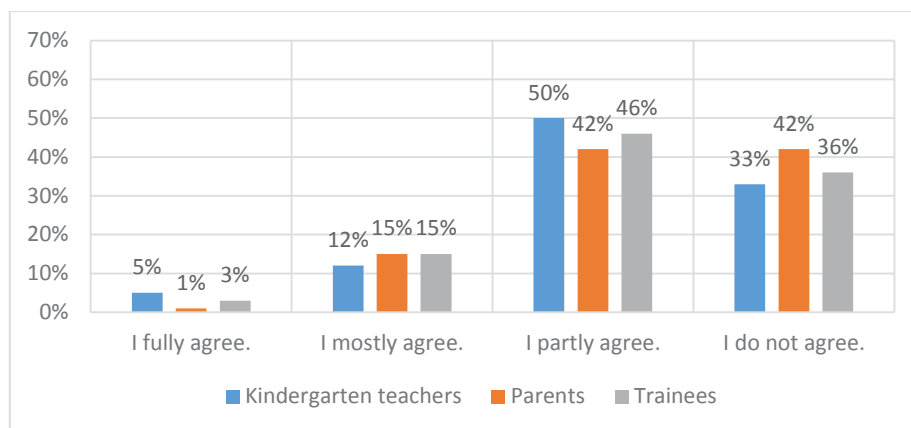
The data demonstrated in Chart 10 support the previous suggestions implying that children create and recreate their own culture based on what they are offered by the adults. A significant proportion of the subjects (69%, 69%, 56%) fully agreed that children are not merely passive recipients in the process of the transmission of culture, but they also have some active, creative and re-creative role in the process at the same time.



**Chart 10: The extent of agreement to the statement of “Culture is not only given to the children by the adults, they constantly create, enrich and recreate its elements” (n=298)**

The responses support the idea that children’s culture is always double layered, one layer is the cultural environment the children are born into and live in, the other is the culture they create for themselves. The children this way do not only get but take culture over and form it according to their norms, which means that they constantly create and enrich the elements of culture. This also suggests the idea that the child is active participant and creator of the transmission of children’s culture and in the course of this process they act individually, create and operate their own culture.

The fourth statement in this questionnaire item targeted the culture forming effect of TV and the Internet. Chart 11 demonstrates the summary of responses to this statement. It is apparent that the responses given by the subsamples of kindergarten teachers, parents and trainees do not vary significantly. 50%, 42%, 46% of the responses suggest partly agreement in that TV and the Internet have exclusive effects on the formation of children’s culture while about 33%, 36%, 42% of the responses suggest full disagreement.



**Chart 11: The extent of agreement to the statement of “TV and the Internet have only a negative effect on the formation of children’s culture” (n=298)**

Responses to **QUESTION V** complete and interpret the data and results gained in **QUESTION VI**. This item targeted to find what values are communicated through the listed media transmitting culture (TV programmes for children, theatre, puppet theatre, the Internet, computer games for children, the kindergarten and the family). 42 % of the responses suggest that TV programmes for children, and 78 % of the responses suggest that the Internet convey knowledge based values. On the basis of the above results it is to be claimed that the subjects of the research do not consider the TV and the Internet as exclusively harmful for the formation of children’s culture.

**QUESTION VII** targeted at the significance of childhood in the overall path of life. It also investigates what the subjects think of a child's brain and genetic programming, the effects of emotions on learning, the performance of the brain and the relationship between computers and brain development.

It is apparent that all three groups of subjects are aware of the significance of early years.

- They know that brain networking starts after being born and this has significance in the later learning processes.
- Besides the genetic programming a stimulus rich environment, bonding and attachment, emotional, social and physical security are needed.
- The subjects know the importance of emotions and the effects they have on the learning processes, and that the prime time of learning is at the early years.
- ICT may have positive and negative effects on the personality development of a child.

## **Directions for future research**

Human brain is a mysterious organ challenging both scientists and early childhood educators. Neuropedagogy includes two major areas: the effects of neurology on the practice of education and the knowledge teachers have on the nature of learning. The brain of a child is not ready when born, we can say that the brain is our only preterm organ. The prime time for brain development is the first eight years of life, the brain develops at a very fast pace, by the time of year three the brain network is extensively developed (Wasserman, 2013). Due care and education at early years influence the build-up of the brain network and structure to a great extent. From birth to the eighth year of existence brain behaves like a magic sponge<sup>12</sup> – it absorbs everything. This is the most sensitive phase of the development of the mind, a “window for opportunities”<sup>13</sup>, this is the time when we learn the most from our environment. However, this window is not open for a long time, and at the age of 8 it slowly starts to close and the building-up process slowly comes to an end.<sup>14</sup>

There have been paradigmatic changes in the interpretation of the early years of our life path in the recent years (Shore, 1997). Education and development of children are critical questions for the growth of a nation and economy as only happy, well-balanced and skilled

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<sup>12</sup> <https://faculty.washington.edu/chudler/quotes.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/dprk/ecd.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.brainy-child.com/dl/brain-dev-report.pdf>

children can become basis of a prospering society. What we give or what we lack to give to our children at early years is crucial. If newborns and infants have only limited possibilities to experience themselves and their environment with their parents, the appropriate neural network may not develop properly, thus their ability to address the world properly may get damaged. Addressing the world is the first step in the school of human learning. Trauma, toxic stress may lead to the malfunction of emotional development which will lead to learning dysfunctions and disabilities. Neurologists continually research (Jensen, 2008) into the development of children's nervous system, while practicing teachers work on the efficient learning strategies to help children explore their possibilities and the greatest per cent of their brain capacity.

## **Conclusion**

The analyses of the research results throw light on how wide the spectrum of the preferred cultural activities by kindergarten teachers, teacher trainees and parents is, and highlighted the dominance of traditional cultural activities. However, the results also point out that our subjects thought that children would rather choose the modern cultural activities. These generation gaps should be addressed by the educators as these will have a crucial effect on the future formation of the culture of the next generation.

A very low percent of the responses represent the preferences related to classical music, or to going to museums and exhibitions both by the adults and the children. By setting good examples, educators should bring classical music closer to children, as classical music is beneficial for the body, and for the development of children's personalities and that of their brain (Viadero, 1998). According to literature, it also strengthens the immune system, lowers the risks of stress, frustration, it increases creativity and it triggers the brain to produce endorphin.<sup>15</sup> Visiting museums and exhibitions might offer social experience to the children community while a versatile way of personal development (cognitive, emotional and ethical) can also be carried out. Today various interactive exhibitions, complex museum pedagogical programmes are offered to children, even at the age of kindergarten, where well-trained experts and museum teachers will see to them.

The research also found that there are cultural activities transmitting vital and life values, namely, the recreational activities, these were only listed by the parents as preferred activities. However, it is important to highlight that parents mentioned outing and sport as preferred

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.iwr.com/becalmd/transmitter.html>



activities by children. If the teacher does not show examples of communicating and transmitting these values, children grow up without considering the culture of basic leisure time activities and spiritual and physical recreation to be important. The founding of a life of high standards, that of recreation and positive feelings are of high significance for the future generation.

Our research focused on the TV, computer and the Internet as preferred cultural activities among children. As could be read on the basis of the results, these represent values of knowledge but not more, results suggest that these only transfer values related to knowledge. One note must be made, and that is that the TV these days often takes the role of a caretaker, child-supervisor, meaning that a child sits in front of the TV set for an average of 3,5 hours a day, moreover, children are free to choose what programmes to watch (Antalóczy, Füstös and Hankiss, 2009-2010). It is a fact that at this age children do not have a well-formed system of values as it is still forming in harmony with the development of their morality, thus they are often unable to choose from the programmes offered, what they see will be drilled in their memory and will have an effect on their play, their social relationships and behaviour (cf. Bandura's theory on modelling and symbolic models, 1965). However, with parental supervision, programmes that are carefully selected and the discussions after watching a programme and the values and examples set by the parents might contribute to the enrichment of the children's knowledge, vocabulary, and to the harmonious unfolding of their personality.

The controversy related to the digital technology that occurs in scientific and public spheres are well mirrored by the results of the research as well. ICT depending on the methods applied can serve positive and negative, beneficial and destructive aims as well. What is not to be doubted is the fact that the adolescents and children of the digital generation are the major users of these technologies. In most families children are better at the use of the Internet, or smart phones. On the other hand, parents as well prefer using the social media to share images, posts, stories on their children, making "online carrier" for them, which means that most children have online footprint before they are online. The digital culturalization is now unstoppable and irreversible, in which children's re-creating influence emerges. This is why media competency of teachers is unavoidable from this time forward. Media competent teachers can point out the values lying in media culture, they can educate them for the responsible behaviour for computer use, who can keep them away from the harmful, aggressive contents (the child is not yet able to differentiate the virtual world from the real one).

Recent years' research into the children's brain and emotional development emphasise the significance of childhood's role in the later life of the individual. They suggest that this is a key and determining period (Evangelou, Sylva and Kyriacou, 2009). Following the research trends of brain and emotional development, a scientific dialogue may be launched between teachers and neurologists trying to find the applicability of neurology research data to education. We also facilitate and promote the dialogue between scholars and scientists who foster the importance of early childhood educational theories, childhood neurology and emotional development. Scientists are working hard to form new educational views, innovation based on this cooperation supporting the formation of this new subbranch of science stemming in neurology and pedagogy.

To sum up our conclusion, it is to be highlighted that children's culture is always double sided, on the one hand, it comprises the adults around the children, the cultural environment, in which children exist and on the other, it comprises the culture they prefer and they create. Therefore, it is crucial to understand and accept the world created by the children, but the content conveyed by the adults is also important, not to mention the fact that the concept of authenticity is also attached to adults. We can only transmit values if we ourselves possess those values while also being capable of transmitting them. For the building of a happy and harmonious adult community the multilayered cooperation of culture transmitting media (people, organisations, institutions) is needed. It is also necessary to keep and protect the values of the universal and national culture, to respect the children's freedom to actively form their culture and to transmit well-balanced equilibrium of life, ethics, and knowledge related values.

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## A FAIRYTALE AS AN INCENTIVE OF ARTISTIC CREATIVITY IN CHILDREN

*The aim of this work was to research the relationship between classic and modern fairytales and children's artistic expressions. Their relationship was observed with the aid of drawings that children drew after having listened to literary texts. The classic Grimm fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood and the modern fairytale by the Croatian author Pajo Kanižaj that was written on its basis and entitled Stara nova priča o Crvenkapici (The New Old Story of Little Red Riding Hood) were used as literary pattern. A preschool group of children from Zadar "Višnjik" kindergarten participated in the research. Even though the children stated that they liked the fairytales equally, the results of the children's drawings lead to the fact that children draw mostly what they have verified, preferring known contents (classic fairytales) that were somewhat enriched with details/influences of other media (cartoon, picture books) while, on the other hand, the drawings indicated a significant difference and the ludic features of modern fairytales were not to be neglected which, by merging into national culture, resulted in some new contents in children's artistic expressions.*

**Key words:** classic and modern fairytale, children's reception, children's drawing, ludism, Little Red Riding Hood, Grimm Brothers, Pajo Kanižaj

### 1. Research objectives

We connect a child's tendency to literary expression with the fact that play is one of the basic dimensions of a child and childhood, as well as an essential characteristic of art and man in general. On the other hand, contemporary Croatian children's literature opens, to a large degree, the door to playfulness or *literary ludism* as a significant function of the literary text. Besides language play, literary ludism is reflected in formative playfulness that is displayed in the structure of a verse or chapter, in titles, in the ironicalness of social reality or literary canon; displayed in genre vagueness, inter-genre geminations, classic literature parodies, intertextuality, trivialisation and other procedures typical for post-modern orientation of literature and culture. Contemporary literature has plunged into reality in a large degree, completely open to the little reader taking into consideration his world and his interests. An initiative to the study was the desire to verify to what extent inherent play in the child responds to play/ludism in the literary text itself, or would the modern fairytale that was created by

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disturbing the classic fairytale model arouse the imagination and significantly stimulate the artistic expression in children considered that it shows the classic fairytale in a new light. An interesting question was whether children responded to the literary game by imagining new contents, taking into consideration the fact that the limits of expectation of the literary text had been completely exceeded. On the other hand, children were offered a classic literary text of universal value whose fairytale structure was well-known to children and additionally enriched with the influences of different media which could significantly influence their image and then the drawing. The experience and the very action of creating an artistic work are very important to children for it is through drawing that the child expresses its emotions and experiences, establishes a relationship with others, develops the capacity of observation and the feeling for aesthetics. <sup>4</sup>

## 2. Literary patterns used in the research

Literary texts used in the research are *Little Red Riding Hood*, the classic fairytale of the Grimm Brothers, and *the modern story by Pajo Kanižaj The Old New Story of Little Red Riding Hood*. The classic Little Red Riding Hood was created on the sources of oral literature. In 1697 it was published in the work *Mother Goose Stories* or *Tales of Past Times with Morals* by Charles Perrault. That first variant did not have a happy ending for the wolf: "And at those words the evil wolf throws himself at Little Red Riding Hood and eats her up." (Perrault, 1993:18) The Grimm Brothers introduced a somewhat different Little Red Riding Hood in their *Children's and Household Tales* at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it was their fuller /more useful *Little Red Riding Hood* more appropriate for children upbringing that achieved world fame. Pajo Kanižaj obviously approached Perrault with his ending for neither did he have a hunter (he did not appear in the story) for he "got stuck" at the hunter's conference.

*Little Red Riding Hood* in Grimm's version started in a stereotype manner: "Once upon a time ..." (Grimm, 1968: 96), and then the most important details of the character were revealed "...young, little girl that everyone liked as soon as they saw her..."(Grimm, 1968:96), and we later found out that the grandmother had given Red Riding Hood the red velvet hood and it was by that hood (which she by grace did not take off) that she was called

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<sup>4</sup>More in detail on children's art creativity, on artistic types of children and phases of children's creativity: N.Grgurić and M. Jakubin, *Vizualno-likovni odgoj i obrazovanje*, Educa, Zagreb, 1996; B. Karlavariš, *Metodika likovnog odgoja 2*, Grafički zavod Hrvatske, Zagreb, 1988; M. Huzjak, Šablone, *Školske novine*, Zagreb, 21, 2000. <http://likovna-kultura.ufzg.unizg.hr/>

Red Riding Hood. Just like the other oral/classic fairytales this one is also instructive, and thus Red Riding Hood's mother gives the moral at the beginning: "(...) Go as soon as possible, while it's not too hot; Once you're outside, go straight on and don't stray." (Grimm, 1968: 97), and she teaches her good manners and respect of the elderly: "When you get to her room do not forget to wish her a 'good morning'; don't peek into the corners." (Grimm, 1968: 97). But on her way to her grandmother's, she met a wolf who succeeded in making her stray from her path in order to realize his aim (to reach grandmother's house before her). "And she strays from her path and runs into the woods to pick flowers. When she would pick a flower, she would run further on thinking that there was a nicer one (...) the wolf, however, went straight on to grandmother's house and knocked on the door." (Grimm, 1968: 98) Thinking it was Red Riding Hood, grandmother let him into the house and he swallowed her up and lied in her bed. Once she had picked enough flowers, Red Riding Hood hurried to reach her grandmother's. When she arrived, she noticed the door open and that something strange had happened to grandmother: "Oh my God, granny, I feel so anxious today, otherwise I love being at my grandmother's." (Grimm, 1968: 99) In talking she tried to find out what was wrong, in other words, she asked questions to which the wolf patiently answered until he was overcome by his voracity: "– Oh, granny, how big your ears are! – To hear you better. – Oh, granny, how big your eyes are! – To see you better. – Oh, granny, how big your arms are! – To grab you better. – But, granny, why such a big mouth? – To devour you better! – cried the wolf: he jumped out of the bed and swallowed poor Red Riding Hood." (Grimm, 1968: 99). Having satisfied his hunger, the wolf lied on the bed, fell asleep and snored. A hunter was passing by the house and thought that maybe grandmother needed help. He realized that maybe the wolf had swallowed grandmother and he opened the wolf's stomach with a pair of scissors and saved grandmother and Red Riding Hood. A stable resolution of the fairytale followed which awards good works and punishes evil. "Red Riding Hood brought stones and filled the wolf with them, so when he wanted to run away the stones put pressure on him and he fell dead. All three were satisfied. The hunter flayed the wolf's fur and took it home; grandmother enjoyed her cakes and drank the wine that Red Riding Hood had brought her and got well." (Grimm, 1968: 100). The moral at the end of the story: "You must never stray from your path alone and run into the woods when you mother forbids you to." (Grimm, 1968: 100).

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On the other hand, in Croatian literature Vladimir Nazor already in 1923. issued in the magazine *Mladost* ( in no. 1, p. 13-16; no. 2, p. 2-6; no. 3, p. 6-7, no. 4, p. 5-8) a new *Little Red Riding Hood* inspiring it with the context of new times. He made some more alterations in the formal sense and created a child's play of Red Riding Hood (instead of characters, the text deals with puppets), it is to say that the text was dramatized and essentially changed according to the Grimm Brothers' pattern. At the time he wrote his *Little Red Riding Hood*, Nazor was the headmaster of the Children's Home in Crikvenica. It was a recovery home for war orphans and children worn out by illness and hunger after the First World War. Nazor adapted his characters to that context. Nazor, as well as Kanižaj, later gave a particular significance to Red Riding's Hood mother position. Red Riding Hood's mother thus got a name, and in his play she is called Mara, and she was a widow of the recent war (World War I): "I am a poor, sad woman,/ Abandoned by all. / My husband was in the war, /But did not come back./ I have no cow nor sheep,/ I have no linen, no wool;/One egg – two krone!" (Nazor, 1977: 254). Nazor introduced numerous new characters such as Ivica, the hunter's son, who is present even in the Grimm Brothers, as well as (we can say the existing wolf) a great number of animals which Red Riding Hood met on her way to her grandmother's (tomcat, bear, fox, rabbit, cuckoo, blackbird, but also three dwarves, a fairy and domestic animals). We here mention Nazor just as an illustration of the first revision of *Little Red Riding Hood* in its contextualization in accordance with the contemporary society of the 20s of the past century. Kanižaj, as well as Nazor, searched for a reason for the father's disappearance for in the original Grimm *Little Red Riding Hood* there is no father character. In his remake Kanižaj gave a satiric version of the father, in line with his temper, in the sense that the father had gone to town and found another lady. Throughout Kanižaj's text we will, of course, find a determined dose of intertextuality with Nazor's text. In contemporary Croatian children's literature, Kanižaj's remake was followed by remakes of *Little Red Riding Hood* by Željka Horvat-Vukelja and Zoran Pongračić. (Vrcić-Mataija and Perković, 2011)

Pajo Kanižaj appeared as a poet in Croatian literature with the collection *Bila jednom jedna plava* (1970) (There Was Once a Blonde) at the same time when Zvonimir Balog issued *Nevidljivu Ivu* (Invisible Iva), a contiguous book of contemporary Croatian children's poetry. He introduced a particular style in Croatian children's poetry that "has the meaning of an opposing literary model in the function of radical disintegration of the stereotype of children's literature." (Hranjec, 2004:192) Continuing on Vitez's illustrative poetry *Gitara jesenjeg vjetra* (Guitar of Autumn Wind) Kanižaj brought graphic and illustrative poetry in the poem collection *Šarabara* (1976).

Kanižaj's prose opus is also made up of five books for children: *Kad sam bio odrastao* (1983) (When I Grew up), *Ta divna čudovišta* (1988) (Those Wonderful Monsters), *Treće i druge priče* (1995) (Third and Other Stories), *Čudo u djetetu* (2002) (The Miracle in a Child) i *Prozor u prozu* (2003) (A Window into Prose), and as literary history points out "Kanižaj's most representative and most recognizable first collection." (Hranjec, 2004:202). It consists of the cycle he named *Two Stories about Little Red Riding Hood and a Princess* where we find *The Old and New Story of Little Red Riding Hood*, *Little Red Riding Hood with a Blue Hat* (where Red Riding Hood became a cheerleader of Dinamo Football Club from Zagreb, which is why she wore a blue hat. "Now Red Riding Hood is wearing a blue hat and has a free entrance on the north, and after the match the other sides are hers" (Kanižaj, 1989:197) and the short story *Tajanstvena princeza* (Mysterious Princess). A parody on the classic fairytale is Kanižaj's story *The Old and New Story of Little Red Riding Hood*. "Kanižaj clearly counts on the fact that there is no child who does not know this fairytale by Perrault and the Grimm Brothers. Kanižaj derogates the poetic quality and naivety of the fairytale in separating it from the fairytale world by putting in facts from the modern world; he thus creates humor in uncoordinated context." (Hranjec, 2004: 202). *The Old and New Story of Little Red Riding Hood* brings completely new motives that break off the connection with the classic template. It is evident already at the very beginning of the story when the author warns the readers that this is a different fairytale and that it is in effect toying with the stereotype characteristics of the "old fairytale": "Most fairytales begin with the words "Once upon a time", but our story does not start in that way. Maybe that is because it could have happened even today, yesterday or tomorrow." (Kanižaj, 2003:53), and he then introduces a new character – the character of the grandfather who is telling the children the story: "Hence, one day, even better, one evening grandfather was telling the children the old fairytale of Little Red Riding Hood!" (Kanižaj, 2003:53). The very beginning of the fairytale "...is full of satiric tones connected to the situation and issues of contemporary life." (Kos-Lajtman, 2008:180) This is emphasized in a series of events in the environment where Red Riding Hood grew up. We find her in some remote village with only three televisions. On the other hand, Kanižaj as well as Nazor, in his variant of *Little Red Riding Hood* is trying to give an answer to what happened to the father. He says that the father went off to town but found another woman there and did not come back any more. But, on the other hand, here is the most interesting reference to football: "There were woods near the village where Red Riding Hood lived. The woods were sold by the village fathers and with that money, they bought a number of football jerseys and a tractor for the village team center forward." ( Kanižaj, 2003:53).

The following feature is not typical for a fairytale, and, as pointed out by Kos-Lajtman (2008), it is auto-reference in narration. “ 'Even though there are less and less wolves and woods in our stories, in this story just like in the real one a wolf will appear.' With Kanižaj we find an interweaving of the level of reality/fiction, i.e. life reality/literary reality with a note on the 'rightness' of the wolf 'And a real one' and the introduction of the wolf in the story in a dramatic text manner 'There he is!'” (Kos-Lajtman, 2008: 180)

What is special about Kanižaj's story, as we have earlier pointed out, is the intertextuality. He is in close contact with the Grimm story, but does not stop from having contact with the previous text (remake) in Croatian literature, with Nator's *Little Red Riding Hood*, with his puppet play respectively. Kanižaj's grandmother, therefore, lives just like Nator's under the birch tree: “Birch trees, cottage! Just like Red Riding Hood described it. Here we are!” (Kanižaj, 1989:196) In Nator's story, namely in the third figure, we have a description of the area (at grandmother's): “A small field with two birch trees and a cottage from which grandmother comes out leaving the door open so a fireplace and bed can be seen in the cottage.” (Nator, 1977:286) Likewise in the monologue of Nator's wolf who arrived in front of grandmother's little house, the area that Kanižaj mentions in his text is pointed out: “Birches. Fields. Cottage. There it is.” (Nator, 1977: 286) And Nator changed in his own manner the standard *Little Red Riding Hood* where there is no grandmother (the wolf does not find her in the house) for in waiting for Red Riding Hood she went to pick mushrooms. The wolf goes into an empty house and into a bed where he waits for Red Riding Hood. (The area is described quite differently by the Grimm Brothers: “And where does your grandmother live, Red Riding Hood? – About a quarter of an hour further in the woods, under three big oak trees: her little house is there with a hazel hedge ...“ (Grimm, 1968: 97)

The story continues to entertain readers with the conversation between the grandmother and the wolf. Here we see a complete twist from the classic fairytale for that terrible moment when the wolf throws himself on the grandmother in the old story of Red Riding Hood is repealed by the self-ironic twist in granny's situation: “I am a wolf! A terrible wolf! I've come to eat you! – Help yourself, sonny! You've come at the right time. One cannot live from this small pension.” (Kanižaj, 2003:53) The twist is even more humorous and the new story of Red Riding Hood is contextualized with reference to the appearance of contemporary society: festival hits (in the seventies festivals were particularly popular in Zagreb, Opatija and Split, the old state's version of San Remo, or the three bags of Podravka soup when soup in bags was in style: “Merrily singing the latest festival hits, she carried cakes, some cheese and three bags of “Podravka” soup to her grandmother.” (Kanižaj, 2003:54).

Humorous also is the conversation between Red Riding Hood and the wolf: “– Oh granny, why are your ears so big? – You know everyone’s pulling my nose and someone makes a mistake and sometimes pulls my ear. – Granny, granny, why are your eyes so big? – So I can easily see my pension, daughter. – Granny, why are you so furry? – Oh, you know, daughter, I wash myself in liquid for hair growth for twice a week I work in the zoo as a wolf. What can you do, you have to live off something.” (Kanižaj, 2003:54). With these sentences the author alludes to the difficulties and inadequacy of contemporary man’s natural and social environment. (Kos-Lajtman, 2008:181) The wolf eats the grandmother in the end, but due to grandmother’s answers the story acquires a funny feature where violence is eased by humor and almost prevented. The hunter did not save grandmother or Red Riding Hood for he took the floor at a conference whereby the author again speaks of today’s hectic world where everything is turning around work. Therefore, the hunter did not have time to perform his duty, which he had in the old story of Red Riding Hood, for he was at another job like some parents who simply cannot reach their children due to daily work. The story does not have a happy ending but still induces a certain dose of humor and the moral remains the same – every lack of caution is dearly paid. As a shift from the conventional happy ending, in this story we have an ending that is actually not an ending: “That is the end of the story, and the hunter’s discussion still continues!” (Kanižaj, 2003:55.). Here, in some way, in everything that happened Kanižaj seems to leave the possibility of the story to end happily. The dominant stylish procedure in this modern fairytale is satire and the clear and unrepeatable Kanižaj humor based on the relationship towards phenomena in society and the family. It is just that which determines this story as modern, and among other things: “Their father went to town to look for work, but instead of work he found another woman and did not come back to Red Riding Hood and her good mother“ (Kanižaj, 1989:196), for which it can be considered to be more adequate for adults. That does not mean that children cannot read it, but poses the question of how they will accept it. (Vrcić-Mataija and Perković, 2011: 129).

### **3. Research METHODOLOGY**

#### *The aim of the research*

The aim of the research is to establish to what extent the literary text (classic or modern outline) influences the artistic expression in children.

### *Research issue*

We will check children's reception of literary texts, their impressions, reasons for acceptance or nonacceptance of classic and modern fairytales. Through the analysis of children's drawings we will verify which drawings have shown to be of greater initiative to their artistic expression.

### *Hypotheses*

H-1 It is assumed that children will accept a classic fairytale due to knowing its structure and contents, while the contemporary one due to its ludic (playful) elements, particularly humor.

H-2 It is assumed that the classic fairytale will stimulate more children's artistic expression than the modern fairytale due to the fact that the former was earlier known to them.

### *Examinees and the procedure*

Children from Višnjik Kindergarten in Zadar aged from 5.9 to 7.1 years participated in the research. On the first day of the research, 22 May 2014, 22 children participated (14 girls and 8 boys) to whom we read the classic fairytale *Little Red Riding Hood* by the Grimm Brothers, and later in a group intervju we asked the same children questions to find out their impressions and reasons for liking or not liking. Following a conversation on the fairytale, we encouraged the children to express themselves artistically, which they did. Upon finishing their work, they explained to us what they had drawn. The second part of the research was performed on May 24, 2014 with eighteen children (nine girls and nine boys) to whom we read the fairytale based on the classic basis *The Old and New Story of Little Red Riding Hood* by Pajo Kanižaj, and then the same procedure followed as on the first day. Since we had not performed the entire research on that day, not all the children had listened to both stories but only the eighteen. We analyzed 24 drawings by twelve children for the needs of this work (six boys and six girls).

### *Research results and analysis of children's drawings*

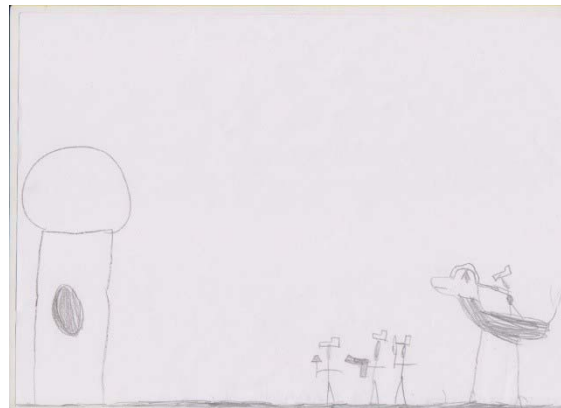
All the children who had listened to *Little Red Riding Hood* said they liked the fairytale. They pointed out Red Riding Hood, the grandmother and hunter as positive characters, and one boy said that the mother was also good because she told Red Riding Hood not to stray from her path. They all agreed that the wolf was evil. Eighteen children had listened to the modern

fairytale and all of them for the first time. One boy said that he did not like the story because it did not have a happy ending while the other children liked it.

From the eighteen children that had listened to both stories, when asked which story they preferred, only five answered they preferred the modern fairytale. Eight said they liked both stories and among them two said they did not like only the end of the modern fairytale. Four of the children liked the classic fairytale because it had a nicer ending. One boy said he did not like the modern fairytale because no one had saved Red Riding Hood. The children who preferred the modern fairytale said that the reason for that was the conversation between the wolf disguised as the grandmother and Red Riding Hood where mention was made on 'pension' (“ – Granny, granny, why are your eyes so big? – To easier see my little pension, daughter.”), and the fact that football was mentioned (“The woods were sold by the village fathers, and with that money they bought a number of football jerseys and a tractor for the village team center forward.”). Here the interest for football started as an actual and eagerly watched sport, and it was obvious that children watched it at that age and that at an early age it had become a part of their perspective of expectations. All the children said that the modern fairytale was funnier. They would not change anything in the classic fairytale while most of them would change the end of the modern fairytale which we attribute to children’s accustomedness to fairytale structures with happy endings.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1a:** *L.R.R. Hood*, Christian, 6.8 years



**Figure 1b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*

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<sup>5</sup> Authors Sanja Vrcić Mataija and Sanja Perković indicate the exceptional importance of a happy ending in stories. They conclude how a happy ending is the key component in accepting a literary text by children. In their expression, children gave preference to the classic fairytale of *Little Red Riding Hood* due to the happy ending, but also to the modern fairytale by Josip Cvrtila *Hansel and Gretel*, based on the pattern of the classic fairytale, for the same reason. Sanja Vrcić Mataija and Sanja Perković: Relationship between modern and classical fairytale: *Dijete i jezik danas: dijete i tekst*, Osijek: Učiteljski fakultet Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, 2011, 123-137.



**Figure 1a** illustrates the artistic expression after having read the classic fairytale, and **Figure 1b** after the modern fairytale. It can be observed at once that both drawings have plenty of unused space and that the land line is marked where the child has placed its figures. The boy's favorite story character is the hunter which can be seen in the drawing. He said he preferred the modern fairytale, but we can, however notice how the classic fairytale has left a greater influence on his artistic expression. The figures have a body and details such as fingers, mouth and eyes. The wolf is drawn in profile so as to point out his mouth and his strength. In the drawing made after the classic fairytale (**Figure 1a**), the child has used colors that are characteristic of the scheme phase<sup>6</sup>, where children act in a verified manner. A problem arises when they have to draw something new and that is why the figures in the second drawing have no body, they are undefined, and the boy has used only a black color so it is difficult to recognize what he wanted to draw, while in the first drawing it is clear who is who. The lines are thin and sharp. The domination of the black color arouses the feeling of emptiness and fear.



**Figure 2a:** *L.R.R.Hood*, Dino, 7 years



**Figure 2b:** *Old New Little R.R.Hood*

**Figure 2a** illustrates the artistic sensation of the classical fairytale. Through his drawing, the boy expresses his experience and introduces his imagination, he has drawn a scene that is mentioned in the story and added details such as a bottle of wine and cakes that flew on the tree when the wolf grabbed Red Riding Hood. As we have emphasized, the artistic expression falls in the phase scheme of when the child has already had enough visual experience and from there probably the detail of a feather on the hunter's hat, he probably saw that somewhere and connected it to the hunter from the story. Warm red and yellow colors

<sup>6</sup> For more detail on the phases of artistic expression in children: N. Grgurić; M. Jakubin, *Vizualno-likovni odgoj i obrazovanje*, Educa, Zagreb, 1996.

dominate. The boy favorite character is the hunter which can be seen in the drawing created after the modern fairytale (**Figure 2b**) where the importance of the hunter is emphasized by his size compared to other hunters. The color is outlined, and the characters have no body and details such as fingers, eyes, which indicates that he has still not learned how to draw human figures which is also a feature of the scheme phase.



**Figure 3a:** *L.R.R.Hood*, Nina 6.10 years



**Figure 3b:** *Old New Little R.R.Hood*

**Figure 3a** shows the artistic expression of a girl in which the influence of other media (picture books and cartoons) can clearly be seen. She has drawn Red Riding Hood with a cloak which is mentioned in the original story. The very character of Red Riding Hood is rich with details which indicates the artistic ability of the child. Warm colors are present such as red, orange and yellow. **Figure 3b** shows a drawing of the scene where Red Riding Hood talks with the wolf disguised as grandmother appearing in both stories. It is, however, evident that the meeting between Red Riding Hood and the wolf had a stronger impact on her after the modern story. Both the drawings have plenty of unused space and the reason can be a reduced experience or disinterest.



**Figure 4a:** *L.R.R.Hood*, Gašpar, 5. 9



**Figure 4b:** *Old New Little R.R.Hood*

In the drawing in **Figure 4a** the author expresses in his own way the experience of the classic fairytale. He still has not mastered drawing a human figure. He draws with colors, colors the objects with local colors (trunks brown, treetops green) and with a free choice of colors (red hunter). The symbol of the house dominates in both drawings. The drawing in **Figure 4b**, the artistic expression after the modern fairytale has not been completed. In order to justify not having completed it, the boy said that Red Riding Hood and grandmother were in the house. We conclude here that the fairytale did not interest him much/encourage him to finish the drawing.



**Figure 5a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Fran, 7 years



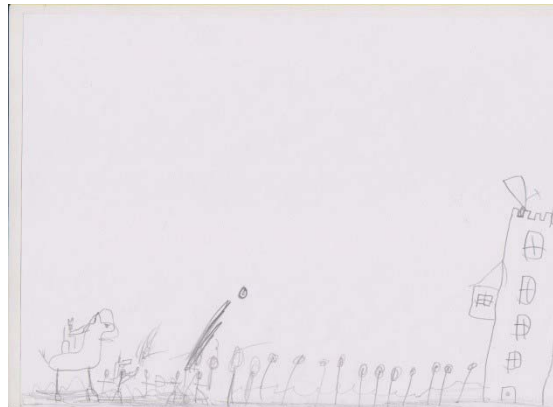
**Figure 5b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*

**Figure 5a** illustrates the artistic expression following the classic fairytale. The expression is richer in details which characterizes the phase of intellectual realism in children. The author puts in his experience of the story and expresses it by including his imagination. Warm red and blue colors are present. He uses color to point out some elements (black moon) and color the objects with free choice of colors (blue bat, black moon). Black color symbolizes worry, unhappiness, while blue color symbolizes eternity, nobleness (Jakubin, 1999). The drawing

illustrates the story of a wolf crawling under the window of the house in which are Red Riding Hood and grandmother. That is a completely new interpretation of the story. The impulse for artistic expression in the modern fairytale (**Figure 5b**) is the mention of football in the story “The woods were sold by the village fathers, and with that money they bought a number of football jerseys and a tractor for the village team center forward” (Kanižaj, 2003) due to which we can conclude that children like contemporary motives in modern fairytales. The drawing shows how the boy follows football carefully for the football player on the left has initials NI K on his jersey which could be Niko Kranjčar, the famous Croatian football player who played in many clubs of the English *Premiership* (among others the London Tottenham), while the player on the right has the advertisement *bwin* which is carried by the football players of *Real Madrid* Football Club, and so we presume that the second player in the illustration of the new story of Red Riding Hood is Luka Modrić, a Croatian football player and national team member who is playing for that famous club at the moment. The work is rich in detail which indicates the artistic ability of the boy. In order to connect the characters with the story of Red Riding Hood, the boy drew the football players in the wolf’s mouth. He still has not mastered drawing human figures.



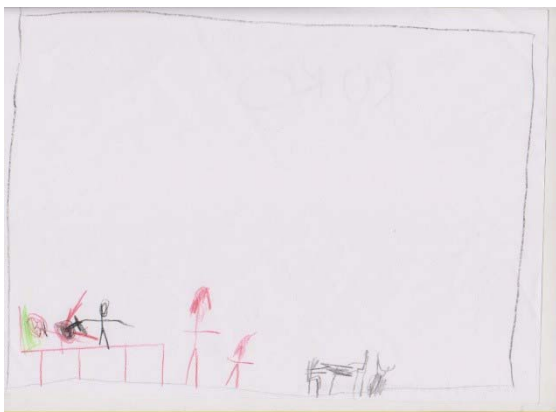
**Figure 6a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Marino, 6.9 years



**Figure 6b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*

Determining space is evident in **Figure 6a** for the line between the ground and the sky is drawn which is a characteristic of the scheme phase as well as drawing objects close to the child (house, flowers). The entire paper has been filled and cold blue and green colors have been used. The trees that are part of the woods through which Red Riding Hood had to pass are pointed out in size. In the drawing drawn after the modern fairytale (**Figure 6b**), the figures have no body. The drawing is telling a story, actually is trying to give an ending, which, according to him, is missing and where the hunters go to catch the wolf. Complex

elements are present in the work and they mark the movements of the hunters which is also a characteristic of the scheme phase. The composition in both drawings is horizontal and seems peaceful giving a feeling of movement from left to right. Since only black color has been used, and a lot of unused space has remained, the impression is that not much attention was paid to the drawing.



**Figure 7a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Roko, 7 years



**Figure 7b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*

In the **Figure 7a** drawing, the boy wanted to tell a certain story, but it is difficult to discern what is in the drawing for the figures have no body. There is a lot of unused space which indicates eventual disinterest and reduced sensation. The lines and strokes are short and thin and leave a cold and dangerous impression. The use of black color causes the feeling of fear and emptiness, while the red color gives the effect of strength and excitement. In the second drawing (**Figure 7b**) drawn after the modern fairytale, in using red color the child points out something it perceived and which is important to him. We see that the end of the modern fairytale has had an influence on him, i.e. the hunter is on the platform and is participating in the discussion. The pattern of the sun is present in the corner which is frequent in the scheme phase.



**Figure 8a:** *L.R. R. Hood*, Cvita, 6.5 years



**Figure 8b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*

The drawings in **Figures 8a** and **8b** are almost identical, the same objects are present (Red Riding Hood, the sky line, sun, trees, flowers, heart) that are close to a child of that age. There are many details in the human figure which shows artistic ability and pleasure in drawing. Warm colors such as red, orange and yellow are present here. Children of this age like to sign their names on drawings. The composition of both works is free, that is, the layout of the shapes and figures on the surface. Both stories have equally stimulated the artistic creativity of this little girl. The works seem joyful, particularly the colors as well as single details in the drawing: six hearts dedicated to Red Riding Hood from the classic fairytale. It is interesting that she has illustrated the new story of Red Riding Hood without the basket (flowers instead if we compare it with the classic story illustration), but with a series of details: butterflies that grasp attention with their beauty and joyfulness and details that give a new meaning to the second illustration, (ex. A big heart that is as big as Red Riding Hood herself). The little girl has imagined both stories in her own manner.



**Figure 9a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Marta 6.3 years



**Figure 9b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*



**Figure 10a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Nola, 7 years



**Figure 10b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*



**Figure 11a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Dunja, 7 years



**Figure 11b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*



**Figure 12a:** *L. R. R. Hood*, Rahela, 7.1 years



**Figure 12b:** *Old New Little R. R. Hood*

The drawings in **Figures 9a, 9b, 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b, 12a and 12b** are similar in the experience of the story with their scenes and choice of motives. Children at that age trace from one another which can also be due to lack of self-confidence or lack of artistic experience. The drawing of Red Riding Hood and the grandmother at the table is present in all four drawings following the classic fairytale and it is obviously verified detail with a

strong influence of other media for the scene of Red Riding Hood and the grandmother talking at the table after having been saved by the hunter is pointed out in many picture books, and it is a result of mutual happiness and a happy ending. Following the modern fairytale, the children have drawn Red Riding Hood alone. The difference is only in the illustration of the characters, each little girl has drawn in her own way Red Riding Hood and the grandmother, and the figure of an identical Red Riding Hood is also present in the drawings of the modern fairytale. In all the drawings, the figures are turned forward which is a characteristic of the scheme phase, only in **Figure 12a** are shown profiles of human figures which is a feature of the intellectual realism phase. This is similar in the drawing patterns of the sun in the corner (**Figures 9b, 10b and 11b**), flowers in the shape of daisies (**Figures 9a, 10a, 11a, 11b, 12a and 12b**) and a green stripe of “grass” at the bottom of the paper and a blue stripe for the “sky” at the top (**Figures 9b, 10b, 11b and 12b**). The same objects are present in all the works such as flowers, butterflies, as well as warm colors such as red, orange and yellow.

#### *Interpretation of the results*

The hypotheses from the beginning of the research were confirmed, children adopted the modern fairytale due to its characteristics of ludism, humor and the use of motives in daily life. It was very interesting for children to set characters of classic fairytales into an entirely new context, nationally colored and recognizable to children, which they confirmed in their answers. It was obvious that the artistic expression was stronger after the classic fairytale for children used more colors and drew different objects. The classic fairytale induced them in creating sceneries that were not mentioned in the story (**Figures 2a, 4a, 5a**). Drawings after the modern fairytale were quite poor (except for the mentioned drawings of Croatian football players), plenty of unused space remained and black color dominated which symbolizes fear and insecurity. We can connect this with a very stable motive in fairytales that appears in the reception of such stories fear – insecurity where children react with fear at persecuted characters, which in this case are Red Riding Hood and the grandmother, but do not have a happy ending because of the absence of the hunter. We noticed that media such as picture books and cartoons influence the literary expression. Children at that age have quite a visual memory and draw what they have verified (figure of the little girl, flowers, wolf), but when they have to use their own imagination the problem arises due to which the characters in the drawings following the modern fairytale are not defined, have no body, are lacking in color and patterns are used. This could be because Red Riding Hood in Paje Kanižaj’s remake has a less liked ending for the hunter continues further with his story at the Hunters’ Association



Conference while the full-fed wolf snores peacefully after having eaten grandmother and Red Riding Hood. On the other hand, the characters from the classic fairytale are well-known to them, the perspective of expectation was not let down nor was the structure of the story itself. The gender difference was noticed in the artistic expression and the choice of motives. The boys were mainly drawing the hunter and wolf (**Figures 1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 4a, 5a, 6b, 7a and 7b**). From 12 drawings whose authors were boys, 9 depicted the figure of the hunter and/or wolf. The girls drew Red Riding Hood (**Figures 3a, 3b, 8a, 8b, 9a, 9b, 10a, 10b, 11a, 11b, 12a, 12b**). In all 12 analyzed drawings, the girls had drawn Red Riding Hood, of which 10 had objects such as flowers, butterflies and hearts. Due to this we conclude that even when children have a given theme, they search for similar or equal motives of those they like to draw anyway.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the end, we can say how the story, or fairytale, takes a significant place in the life of a child. We have seen how imaginative their visual interpretation is based on their knowledge of the world and culture. Children like to listen to fairytales, daydream about them and sail into marvelous worlds. The moral of the fairytales that leads to the victory of good over evil is one of the conveniences of fairytale reception in the children's world and in the building of their character and view of the world that surrounds them. Fairytales are an infallible part of childhood and their presence is necessary in the life of every child. Wonder, positive and negative characters, contemporariness, spatiality and a happy ending make a fairytale the right reading for children. Today's fairytales, in a different guise, also capture children with cotemporary motives and themes. The story covers a wide area that various theoreticians define in different ways and divide into many subtypes. Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers distinguished themselves in collections and remakes of oral stories/fairytales. The story started developing in Croatia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, first of all in children's magazines: *Bosiljak*, *Smilje* and *Bršljan*. These stories are characterized by excessive didactics, but it was only with the appearance of Ivana Brlić Mažuranić and Vladimir Nazor that the first artistic story was created. Under the influence of artistic art, motives taken from Slavic mythology, especially Russian mythology and the author's experiences *Priče iz davnine* (Stories from Ancient Times) were created as the highest range of Croatian artistic fairytales. After the Second World War, Croatian literature for children developed intensively, and a particular development took place after the 70s of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century with the appearance of Zvonimir Balog, Luko Paljetak and Pajo Kanižaj. Contemporary fairytales use classic motives in a new way, expand the description of characters, place and time, and the moral is often left out. Modern fairytales appear taking themes or characters from artistic fairytales to show irony or humor. In this work we have tried to verify how classic and modern fairytales influence the artistic creativity of children. We decided on drawings, as the easiest way for children to express their emotions and experiences is through drawings. There are certain phases in children's artistic expression that are universal or inborn. The children who took part in this research were in the scheme phase where thought moves the artistic ability, drawings record the course of a child's thoughts and children give significance to the drawing. Children's drawings are a means of communication among themselves, and most frequently of the child communicating with itself. Emotional coloration characterizes them, and each drawing has a value in itself regardless of the child's ability. Due to this, it is ungrateful to generalize and analyze these drawings but certain features can be drawn out. Drawings drawn after reading classic fairytales like *Little Red Riding Hood* by the Grimm Brothers are quite imaginative, colored and illustrate scenes that are not mentioned in the story which means that it stimulated their creativity, while after the modern fairytale *The Old and New Story of Little Red Riding Hood*, children drew quite poor drawings in which colors were missing, there was plenty of empty space on the paper and often they traced from each other (except for the most informed one on football where, as we have already pointed out, Croatian football players Niko Kranjčar and Luka Modrić were drawn). The reason, of course, can be temporary dissatisfaction or disinterest, satiation or lack of motivation. The difference in gender is also noticed in the choice of motives, colors and figures. Namely, the girls pointed out that their favorite character was Red Riding Hood, and they drew her in colors and motives such as flowers, butterflies for which we can say are characteristic for girls, while the boys decided to draw the hunter with a gun. The results show how children are like fairytales. They like the classic fairytale because they are familiar with it and it has a happy ending, the characters are positive or negative and the plot is simple. Children have already met with the story in their family circle through stories told by adults or through picture books. Many of the Zadar children go regularly to the puppet theatre where the Grimm Brothers' fairytales are on the repertoire and so is *Little Red Riding Hood*. As we have emphasized, they like the contemporary story for its elements of humor, surprises and motives that appear in their daily lives and are a part of their life regardless of the happy ending which is exceptionally important for children but has been left out in the modern story. Classic stories capture them anew and they will surely be their faithful readers, but, on the

other hand, the modern fairytale with its playfulness is finding a place in the childhood of children and, as we have seen, children gladly accept it. At the end, even though the drawings lead to a significant difference, or they prefer classic fairytales as a literary pattern for drawing, the ludic character of modern fairytales is not to be ignored for the modern fairytale has plunged into national culture resulting in some new contents in a child's literary expression which can eventually be a significant impulse in children of an older age.

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## PEDAGOGIC-DIDACTIC CONCEPT IN BRINGING UP AND EDUCATING GIFTED CHILDREN

*The upbringing and education of gifted children is all the more becoming a central theme in pedagogy, trying to research, perceive and contribute to as completely possible a pedagogic-didactic concept that would enable a maximal development of capacities – whether general (intelligence) or specifically for mathematics, technique, music, literary, artistic expression and independence, curiosity, original way of thinking, high level of creativity and similar. Its desire is, at the same time, to reach the competence profile of contemporary educators/teachers in order to improve at the most their role in identifying and working with gifted children. This work would like to contribute to the above mentioned in first taking into consideration the starting point discovering and identifying the gifted. Then the work views the programmes of giftedness encouragement in preschool institutions, work with the gifted in elementary school and the competence of educators and teachers in working with gifted children. Bearing in mind the importance of acknowledging and developing giftedness, the conclusion points out the need of recognizing specific individual potential in a child already in the preschool and early school period and thus direct it adequately and support its development so that special programmes and adequate teaching atmosphere may timely work on stimulating and developing their giftedness.*

**Key words:** *gifted children and pupils, programmes, educator and teacher competences*

### Introduction

The Croatian legal framework has been established so as to foresee numerous possibilities of working with the gifted, but the biggest problem is that only a small number of experts can implement all these contents and possibilities and realize them adequately in practice. In the study programme of educators and teachers at Croatian universities there is no course on gifted children and pupils. There is no course at Zagreb University (studies in Zagreb, Čakovec and Petrinja) and neither in Split, and there is no mention of giftedness within the framework of Children with Special Needs. In Osijek only a couple of lessons are foreseen on the theme of gifted children and pupils within Children with Special Needs, while at the

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universities in Pula, Rijeka and Zadar, optional courses such as Gifted Children and Work with Gifted Pupils are given within the study programme for teachers and educators.

Gifted children are those children from whom one can expect high achievements due to their exceptional capacities. They require special education programmes from the ones offered in kindergartens and schools, and additional contents for individual expression of particular potentials in their gifted and creative self (Vican, 2007). In order to perform adequate procedures, it is most important to recognize giftedness, i.e. observe indicators of giftedness and understand their capacities so as not to be socially “inadequate” and badly adapted among other children.

A potentially gifted child: starts and speaks “intelligently” with older children and adults, has a subtle observation and memory for details of things it observes, can narrate parts of stories, poems and games seen on TV or heard from the teacher in exact chronological order, without being encouraged, asks questions that are difficult to answer, wants to study independently (letters, reading) and in doing so needs little help from adults, tidies up toys and other objects so as to group together what goes together (classifies them according to a certain criterion), uses logics in discussions, connects causes and consequences using words such as “because” , “since”, can concentrate on a task or activity, enjoys talking about how machines works, possesses a rich and lively vocabulary, expresses his own feelings even when others do not agree, feels certain events intensively, is obstinate, persistent in his assurances, certain activities or issues preoccupy him to the measure that he cannot transfer to other activities, is very curious (often asks “who”, “what”, “when”, “where” and “why”), can verbally put together a short story, poem or letter, or add his own details to a poem, discusses intensively on what is right and what is not, on good and evil, guilt and justice, has a subtle sense of humour (finds some things funny even when other children do not), imitates people and animals in successful pantomime, shows impatience in routine duties such as tidying up and similar, performs some works differently from others but logically, plans, creates his own games, in his game he has imagined toys and co-players, is capable of producing a great number of ideas or solutions to problems, shows intellectual playfulness, imagination, thoughtful experimenting in the sense “I ask myself what would happen if ....“.

Due to all the aforementioned, gifted children have problems in social interactions with other children: they are unusually vulnerable to criticism from others, have a very expressed need for success and self-confirmation, are often isolated and reserved which reduces self-respect, worry at attempts of unrealistic changes and goals that may bring about strong frustrations. Intolerance and lack of understanding from peers is frequent and can cause

rejection and possible isolation. Lack of understanding and support for gifted children can cause significant problems (Webb and Kleine, 1993). The aspiration for high upbringing and education standards and achievements demands the attribution of greater meaning to the discovery of gifted children and the creation of possibilities for the development of their giftedness in one or more fields. The task of the educator and teacher is to substitute the usual situation in which contents, methods and ways of working are adapted to the average majority in the group. Observing gifted children and encouraging their giftedness by creating programmes in line with the tendencies, interests, motivation and capabilities of gifted children is an obligation of the educator and teacher and the research assistant.

Even though significant differences exist among gifted children and pupils, they are described as those with greater cognitive possibilities, developed capacity for quick understanding of complex ideas and concepts, learn faster with deeper understanding than their peers, show great curiosity in certain fields, creative ability, ingenuity and capacity in creating a great number of ideas and in observing different viewpoints. Talented and gifted children and pupils can have difficulties that disturb the recognition of talent and giftedness. The difficulties can be in the motor, sensory, and emotional plan, in study and behaviour respectively. They are inconstant in their work, do not finish their tasks, are constantly restless and similar. They give the impression of being average and under average, achieve results that are under their capacities. These children and pupils demand particular diagnostic examining and a carefully designed curriculum.

### **Giftedness encouragement programmes in preschool institutions in the Republic of Croatia**

The first programme of giftedness encouragement in the preschool period in the Republic of Croatia started being implemented in 1993 in Zagreb as an experimental programme entitled “Additional encouragement of the development of clever and potentially gifted preschool age children”. It was based on the cognition of the importance of early discovery and corresponding encouragement of development possibilities in children with above average capacities (Cvetković-Lay, 2002) and in 1995 the Bistrić Centre for promotion of giftedness in children was founded. It organized seminars and training for parents and educators with the aim of developing professionally applied activities in the field of education of the gifted in upbringing and education practice and counselling work with parents.



The early discovery and encouragement of capacities in gifted children is an area that is becoming all the more important in the world because it is possible and necessary to observe giftedness at the earliest age. Such an approach has a preventive significance for researches have shown that inappropriate upbringing and education of gifted children can later result in various types of their unacceptable and antisocial behaviour (Saunders and Espeland, 1991, according to Cvetković-Lay, 2002).

The first significant step in discovering capacities in children is by watching and observing behavioural features. It is necessary to observe early enough the special behavioural signs that indicate potential giftedness, adequately support development and accept the child with all its “difficult” characteristics, and these are the first steps on the road to successfully realize a child’s potentials. Considering that the evaluation of giftedness will be performed by professionals (generally psychologists), it is important for educators and teachers to recognize the signs of potential giftedness.

Gifted and clever children are to be differentiated. A clever child shows interest, answers questions, knows answers, is at the top of the group, understands what something means, observes with liveliness, finishes what it has started, has good ideas, enjoys school, has a good memory, performs its tasks obediently, learns easily, likes to display in parts, likes the company of peers, and absorbs information. A gifted child is particularly curious, searches for new knowledge, new ideas, discusses in detail, asks questions, looks further away from the group, has an aim and knows what it is looking for, comes to conclusions by itself, observes attentively, does not quickly reject ideas, starts projects, has unusual ideas, enjoys studying, makes good assumptions, searches for analogies in nature, is very critical, likes complexity in exposure, prefers adults or older children, and manipulates with information.

The behavioural features of gifted and clever children may surely be a landmark in their being recognized by teachers and educators, as an incentive to direct children (with the consent of their parents) to identification procedures. It is, therefore, particularly important for school age children to find contents of upbringing and education and forms in which they can develop more intensively. Clever children often please their educators and parents, and it is easier and more pleasant to teach them, while gifted children can be exceptionally difficult for they do not adapt to the usual standards. Many gifted children equally manifest behaviour that is connected to the ADHD syndrome: motor restlessness, inattention, high level of activity, impulsiveness and absence. Gifted children and children with lack of attention and hyperactivity have many similar features such as: weaker attention, boredom and absence (daydreaming) in specific situations; low tolerance and lack of perseverance in tasks

perceived as too easy and unimportant; discerning power (maturity) is not in line with the advanced intellectual development which may cause impulsive reactions; intensive nature can be the cause for conflict with authorities; reveal a high activity level – they need less sleep; have a tendency to question the rules, customs and tradition.

Therefore, programmes for the encouragement of giftedness must follow the basic concepts of a differentiated programme and they are: widening and lengthening of the basic programme, satisfaction of expressed interests, tendencies and capacities of the child, faster pace and more flexible exchange of activities, encouraging higher levels of the thinking process and freedom and independence in creating programmes for children and educators (Cvetković Lay, 2002).

Article 12 of the Government Pedagogic Standards for Preschool Upbringing and Education (NN 2008) states that special programmes for preschool upbringing and education of gifted children are realized as:

a) expanded regular programmes that are partly adapted to the child's expressed interests, tendencies and capacities and realized through regular preschool upbringing and education programmes,

b) work programmes in smaller groups of children of equal or similar capacities, tendencies and interests with organized special activities (projects, more demanding logical-didactic games, work on multimedia computers and similar),

c) specially adapted programmes with additional contents that stimulate the development of specific areas of giftedness while respecting the particularities of gifted children and are realized as:

- play rooms for gifted children of similar intellectual capacity and interest (up to 15 children)
- programmes of specific content for children with similar capacities, interests and talents (music, visual art, sport, languages, creative play room)
- individual mentor work.

Equally when dealing with measures for didactic means and other tools necessary for the implementation of regular and particular programmes in line with Article 12 Subparagraph 2 which states that corresponding tools are to be ensured in special programmes for children with special upbringing and education needs (children with difficulties, gifted children and children with health needs).

## **Work with gifted children in the elementary school system in the Republic of Croatia – general directions, legislation and regulations**

The Regulations on Elementary School Upbringing and Education of Gifted Children (OG 34/91) are in force in Croatia which regulate the manner of observation, education, stimulation and follow-up of gifted children, and the conditions and procedures by which a pupil can finish elementary school in a shorter than prescribed period. Article 2 of the Regulations on the gifted defines a set of characteristics that enables the pupil to permanently achieve above average results in one or more areas of human activity and this is conditioned by a high level of development of single capacities, personal motivation and outer stimulus. Such children achieve high results or have the potential for high results in: general intellectual capacity, special school capacities/academic capacities, creative and productive opinion, management capacity, visual and acting capacities and psychomotor capacities. Article 4 – identification and assessment of gifted children's features are realized by elementary school teachers and professional associates. The school will use data and opinions given by parents, educators in kindergartens and other experts – realizing programmes in which the pupils are participating outside school. *Article 5* – in aiming at gifted children's development, the elementary school will enable: work according to various intensity programmes, choice programmes, group and individual work, work with a mentor, early registration, acceleration or ending of the elementary education in an earlier than prescribed period, extracurricular activities and activities outside school, contacts with experts from the area of interest, access to sources of specific knowledge. *Article 8*- Elementary school pupils (from 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade) can finish two grades in one school year if it is established that on the basis of objective examination of reading and comprehension, literacy and mathematical knowledge and knowledge of other teaching subjects the level of knowledge is higher or equal to that of pupils in a year older grade. A pupil from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade can finish two grades in one year after having passed the class exam. Article 32 of the Government Pedagogic Standard of Elementary School Upbringing and Education, OG 63/08, states that the school is obliged to systematically identify gifted children during the school year, work with them according to a special programme, follow their improvement and draw up a report of this based on the judgement of the expert school team. Work with gifted pupils is performed according to programmes of various intensity and complexity as a differentiated teaching programme in the class or in upbringing and education groups, creative and/ or research workshops through

choice programmes, group or individual, in particular outside school activities, parallel, extended programmes or enabling access to sources of specific knowledge. The school can approve the absence of a gifted child for a period longer than the prescribed one and the need to adapt the manner of examination and grading for such pupils. The work programme with gifted children consists of: increased work of the teacher with gifted children, procurement of necessary teaching tools and literature, access to special sources of knowledge, state and international competitions of gifted pupils organized by the competent Ministry of Education and other subjects that have the approval of the ministry authorized for education, incentive funds for pupil scholarships, awards and other.<sup>4</sup>The aspiration for high upbringing and education standards and achievements demands attributing more meaning to the discovery of above average and gifted children and creating the possibility for the development of their giftedness in one or more areas. The task of the teacher is to substitute the usual class situation where contents, methods and ways of working have been adapted to the average majority in the class. Noticing gifted children and encouraging the development of their capacity by drawing up a programme in line with their tendencies, interests, motivation and capacities is the obligation of the elementary school teacher and professional associate.<sup>5</sup>

An individualized curriculum is drawn up for gifted pupils whereby its contents and quantity correspond to the needs of the individual or group. The curriculum should be reflected on an advanced level of opinion and problem solving which is attributed to these pupils, a depth and complexity of content that offers them the corresponding challenge and intensity as well as the opportunity to express themselves creatively. An individualized curriculum makes it possible and includes aspects of support which eliminate or reduce obstacles in the achievement of determined goals. With the manner of organizing the upbringing and education work and programme for gifted children, the school ensures the participation of pupils in the upbringing and education programme in line with the level and type of giftedness, additional lessons and other types of work that encourage their capacity and creativeness. The formation of an individualized curriculum demands a corresponding adaption, difference (differentiation) of contents and themes and the period of time for mastering the contents and the course of study and work form. The curriculum must open new possibilities in school work organization, firstly in enriching the upbringing and education programme content of gifted pupils, methodical procedures, textbook offers, communication

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<sup>4</sup> Completely taken over from Government Pedagogic Standard for Elementary School Upbringing and Education OG 63/08

<sup>5</sup> Excerpts from Croatian National Educational Standard

skills and social relations. It is necessary to adapt to gifted children's goals, contents and ways of work.

Two most common approaches that are used for the needs of gifted pupils in elementary school are: expanding, drawing up and realizing a particular or enriched upbringing and education programme and an accelerated programme. Expansion represents vertical adaptation that enables the pupil to advance more quickly with the curriculum. It can contain *acceleration*, when pupils "skip" a part of the curriculum in order to move faster towards their goal. The contents of the general curriculum can be enriched so it can become more complex which leads the pupil to a deeper introduction of single contents and advancement at an adequate speed for the pupil. Enrichment signifies horizontal adaptability within the entire curriculum. It signifies a type of study that is outside the elementary programme that children study, it respectively represents an addition to the general curriculum if it does not change it. It can be achieved with a group of children and pupils working together at additional contents within the curriculum. The enrichment does not have to be intended only for gifted children but also for the other pupils in the class. The application of a drawn up particular and enriched upbringing and education programme for gifted children or a group of gifted children and its implementation assumes: the identification of a gifted pupil, the diagnosis of giftedness respectively, drawing up a work programme for one or a group of gifted children, creating a team of professionals who will follow their/his work, ensure conditions for the implementation of the programme (timetable, teaching tools, literature, forms of teaching or studying), and the evaluation of the pupil's results and achievements.

The possibilities of enriching the programme for gifted pupils or pupils are various. The programme can refer to every upbringing and education area, and the approach to the contents is deeper, lead individually, often connected to other areas, interactive, and can be under the leadership of an outer mentor (for example, a scientist, artist and other). In the enriched programme practice, gifted pupils do not stand out in the class community or school environment but work individually at tasks or projects with professional guidance. It is important to take into account the individual needs and tendencies of each gifted pupil and particularly their motivation.

Acceleration <sup>6</sup> is a form of teaching which enables the pupil to finish elementary school in a period shorter than prescribed. Acceleration means that a pupil is earlier included in the

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<sup>6</sup> Acceleration can be *partial* – when the gifted child spends only one part of the school day in a higher class listening to one or more subjects and *complete* – when the pupil finishes two grades in one school year.

regular elementary school education or the possibility of transferring to higher grades during the same school year, and it refers to those pupils that stand out with excellent achievements in one part or all upbringing and education subjects. Acceleration is a more demanding and more sensitive manner of realizing the needs of gifted pupils. Gifted pupils stand out in determined above average capacities, which is more demanding for the teacher in the didactic and methodical approach. It is thereby important to take into consideration the level of emotional and social maturity of gifted pupils before deciding on the application of acceleration. Pupils are often encouraged with additional work in order to participate at competitions, gatherings and meetings. The Croatian school system enables a third type of work with gifted pupils and that is enabling them to participate in special periodical upbringing and education programmes that are organized for a group of gifted children within the school itself – music, ballet, visual art and similar programmes that are periodically organized in the so-called summer schools, Saturday schools, specialization programmes and similar.

The National Framework Curriculum of the Republic of Croatia emphasizes how gifted children are to be included in additional teaching and other forms of work that stimulate their capacity and creativity. A programme based on characteristics and special upbringing and education needs of such children and groups of pupils must be different in quality and not in quantity from the regular, general curriculum. It demands not only a corresponding adaption, differentiation of contents or themes and a pace for mastering the contents respectively, but also the process of teaching and work form, above all the drawing up of an individualized study programme. The goal of the National Curriculum is defined accordingly: enable gifted and talented children/pupils the development and implementation of their potentials respecting their social and emotional needs. Special attention is given to mentorship, competition, special programmes, pupils with “double special needs” and centres of excellence.<sup>7</sup>

Mentors are experts in the field of pupil interests, or capacities, whereby a child/pupil can work on the principle of “apprenticeship”. The mentor then has the role of guide, teacher, idol and friend. Besides mentor assistance to gifted pupils that can be subject to difficulties arising from the disharmony of intellectual and socio-emotional level of maturity, academic and socio-emotional support is also offered. Therefore, mentorship has a dual function: assistance

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<sup>7</sup> Completely quoted from the Croatian National Educational Standard

in developing giftedness or talent and support through “emphatic cooperation”. A mentor can be a teacher, older pupil, parents-volunteers and a guest expert.

Children are directed to various competitions in the areas of their interest whereby the chance is offered to compete or show their capacities and talents with which they receive acknowledgements but also test their capacities. It is therefore considered that competitions can be local, national and international as well as individual and group ones.

Special programmes are various extracurricular activities, workshops, summer and winter schools and clubs where gifted children/pupils participate and attend programmes according to their special areas of talent and interest.

Gifted and talented children/pupils with “double special needs” are gifted children that have an additional difficulty such as, for example, ADHD, difficulties in studying, sensory and motor difficulties, etc. The giftedness and talent of such children most often remains unrecognized and they do not have the possibility of realizing their potentials. They, therefore, need special forms of identification and support in the upbringing and education system, but also outside such a system, through alternative off-school educational and therapeutic programmes.

The following group of gifted children that are in danger of not being able to realize their potentials are pupils “outcasts”, gifted children that seem average and under average respectively, inconstant in work, not finishing their tasks, etc. These children/pupils also demand special diagnostic testing, alternative off-school forms of studying, non traditional studying skills, mentorship.

It is necessary to establish centres for the development of giftedness and creativity that will offer professional assistance, lead research and education activities in the field of giftedness and creativity, connect legal bodies and education, science and economy employees, and all this with the aim of providing corresponding education support to gifted children /pupils. The centre offers support to gifted children’s parents and informs, counsels and educates parents on the characteristics and needs of gifted children. The centre is a place where gifted children socialize at national and international level, and find encouragement and support among peers (mental and chronological). It ensures seminars, summer and winter schools, camps for the gifted, pupil interest groups, learning by internet and online forums where members can discuss on various themes. It also cooperates with international organizations and institutions for the gifted and enables gifted children in the Republic of Croatia to attend camps and various events organized for them at home and abroad. Besides

working with children and pupils, the centres have the task to train professionally all the participants of the system.

### **Educator's and teacher's competences in working with gifted children**

Competences needed for working with gifted children refer to, firstly, the capacity of identify giftedness. Namely, it happens in practice that educators and teachers do not identify giftedness or have a feeling of discomfort and fear and ignore the child's giftedness. They must, first of all, show interest in lifelong learning, team work interest and the assistance of experts of various profiles but also nourish flexibility (develop and research styles and learning strategies). It is important to create an atmosphere in class that will favourably influence giftedness which means: give pupils freedom and encourage them to think independently, react positively on curiosity and unusual questions, always stimulate pupils to participate in additional activities they are particularly interested in and stimulate their imagination and perceptive presentation.

The teacher is to enable gifted pupils to have access to specific sources of knowledge, bringing them additional literature, magazines with themes they show interest in. It is equally inevitable to communicate with parents daily so as to stimulate the giftedness. A gifted child in class can be of great help to the teacher if he knows how to stimulate the child's potentials for he can have a positive impact on the other pupils in the class if assisted by a competent teacher. We can thus point out the positive side of a child's giftedness in teaching: they express well their thoughts and feelings, work conscientiously, constantly achieve success, wish to learn, explore, search for additional information, are sensitive to the feelings and rights of others, they are original in discussions and are stimulating, and they are quick at observing the connection and relation between phenomena and objects. Teachers sometimes neglect a pupil's giftedness for working with gifted children demands great engagement, patience and special methods of work for the existence of not only positive but negative aspects of giftedness that make it difficult to have quality work in class. We, therefore, say in particular: thanks to their capacity of speech they can report on the basis of little knowledge, they tend to dominate in discussions, they can be impatient upon taking over new task, they can decide to read literature instead of actively participating in activities, they can resist standard procedures or rules, they can experience frustration due to lack of logics in daily school activities and off-school events, they can be bored at repeating the covered material, and they can use humour to manipulate.



When speaking of gifted children's characteristics connected with studying, it is important to emphasize that such pupils have a very well developed vocabulary for their age and a wealth of expression, master reading early and read books of serious content. They have a good memory, learn fast and easily, pay attention in class and often observe more than others. They are highly motivated, strive for perfection, are not easily satisfied with their achievements and are very self-critical. A gifted pupil is focused on discerning the correct from the incorrect, the good from the bad, and tend to judge events, people and things, and they are characterized by great self-confidence and persistence in work.

Gifted pupils enter into a social relationship with great self-confidence and cooperate well with peers and adults. At the same time, they love to dominate for they have good organization capacities which are not always accepted and they can cause isolation with peers. Gifted children have an imagination, original ideas and often find unusual solutions, like to improvise and include a great number of elements in their artistic work and thus the characteristics of these children are emphasized creativity and artistic expression.

### **Preschool institution curriculum – from traditional to an organization learning and changing permanently**

Continual changes in upbringing and education institutions include the need for continual studying of all upbringing and education processes. Some authors point out the meaning of organization readiness to respond to the changes in contemporary society by stating “the speed of learning in an organization must be equal – or greater – than the speed of change in the outer environment for the organization to survive and develop” (Stoll and Fink, 2000: 201). Continuous studying and development in an upbringing and education institution represents the necessity to accept new types of professional development of educators and teachers who contribute in creating the culture of continuous research and study (Fullan, 1993; Malaguzzi, 1998).

Preschool curriculum cares for all the areas of a child's development whereby it enables children and educators to create, shape and develop it in line with the individual child needs and its differences. It is impossible to unequivocally define a curriculum and its significances. While some authors “equalize” it with the term of a teaching plan and programme (Marsh: 1994), others are of opposite opinion (Fullan, 1993; Malaguzzi, 1998; Elliott, 1998; Ellis, 2004; according to Slunjski, 2011).

The differentiated concept of curriculum reflects not only on its conceptual and theoretical attribute but also on the different conception of the methodology of its making, contents and structure. The curriculum is equalized with the complete, systematic and whole planning of upbringing and education and refers to tasks, time, work methods and instructions on work organization by precisely determining what pupils need to adopt at a proper level of knowledge and skill. (Mijatović, Previšić and Žužul, 2000). Previšić (2007) differs the *closed curriculum* which mostly has the characteristics of a traditional concept of plan and programme and does not endure any features of spontaneity in its making, while in an *open curriculum* it is the spontaneity and non-planning in its making that are acceptable and imply the flexible methodology of its making. Besides these two mentioned types, Previšić mentions the *mixed curriculum* as one more type of curriculum that represents the transitional form from standardized to a humane and creative curriculum. A mixed curriculum endures less what is provided, sets the framework for building the implementing core in a free and creative manner so as to activate the pupil as much as possible in the development of knowledge, capacities and skills, as well as general and specific competences through projects and research tasks, and it is the transition from a standardized to a humane and creative curriculum of contemporary upbringing and education. The teaching plan here is more a direction for the teacher from the point of view of work organization, way of implementation and control of the performed (Previšić, 2007).

The curriculum in a broader sense represents the official conception of upbringing and education, mutual at state level, prescribed by acts that contain the basic ideas and principles of upbringing and education, the living and studying of children in an institution of early upbringing, while, in the narrow sense, it represents the ways in which single upbringing and education institutions succeed in realizing these principles in practice. (Slunjski, 2012). In the Republic of Croatia this is displayed in the acts *Program Direction of Preschool Children Upbringing and Education (1991)*, *Proposal of Preschool Upbringing Development Concept (1991)* and *National Curriculum Framework (2010)*.

The curriculum is designed in order to realize long-term goals with children in social, emotional, bodily and cognitive areas. It is oriented towards knowledge, skills, understanding attitudes, points out the development of contemplation, conclusion and capacity development in solving issues, and its contents need to be stimulating and meaningful to children and actively include them in the process of studying. It thus ensures the psychic security of children and supports their individual, linguistic and cultural differences, and develops the supporting relationship with the family.

It is indisputable how almost all contemporary approaches in upbringing and education point out the importance of the individual approach to children. Contemporary schools, as well as preschool institutions, find it difficult to achieve the function of developing individualization and ensure the basic assumptions of lifelong learning of individuals. Their priority task is thus to identify and develop the existing predispositions of each child and subsequent finding of contents. Hentig names such an approach “teaching directed towards the pupil” (Hentig, 1997). A child that learns is more active than the teacher, while the teacher’s role is changed; he is the creator of conditions for a child’s learning and the organizer of various situations that favour learning.

In literature we find three different approaches to curriculum orientation (Slunjski, 2001). The first is transmission-oriented and consists of direct, verbal teaching of a child with prescribed contents for a determined chronological age whereby the position of the child is passive with reference to the educator. The second, the transaction curriculum orientation refers to the deliberation of the result and education process, organization of the environment in which every child is to be educated through his own activities and the indirect support of the educator. Attention is there paid to the process of creating significance and comprehension of what is being studied, and knowledge is looked at as one’s own construction and the reconstruction of the child’s acquired experiences. The child is intrinsically motivated to study and understand the world around it without the permission of adults and outer motivation. The last is the transformation curriculum orientation which refers to the personal and social transformation of the child and educator who upgrades his personal and professional development through the constant research of his own upbringing practice. It reflects the concepts in which knowledge is constructed in the learning process leading to constant changes of the individual, the child who studies respectively.

A traditionally outlined curriculum is based on transmissive orientation and implies a strictly structured process organization of upbringing and education where the educator plans in advance and realizes with children certain themes or contents regardless of the differences in their potentials. Such an approach is based on forcing intellectual goals according to general criteria and not according to the child’s interests and knowledge. On the other hand, contemporary preschool education should be directed towards respecting the dissimilarity of interest, disposition and capacity of children. In line with such a curriculum, the point to start from should be the developing continuum of each child. It is, therefore, necessary to plan heterogeneous teaching strategies in creating the context of learning inasmuch as every child

is a single individual with an individual pattern, experience, growing up timeline with different studying styles and interests.

A curriculum is defined as the joint living of a group of children, educators and parents. This community studies together, tries various ways of having a better understanding of the life situations they find themselves in. The most important characteristic of an open curriculum is that it is installed and develops within all life situations. The emphasis is on the upbringing process, and the principle method of open curriculum development is dialogue among the members of a group. It is important that each one participates equally and according to his possibilities (Slunjski, 2001).

The integrated curriculum<sup>8</sup> unites all development areas in one activity at the same time. Its nature is unpredictable, not predefined; time is flexible and starts from the child's interest. If we perceive a child as a comprehensive and integrated human being, it is necessary to ensure an open and integrated approach to learning in his development. It is the integrated curriculum that joins all development areas (psychological, socio-emotional, and cognitive) and, at the same time, it starts from the child in a determined physical and social context. Advocates of this curriculum approach base their attitude in the connection of different areas in a joint theme that causes interest with children. The theme is chosen as valuable to a child's interest and is fully studied in a purposeful context. On the other hand, isolated presentation of activities confronts the child with fragmented information which complicates his comprehension whereby it feels incompetent and disinterested.

The integrated curriculum is cohesive and its basic goal is to help children develop apprehension, critical knowledge on different problems they deal with. To realize a cohesive curriculum means "...to ensure and organize the theme or concept in the domain of a child's experience (and its apprehension) that will enable his research, interpretation and active participation in activities that can refer to one or more areas of learning, i.e. disciplines." (Bredekamp and Rosegrant, 1992). The aim is, therefore, to develop in children the desire for learning and researching and enable them to engage personally in the research and apprehension of the problem. Cohesiveness leads to deeper understanding of the issue. It is organized on the theme that interests children, helps them understand the world they live in, encourages self-regulation and independence in a child and a deeper research on the theme.

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<sup>8</sup> The integrated curriculum is characterized by the following elements: the curriculum is not defined in advance but is created by educators and children, children of different age and capacities are integrated, a stimulating, interesting and concrete environment for learning and acquiring experience, flexibly arranged time, joint cooperation with parents and experts, activities should integrate different areas of knowledge, and the importance of the educator's team work with children.

One of the aspects of a cohesive integrated curriculum appears under the name “work on the project” (Katz and Chard, 1989). In such an approach, educators stimulate children to find the issue in their environment which they will study more profoundly independently or through joint research with others.

### **Projects of approach to work and learning**

Project teaching is a didactic system that takes place according to the project that enables self-organized and self-responsible teaching whereby the individual work of a pupil is tied with the assistance of the co-pupil and teacher. The project is a joint attempt of the teacher and pupil to connect learning and work so as to jointly process the set task and bring results. In project teaching pupils learn the methods and strategy of learning which means: pupils in project teaching learn how to search for information, how to structure, organize, plan, decide, shape, maintain order and visualize. Work on the project as a cooperative form of teaching and learning allows the drilling of solidarity action and provides experience in team and group work. Teaching work in project teaching is directed towards an interdisciplinary approach and stimulates thoughtful connection of knowledge from a larger number of teaching subjects.

The project form of teaching represents the integrated aspect of learning and researching in children and educators which is completely directed towards the child’s interests. The work concept on the project<sup>9</sup> enables the integration of various areas of child learning and the satisfaction of numerous goals towards development areas. Children best learn from experience and in those circumstances that stimulate curiosity and research. Author Slunjski (2001) defines “work on a project” as a set of activities where one or more children study a theme or issue more profoundly. The work of children on a project can last for a few days, weeks, depending on the age of the children and the nature of the theme. It is significant to point out that this approach is important even for the position of the educator in the study process for it is based on the understanding and respect of the importance of the philosophy of education, professional and personal development of the educator, understanding education as

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<sup>9</sup> Work on the project is not a new period in early upbringing and education. The historical context of development of this approach to learning is connected to the USA, and in England it was accepted during the 20s of the past century. The project method of working with children of early age was founded by Klipatrick in 1918. (Slunjski, 2012) The conception close to the work on the project was mentioned under the name “Bank Street Approach“, and later developed into “Bank Street College of Education“ in New York. Its purpose was to connect the awareness of the child’s possibilities with the concepts of education and stimulation of various levels of the child’s development and its interaction with the environment.

a process of strengthening the individual in participating in the democratic process, and the respect of the child's family, community and culture context.

Children are intrinsically motivated in a project, explore issues and experiment in cooperation with other children, and the educator stimulates the children to enter into interaction with the environment in a way that makes sense to them. Such a manner of integrated learning points out the active participation of children and stimulates the development of emotional, moral and aesthetic sensibility in children, as well as the development of skills and knowledge, and helps the child to awaken the understanding of its own experience in his living environment. The theme of the project is chosen according to the child's interest on which his knowledge also depends. On the basis of observing and listening to children, the educator comes to new ideas. The theme project develops through the model **Z – Ž – N** (Hansen, Kaufmann and Walsh, 2004). The mentioned model gives answers to three key questions. The first question (What do I know?) is connected to the initial knowledge on the theme where the educator asks the question and encourages a conversation with children, and the children's answers are written on a paper with their name and comments. In the second question (What do I want to know?) the answers become the content of the project theme, questions are written down and a plan of activities is drawn up on the themes to be discussed, visiting sites are determined, their organization and similar. The final question (What have I learned?) enables the educator to cooperate with children in the evaluation of their knowledge and skills they have adopted during the project, and to analyze the activities that have been conducted which will contribute to the success of later projects.

One of the better known pedagogic concepts applied in preschool institutions and lower elementary school grades is the Reggio conception<sup>10</sup>. The concept is founded on the studies of Dewey, Piaget<sup>11</sup> and Vygotski<sup>12</sup>. The theoretic strongpoint of the conception is made up of three principles, and they are constructivism, attentive learning and a school open to the

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<sup>10</sup> The Reggio concept appeared in the 60s of the past century in Italy and its author was Loris Malaguzzi who considered that a child has numerous inborn possibilities of expression and potential that stimulate one another.

<sup>11</sup> The founder of constructivism, Jean Piaget, pointed out the importance of the child's individual development through cognition, his own activities, in interaction with his physical surroundings and his inner inborn assimilation, accommodation and equilibrium process. He states that knowledge is an active process that takes shape during the permanent process of interaction of the body and surroundings, and it appears though the very activity of the person learning, and upon learning the process of creating, maintaining and elaborating knowledge presents itself.

<sup>12</sup> The founder of socio-constructivism is Lav Vigotski whose theory proceeds from the assumption that the social environment in which a child acquires its experience is essential for the development of higher thinking processes. Socio-constructivism is realized as a principle through cooperation and knowledge acquired through interaction, relationship, and active structuring of new knowledge with the existing one.

community. Constructivism<sup>13</sup> emphasizes process and not the product of learning. Learning starts when children try to understand the world around them and there exists the interactive process that includes children, adults and the environment. The social interaction has a significant role in Vigotski's theory, and its most important means is language whereby self-regulation and human development which happen through language and symbols are pointed out. In Reggio pedagogy, the project represents the means of shaping and structuring the experience of children and educators and the backbone of their joint learning. The basic principles of the Reggio conception are the educator's picture of the child as a strong, competent and resourceful being. The child is looked upon as abundant in potential, curious to know and explore the environment and is in interaction with the social environment and surroundings. Loris Malaguzzi states three basic rights of the child which are to be respected in work, and they are the right of the child to understand and develop its potentials, the right of confidence of adults and the right of support from adults.

The Reggio conception is characterized by numerous determinants. One of them is that children are active participants in acquiring their experience, and it is necessary to respect the child's personal rhythm. It is important for the spatial environment to be designed so as to encourage the child's research. It is also important to encourage various forms of social interaction in children, as well as cooperation, discussion, joint conversations, reflections among children. Furthermore, children learn in spiral and not linear progression. It is important to enable and encourage different media of child expression. The educator should listen to the child and perceive what the child is saying and use the ethnographic method in gathering documentation. The following features result from the Reggio approach. The first feature is the relationship among all the people in the kindergarten. They have to be equal, positive, respectful and independent of the differences among people. These are achieved through quality communication and equal dialogue. Creativity is the feature that is needed to be stimulated in children. Through fostering, respecting and developing creativity, the child will strengthen its "100 symbolic languages" through artistic, gestural, verbal and graphic language. Creativity is stimulated by engaging the child's high thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation), through their encouragement in expressing ideas with different symbolic means, thorough the integration of the areas in subject in the form of the child's relevant projects and by ensuring adequate time for more profound research of specific themes that arise from the child's spontaneous interest (Nenadić-Bilan, 2014: 27). Great

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<sup>13</sup> Constructivism represents a way of cognition that is in substantial connection with cultural values, ethical beliefs and the social consensus of the learning group.

attention is given to the surroundings and material that are called the “third educator” for they enable the child’s research, freedom of expression, thinking, discovering, interaction and privacy and encourage them to communicate and socialize. Besides this, flexible time organization where single activities are harmonized with the children’s needs also give significance to this work and learning approach whereby the child’s feeling for time is respected and his personal rhythm in planning and developing activities. The duration of activities in kindergarten is not previously planned and thus the development and learning continuity is not disturbed by the structuring of time. The following feature refers to learning and teaching when children and adults become partners in learning. Quality relationships are established among children, educators and parents as well as interaction in all parts of the system. Dialogue among children is the key variable of social constructivism (Daws, 2005). Educators and children’s partners do research and study with them, and emphasize also the value of the parent’s role who thus become partners and active participants in the upbringing and learning process. Through reflexive practice, educators explore their own upbringing and education practice. They write down all the activities, take photographs, document and thus learn about children and together with children whereby the documentation that represents the basis of individual and joint evaluation of one’s own work give parents an insight into the way their children learn, apprehend and develop has a special value.

“In kindergartens in Reggio Emilia children with a strong experience and feeling for adventure explore the surroundings searching for material, observing tiny details...” (Vecchi and Giudichi, 2004).

In the works of authors dealing in Reggio pedagogy (Malguzzi, 1994; Gandini and Edwards, 2001; Rinaldi, 2005) two basic principles are pointed out; the socio-constructive approach to learning and the creative and active nature of the child. Children are curious beings who from birth participate in active interaction with objects and people from their environment, thus creating “maps of their individual, social, affective and symbolic development” (Nenadić-Bilan, 2014: 29). The need for preschool children to explore, design and co-design knowledge is to create a system of values and build an identity is particularly emphasized. In gifted children the desire for cognition and learning is often more emphasized, and curiosity is inexhaustible with regard to peers. Therefore, authors (Wray, 1989; Glogovac, 1994) that are directed towards working with gifted children of preschool age consider the work on the project to be one of the most efficient strategies in their work. Experiences from practice connected with work with gifted children confirm the efficiency of this kind of work with gifted children of preschool age, and particularly considering the fact that it is necessary



to satisfy specific upbringing and education needs and in doing so not to separate them from the regular upbringing and education group. The possibility of identifying potentially gifted children in the group is thus provided and possibilities are “opened” in personal development, particular capacities, potentials and creativities of all other children.

### **Work on the project “Little Glagolitics” – encouraging and developing giftedness in preschool children**

Research based on the application of the humanistic development concept of pedagogic practice in kindergarten point out the importance of the environment determined by an atmosphere of unity that is to be considered in the broader context for it covers the total of all aspects that make a kindergarten: human, expert, relation and communication, material, organizational and spatial potentials (Bredkamp and Rosegrant, 1995; Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998).

Lead by their natural curiosity, the children of Sunce Kindergarten in Zadar set off on a research work of getting to know Glagolitic. The children’s interest was a stimulus for the educator<sup>14</sup> in designing a preliminary plan of the project.

The basic assumption for a successful start and realization of the project came from the children’s interest. It was, in this case, when one of the regular magazines for children Radost, Smib and Mak arrived at the kindergarten. In one of the Smib magazines, children found a present, a booklet entitled “Half a Meter of Glagolitic”. The unusual picture book attracted the attention of some of the children. They were interested in “What was it?”, “What were those strange letters?”, “Who wrote that?”, “Can we write like that?” The children’s future interest in the “unusual letters” did not die down and it was clear to the educators that they would have to satisfy the children’s curiosity in all ways available adapted to the age and also to the individual capacities of each child. Assisted by the parents and other experts, a sufficient picture and written material was gathered and the living room of the kindergarten turned into a small “Glagolitic” library where a certain number of children gathered daily and leafed the pages, “read”, commented and explored the unknown alphabet. The children asked “Where did the people who wrote this live?” (Paula asked) and the shape of single letters were

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<sup>14</sup> Educator Rozana Bogdanić is specially trained in working with gifted children of preschool age, and the Programme of Work with Gifted Children is being implemented in the branch building “Duga“ which is one of the branches of Sunce Kindergarten.

associated with objects from daily life “This letter is like a mushroom” (Ana stated), and this is like a “ship” (Mate answered back).

The image inscription on the Baška tablet caught the particular attention of two boys. The educator came to know that in the city library there was a moulding of the Baška tablet in its natural size and that was a motive for visiting it. The visit to a locality where the children could learn and comprehend their past resulted in excited observation and attempts to figure out “What is written on it?” not being able to really read the contents from the “stone tablet” the children started a game of associations. The letters then became boats, clocks, small houses, traffic lights, presents and similar. The visit resulted in borrowing other written sources and arranging another visit library. Stimulated by the game of associations, the visit to the library created a small spelling book.

The educator continued her road in the past together with the children in organized walks in the old city nucleus of Zadar searching for remains of Glagolitics. The reflection of the kindergarten experience created a stimulating environment of expressing the experience through different drawings, writing, modelling letters, dramatizing and similar activities. The walk in the city induced them to draw their Zadar and write its name in Glagolitics.

The participation of parents and experts was not lacking here. Namely, the kindergarten group was visited by the father of one of the children from the group, a professor who is engaged in preserving the cultural heritage.<sup>15</sup> He shared his knowledge with the children by talking about times long past when Glagolitics letters appeared, about the people who had created them, how they had transferred them and written them. The visit and conversation resulted in the children’s adopting much new knowledge on the past. It was necessary to once again enrich the activity centres with new means and material and enable the children to process the experienced contents. In the research centre a goose feather, Indian ink and different papers were thus found for the children to perceive how once people wrote. “The secret letters“ – the written letters and words on white paper in white Glagolitic colour induced the children in discovering “What is written there?” The family and drama centre has stick dolls shaped in Latin and Glagolitic letters and the text of a play which prompted the children in creating their own play. The construction centre had been gathering for days a group of boys who were trying to make a Baška tablet from clay and to imprint Galgolic letters with wooden sticks they had made by themselves. In the art centre, children were modelling with fimo-mass the Glagolitic first letter of their names, and when the project

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<sup>15</sup> Professor Livio Marjan is at the same time the father of one of the boys of the group where the project was implemented.

developed they mastered the remaining letters so that they could make all the letters of their names, and birthday cards and the names of pets in Glagolitic. In the centre of initial reading and writing, children were offered memory games that had Glagolitic letters, carousel letters, crossword puzzles and fill up gaps. The acquired knowledge and its review and further learning and perception of the past continued even through numerous other visits and meetings. One of them was a visit to the Church of St. Michael where children “found” traces of Glagolitic and on how it had been preserved to the present day in conversations with the Franciscan friar in the church. During their visit to the church, the children had the opportunity of listening to Glagolitic chants from old Slavic masses played on the organ by a music professor.<sup>16</sup>

The process of the experienced contents took place throughout all the activities even though the children were most familiar with the artistic expression. The works that arose as a result of the experienced and learned material were presented on billboards to familiarize other children and parents with the project and make it possible for them to join in the project. The role of the parents thus did not remain only in collecting material and stimulating but also in stimulating conversation on Galgolic, letters and heritage. A joint workshop was organized for children and parents who had the opportunity to use various materials and contribute thus to learning, preserving heritage and developing the project and further supporting the children’s learning.

Notes, gathering statements and experiences, archiving during the project was enabled by its assessment whereby we concluded that work on the project had induced interest in something new and unusual. Children’s rights and interests in integral learning and adopting knowledge in a natural manner, the right to participate and state one’s opinion, and the right to a cultural and national identity has been fulfilled. The children also learned how to use various sources of information and to apply what they had learned in everyday life.

New knowledge strengthened the children’s self-confidence and the positive image of themselves and opened the road to further learning and developing interest, and they shared this with their families and thus participated in the realization of single phases of the project. During the project, educators learned together with the children, developed competences for lifelong learning and professional development in advancing practice.

It is of extreme importance for the child’s earliest experience to be adapted with quality to his needs, and the demand for quality upbringing and education is to be taken into

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<sup>16</sup>Music professor Ivo Nižić had for long years been a music professor at the Department for the Education of Teachers and Educators of Zadar University

consideration when fulfilling a child's specific needs. The principal rule in working with children in kindergarten is to treat each child as potentially gifted and enable an education that will optimally stimulate the development of his possibilities. Even though the majority of children show potential giftedness at an early age, which does not necessarily develop into a productive one, it is important to make it possible for all children to have a very rich working and learning environment. The shown example proves that a work project in preschool institutions offers wide possibilities of satisfying the specific upbringing and education needs of potentially gifted children.

## **Conclusion**

It is often said that a gifted child is a child that has highly developed capacities – whether general (intelligence) or some specific capacity for mathematics, technique, music, literary capacity or/and artistic expression, etc. Giftedness is sometimes characterized as: independence, curiosity, original way of thinking, a high level of creativity and similar. Unfortunately, many teachers even today identify giftedness with good school results, respectively with general knowledge, reading speed, conscientiousness and responsibility of the child and his behaviour adapted to the school demands and the wider social environment.

It is often expected that gifted children achieve extraordinary school results with the expectation that it is sufficient warranty that they will remain creative persons whose works will have a significant influence – which has proved to be an exceptionally inaccurate assumption in life. Some of the gifted children will become exceptionally gifted while some will “lose” their giftedness during their schooling. Namely, the development of giftedness depends on numerous influences most of which do not depend on the individual himself. It is, therefore, very important that the specific individual potential of a child be identified already at preschool and early school age and thus be correctly directed, shaped and dosed according to his age. It is likewise important to timely work on special programmes and an adequate teaching environment to stimulate and develop the giftedness. The teaching plan and programme for the gifted children should make it possible to maximally realize the basic skills, the content that is above the prescribed regular programme, exposure to new areas and disciplines, contents at pupils' choice, greater exposure of contents, extensive experience and creative thinking and problem solving, development of thinking and creative skills, realization of the pupils' goals, and an effective general development and independence development. Parents, educators and teachers of gifted children are showered with numerous questions that

are not easy to answer. Programmes are drawn up for average children and the gifted are not part of this category which creates difficulties. Gifted children need special attention and special treatment in the education system. Inasmuch as the family and education environment do not support them mutually, they cannot ensure adequate satisfaction of the special needs of gifted children creating the occurrence of serious danger of permanent neglect, suppression and non-exploitation of the children's potentials.

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**INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A CHILD'S SELECTION  
OF MUSEUM CONTENTS AND THE LEVEL OF PEDAGOGICAL  
MODELLING OF ACTIVITIES IN THE KINDERGARTEN  
ENVIRONMENT**

*The paper presents a research on the interconnection between a child's choice of museum contents and activities as well as the degree of satisfaction and interest and the degree of pedagogical modelling of such contents in kindergarten. The mentioned interconnection has been observed on the basis of research of the dimension of child perception in a group of 68 children from two kindergartens in Zadar. The features of child perception in a museum environment were followed in the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum in Zadar. Combined methodology was used in the research. Quantitative data was gathered using the Likert scale with three levels aiming at determining the level of satisfaction and interest, and qualitative data by analyzing children's free drawings and semi-structured interviews performed individually with children after their free illustration of experiences through drawings.*

*The conclusion of the paper explains different dimensions of the interconnection between a child's choice of museum contents and activities and the degree of satisfaction and interest and the degree of pedagogical modelling of such contents in kindergarten.*

**Key words:** *choice of museum activities, interest and satisfaction with museum contents, pedagogical modelling of museum contents in kindergartens.*

### **1. Research objectives**

Museums are not only places that treasure a large number of exhibits, but they also have a significant role as institutions of pedagogical communication. The initial incentive for the deliberation of a pedagogical dimension of museum activities was the fact that museum curators most often only differentiate their educational activities roughly by age, directing them towards young visitors (children, youth) and adult museum visitors (Kisovar-Ivanda, 2013). Contemporary museum practice strives towards strengthening the cooperation between museums and pre-school institutions and such inappropriate age differentiation of museum activities is less and less acceptable. In this respect Hooper-Greenhill (1994) points out how precisely variety and flexibility are the most significant advantages of a museum and

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its use in the process of education. In using museum contents, it is possible to create open, flexible and self-regulated activities in the kindergarten environment.

The aim of the research was to investigate and see to what extent the pedagogically shaped and museum connected contents in the kindergarten environment could contribute to the creation of a richer content perception of museum activities and museum exhibitions in pre-school age children. The research problem was to establish whether there was a connection between the children's choice of activities in the museum, their satisfaction and interest and the level of pedagogical modelling of the contents in the kindergarten environment.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1 The museum and pre-school children*

The museum offers children of pre-school age the possibility of getting to know the world and explore different new ideas. Children come to the museum with a wide spectrum of interest and manner of studying that they give advantage to and which obliges the educators and museum curators to prepare different strategies and aspirations towards optimal conditions for meaningful learning.

According to Piscitelli, Everett and Weier (2003:11.) children show numerous features in the world of museums and these make them motivated pupils and their studying a dynamic one. The mentioned authors indicate the following features of younger age pre-school children:

- being energetic
- high level of capacity
- curiosity
- activity
- multi-sensitiveness
- tendency to explore
- playfulness
- tendency to continual question asking
- richness of ideas
- educability (application of educational contents)
- communication skills

- creativity
- independence
- tendency to create one's own approach (concepts)

The museum is a special and bright environment for a child; irresistible with its spacious interiors, unusual architecture and contents completely different from the school ones and the ones at home. Piscitelli, Everett and Weier (2003) point out that children react in different ways to this unusualness of the museum environment: with wonder and surprise, feeling of comfort and curiosity. During the described research, these authors noticed that at the first encounter with the museum space, children had a tendency to run around the museum and to orient themselves in the rooms. These children's activities are called *cognitive mapping*, followed by a phase of pacification. They observed that children of pre-school age slow down after thirty minutes and start to express selectively, more meaningfully and calmly and that cognitive mapping is an important phase in a child's visit of the museum. Furthermore, they notice the tendency of start-stop style of looking round the exhibition. Children interrupt abruptly the visit of one part of the exhibition and turn to another that has suddenly grasped their attention. Therefore, children's interaction with the exhibition is not always as the exhibition designers imagined it for a child generally follows its own interest.

During their research Piscitelli, Everett and Weier (2003) observed that during their first visit to the museum some children were pronouncedly active, warmed up, blushing and sweaty. During their study, they were interested in what was actually happening during the study with children who were preoccupied with studying to the extent that such bodily manifestations occurred. They came to the conclusion that brain activity assisted by movements and practical actions lead to the intensification of the study process. They referred to researches performed by Rennie and McClafferty (1996) who concluded that practical activities were most often equalized with perceptive researches, but it was only the process in which children mentally analyzed their practical activities that gave sense to their exploration experience. The concept of *kinesthetic thinking*, towards the same authors, described the process achieved during studying with integrated bodily actions whereby children engaged their brain, body and hands. *Kinesthetic thinking* has a great advantage with preschool children whose study is to great extent concrete and sensory. Piscitelli, Everett and Weier (2003:14.) point out that handling objects and materials allows unexpected discoveries, develops the feeling for the right moment, actuality and need for immediate action. Children contemplate on the things they touch and can be projected in the physical sense. A large

amount of sensory stimuli, through tactile and kinaesthetic experience, deepens children's attention, creates a more complete picture of objects and supports retention of information. The mentioned authors furthermore mention that the emotional aspect and kinaesthetic experience influence the retention of ideas the child encounters during his visit of the museum. During physical activity children can feel excitement, joy, frustration, empowerment, success or thrill. Bodily activity has a directing role, connecting sensory stimuli and emotions (Wright, 2000, according to Piscitelli, Everett and Weier, 2003). Bodily and emotional connections with objects increase the intensity of memory and the experience of studying.

## *2.2 Museum features connected with pre-school age children's learning*

Following the model of contextual learning in the museum, Kelly and Groundwater-Smith (2004) mention specific demands towards the museum as an institution which we define as a place of learning for children. They connect their demands with various aspects of children's needs. In defining the criteria that a museum adapted to study must fulfill, Kelly and Groundwater - Smith mention four types of specific factors: (1) cognitive factors, (2) psychophysical factors, (3) social factors and (4) emotional factors.

### 1) Cognitive factors

Aiming at maximizing the stimulation of children's activities, children should be given the possibility of cognition of the basic ideas connected with the exhibits, their structure and function, make asking questions possible, handle objects if possible, have a closer introduction of the objects, dispose of information from several sources appropriate to the expression style of the child's age as well as the encouragement of cognition through different senses.

### 2) Psychophysical factors

It should be made possible for children to have a pleasant and secure environment, free movement in space without a large number of limitation bans. Light and architecture design of the space should be adapted to the age and psychophysical needs of the child.

### 3) Social factors

Children like to study with friends, particularly in situations of informal studying. Even though they are aware of the fact that a museum visit is planned by their educators, they would like to have the possibility of a less conventional style of studying, learning from their peers and together with them. They would thereby like to have fun and enjoy the museum environment.

### 4) Emotional factors

Children are emotionally engaged by an adequate museum collection. In case of inadequate presentation of exhibits, children cannot establish an emotional connection with the museum contents. In case of inappropriate contents, a feeling of fear or discomfort can sometimes appear.

## *2.3 The learning theory and children's perception of museum contents*

Most learning theories that we today consider as key theories within various approaches to children's perception of museum contents started to get through in the 70s and 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We relate them with Piaget, Bruner, Bloom, Ausubel and Gardner (Gibs, Sani and Thompson, 2006; Vizek Vidović, Vlahović-Štetić, Rijavec, Miljković, 2003). The most appropriate current theory in USA museums is the Howard Gardner theory of multiple intelligences (according to Gibs, Sani and Thompson, 2006). It gives the possibility to successfully explain the cognitive and affective contribution of studying in museums (Milutinović, 2008). It appeared in the 80s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is still developing. Gardner considers that intelligence is not an entity made up of more abilities but that it is at least seven independent multiple intelligences, and in 1999 (Armstrong, 2006) he added an eighth intelligence. Gardner designed (Armstrong, 2006:14) a way of mapping a wide spectrum of human abilities by grouping them into eight comprehensive categories or "intelligences" (1) linguistic intelligence, (2) logical-mathematical intelligence, (3) space intelligence, (4) bodily kinaesthetic intelligence, (5) musical intelligence, (6) interpersonal intelligence, (7) intrapersonal intelligence and (8) scientific intelligence.

Every person has a unique combination of the mentioned intelligences. Even though the development of each of the mentioned intelligences is different, each person should develop it to personally possible level. Intelligences are in interpersonal interaction and process of development and mutual completion from the moment of birth. In such an inter-relationship, they act jointly in realizing complex activities of each human being, being including thereby

in the symbolic system of each cultural environment (Moussouri, 1999, according to Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, 2000). Gardner's ideas are very influential even in the field of formal and informal education. This theory is important in the exposure and interpretation of objects in single museums, encouraging museum experts to contemplate on one theme in different ways, using different intelligences. Gardner (2000, according to Gibs, Sani and Thompson, 2006) firstly believes his theory to be applicable in museums in which exhibitions stimulate the use of exciting mixtures of multiple intelligences, getting through to many visitors and helping them in the development of all intelligences. In this research Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence had a significant role during the didactic structuring of the contents. We have tried to use the development of capacities that Gardner (2005) considered for single forms of intelligence as study goals during the pre-visit learning activities (work in various centres).

The socio-cultural learning theory is particularly interesting in the context of learning in museums. It was designed by the Russian development psychologist Lev Vigotski at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His understanding of the development of thinking has a strong influence on contemporary researchers, representatives of social constructivism, proceeding from the assumption that the social environment in which a child acquires experience is important for the development of higher mental functions (Gardner, 2005, Vizek Vidović, Vlahović-Štetić, Rijavec, Miljković, 2003). He believes that social interactions lead to learning and that they are the key to understanding the acquired knowledge. Thus Falk and Dierking (2000) point out the importance of certain Vigotsky's statements according to which social mediation is exceptionally intensive within a group and that all the more mental functions have a social root. He thereby means logical memory, conceptual contemplation and self-regulative studying. Museum studying based on the tenets of the socio-cultural theory of learning ensures the facilitation of the different process of learning with rich social interactions which is particularly efficient when we meet families or groups of children as visitors. Thereby, the socio-cultural theory represents, besides the already mentioned theory of multiple intelligences, a significant theoretic starting point in our research.

However, it is important to emphasize that educational issues are very complex. Every learning process, and thus the range and course of the process of learning in museums is difficult to reduce into just one theory or learning model. In the museum practice we therefore often meet eclecticism in its productive forms.

#### *2.4 Recent investigations on child perception of museum contents*

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007) deals in the issues of museum perception, leading the research on museum perception to a certain connection with pre-school and school institutions. The author reports on the inquiries of children's experiences during studying in museums. The contribution in analyzing children's perception on certain issues presented in the museum context is also given by Sandon, Turner and Foster (2008) inquiring on children's attitudes on the biodiversity of jungles in the Cambridge University Zoology Museum. In their work, they focus exclusively on children's experience of the theme of the exhibition (zoological and ecological issues), not thereby addressing the aspect of children's experiences which could refer to the museum as a context of studying and spending free time.

The issue on studying children's experiences of museums is investigated by Crmpotich and Peers (2011) in the international research (*Generating New Forms of Knowledge*) conducted in Canada and Great Britain. Within the linguistic research, they tried to gain data on the emotional influence of museum exhibits on children's thinking using various forms of conversation techniques. Tofanenko (2011) performed a research in Canada on emotional reactions in children in the museum during encounters with traumatic historical experiences, observing educational consequences of such museum communication. She concluded that it was the emotional experiences that influenced a child's decision on whether it will or will not continue to participate in museum activities.

The pedagogical activities of museums in Croatia can be followed in Conference proceedings of Croatian museum educators (Croatian Museum Society, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010) through examples of good practice whose aim it is to enrich the practice of museum educators with practical modelling of museum activities, and thus improve the educational work of the museum. Škarić (2011) mentions experimental museum pedagogy, and from the position of the museum she points out that the layout of the exhibition has an incredible force of action on visitors, as much in the manipulation of information as in the support of continuous experience resulting in cognition and growth in emotional, spiritual, moral and democratic values. The author here indicates the need of studying the mentioned values with museum visitors, addressing primarily museum pedagogues. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Croatia, potentials in the heritage aspect of teaching as well as potentials heritage contents of upbringing and education in pre-school institutions were researched in the pedagogical context (Raspović, Nenadić-Bilan, 2007, Nenadić-Bilan, 2014). Rosić (2005) interprets the pedagogic value of plainness being an essential value of the museum collection, and in the document value of the exhibits. Art pedagogues (Balić Šimrak et al., 2011) in the

museum observe the context of enriching children's artistic experience, make efforts in enabling children's contact with world famous art works through visits to galleries and museums and point out that in that respect a holistic approach to the curriculum of art culture is reflected on art creativity. Kisovar-Ivanda (2008, 2009, 2012) deals with the student's perception of museum contents and its connection with motivation and cognition of teaching contents whereby a positive influence of the museum experience on the motivation during curriculum learning is observed.

In order to verify the mentioned theoretical analyses and researches of various authors in Croatia and abroad, we have approached our own focused empirical research in Zadar kindergartens. Namely, even though potential were evident in Croatian pedagogical literature data on the study of educational museum experience, the need still remains for a closer study of the issue of dimensions of child's of perception of museum contents as the central problem of scientific researches.

### **3. Research questions**

Upon creating research questions, research structure according to Onweuegbuzie and Leech (2006) was used. Therefore, key research questions were not given as hypothesis and thereby directed only in foreseeing the expected connection degree of independent and dependent variables in experimental and control groups as well as statistically significant differences of these connections among the mentioned groups. Research questions in this research refer to understanding the connection of data acquired with quantitative methods of data collection and analysis on one hand, and data acquired with qualitative methods of data collection and analysis on the other hand. Namely, the desire was to give a deep explanation and interpretation of the studied phenomena in a new light using the combined approach of the quantitative and qualitative data interpretation.

Q-1: How and to what extent the analysis of childrens' drawings and analysis of transcripts of interviews with children can contribute to the understanding of the interconnection between *level of childrens' satisfaction* and the levels of structuring of museum contents.

Q-2: How and to what extent the analysis of childrens' drawings and analysis of transcripts of interviews with children can contribute to the understanding of the interconnection between *level of children's interest for the museum contents* and the level of structuring of museum contents.

#### **4. Description of sample**

Four kindergarten groups of children participated in the research, a total of 68 children. Two groups (one in each kindergarten) participated in the work of the experimental group (32 children), while the other two groups (also one in each kindergarten) were included in the work of the control group (36 children). Considered that the average age of the children included in the work of the experimental group was 5 years and 4 months, and the children included in the work of the control group was 5 years and 6 months, we can say that the groups were age-equable. A high level of homogeneity was observed also in the questions on space and material working conditions in the followed kindergartens, as well as the educational level and professional profilation of the educators in both kindergartens.

The experimental groups of children participated in educational activities before visiting museum and they included stories (thematically connected with the museum contents) and activities offered within five centres (work visits with a rotating course of activities) also thematically connected to the museum contents. Structural correlation with museum contents was at times established along with thematic correlation with museum contents. The mentioned activities took place during one working day in the kindergarten, and the next day a visit to the museum followed. The control group of children were not included in such preparation activities prior to a visit to the museum and did not receive any information on the museum itself.

#### **5. METHOD**

##### *5.1 Instruments of data collection*

A pedagogical experiment was used in the research. The level of satisfaction and feeling of interest in museum contents was determined by the children's self- evaluation on the Likert scale with 3 levels shown during conversations with the examiner. The use of the Likert scale during survey work enabled a quantitative or numerical description of the results of the processed group of children as research participants.

Through the analysis of children's drawings, as well as the analysis of transcripts of semi-structural interviews performed after the children's illustration of museum experience through drawings, qualitative data were collected with the intention of explaining the research problem in depth. It is evident from the above stated that combined quantitative and quality approaches were used to connect paradigmatic systems and the advantages of both



paradigms were used. In applying simultaneous triangulation, analyses and interpretations of qualitative and quantitative data enabled us to get multi-dimensional explanations of the research issues.

### *5.2 Analysis and interpretation of children's drawings*

The Kuhn's model of children's drawing interpretation was used (Kuhn, 2003) in children's drawings analysis which is intended for the evaluation of children's attitudes in play and sports activities in the school area, but the structure and analytical approach to this model can also be applied to the interpretation of children's drawings directed to illustrating different dimensions of museum communication.

For the needs of this research, the Kuhn's model was adapted (Kisovar-Ivanda, 2014) for the analysis and interpretation of children's drawings in the context of museum communication by determining the following steps:

- 1) Identification of drawing elements whereby differ:
  - a) persons (child, educator, researcher, museum staff)
  - b) space (museum environment, museum interior, shelves)
  - c) objects (exhibits, other observed objects)
  - d) text (title, inscriptions, words or sentences in balloons)
  - e) symbolic elements (heart, question mark, exclamation point, arrow).

The identification of drawing elements included determining the shape of the descriptive illustration in museum communication:

- a) drawing and text illustration
  - b) only drawing illustration
  - c) only text illustration.
- 2) Determining the interpretation significance of the space area or location, social relationship and activities
- 3) Thematic interpretation of drawings including five levels:
  - a) static illustration of a person (child, educator, researcher, museum employee) or object (museum exhibit, photograph, shelf or exhibition space)
  - b) activity illustration (in the museum space area or another space that is in any way connected to museum communication)

- c) illustration of a specific event connected to museum communication
- d) illustration of a museum object that the child likes and observes and shows it by drawing it in a real situation or an imagined one
- e) illustration of an abstract value that the child is inclined to (for example, the beauty of a museum installation, warmth in communication, love and friendship, sympathy for peers or adults and similar).

### *5.3 Analysis and interpretation of interview transcripts*

We can define the research interview (Cannell and Kahn, 1968, according to Choen, Manion and Morrison, 2006:269) as a conversation between two persons initiated by the examiner for the specific purpose of gathering information relevant to the research and which he directs to the contents determining the aim of the research as a systematic description, anticipation or explanation. Data is here gathered by the direct verbal interaction of individuals.

A total of 68 semi-structured interviews were performed with children of the experimental and controlled groups, after a visit to the museum and the children's free illustration drawing of their museum visit experience. Even though the questions had been drawn up before the interview itself, during the conversation some new questions relevant for a child's perception of the museum arose. During the analysis of interview transcripts, the a posteriori procedure of content analysis was used as a technique of qualitative analysis.

### *5.4 The course of pedagogical modeling of museum contents prior to the museum visit*

During the research, efforts were made to offer the children kindergarten and museum activities so they contribute to the creation of positive experiences and development of positive attitudes in the research. Even though the children's choice of offered kindergarten and museum activities was independent, children were encouraged during the activities, and efforts were made to strengthen their self-confidence through individualized approach.

Kindergarten activities for children of the experimental group were organized within five centres (stations with rotating course of activities): (1) table-manipulative centre, (2) construction centre, (3) art centre, (4) research cognitive centre (5) centre of initial reading and writing, which were preceded by reading and short interpretation of short story *The Secret of Grandpa's Box* with children of all kindergarten groups.

1) table-manipulative centre

Labyrinth game *Let us find the jewellery for our museum*: single types of jewellery are hidden in the labyrinth and children try to get to the jewellery so as to store it in the museum.

2) construction centre

The game *Let us build our museum*: In the construction centre, children arrange the museum area for their exhibits and works.

3) art centre

The game *Let us shape the vessel*: In shaping clay, children make their vessels, jugs, vases, saucers and similar and complete their museum collection and create their own museum.

4) research cognitive centre

The game *Let us search for the shadow*: Children match their exhibit with the corresponding carton shadow.

5) centre of initial reading and writing

The game *Which letter is missing*: The names of the exhibits are written in printed capital letters on the bottom border of the photograph. Some letters are missing in the names and children complete the word by choosing the corresponding letter among a multiple choice of letters.

Activities were performed during one working day and all the children's works were exhibited in *our museum* at the end of the day. It must be emphasized that children's activities in the kindergarten space area were independent and self-regulating and that the possible children's activities rotations within the centre were individual. The connecting idea however was the idea of creating a small museum in their kindergarten space.

A visit to the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum in Zadar followed the next day. During the visit to the museum new challenges were pointed at and contacts built in the cultural institution where the children could be directed in the future. Self-initiated social interactions were rendered possible within peer groups, and children approached the museum artefacts independently establishing their own order of observing the exhibits.

## 6. Description and analysis of research results

The level of satisfaction and feeling of interest in the museum contents is determined by the children's self-evaluation on the Likert scale with 3 levels stated during a conversation with the examiner, and the statistic significance of the difference is established by the use of inferential statistics (t-test).

	<i>Arith. means exp.</i>	<i>Arith. means cont.</i>	<i>t-test Amount</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>N exp.</i>	<i>N cont.</i>	<i>Std. dev. exp.</i>	<i>Std. dev. cont.</i>
Museum activities satisfaction	2.50	2.72	-1.32	66	0.1881	32	36	0.89	0.56
Interest in museum contents	2.62	2.55	0.40	66	0.6845	32	36	0.70	0.69

Signs \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.005$

**Table 1 t-test results in total sample**

As it is visible in the table with the t-test results, both children of the experimental and the control groups showed a very high level of satisfaction with the museum visit. After examining the results of t-test we could not perceive statistically significant differences in the museum visit satisfaction variable between the results of children from experimental and control groups;  $t(68) = -1.32$ ,  $p > 0.05$  (with children from the experimental group  $M = 2.5$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ , with children from the control group  $M = 2.72$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ). Namely, children from both groups showed a pronounced satisfaction with the fact that they had the opportunity of visiting a museum as an institution. A most probable influence here was the fact that for most children this was their first visit to a museum. The t-test did not show a statistically significant difference, not even in the interest in the museum contents variable  $t(68) = 0.40$ ,  $p > 0.05$  (with children from the experimental group  $M = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ , with children from the control group  $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ).

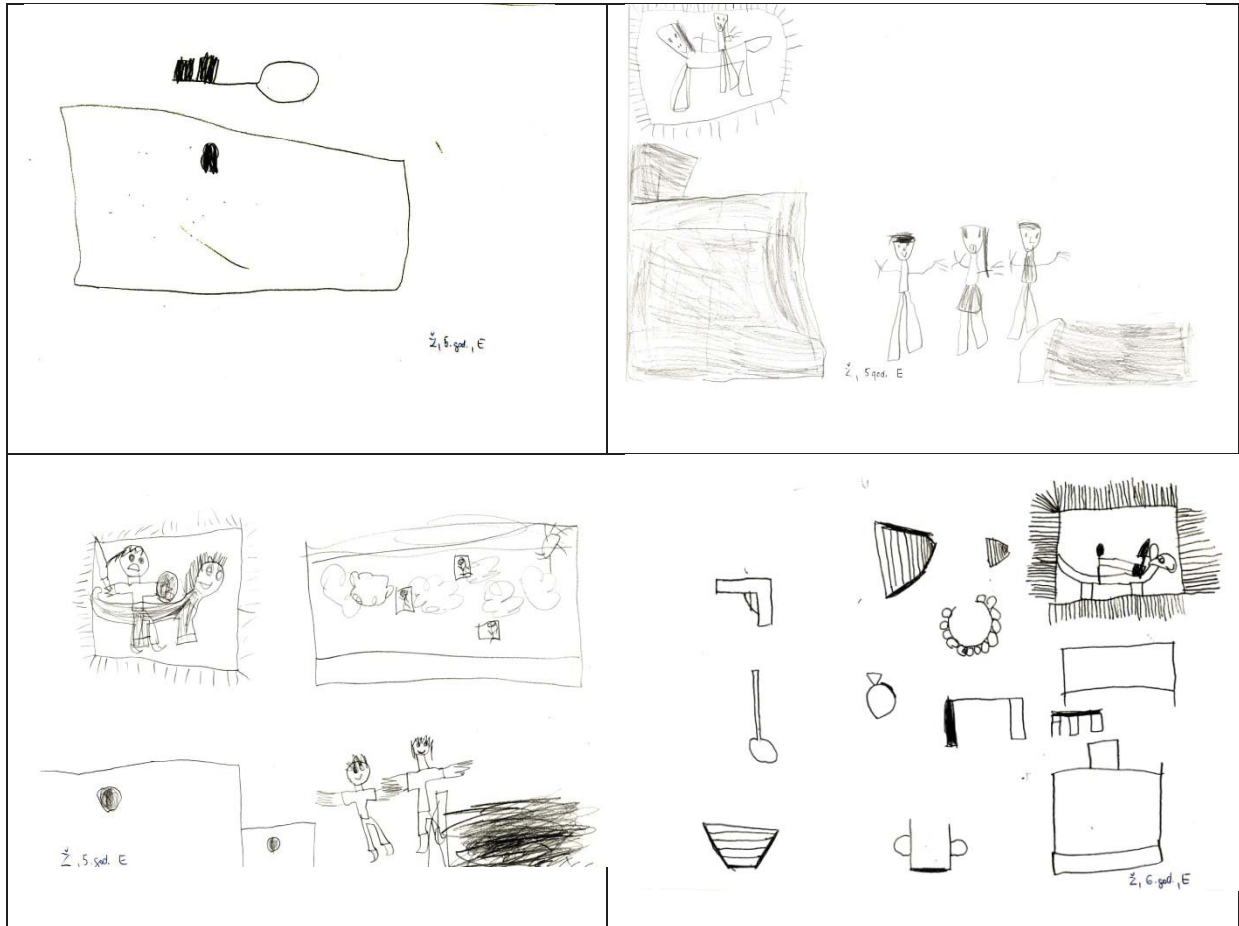
The analysis of children's drawings and the interview with them indicate, however, interesting differences between the experimental and control children's statements and significantly complete and give in-depth image of their perception of the museum.

Elements of drawing	The experimental group	The control group
<b>The museum exhibits - a focus of attention</b>		
Chest with lock	<b>84,37%</b>	11,11%
Key	6,25%	-
Necklace	25,00%	<b>44.44%</b>
Rings	6,25%	<b>38.88%</b>
Earrings	-	22.22%
Dress	6,25%	22.22%
Little shoes	-	5.55%
Clay pot	<b>31,25%</b>	16.66%
Straw (thatch)	12,50%	-
Fireplace	-	11.11%
Tapestry with the figure of St. Grisogono (Krševan)	43,75%	11.11%
Weaving loom	12,50%	5.55%
Table	6,25%	11.11%
Bed	12,50%	11.11%
Paintings on the wall	6,25%	16.66%
Cradle	6,25%	11.11%
Pistol or rifle	12,50%	22.22%
Barrel	12,50%	-
Fishing nets and weirs	-	22.22%
<b>The perception of museum space</b>		
The museum staircase	12,50%	<b>47.22%</b>
<b>Social interactions</b>		
The kindergarten peer group social interaction	<b>25,00%</b>	<b>27.77%</b>

**Table 2. Analysis of children's drawings**

It can be noticed that the focus of children's attention in the experimental group is directed the most towards the chest with a key and clay pots (what we can connect with the story in kindergarten educational preparation for the museum visit). In the perception of the children in the control group dominates the museum jewelry that belongs to the most attractive exhibits.

We can explain this by the fact that children did not have the preparations for the visit to the museum which might somewhat affect the focusing of children's attention in the museum environment to certain museum artifacts.

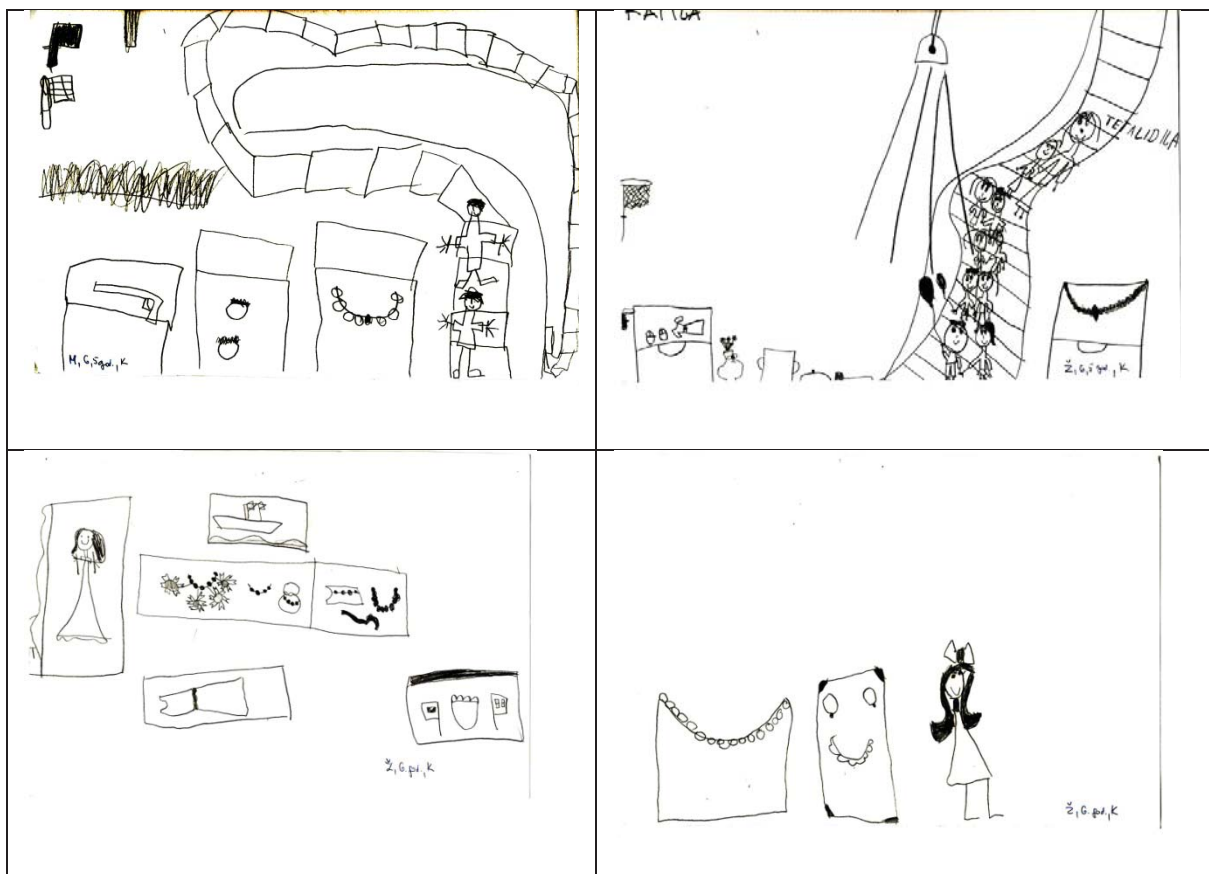


**Figure 1. Drawings of children in the experimental group**

It is interesting that children in the control group were more dedicated to the inner space of the museum, which is presented by numerous drawings of the museum staircase on their individual and freely structured thematic drawings. We can see the fascination with museum inner space and with the museum institution. Since the children in the experimental group talked about the museum before the museum visit, they are not so impressed by both the museum as an institution and its inner space. They are drawing the inner space of the museum with a staircase in only 12.50% of drawings, compared to 47.22% of drawings of children in the control group, showing the staircase and the interior space of the museum. There is an evident increased focus of children in the control group on museum institution and its space and towards most attractive exhibits. Children in the experimental group were constantly trying to open a chest with a lock and asked for clay pots, associating these items

with the content of the story *The Secret of Grandpa's Box* from the preparatory activities for the museum visit.

The orientation toward social interactions is relatively similar in both groups. It is interesting that the preparatory activities in experimental group had not such a big impact on the representations of peer social interactions and social interaction of children and adult persons (teachers, museum curators) in the museum on their drawings, which is noted in a similar research in which participated school-age children (Kisovar-Ivanda, 2013).



**Figure 2. Drawings of children in the control group**

Analysis of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with children from both groups indicates results that are directed very much like the results of the analysis of children's drawings. During the interview the children in the control group significantly more often show the fascination with museum space than children in the experimental group, who express a special interest in the interviews for the chest with a lock, as well as on their drawings. Children in the experimental group in the conversation show admiration for exhibited traditional jewelry, almost as well as the children in the control group, although they do not draw the jewelry at the same level of frequency in their drawings. This shows us spontaneous

fascinating potential of attractive museum object for preschool children, regardless of pre-visit educational activities. It is interesting that in the interviews children in the experimental group more often emphasize the importance of social interactions with peers than children in the control group. In connection with this we can notice the difference in comparison to their thematic drawings and it shows that less focus on the space itself results with the situation in which children are more focused on social interactions in a group of their peers.

<b>What do you particularly like about the museum?</b>	The experimental group	The control group
Museum staircase	6,25%	<b>41,66%</b>
Clay pot	28,12%	13,88%
The chest with lock	<b>43,75%</b>	11,11%
The rifle, pistol	31,25%	27,77%
Jewelry (children called it differently)	<b>37,50%</b>	<b>44,44%</b>
I liked the most that I was at the museum with my friends.	18,75%	5,55%
<b>Would you like to re-visit this museum?</b>		
Yes, I'd like to visit the same museum.	<b>62,50%</b>	27,77%
Yes, but next time I'd like to visit another museum.	37,50%	<b>72,22%</b>

**Table 3. Analysis of transcripts of semi-structured interviews**

Children's responses in experimental and control groups on the the question whether they wanted to re-visit the museum are different to a large extent. 62.50% of the children in the experimental group would love to re-visit the same museum. They state a variety of reasons, but the most common is the desire to re-watch a favorite museum object or to carefully observe the object that during their first visit they failed to observe long enough.



*Yes, I'd love to come back and see more things. (Boy, 5 years old, experimental group)*

*Yes, to see small and large chest and one more chest. I like like chests more than other things. (Boy, 6 years old, experimental group)*

37,50% of the children in the experimental group would love to visit another museum next time.

The situation in the control group was reversed. 72,22% of the children in the control group would love to visit another museum next time.

*Yes, I would like to re-visit the museum, but the next time archaeological museum. I have heard that there are dinosaurs, mummies and some skeletons there. (Boy, 6 years old, control group)*

*Yes, I'd like to visit another museum because I liked this museum. (Girl, 6 years old, control group)*

After analyzing the interviews we can conclude that the children in the experimental group focus more on the exhibits in the museum. Their attention is mostly directed towards those museum exhibits that are thematically related to the story from the preparatory activities. The children in the control group focus more on the museum space presented with description of the museum staircase. In repeated visit to the museum children from the experimental group in greater percentage would like to re-visit the same museum. Children from the experimental group museum exhibits observe longer and closer and as the reason for repeated visits most often cite a desire for the repeated observing of certain exhibits. While the children in the control group in greater percentage would like to visit another museum which could imply that they did not establish a deep internal communication with museum exhibits.

## **7. Conclusions and suggestions for implementation**

Results indicated the importance of modeling of museum contents in the development of positive child's perception of museums and a child's selection of museum contents. We could not perceive a significant difference of two dimensions of child's perceptions of the museum (satisfaction and interests for the museum contents) between experimental and control group at the statistical level. Both, children of the experimental and the control groups showed a

very high level of satisfaction with the museum visit, but a deeper insight into the children's descriptions of museum experiences in interviews and findings from analysis of children's drawings show some differences in the perception and choice of museum contents between the children in the experimental and control groups.

It can be noticed that the focus of children's attention in the experimental group is directed the most towards the museum artefacts especially towards chests and clay pots (what can be connected with the story in kindergarten educational preparation for the museum visit). In the perception of the children in the control group dominates the fascination with museum inner space and with the museum institution. Since the children in the experimental group talked about the museum before the museum visit, they are not so impressed by both the museum as an institution and its inner space. The orientation toward social interactions is relatively similar in both groups. Preparatory activities in experimental group had not such a big impact on the representations of peer social interactions and social interaction of children and adult persons (teachers, museum curators) in the museum on children's drawings.

As the qualitative analysis showed the most obvious correlation can be seen between the content of children's stories, in the context of preparatory activities, and orientation of children's attention, curiosity and readiness to a museum activity. It seems that in preparatory storytelling the context for the application of our results could be found. During the planning of cooperation between kindergarten teacher and museum educator it would be useful to design a variety of activities that could motivate children for museum visit, with educational optimum for each individual child. Special attention should still be directed toward storytelling thematically related to museum contents and activities. Storytelling as pre-visit museum activity provides platform for various forms of pedagogical activities, and can be organized in conjunction with all of the activities described in the previous sections of this article. The conclusions of the study can be useful in structuring of printed and multimedia materials for the promotion of the museum culture of preschool children.

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## SOCIAL INTERACTION AMONG CHILDREN IN PLAY ACTIVITIES

**Introduction:** Contemporary cognition from developmental psychology leads to the conclusion that along with competence arising from the child-parent relationship, social adjustment is the result of a child's experience in peer interactions (Hartup, 2011). Social behavior of preschool children is developed from onlooker behavior across parallel-conscious play into social peer interaction. Parallel play has a two-way influence between independent activity and social activity (Howes, & Matheson, 1992). The aim of this research was to establish whether children of different preschool age differ with regard to mutual social interactions and whether gender differences exist. It is assumed that there are differences in social interaction of preschool children with regard to their age and directed toward a growing cooperation with age. Gender differences are also expected with regard to some forms of social behavior as, for example, rough play which leads us to the results acquired in other researches.

The goal of this research was to establish the possible differences in social behavior of preschool children during their daily activities in kindergarten.

**Participants:** 91 children aged from 4 to 7 participated in the research. There were 52 boys and 39 girls.

**Procedure:** Teachers have evaluated the usual behavior of each child in its own group during their leisure activities – play.

**Measure instrument:** The observed behaviors are defined in the Preschool Play Behavior Scale during preschool children play (PPBS, Coplan, & Rubin, 1998).

**Results:** The variance analysis results point to the conclusion of gender differences in children's solitary passive behavior. Boys participate more often than girls in solitary passive play. Age differences have not been recorded, which means that children, regardless of age, use solitary passive activities. The variance analysis results of solitary active behavior show that age and gender differences do not exist in such a form of social behavior which means that boys and girls equally use solitary active behavior and that in such behavior changes do not take place with age. Gender differences were recorded in rough behavior in the direction of rough play in the boys' behavior repertoire. Results clearly show that gender and age differences exist in the cooperative play of children from the age of 4 to 6. The difference was recorded between four-year-old and six-year-old boys directed towards an increase in social behavior with older boys.

**Conclusion:** The result of this research indicates the changes with age in different aspects of social behavior during early childhood. However, the results also indicate particularities regarding the aspect of social behavior.

**Keywords:** social behavior, play activities, preschool children

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary cognition from developmental psychology leads to the conclusion that along with competence arising from the child-parent relationship, social adjustment is the result of a child's experience in peer interactions (Hartup, 2011). The relationship of a child with his peers is a significant aspect of social development (Cillessen, & Bellmore, 2011). The interest of developmental psychologists is, therefore, directed to studying both social factors, parents and peers, as well as the interaction of these two factors.

Peer interaction can be determined as a social exchange between children where all participants are responsible and encourage each other's behavior (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). In the peer context, a child adopts a wide range of behaviors, skills, attitudes and experiences that are a life-long basis of adjustment (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

An increasingly important place in the life of a child is the development of relationships with peers. Friendships and peer relationships are changing dramatically with age and becoming closer and more attached. (Berndt, & McCandless, 2011). Moreover, peer relationships are important for the social development and psychological adjustment of a child. (Berndt, 2004; Shaffer, 2000:437). Interaction between peers encourages the social and personal development of a child.

### *The developmental aspect of relationships with peers*

Based on numerous researches, we can conclude that relationships with peers become more important with age and the research of peer relationship development is particularly significant.

Two different dimensions in peer relationships, two different social experiences that a child acquires in peer interaction, two different types of needs that a child satisfies in such interaction seem to appear successively in the development of a child. Many authors assume that the need to be accepted (relationship in a group) is the vanguard to the need for friendship (relationship in a dyad). Preschool children have an emphasized need for companionship. The first real social relationships are met by a child at the age of three. Companionship interest is emphasized throughout early childhood, but it is at starting school that relationships with peers assume importance. Considering the changes taking place in the cognitive plan, it is only in the school period that a child is ready to cooperate (Borich, & Tombari, 1995). The capacity to cooperate and solve conflicts enables more successful companionship. In observing the structure of social relationships with peers, group relationship is important in

the preschool and early school periods. A child compares itself with other children and its status in a group is important, in other words, it is important to know to what extent it has been accepted by its peers. Rejected children more often show inadequate, inadapted forms of behavior such as aggression, social reticence, loneliness, failure in mastering school curriculum (Parker, & Gottman, 1989; Sullivan, 1953; Berndt, 2004).

Relationships with peers have their course of development in line with the development of other aspects of character.

Preschool children (up to 6 years of age) consider the child they play with to be their friend. Time spent together as companions and friendship indicator does not change with age. The proportion table indicated by Berndt (1986) shows that this category of responses is 0.69 for preschool age children, 0.69 for third grade pupils, and 0.59 for sixth grade pupils. Time spent together is a friendly relationship that appears at all levels, characteristic of development with only the types of joint activities changing with age. Thus preschool children state playing as a form of interaction, older children state studying together, sports activities, going to the cinema and similar. Other characteristics of relationships with friends increase in importance with age. In mid childhood, children more often mention intimacy and trust as characteristics of friendship with regard to children of preschool age. The desire to share feelings, thoughts and intimacy needs is all the more important in a friendship which supports the hypothesis of Sullivan's theory (1953). Furthermore, older children point out loyalty as an essential characteristic of friendship, while those same children cite disloyalty in a friendship as the reason for breaking a connection, and which they do more frequently than children of younger age. The proportion of responses relating to loyalty with age (6 years, 9 years, 11 years) is 0.00, 0.06, 0.31. The following characteristic of a friendly relationship which gains more importance with age is pro-social behavior, and the response proportion relating to this behavior for the same chronological age is 0.28, 0.56, 0.68. With age, aggressive behavior becomes more often the reason for a break in friendship connection. Friendship, by definition (declared friendship), decreases as a relationship characteristic and it amounts to characteristic 0.50, 0.62, 0.28 in proportion according to chronological age. In the same research, Berndt (1986) states gender differences only in friendship characteristics that refer to disloyalty and dishonesty. Girls, more often than boys, state these two characteristics as the reason for breaking companionships.

One of the most famous development classifications is Selmon's classification of the interpersonal relationship comprehension level (Selman, 1981). The author discerns a number of levels of social relationships with peers. Relationships with peers with regards to age range



from egoistic perspective at preschool age to mutual trust and reciprocity in social relationships in adolescence. Zero level of Selman's classification is made up of the egocentric perspective and is typical for the early childhood period. Taking into consideration such a perspective that stems from the impossibility of differentiating oneself from others, one's own perspectives from the perspectives of others, one's feelings from the feelings of others, there can be no understanding in solving conflicts among children. A friend is the child one plays with and the friendship lasts as long as the playing.

The first level of social relationships with other children is characterized by understanding the feelings of others. A friend is someone who helps or does other good things for a child. However, in this period of development there is no feeling of responsibility for mutual assistance. This development level is characteristic for preschool age.

The second level that is characteristic for early school age is marked by reciprocity. The capacity of cooperation appears in this period. Children observe friendship as a reciprocal relationship that should be adorned with trust, tolerance and succour. If cooperation is not possible in a relationship and conflicts often arise, that is a valid reason for breaking the friendship.

The third level, characteristic of mid or late childhood, is featured by the mutuality of a friendly relationship. A friendship is determined by the relationship between two children in which there is mutual support and mutual understanding. Intimacy becomes an important feature of a friendly relationship.

The fourth level is related to the adolescent age and adulthood. The characteristic of this period, from the aspect of relationship with peers, is the existence of a balance between friendship and mutuality on one hand, and individuality on the other hand.

Authors Youniss and Smollar (1985) speak similarly of the development periods of friendship. During childhood, friendship is determined in terms of mutual activities. Upon entering adolescence, acceptance and mutual respect dominate. In late adolescence partners expect, besides acceptance, the self-disclosure of personal problems and feelings without any fear of losing the respect of the other partner.

Shulman and Knafo (1997) also speak of several types of interrelationships within development, from an interdependent relationship to a relationship where balance prevails between mutual needs and individual needs.

Changes in understanding friendship are the result of understanding mutuality (Erwin, 1998). Reciprocity is very correct and simple with children from 6 to 8 years of age. They will socialize with other children, share their toys but with the aim of satisfying their own needs.

Mutuality with older children and adolescents is based on adjustment and equality. Realizing that a friend is an irreplaceable person is an essential feature of mature friendship relation (Erwin, 1998).

Parker et al. (Parker, & Asher, 1993; Parker, & Gottman, 1989; Parker, & Seal, 1996; Parker et al. 1995) tried to describe the course of relationship development with peers which he divided into three periods: childhood (3-7 years); mid childhood (8 - 13/14 years) and adolescence (14 - 18 years).

### **Social integrations during early childhood**

Peer interactions become significantly more frequent and complex from 2 to 5 years of age. Early childhood is marked by play as a dominant child activity. Children of that age name as their friend a child they spend their time with playing (Berndt, 1986; Berndt, & Perry, 1986; Youniss, & Smollar, 1985). In studying interaction in children's play, Parker & Gottman (1989) state that the level of enjoyment and satisfaction a child realizes in playing with friends depends almost completely on the level of realized cooperation. When stating cooperation, the authors imply the level of interdependence within the dyad. A child's game is coordinated at the lowest level of cooperation, and it is still parallel for it is played without conflicts and a reflection of peaceful companionship. At a higher level of this phase, the play acquires a feature of mutuality. Mutuality enables entertainment, humor, solidarity, but also conflict with regard to parallel play. The play of fantasy that appears in this period is the dominant activity among friends and plays a significant role in social and emotional development. Children learn rules, different social relations, learn how to anticipate the behavior of others. An interest in social contacts grows during the preschool period. With age, conflicts and aggressive behavior (particularly open aggressive behavior) among friends decreases with regard to the positive forms of interaction. Pro-social behavior becomes more frequent in the behavior repertoire (Parker et al 1995). This is understandable considered that in children's activities parallel play is substituted by joint play which demands communication and cooperation. Friendship in the preschool period suffers consequences not only in social development but also in emotional development directed towards regulating and controlling emotions (Parker, & Gottman, 1989).

The author who first spoke of development changes in quantitative features of social interaction with preschool children was Parten (1932, according to Coplan, & Arbeali, 2011). Parten tried to describe the levels of development of social participation during the preschool

development period. The author names the first level of social participation as non-social behavior that is marked by a lack of intention for interaction. Such social interactions (interactions that are not present respectively) mark parallel play during which children play but are thereby not together. The following level of development of social interaction is made up of associative play which includes social interactions during which children use similar objects but without any cooperation. The last phase of social interaction development is made up of cooperation that plays a significant role in organizing group activities and harmonizing mutual goals. These two last forms of social interaction, associative and cooperative, are later named social interaction. With regard to the level of development of social interaction, Coplan, Rubin and Findlay (2006) speak of unsocial play marked by independent play in the presence of other children, and social play that implies cooperation and social interaction. Thereby, parallel play represents the function of an important sequential bridge in the development of peer interactions with preschool children. Social behavior of preschool children is developed from onlooker behavior across parallel-conscious play into social peer interaction. Parallel play has a two-way influence between independent activity and social activity (Howes, & Matheson, 1992).

The development of social interactions in peer groups and changes in the complexity of these interactions is manifested in play activity. Thereby nonsocial activities that include independent play without social interaction can differ; parallel play that includes more children but not the interaction among them; associative play includes sharing but not participating in joint tasks; cooperative play implies cooperation, a true reciprocal social interaction during which children cooperate in joint activities (Coplan, Rubin, & Findlay, 2006). Watching and not participating in activities is reduced significantly between the age of 3 to 5. Group activities and mutual conversations are more frequent. The circle of peers that participate in joint activities is thereby expanded (Howes, & Matheson, 1992). In group activities, a child learns about social behavior such as sharing, cooperating, and respecting others. In peer interactions, a child also learns about communicative, cognitive and motor skills. The development of social relationships during the preschool development period is therefore very closely connected to cognitive development, speech development, social skills and social cognition development (Coplan, & Arbeali, 2011). Children of older preschool age spend all the more time in conversation which is a reflection of joint tasks (rules, negotiation, and argumentation). There is more direct and verbal communication (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Regardless of the fact that during preschool age there is less observance activity and noncooperation, Coplan et al. (2006) consider that such behavior is not

extinguished. Moreover, such reticent behavior is still present but it is interpreted as shyness and social fear. Shyness and social anxiety in the preschool period could be connected with anxiety, loneliness, social incompetence, low self-esteem and other internalized problems in later age. (Coplan, & Armer, 2007).

There is a very large corpus of works dealing in the research of gender differences in children's social behavior. Girls are undoubtedly more socially oriented than boys, while boys are more prone to rough and competitive activities (Barbu, Cabanes, & Maner-Idrissi, 2011; Leaper, 2002). The study of gender roles seems to be a significant factor that contributes to gender differences in social interaction. In line with this, there are gender preferences in the choice of playing (Maccoby, 2008). Girls prefer to deal with more peaceful, cooperative and assisting activities while boys prefer to deal with sports and competitive activities. Repeating feminine-stereotype play enables, at the same time, affiliative and assertive activities (worry, cooperation). Repeating masculine-stereotype play enables self-assertive behavior (i.e. competition) (Bussey, & Bandura, 1999).

The aim of this research was to establish whether children of different preschool age differ with regard to mutual social interactions and whether gender differences exist. It is assumed that there are differences in social interaction of preschool children with regard to their age and directed toward a growing cooperation with age. Gender differences are also expected with regard to some forms of social behavior as, for example, rough play which leads us to the results acquired in other researches.

## **Research methodology**

### *Participants*

91 children aged from 4 to 7 participated in the research. There were 52 boys and 39 girls. There were 33 children in the 4-year-old group and 20 in the 5-year-old one, while 38 were in the 6-year-old group. ( $N_{(4)}=33$ ;  $N_{(5)}=20$ ;  $N_{(6)}=38$ ). All the children live with their families in Zadar.

### *Procedure*

Teachers have evaluated the usual behavior of each child in its own group during their leisure activities – play. The evaluations thus acquired have advantages but also disadvantages. The evaluations given by teachers are very valuable and, compared to the evaluations given by peers or parents, have certain advantages. One of the advantages is efficiency and shortness

of time spent in research. Furthermore, the evaluations given by the teachers are more objective than those given by peers and parents. There exists, at the same time, the danger of acquiring evaluations from an adult perspective (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). These features of acquired evaluations are to be taken into consideration during the interpretation of the results. Observing behavior is assisted by the Preschool Play Behavior Scale (PPBS, Coplan, & Rubin, 1998).

The evaluated behaviors correspond to the descriptions of social interactions that correspond to solitary activities (active, passive and reticent), rough play and cooperation activities. Interactions of each child were reported in each group (there were 4 groups of children).

#### *Measure instrument*

The observed behaviors are defined in the Preschool Play Behavior Scale during preschool children play (PPBS, Coplan, & Rubin, 1998). The scale measures three different types of non-social behavior (reticent, solitary passive and solitary active behavior), social behavior and rough play. Solitary and non-social behavior measure 10 assertions, solitary-active behavior 2 assertions, solitary-passive behavior 4 assertions, reticent behavior 4 assertions, social behavior 6 assertions, and rough-play 2 assertions. The scale consists of 18 assertions which observers answered to the 5 - part Likert Scale (1- never; 2- rarely; 3-sometimes; 4-often; 5-always).

Considered that this PPBS Scale used for the herein research has been translated into the Croatian language, the factor structure and reliability of the mentioned subscales has been checked. The descriptive data is shown in Table 1.

	M	SD	Cronbach alpha
Solitary-active behavior	4.27	2.17	0.72*
Solitary-passive behavior	11.13	3.15	0.81
Reticent behavior	8.46	3.35	0.85
Rough-play	3.88	2.16	0.76*
Social-play	22.22	4.99	0.88

\*considered that subscales consist only of two assertions, the correlation coefficient is calculated in order to check reliability

**Table 1 – Basic descriptive data for five types of social behavior (PPBS Scale)**

As the results of reliability analysis indicate, all scales are satisfactorily reliable. The inner reliability of the assertions is also satisfactory and is from 0.70 to 0.88. We can conclude that the subscales measuring different forms of social behavior are reliable measure instruments.

The results of factor analysis confirm 5 different forms of non/social behavior and lead to the conclusion that the mentioned subscales can be treated as separate measuring instruments that measure relatively significant social behavior of children which is in line with the expectations of the scale authors (Coplan, & Rubin, 1998). The correlations between the mentioned forms of social behavior are relatively high but not so much as to conclude dealing with the same measure instruments. What is only obvious is the high correlation between cooperative behavior and social reticent behavior, and for that in a negative direction leading to the possible conclusion of having to deal with two poles of one and the same social behavior. The correlation analysis results are indicated in

	Social-play	Solitary-active behavior	Solitary-passive behavior	Rough-play	Reticent-behavior
Social-play	<b>1.00</b>	0.09	-0.38*	-0.07	-0.74*
Solitary-active behavior		<b>1.00</b>	0.48*	0.07	0.11
Solitary-passive behavior			<b>1.00</b>	0.01	0.34*
Rough-play				<b>1.00</b>	0.06
Reticent-behavior					<b>1.00</b>

\*p<0.05

**Table 2 – Correlation analysis results between various types of children’s non/social behavior**

Based on the performed analyses, we can conclude that the PPBS scale is a measuring instrument that assists in measuring the social behavior of preschool age children.

## Results

Considering that the goal of this research is to establish whether age and gender differences exist in various forms of non/social behavior of preschool age children. The ANOVA analysis of variance is calculated for each type of social behavior. The variance analysis results for solitary passive behavior are shown in Table 3.

	Age					
	4		5		6	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Male	10.76	3.29	11.82	2.14	10.00	2.13
Female	11.37	2.44	8.00	1.87	9.79	2.49
Gender $F_{(1,85)}=4.38$ ; $p=0.04$						
Gender X Age $F_{(2,85)}=5.25$ ; $p=0.007$						

**Table 3 –Variance analysis results of solitary passive behavior with regard to age and gender**

The variance analysis results point to the conclusion of gender differences in children's solitary passive behavior. Boys participate more often than girls in solitary passive play. Age differences have not been recorded, which means that children, regardless of age, use solitary passive activities. The interactive effect of gender and age is significant. In order to acquire more precise results on differences, the Sheffe-test was performed showing differences between five-year-old boys and girls whereby boys participate significantly more often in solitary passive play ( $p=0.047$ ).

The variance analysis results of solitary active behavior show that age and gender differences do not exist in such a form of social behavior which means that boys and girls equally use solitary active behavior and that in such behavior changes do not take place with age.

Gender differences were recorded in rough behavior in the direction of rough play in the boys' behavior repertoire (Table 4). Sheffe-test shows the difference between the youngest boys (4 years old) and all the girls' age groups (4 years old  $p=0.009$ ; 5 years old  $p=0.041$ ; 6 years old  $p=0.017$ ).

	Age					
	4		5		6	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Male	5.71	2.76	3.55	1.69	4.25	2.09
Female	2.94	1.48	2.88	1.67	3.00	1.57
Gender $F_{(2,85)}=13.03$ ; $p=0.000$						

**Table 4 – Variance analysis results of rough behavior with regard to age and gender**

The presence of social reticent behavior differs with regard to age and directed towards reduced reticent behavior with older children. Reticent behavior with six-year-old boys is significantly reduced with regard to other groups of children (Sheffe-test,  $p=0.04$ ). Gender differences were not recorded (Table 5).

	Age					
	4		5		6	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Male	10.00	3.62	10.00	2.28	6.54	2.65
Female	9.75	3.39	7.22	1.56	8.00	3.90
Age $F_{(2,85)}=6.04$ ; $p=0.04$						

**Table 5 – Variance analysis results of reticent behavior with regard to age and gender**

	Age					
	4		5		6	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Male	18.76	5.64	20.36	3.26	23.58	3.56
Female	20.19	5.42	26.00	2.74	25.43	3.99
Gender $F_{(1,85)}=9.56$ ; $p=0.003$						
Age $F_{(2,85)}=11.85$ ; $p=0.000$						

**Table 6 – Variance analysis results of social behavior with regard to age and gender**

Results clearly show that gender and age differences exist in the cooperative play of children from the age of 4 to 6. The difference was recorded between four-year-old and six-year-old boys directed towards an increase in social behavior with older boys. (Sheffe-test  $p=0.04$ ). A



difference was also recorded with the youngest boys (4 years old) and two older groups of girls (5 and 6 years old;  $p=0.009$ ;  $p=0.005$ ). An interactive effect in age and gender was not recorded.

## **Discussion**

The goal of this research was to establish the possible differences in social behavior of preschool children during their daily activities in kindergarten.

During their early childhood significant development changes take place in all aspects of development. The mutual connection of all these changes is manifested in acquiring maturity in all aspects of a child's development. On the social plan, children become more mature for social relationships, which is obvious in their daily interaction among peers. Social interaction becomes more all the more complex and including an increasing number of children and preferences of being with other children. The adoption of social skills is the basis of social behavior on "how to be alone and play with others".

The result of this research indicates the changes with age in different aspects of social behavior during early childhood. However, the results also indicate particularities regarding the aspect of social behavior. With the aim of examining social behavior, we have used the model of authors Coplan, Rubin, & Findlay (2006) and in line with the model, the scale that measures social and nonsocial behavior in general was used. The evolution of the scale on the sample of Croatian children indicates its reliability which is in line with the results acquired by the authors.

Nonsocial behavior is measured with the help of four aspects, solitary passive, solitary active, rough and reticent behavior. It is interesting to point out that in the activities where a child plays alone there are no age limits, regardless of whether the activities are active or passive. Other authors (Coplan, Rubin, & Findlay, 2006) speak of the solitary activities that are a feature of the entire early childhood emphasizing that such activities tend to reduce but not disappear during this development period. Children are eager to spend their time alone playing and drawing, playing with building blocks or making different figures. On the other hand, the results point to the conclusion that, regardless of gender, with age a child develops the capacity of playing with other children, social behavior grows and is characterized by respecting rules, conferring, negotiating and cooperating. The child also shows its preference in choosing with whom it wishes to play and with whom it doesn't (Coplan, & Arbeali, 2011). An important role in adopting these skills is associating with other children in kindergarten.

Namely, kindergarten is very often the first experience of the child in negotiating with peers without the presence of adults. The results of this research support the cognition that during early childhood the child's tendency to play increases while cooperating with other children. It is important to point out that rough play does not change during the preschool period which favors the results of some researches. Rough, aggressive activity is relatively stable during childhood (van Beijsterveldt, Bartels, Hudziak, & Boomsma, 2003).

We can conclude that regardless of the gender of children from 4 to 6 years of age, cooperation activity tends to increase, and social reticent behavior tends to decrease. It is thereby important to point out that solitary activity remains present throughout the early childhood period.

Gender differences are visible in boys and girls at the age of 5. Boys spend their time more often drawing or playing with building blocks or solving puzzles with regard to girls of the same age which is in line with other researches (Barbu, Cabanes, & Maner-Idrissi, 2011). Researches indicate that solitary passive activity in early childhood does not have any negative consequences (Coplan, & Rubin, 1998). This type of play is connected with temperament featured by shyness, but with boys it can also be an indicator of maladjustment (Coplan, Gavinski-Molina, Lagacé-Séguin, & Wichmann, 2001). On the other hand, solitary active play indicates social immaturity and impulsiveness (Coplan, et al. 2001). Rough play is also a characteristic of boys, particularly the youngest ones. They more often participate in pushing and fighting compared to older boys and girls of all group ages. In observing average values, one can conclude that boys play rough more often unlike girls. It is also obvious that girls of all ages play more cooperative games with regard to boys of the same age. Socialization theories speak of gender differences in children activities. In the context of such theories boys are encouraged and approved to play rough, and girls are encouraged to play and participate in activities that include agreement and compromise. Encouraging determined patterns of behavior, imitation of adults and other peers has a significant role in the socialization process (Maccoby, 2008). Gender differences in social interaction are recorded in numerous scientific researches. Girls are more socially oriented with regard to boys (Barbu, Cabanes, & Maner-Idrissi, 2011). Although children learn a great deal about gender roles observing their parents, who serve as gender role models (Leaper, 2002), a good indicator of teaching social roles is playing. Researches show that parents are more likely to get involved in socio-dramatic plays with their daughters than with their sons. This kind of play happens most often between mothers and daughters and is supposed to teach and practice social and domestic roles (Leaper, 2002). Fathers spend more time on recreation and physical play with

their sons than with their daughters (Keizer, Lucassen, Jaddoe, & Tiemeier, 2014). We can notice that girls are at a very early age pushed into typical domestic roles and developing nurturing skills, while boys into developing competitive and physical skills. Parents of both sexes talk to their daughters using more emotional words than they do when talking to their sons (Papalia, & Olds, 1992). Girls get more freedom in the clothes they wear, games they play and people they play with (Papalia, & Olds, 1992).

Boys, on the other hand, experience more rough-and-tumble play than girls, and are more likely than girls to be given whole-body stimulation by their parents (Paechter, 2007). They are punished, praised and encouraged more often (Papalia, & Olds, 1992). The possible explanation of that, apart from a very old and present in low-developed cultures opinion that boys are more important and of greater value than girls, is that boys may demand more attention because of their greater resistance to parental guidance (Papalia, & Olds, 1992).

However, it is to be pointed out that results which show gender differences are not consistent. The results of some researches do not lead to the conclusion of gender differences in social interactions (Coplan, & Rubin, 1998). A possible reason for result inconsistency lies in the manner of child behavior evaluation. It is possible that teachers experience boys' play as rough, and thus evaluate it as such (Coplan, & Rubin, 1998). Future researches should, therefore, be more fundamental with evaluation results from various sources such as peers and parents. It also seems important to point out the necessity of permanent research of gender differences in social interactions and socialization in general, considering the quick social changes that we are witnesses to and which probably contribute to the changes in the behavior of boys and girls.

It is to be mentioned in the conclusion that during early childhood significant development changes happen in the social plan, and they are manifested in a growing tendency of children participating in activities that are based on cooperation and fellowship. On the other hand, the child's further present aspiration of playing only in solitary activities should not be neglected. The gender role is also significant when speaking of social interactions. Girls tend more to mutual activities with regard to boys. On the other hand, boys prefer rough activities with regard to girls.

Social interactions are connected to cognitive and emotional development (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Social rejection and isolation are connected with anxiety, loneliness and other internalized problems (Rubin, & Burgess, 2001). Recognizing tendencies in social behavior that stand out from normative development changes is very significant in terms of intervention.

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## MATERIAL AND SPATIAL DIMENSIONS OF THE CHILDREN'S PROJECTS IN THEIR EXPLORATIONS OF THE SURROUNDINGS

### 1. Research objectives / rationale

The environment has always been considered important in providing a wide range of activities and resources in children's explorations. Every child's activity is shaped by the physical environment. In our research the focus is on the physical environment, its material and spatial characteristics, in the function of the children's explorations during the project activities. Our research of the material and space organization builds upon the socio-constructivist paradigm. From the socio-constructivist point of view, knowledge is individually constructed and socially co-constructed by children based on their interpretations of experiences in the world. Since knowledge cannot be transmitted, instruction should consist of experiences that facilitate knowledge construction (Jonassen, 1999: 217).

Children's learning comes through experience and engagement in real-world learning activities. We decided to follow the activities of children in the project activities since the project is a contemporary form of an integrated preschool curriculum. Project-based learning integrates courses at a curricular level. The term project refers to an in depth study of a particular topic and its key feature is an investigation or a research that involves children in seeking answers to questions they have asked. Work on a project usually extends over a period of days or weeks, depending on the children's interests. Projects are selected by the children themselves, resulted from a child's encounter with environment. The theme of a project is interesting, relevant and engaging for children. Conception of socio-constructivist approach recommends engaging children in exploring authentic problems, which means personally relevant or interesting to the children. The whole process of project realization is directed by the children. Children are likely to work on projects in small groups rather than as a whole class. As a way of learning, the project approach stresses children's active participation in the learning, realization and evaluation of a project. Children in project activities may explore topic in a number of ways choosing various materials and tools, what is in accordance with Gardner's concept of multiple approaches to understanding. "It is

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highly desirable that the multiple approaches explicitly call upon a range of intelligences, skills, and interests” (Gardner, 2009: 85). Presenting materials and tools that scaffold multiple intelligences is one of the most important components of socio-constructivist approach.

In order for children to be active, they must manipulate something and affect the environment in some way. Activity theory describes “the transformational interactions among the children, the objects that the children are acting on, and the signs and tools which mediate those interactions “(Jonassen, 1999: 222). Learning centers in the preschool environment encourage children to work and learn at their own pace with materials that meet their individual needs and levels of development (Munro and Paciorek, 2004). It is necessary to provide the adequate materials and environment that would scaffold various children’s skills, as well as to provide conversation and collaboration tools to support “discourse communities, knowledge-building communities, and/or communities of learners” (Jonassen, 1999: 216). Children have the need to be in an interestingly organized social and object-spatial medium, which could evoke emotional and intellectual associations, satisfy their natural needs, and provoke their curiosity, communicability, individuality, and creativity (Dinchiiska, 2004: 40). Developmentally appropriate programs provide substantial periods of time when children may select activities to pursue from among the rich choices teachers have prepared in various centers in the room (NAEYC 2009: 2). Offering choices helps differentiate instruction in order to better educate diverse learners (Hughes and Valle-Riestra, 2007).

The Reggio Emilia approach especially recognizes the importance of the space organization. Moreover, the organization of the physical environment is crucial to that approach. The Reggio Emilia identifies a third teacher between child, teacher, and parent: the environment. The space has to be thoughtfully arranged because it is a key source of educational provocation and insight. The physical environment contains the messages which have the impact on children’s feelings and interactions. Kindergarten is a place of life for children and preschool teachers – place not only to transmit culture, but to create a new culture, the culture of childhood. “The space encourages the investigation. The space has the possibility to transform itself. The space has to communicate. It can speak many different languages. The space is a powerful and fundamental language.” (Rinaldi, 2001: 54). The environment is designed to activate, engage, inform, and provoke children.

The enabling environment is a very important in the early and preschool years because of its supporting role in a child’s learning and development. Physical environment plays an

important role in children's learning, since upon it depends whether and how a child will communicate and construct its knowledge (Fortunati and Catarsi, 2012). An enabling material and space arrangement promote young children's creativity and curiosity and develop a greater understanding of the world. The design of learning spaces has to gain more pedagogical attention because it influences the learning climate and learning results in multiple ways (Arndt, 2012). For example, Anders et al. (2012) examined the influence of the quality of home and preschool learning environments on the development of early numeracy skills in Germany. The analyses identified that the quality of the home learning environment was strongly associated with numeracy skills in the first year of preschool, and this advantage was maintained at later ages. In contrast, the process quality of the preschool was not related to numeracy skills at the first measurement, but was significantly related to development over the period observed.

Children are exceedingly sensitive to the space organization. Vecchi (2010) believes that the preschool teacher should not be directed towards the transfer of knowledge, but to construct the context in which children will explore their ideas, hypotheses individually or in groups and discuss them. Research indicates that children have four major environmental needs within the classroom - movement, comfort, competence, and control (Olds, 2001).

The enabling environment as a subject of research should not be neglected by educational researches. It seems that classroom management is not of primary importance in preschool teacher preparation program. "Teacher preparation frequently fails to provide students with a comprehensive, coherent study of the basic principles and skills of classroom management. Classroom management is neither content knowledge, nor psychological foundations, nor pedagogy content knowledge; it seems to slip through the cracks." (Evertson, 2011: 4). Classroom management refers "to actions taken to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to successful instruction (arranging the physical environment, establishing the rules and procedures, maintaining the students' attention to lessons and engagement in activities" (Brophy, 2011: 17). The physical environment is crucial to classroom management because it influences children's activities. The researches of the physical environment suggest that space should be organized to accommodate a variety of children's activities throughout the day in order to meet their needs and interests. The spatial dimension of the environment is important because it dictates the types of activities, as well as the types of behaviours. A classroom that has a well-defined physical arrangement will promote an enabling learning environment.

## 2. Literature

Numerous Croatian studies examined the influences of the quality of preschool learning environment on the child's exploration of the world surrounding him and the child's vision of the world. In contemporary Croatian pedagogical concepts the stress is on introducing changes that will tailor kindergartens to the needs of children and desires of parents. It is important to create a complex, stimulating environment "that will provide enough impetus for children to express their creative potential, create a positive emotional climate and communication, friendships and peer interaction, constant possibilities of adaptation and changes of space, the development of prosocial behaviour and partnership with parents"(Mlinarević, 2004: 119). The desired improvement of preschool education hinges on a high-quality (self-) evaluation of preschool education subsystems, and one of the criteria for (self-) evaluation in the early childhood education system is material environment (Ljubetić, 2007).

Young children learn from manipulating and exploring with a variety of materials. "In badly conceived circumstances, children often do not possess the opportunity to demonstrate their real abilities, on the grounds of which adults may mistakenly conclude that certain abilities do not even exist" (Slunjski, 2008: 79). Educational theory based on socio-constructivist settings emphasize not only the importance of the social environment, but also the importance of physical environment, "because learning is an interaction with the social or physical environment" (Miljak, 2009: 95).

Hajdin (2011) describes preconditions for creation of pedagogical environment as aesthetically designed, interestingly and well-equipped environment that can affect children's exploration of the surroundings. The author concludes that in humanistic oriented curriculum educational process is based on creation of materials and other (psychological, pedagogical) conditions that allow children's self-organizing activities.

Organization of activities, time and space has a conclusive influence on the process of child's exploration and learning. Assumptions for creating stimulating developmental environment for children are very similar as assumptions for insure conditions for child's personal space. This space has communicational and protection function for a child, and it enables him developing his potentials, without feeling any threat (Sindik, 2007). The space is to be organized in a way to enable the child freely express its creative potential, curiosity, autonomy and communication with others (Nenadić-Bilan, 2014).

The early childhood educator establishes an appropriate physiological and psychological environment. “Qualitative improvement of the environment can lead to significant changes in children’s behaviour; it influences their mutual cooperation, the way they (self)organize their own activities, the way they solve various problems, in other words, the way they think, explore and learn “ (Slunjski, 2011: 229). Studying the quantitative indicators of inclusion of preschool children in the centers of activities in kindergarten, Sindik (2012) came to the conclusion that they are primarily initiated by an enabling environment. Discussing the importance of creating favorable conditions for learning, growth and development of preschool children, Valjan Vukić (2012) emphasized the need for creating an encouraging environment not only from strict pedagogic aspect, but also from the aspect of architecture, the role of the educators, and the culture of the educational institution.

As far as the role of play and its pedagogical potential, Slunjski and Ljubetić (2013: 139) pointed that “the quality of playing is affected by many organizational preset conditions of an institution of early education, which are based on ensuring adequate spatial and material conditions, creating an above all positive environment”. The educator creates and designs a rich and an encouraging context (ensures quality resources) that will initiate, develop, enrich and sustain a playful activity (Šagud and Petrović Sočo, 2014). “A child is not able to determine in advance what and how it shall play, thus the environment ought to suggest the things it can explore and play through their functionality, materials and aesthetics “ (Vujčić and Miketek, 2014: 148).

As children can benefit a lot from enriched and encouraging environment that can offer them numerous possibilities for exploring and learning, it is necessary to organize the space for exploring and learning in different contexts. More and more the educational researchers have focused their attention to the informal educational setting. For instance, a visit to a museum may provide a unique milieu for contextual learning (Kisovar-Ivanda, 2009). Museum context is appropriate for designing constructivist learning environments. Quality learning stimuli and materials in many other contexts, e.g. outdoor spaces (parks, playgrounds), as well as other institutions (libraries, galleries) give children a high degree of freedom and independent investigations. An offer of diverse materials enables children to explore and demonstrate all their abilities. The curiosity of children may be revealed in a context in which children feel freedom, trust and understanding.

### 3. Hypothesis

This research aims to support practitioners in nurseries and pre-schools to develop rich learning environment for the children in order to enable children's active and creative explorations. The research goals can be summarized in three points:

- to identify the physical characteristics of the classroom arrangement in the current project activities;
- to identify planned and unplanned actions in the classroom arrangement;
- to list commonly used centers of activities.

According to the research objectives, we start from the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Early childhood classroom are organized by centers of activities (learning centers) including art center, block center, dramatic play center, math center, reading and writing center, science center and music center.

*Hypothesis 2:* Centers of activities provide the flexibility for responding to the children's changing interests accepting planned and unplanned changes in the environment.

*Hypothesis 3:* It is assumed that block center and art center are two most commonly used centers of activities.

### 4. Description of sample

The research was conducted in the kindergarten *Višnjik* in Zadar. Approximately 125 children attend the kindergarten *Višnjik*. *Višnjik* is one of nine kindergartens of the preschool institution *Radost* in Zadar. *Radost* is a preschool institution with nine facilities; accepts 926 children divided into 43 groups who are looked after by 80 preschool teachers, 6 administrative employees, and 44 employees of technical services.

The kindergarten *Višnjik* has five living rooms with associated sanitary facilities, kitchenette, separate dining room, and fully-equipped sports hall. In addition, there is also outdoor garden which is used for play and entertainment. Children in the kindergarten area can move from place to place, staying in all areas that are designed for various activities. The organizational part of the work is divided into five pedagogical groups. The groups are age-mixed composition which proved to be useful in order to enable mutual learning and support among children.

For the purpose of this research, one pedagogical group was selected in the primary program of the kindergarten. The group consists of 23 children aged 4-7 years. The research was conducted in naturally occurring setting.

## 5. Sampling

The focus of our research was educational practice, namely the environment in which children's activities took place. The mental grid for this research was derived from previously mentioned researches, i.e. on a review of relevant literature. All information about the material and spatial dimension of the preschool curriculum was examined prior to entry into the research problem.

In order to achieve the research goals, the selection of appropriate methodological approach was made, as well as the selection of the part of the children's project activities, and the pattern of the material and spatial dimension of the kindergarten.

### *Methodological approach*

As for the methodological approach, we decided to apply *ethnographic research*. Ethnography is concerned with the descriptive study of the everyday events of daily life and interprets the nature, norms and the role of artifacts (i.e. materials, space, etc.) constructing the roles and relationships that can exist within the group, and developing the cultural knowledge required for appropriate participation. According to Hymes (1982), ethnographers may be concerned with a more comprehensive ethnography or a topic-oriented ethnography. The difference between these two approaches is in the scope of the research and the types of questions being explored. While the comprehensive approach enables the broad-level investigations, the topic-oriented permits a close exploration of particular aspects of the research problem. In our research a *topic-oriented approach* was applied.

A *holistic perspective* is used in an ethnographic study in order to describe the broader context of the research problem. Holistic perspective understands the nature of the "part-whole" relationships in a way that the analysis has to consider how the individual parts relate to the broader whole. In this research, a piece of the preschool curriculum (material and spatial dimension) was examined in order to further explorations of larger curriculum issues (e.g. interactions between children, teaching strategies, etc.).

Ethnography, as a systematic approach to the study of children's everyday life in kindergarten, includes three phases: a planning phase, discovery phase, and a presentation of a findings phase. Since ethnography is a dynamic, and interactive-reactive approach, all decisions about the research were not made prior to beginning data collection. In observing the children's actions, the ethnographer often has to refine and adopt the previously put questions. Each modification of the planning phase is an instant response to the emerging conditions. In this way, an ethnographic research is not only an interactive-reactive research, but also a responsive one.

As the first two phases of this research describe the context of the data identification, collection and interpretation, and the third phase reflects the context of presentation, it is possible to speak of the dual nature of the ethnographic research. So, we can talk about "doing ethnography" and about "writing an ethnography". In this research, ethnographic recordings, as an essential tool, were made, what served for a better understanding of the children's attempts in using the materials and space during the project activities.

In this research, as a topic-oriented, the focus was on a *particular aspect of the preschool curriculum* (material and spatial dimensions of the children's project activities) and on a *particular children's activities* (preparatory activities for the visit to Ethnological department of the National Museum), what located the research in a *particular place* (kindergarten *Višnjik* in Zadar), established a *time frame* (morning part of the daily schedule), and identifies a *particular group* of children (23 children aged 4-7 years in one mixed educational group). The material and spatial dimension of the children's project activities were explored during the daily life in the kindergarten. The collected ethnographic recordings enabled us to maintain authenticity of children's experiences.

Wishing to realize the research in naturally occurring setting, we had to gain an *access* to the kindergarten group of children. Considering that in an ethnographic research access is more than entry into a physical setting, the nature and the type of access had to be chosen. Access involved issues of roles and relationships among the researchers, children and preschool teachers.

Access was closely related to the *roles* that the researchers had assumed: insider's or outsider's perspective. Role in an ethnographic research is dynamic and changeable; an ethnographer often assumes both of the roles. In this research we used both perspectives. Insider's perspective, i.e. our engagement in the participant observation, enabled the total immersion into the preschool setting. From outsider's perspective, we were able to take

records (in fieldnotes and on videotape) that would form the basis of exploration the research problem.

We had to plan the types of data collection - *the tools and techniques* that would be used during the problem research. Depending on the problem questions, the nature of the planned access, and on the roles assuming during the study, we decided to use descriptive fieldnotes and recording devices (videotapes and photographs). By carefully listening to children, recording and photographing, we could gain understanding in what ways children interact with materials in center activities.

*Ways of writing ethnography* had to be determined too. Van Maanen (1988) suggests that there are seven ways of writing ethnography: realistic, fieldwork confessional, impressionistic, critical, formal, literary and jointly told. In writing ethnography, the ethnographer translates what is learned into a new category-what is communicated. Deciding on the manner of writing, we chose realistic style.

#### *Project activities*

The research was conducted over one-month duration of the project *Family*. Children were involved in a number of project activities having the opportunity to talk about the people most important to them; learning what makes up a family; discovering that families can live in different types of dwellings; drawing a family portraits; expressing the emotions about the family members; playing the games on the topic of family; comparing and finding the similarities and differences between human and animal families; etc. As the project was progressing, children spontaneously began discussing the questions of family traditions and family origins. They started to compare one family tradition to other families' tradition; where the parents and the grandparents were born; what county their ancestors were from; etc. Children's research on the tradition and origin of family motivated the preschool teacher to organize a visit to Ethnological department of the National Museum. For the purpose of this article, one part of the project activities was selected relating to the family in the past. Our focus was directed towards the set of preparatory activities for the following day's visit to the museum.

#### *Spatial dimension of kindergarten*

Data were collected in the natural environment, and a comprehensive view of children and their ways of using the materials and the space in the kindergarten was provided by the ethnographic approach. A physical space of the classroom (living room) was divided into



center of activities (interest areas, learning centers): manipulative center, art center, block center, dramatic play center, reading and writing center, and science center. The interest areas that are relatively quiet (reading and writing center, art center) were away to noisy ones (block center, dramatic play center). Separate center of activities offered children a range of free choices addressing the preschool children needs and interests. Children had an access to various materials, tools and equipments. The learning materials in every center were well organized and accessible to all children (arranged on low shelves). Children had the ability to choose freely materials and activities, as well as the space where their activities were carried out.

## **6. Description and analysis of research results**

The observation and recording began at eight o'clock in the morning. The preschool teacher reviewed the plans for the day; prepared the center of activities; set out self-served breakfast; greeted children and parents; helped children store belongings. At 8,30 am she gave the signal to gather the group in the dramatic play center and read them a story of her grandfather's old chest. After reading, they talked about the story, and afterwards children selected the interest areas. At 11,50 am the teacher helped children to prepare the tables for lunch. She encouraged conversations about the day's events, the topics of interest to the children, and the meal itself.

### *Dramatic play center*

Many preschool teachers begin the year with home center, usually situated in the dramatic play center. This area is equipped with child-sized furniture that represents a kitchen, dining room, dress-up clothing, and materials such as cooking utensils, dishes, cloths, dolls, etc. The center is arranged so that children have sufficient space to move around easily.

The project activity started in this center. While the preschool teacher was expressively reading a story of her grandfather's chest, children were carefully listening. All children got together in the center. The story as an introductory stimulus successfully motivated children to express their impressions sharing their experiences about their own grandparents' old furniture, houses and traditional activities. Although all children listened with a great care, even though the conversation about it was very interesting, the continuation of activities did not happen in this center. The preschool teacher didn't provide new materials to support the activities in this interest area. Children were not encouraged to continue activity in the

dramatic play center, or to enrich the center with spontaneously discovered materials. During the continuation of the activities, children no longer used this space.

After reading the story, most of the children went to the art area (7 children), and manipulative center (7 children).

### *Art center*

A wide variety of media was available in this interest area, so that art activities were not limited only to drawing, but to painting and modeling. Opportunities were offered for drawing with different media such as colored pencils, chalk, charcoal, and pastels. Children could explore with easel and brushes painting, sponge painting, and cotton swab painting. There were also collage papers, clay and play dough for creating the works of art. For this project activity clay coloured terracotta attracted the most attention and encouraged children to experiment with new material. This kind of clay is not usually available in art center. Perhaps that was the reason why children were first exploring its properties, and then began modeling mugs, plates, glasses, and trays. Some children brought the wooden rollers for better plate modeling (Picture 1.). This motivated one child to bring a wooden cube for pressing the clay.

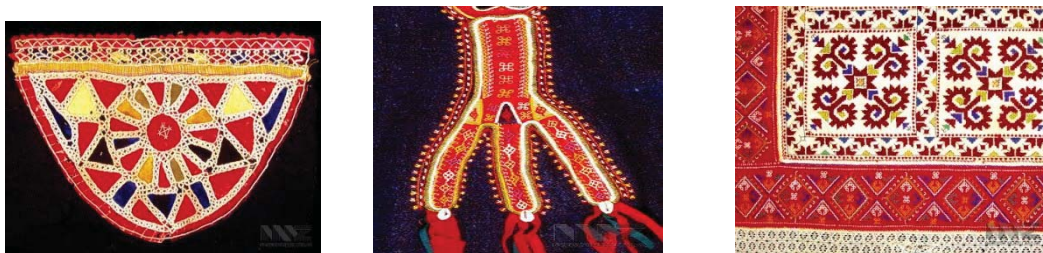


**Picture 1. Art center**

Children spent most of the time in this center. After children had made the objects, they placed them in a “museum” located in reading and writing center.

### *Manipulative center*

This center was equipped with collections of boxes containing geometric shapes, various cards, pattern, numbers, puzzles, materials for sorting and counting games, etc. For the purpose of the project activity, the memory cards with pictures of the museum artifacts were displayed on the table (Picture 2.).



**Picture 2. Memory cards in manipulative center**

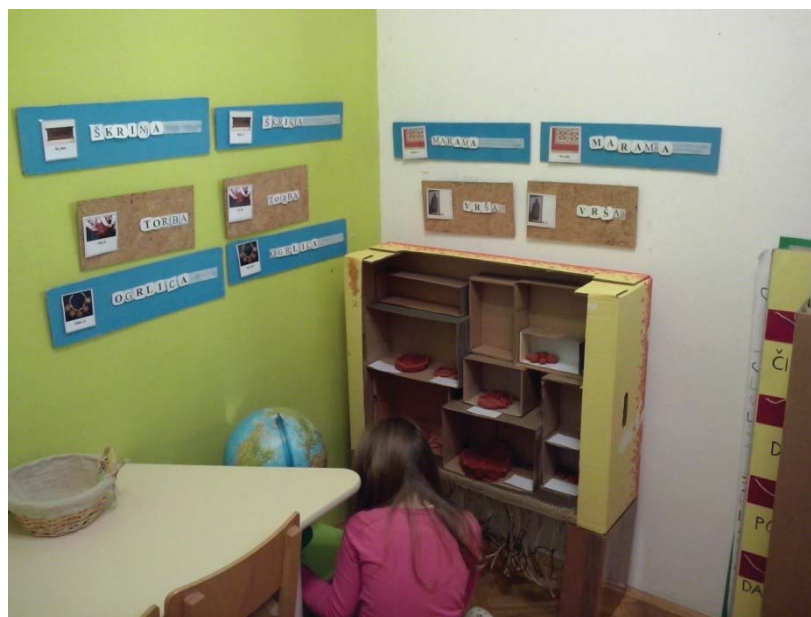
Ethnological peculiarities and traditional culture of northern Dalmatia were represented on the memory cards. The fragments of embroidery and lacework (the preserved samples dating from the first part of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the XX<sup>th</sup> century) caused a strong delight in the children. Memory game was a favourite game for this group of children. It required observation, concentration and a good memory to match the cards. At the beginning of the game, they were not successful in making a match. So they flipped the cards back over and continued playing. After finishing the task, children were looking at the cards and describing the parts of traditional clothes.

### *Reading and writing center*

This center was located in a quiet part of the room. A wide variety of books, wordless books, classic fairy tales, poetry, child-made books, several types of paper, a variety of writing utensils, posters of the alphabet, wooden and printed letters, and other items were available on the shelves. The letters of the alphabet represent the sounds that make up spoken words.

The preschool teacher offered a new material for reading skills development – cards with the pictures of traditional clothes, jewelry, domestic objects, hand wheel pottery products, and folk husbandry. Name of item was printed in large letters at the bottom of the image. Some letters of the alphabet were missing. Children had to fill the missing letters. This preschool reading game helped young children have fun while filling the missing letters.

At the end of the morning activities children brought the cardboard box in this center (Picture3.). The box represented children’s “museum”, and was made up of smaller and larger boxes in the block center. Although the “museum” was placed in the corner of the room, and there was not sufficient place in front of it, it enabled developing interactive space for children where they put objects, shared ideas and communicated through their art products. Relatively narrow path between the “museum” and a table in the reading center was acceptable for most children. But the “museum” itself had enough room to house children artifacts.



**Picture 3. “Museum” in reading and writing center**

This learning center provided the flexibility for responding to children’s creative ideas and changing interest. Children had the opportunity to verbalize what they were doing and thinking. It actually turned to be a very interesting space where children were engaged for longer period of time.

### *Block center*

The block center is usually a favourite of young children. This center had a large space for block construction and was equipped with large and small wooden hollow blocks, large and small cardboard hollow blocks, small-units blocks, and small and large cardboard boxes. The center was located in an out-of-the-way area, so that those passing by did not disturb the construction play. The blocks were arranged by size and shape, and placed in open shelves.

After the story of the grandfather's chest, three boys entered the block center. Children made a decision they would build a museum of the boxes. Probably discussion after telling a story and talk about a museum as a place for keeping the old things influenced their decision. After a while, the number of children who had come to the center slowly increased.

The boxes were offered to them in sufficient numbers, so that their constructive play could develop in different directions. Children first decided to choose a large box that would represent the building of the museum. They cut the front part of the large box. One boy suggested putting the smaller boxes in the large one, so representing the shelves for items exhibition. Children explained their idea to those working in the art area inviting them to prepare the items for an exhibition in the museum. After the museum had been made, it was placed in the reading and writing center.

### *Science center*

Preschool children are usually drawn to science themes because of their curiosity and never ending questioning. Having a science center in the room is a best way to encourage creative thinking, questioning along with exploration, critical thinking and evaluation. Effective science area requires hands-on contact with materials and time to investigate and communicate the results.

Our science center was equipped with nonfiction books and themed nature magazines, collection of seeds, magnets, rocks, magnifying glasses, discovery bottles, and other science-oriented objects. The preschool teacher, to meet the needs of the project activities, prepared the materials for two types of activities: *Looking for shadows* (pictures of objects and their cardboard shadows) and *Tying ribbons to the given pattern* (ribbons). The matching the picture with its shadow was too simple and not developmentally appropriate (Picture 4.). The other activity, *Tying ribbons to the given pattern*, was too complex for children. A pattern was given for tying the ribbons: 3-2-4-3-2-4-etc. Two boys were involved in the first activity. They solved the task very quickly and went into the block center. In the second activity two girls were engaged trying to tie the ribbons according to the pattern. They failed to follow the default rhythm. Nevertheless, they continued tying the ribbons in their own way. Children were most looking for help in this activity. Obviously the arrangement of the activities in the science center was very different from the centres described above.



**Picture 4. Looking for shadows**

The activities should be meaningful to children, and the reasons that children engage in these activities should be real and appropriate. When one girl realized that the ribbons could be used as decoration for the museum shelves, she decorated them by sticking the ribbons on the bottom shelf (see Picture 3.).

## **7. Findings**

The data are in agreement with the first hypothesis that early childhood classroom are organized by centers of activities. During the realization of the project activities several centers were found in the classroom arrangement: manipulative center, art center, block center, dramatic play center, reading and writing center, and science center. It is worth mentioning that the music and movement center was not organized in this classroom. Children are naturally and spontaneously drawn to music and dance, and they enjoy singing, playing instruments and dancing. That is a reason why the music and movement center should be organized.

Most of the above mentioned centers are available to children throughout the year, but interest areas are not limited to these common ones. Several other learning centers can be introduced, according the ongoing project theme and children's interests, such as sand and water center and library center.

The research results have shown that most of the interest areas are equipped with developmentally appropriate materials. Considering children's age, levels of development,

needs, interests and abilities, the adequate materials were chosen and displayed on the shelves. However, some materials did not support young children's interests, their abilities and developmental stages. For instance, the pictures of objects and their cardboard shadows in the science center did not reflect the children's abilities. The ribbons for math activity in the same center were not developmentally appropriate. Children didn't stay involved with those materials for a considerable period of time. They left the science center quickly.

According to the second hypothesis, the centers of activities generally provided the flexibility for responding to the children's changing interests accepting planned and unplanned actions in the arrangement of environment. The preschool teacher told us that she had predicted the children's usage of materials and space (i.e. children's great interest for art and block centers). Teacher's planned actions referred primarily to the teacher's role as a classroom manager. Her managerial ability revealed in detailed advance planning of how the classroom arrangement would be used in the project activities. She had put the question: how she would show children how to obtain and replace materials; how she would motivate children to the availability of materials; how she would identify the child's concern accurately and respond in a way that child's interest would be addressed.

As children began to work in the centers, some unplanned changes occurred. Observing the children's traffic patterns, the way and the type of materials they used, the teacher might find out if the classroom had been effectively arranged. One cannot truly know how to arrange environment successfully until children actually begin to work in the centres. In these project activities the children expand their explorations, they discovered new tools and materials, and located their activities and artefacts in another center. Children who participate in developmentally appropriate program are encouraged to bring and realize their own ideas. The research data refers to emerging preschool curriculum, which should not be planned in advance.

According to the third hypothesis, the block and art centers were two most commonly used centers of activities. How well the centers were set up could be analyzed by observing how often the center was chosen by children, as well as by observing the types of children's interactions with the materials in the centers. The music and movement center and dramatic play center were not selected by the children. The materials in these interest areas didn't motivate the children to engage in the project activities. In these project activities the mentioned centers should be reworked to make them more appealing to children. In such a case a teacher may consider if the materials reflect the children's current interests. Some questions can help in better classroom arrangement: Are the materials presented in an

attractive way? Are the materials available for all children? Do materials need to be more frequently exchanged? In rearranging a center of activity, it is useful to consider if the physical environment convey the messages a teacher intend to send. The messages that children want to receive are probably those: *This is a good and amusing place which I can trust. This is a place where I can be myself and where I belong to. This is a place where I can do many things on my own. This is a place where I am loved.*

## **8. Conclusions and suggestions for implementation**

A preschool physical environment divided into center of activities is an ideal setting for young children who want to investigate, communicate their ideas in various ways, and pursue their own interests. There is no a strictly defined rule for the number of centers. Classroom arrangement is successful organized if children can make choices and select activities on their own. Addressing children' needs through choice of diverse materials and giving sufficient numbers of appropriate choices of activities, a dynamic physical environment is created. Materials should also reflect a dynamic principle in arranging the interest areas. Carefully chosen materials support children's cultural background and their diverse styles of learning. The best materials are those open-ended, what means that they can be used in a variety of ways.

Since young children do not mentally divide learning into different subject areas, children's activities and experiences are integrated. It is possible to integrate children's learning in numerous ways, but one effective way is through the materials displayed in the centers of activities. In our research recordings one can clearly observe how children have succeeded to integrate the materials and activities in art center, block center, and reading and writing center. The artifacts, made in the art center, were put in the "museum", which had been built in the block center and then situated in the reading and writing center.

What we're trying also to point out is that one should not rigidly follow the basic guidelines to arrange a learning space for young children. For instance, one of the general guidelines to follow is that pathways between the centers should promote smooth movement of children from center to center. It is certainly a true statement, but there are situations when children will not be disturbed in their activities despite relatively narrow paths between centers. That happened in our project activities when children enjoyed arranging the museum in spite of lack of space and inadequate location of the museum. Their satisfaction



with the artifacts and the possibility of creative expression were not distracted by insufficient space for arranging the exhibit.

The space arrangement should not be strictly and completely planned in advance. Although it is necessary to make a framework for center materials, children initiatives should drive the physical environment arrangement. Preschool teachers are expected to follow the children and their ideas about the space arrangement. The goal of emergent curriculum is to meet every child's need and interest. But, as Jones (2012) stated, emergent curriculum emerges from the children, but not only from the children. The space arrangement is coconstructed by the children and teachers, and in environment itself. "To develop curriculum in depth, adults must notice children's questions and invent ways to extend them, document what happens, and invent more questions." (Jones, 2012: 67). Emergent means coming from the daily lives of young children and their unique experiences. Emergent curriculum is rigidly structured curriculum. On the contrary, it is flexible and open-ended and continues to develop as children and teachers coconstruct it.

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## AN ACCOUNT OF THE CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF CHILDHOOD AND THE ROLE OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF CHANGES IN CZECH SOCIETY

**Objective:** *To trace the evolution of the concept of childhood, child rearing and early childhood education and examine the milestones in this process against the backdrop of political and social changes in the Czech Republic.*

**Subject areas:**

*The changing conceptions of early childhood education in the context of democratisation*

*A survey of the recent developments in early childhood education (from 2000 to 2014)*

*Health as an important factor in the socialisation and personality development of children*

**Method:**

*Study of documents, reports and papers*

*Review of approaches suggested by individual authors*

### Antecedents of a curriculum

In order to provide an inclusive account of the changing conceptions of childhood and the related changes in strategic curriculum documents and curriculum research in the Czech context, we should first take a look into history. Perspectives on childhood, child rearing and early childhood education have evolved just as humanity has. Historical sources show that these views were continuously re-examined as the body of political, economic and scientific knowledge expanded. In other words, the philosophy and content of education reflected the needs of a given period.

We shall now give an overview of the various perspectives on childhood and child rearing as they evolved through time. We shall comment on the milestones and important figures and their impact on early childhood education and curriculum development within the Czech context (Šmelová, 2004).

Prehistoric **societies were egalitarian: all members of a community were engaged in child rearing.** The subsequent differentiation of roles combined with the division of labour

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between men and women. From an early age, a child participated in the activities of his/her parents and imitated them. Many archaeological finds interpreted as toys and cult objects are miniature representations of tools and animals. A prehistoric community's *raison d'etre* was to safeguard its progeny, or children (Šmelová, 2004).

In late antiquity and the **Middle Ages**, the church became a powerful presence and education took on a Christian character. Children in the Middle Ages were brought up to be obedient and humble. Independent thinking was not encouraged. The children of the ruling classes were being prepared for their future role in society, while the children of peasants often lived in miserable conditions and were subjected to hard work. Priests were tasked with providing enlightenment to parents. A child was regarded as a “small adult” (Šmelová, 2004).

The existing paradigm began to erode in the **16<sup>th</sup> century** and continued to fade out at an accelerated pace throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as the Enlightenment progressed. There was a surge in interest in childhood and in understanding the personality development of children. A substantial contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the subject came in the extensive oeuvre and revolutionary ideas of **John Amos Comenius**. This Czech philosopher, writer, theologian and teacher was – and continues to be – a major influence on pedagogy as well as on other areas. His ideas about the humanisation of schools, a unified curriculum, the equal treatment of all children and respect for individual differences were way ahead of their time. If we revisit Comenius today, we see that his ideas have not been fully put into practice yet. In his *Informatorium školy mateřské (The Czech School of Infancy)*, Comenius proposed a comprehensive system of support for early childhood education from zero to about six years of age. He was the first scholar ever to have suggested including pre-primary education into a national educational system (Rýdl, Šmelová). Comenius' intellectual legacy has had a lasting impact on the development in pre-primary education. Let us now take a closer look at his *Informatorium*.

A curious mind might be inclined to ask: “Is this the world's first curriculum document for early childhood education?” In the following chart, we shall attempt to compare Comenius' *Informatorium* (1632) with the latest curriculum document, the *Framework Educational Programme for Pre-Primary Education* (2004), hereinafter abbreviated as *FEPPE*.

The attributes that we have been looking at in the two documents are based on the white paper *National Programme for the Development of Education* (hereinafter “*White Paper*”) and Act No. 561/2004 Coll.

	<b>The current curriculum (FEPPE, 2004)</b>	<b><i>Informatorium školy mateřské (The Czech School of Infancy) (1632)</i></b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>Objectives</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Developing a child's learning ability and knowledge</li> <li>2. Learning values</li> <li>3. Learning attitudes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cultivating faith and religiousness</li> <li>2. Imparting morals and virtues</li> <li>3. Building language and communication skills</li> </ol>	Comenius' work exudes profound piety. The <i>FEPPE</i> is liberal.
<b>Content and content parts</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A child's body</li> <li>2. A child's psyche</li> <li>3. A child's interaction with others</li> <li>4. A child in society</li> <li>5. A child in the world</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Religiousness</li> <li>2. Morals and virtues</li> <li>3. Knowledge of the following subjects: physics, optics, astronomy, geography, chronology, history, economics, politics.</li> <li>4. The mind, language: dialectics, geometry, arithmetic, music, craft</li> <li>5. Language: grammar, rhetoric, poetics</li> <li>6. Physical education, handicraft</li> </ol>	Unsurprisingly, Comenius' ideas are informed by religion. The current curriculum concentrates on building knowledge, skills, attitudes, information skills, etc.
<b>Expected outcome of pre-primary education</b>	<p>Acquisition of key competences:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Learning ability</li> <li>2. Competence in problem solving</li> <li>3. Communicative competence</li> <li>4. Social and interpersonal competence</li> <li>5. Action competence and civic competence</li> </ol>	A wise, pious, conscious person capable of controlling his or her actions	Comenius does not use the term "key competences"; instead, he draws up a profile of an ideal adult. The <i>FEPPE</i> defines the basic key competences that are understood to form the foundations of lifelong learning. Both documents support efforts at building solid foundations for a child's future education.

<b>Methods (prevalent)</b>	Verbal, practical, demonstrative, activating	Verbal, practical, demonstrative, activating	Today's nursery schools rely on play as the essential means of conveying educational content. Comenius, too, was aware of the importance of play for all-round child development. In the <i>Informatorium</i> , the other methods are also mentioned as useful.
<b>Forms (prevalent)</b>	Group, individualised	Individual	These are the most widely used methods in nursery schools today. The <i>Informatorium</i> was intended to be read by parents, so we can assume that the individual form predominated.
<b>Respect for individual differences</b>	YES – personality-based learning	YES – respect for individual differences in a child's development	Both the <i>FEPPE</i> and the <i>Informatorium</i> embody respect for individual differences among children. Comenius warned against overloading children with activities.
<b>Document's intended audience</b>	Teachers, parents	Parents (nannies)	In Comenius' times, there was no interest in educating children outside the family context. Comenius, however, proposed to structure education into stages involving semi-public schools for children between 4 and 6 years of age where they were supposed to be taken care of by virtuous women.

(FEPPE, 2004, John Amos Comenius, 1632)

In spite of the small differences (attributed mainly to the different times when the documents were conceived), there is a great deal of unity between the two. The *Informatorium* contains rudiments of personality-based learning that has much currency today. Note that the two documents are separated by four centuries of history; this only goes to show how visionary Comenius' ideas really were.

During the rapid growth in manufacturing in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was common for children to be involved in the labour process. This changed in 1774 when Maria Theresa instituted compulsory education with the aim of restricting child labour. In 1805, Francis I mandated compulsory school attendance which, at first, applied only to boys, but was later extended to girls as well. All children aged six and above were subject to it. Younger children remained in the care of their mothers and participated in their mothers' duties (Kasper, Kasperová, 2008).

The advent of the Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant sweeping economic, political and social changes that had a substantial impact on childcare. Typically, both of a child's parents and older siblings were employed at one of the emerging factories, so young children were often left alone in unsuitable conditions. There was a growing demand for facilities that would provide care for children whose parents were at work. The facilities that arose to meet this demand were often private and established through the philanthropy of middle and upper classes or patriotic circles that sought to support education in the Czech language and promote the Czech culture. Many of these institutions were founded by owners of factories that employed the parents of the children in need of supervision (Šmelová, Rýdl, 2012).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Austria-Hungary experienced a tremendous growth in the number of orphanages, children's hospitals, sanatoriums, protectories, day care centres, German kindergartens and nursery schools. **Orphanages** provided care for children who had lost their parents; **children's hospitals** cared for children who were ill and enfeebled; **sanatoriums** were intended for children with long-term illnesses; **protectories** initially served a social purpose (the supervision of children whose parents were at work), but later, thanks to Jan Svoboda, took on an educational function; **day care facilities** provided rudimentary care for children from poor backgrounds; German kindergartens were established with the aim of Germanising the population; and **nursery schools** prepared children for entry into primary school (Šmelová, 2004).



The first protectory in Austria-Hungary was established by Countess Teréz Brunszvik de Korompa in the city of Banská Bystrica. The highest concentration of protectories was found in Prague. Specifically, one of those protectories called “Na Hrádku” was established in 1832 under the auspices of the Czech Count Karel Chotek z Vojína and the Prague Mayor Petr Sporschil. It was led by Jan Vlastimír Svoboda. Svoboda devised an educational conception which he titled *The nursery school or the initial, practical and hands-on, all-round education for young children aimed at unfolding a sober, refined-reasoning and virtuous heart, featuring the preparation for reading, arithmetic and drawing instruction for teachers, nurses and parents* (for concision hereinafter referred to as “*Nursery School*”). In writing this conception, Svoboda was inspired by the didactic rules proposed by Comenius. Svoboda took a comprehensive view of education, distinguishing **intellectual education** (the knowledge of nature, social relations, human labour, training of the senses and language); **physical education** (self-care, hygiene habits, the development of movement skills), **moral education** (religion) and **aesthetic education** (singing, folk plays, drawing). The **trivium** was included as well. The document prescribes goals, methodological approaches and a range of activities for preschool children. It is divided into 57 tightly woven chapters that guide the teacher (nurse, parent) through various activities that reflect the developmental needs of children at different ages. The methodology and activities described in the book should not be seen as mandatory for children. The author believed that a teacher (nurse, parent) should make use of the moment when a child shows interest in a thing or a subject and encourage that interest. The merit of Svoboda’s *Nursery School* is in introducing systematic education as a complement to the social function of protectories. Children were supposed to consider all the activities as play, which, according to Svoboda, is the best method of learning about the world and discovering one’s personality (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

We shall now briefly describe the first nursery school in the Czech lands which was established in 1869 at St. Jacob’s. The school’s educational programme was based on three strands of thought: Svoboda’s *Nursery School*, the French tradition and the ideas of Friedrich Fröbel. Nursery schools were supposed to approximate the role of the family and take over some parenting duties during the parents’ absence. The term “*mateřská škola*” (which roughly translates to “maternal school”) was coined by Marie Riegrová, an important 19<sup>th</sup> century child welfare campaigner.

It can be said that up until 1872, early childhood education was concerned primarily with developing a child’s intellectual capabilities as well as with religious and moral enculturation.

To that end, group instruction, explanations and the use of teaching supports were preferred over play and manipulation; nursery schools taught the trivium (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

**The years 1869 and 1872** may be considered the most important years of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in regards to early childhood education. As the country became increasingly industrialised, more and more children needed to be placed in nursery schools. The capacity of existing institutions proved insufficient which laid bare the necessity for a comprehensive solution to this untenable situation. In 1869, Leopold Hasner issued the imperial Act on Education (the so-called Hasner Act), which instituted a national educational system of which nursery schools were an “optional” part. The act defined, among other things, the organisational and educational framework in which nursery schools were to operate. Close on the heels of the Hasner Act came the ministerial decree No. 4711 of 1872 which defined the roles of the particular types of pre-primary school facilities, which were to be public and their services were to be offered to parents free of charge. The decree abolished the teaching of the trivium. Day care facilities were to provide care for children less than three years of age; protectories were to focus on teaching self-care and manners, but were not supposed to prepare children for entry into primary school. Nursery schools were to supplement education within the family and prepare children for entry into primary school. After some time, nursery schools started to spring up outside of Prague as well. The ministerial decree defined a framework that the nursery schools were able to draw upon in devising their own programmes. These changes coincided with a boom in book and magazine publishing which gave the public access to designs and instructions for games, poetry, fiction, etc. (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

It should be noted that during this period a certain rigidity and formalisation set in, despite protests from nurses. This brings us up to the **turn of the century**, when the first ideas of education reform started to crop up. Experts now appreciated childhood as a distinct period in a person’s development. The foundations of disciplines like paediatrics and infant physiology were established. Childhood became the subject of many scientific studies. For example, František Čáda was interested in speech development and children’s drawing and founded Czech paedopsychology (child psychology). He is the author of, among other publications, *Dětská kresba (Children’s Drawings)* and *Studium dětské řeči (The Study of Infant Speech)*. Čáda was instrumental in the 1910 creation of the *Sdružení pro výzkum dítěte* (Association for Infant Research). He initiated the establishment of The Paedagogical Institute of Prague (later renamed to The Institute of Infant Research) that was, for a long time, the hub of paedagogical research in the country (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

Another name that should be mentioned here is Václav Příhoda whose *Úvod do paedagogické psychologie* (Introduction to Paedagogical Psychology) and *Ontogeneze lidské psychiky* (The Ontogeny of the Human Psyche) were important contributions to the development of Czech paedagogy and psychology. The discoveries of cognitive psychology and constructivism have changed the course of psychology forever. Cognitive psychology is concerned with the study of mental processes; constructivism views the person as an active subject and examines his/her assumptions and interactions with others. Important changes were afoot in the area of children's rights as well, culminating in the 1924 adoption of the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Advances in developmental psychology led to a better understanding of a child's life. The ideas of reformers Maria Montessori, John Dewey and Ellen Key reverberated throughout the world. Meanwhile in the Czech lands, efforts to reform the nursery school system and do away with its formalism were underway. These changes were spearheaded by Anna Süsová and Ida Jarníková, who both embraced reform ideas (Šmelová, 2004). Their endeavours were grounded in **paedocentrism**, a philosophy that puts the child at the front and centre meanwhile pushing the teacher into the background so that he/she becomes the child's guide and partner (Štverák, 1983).

In 1908, there was a Congress of Czech Nurses which formulated a resolution containing the following requests: the elimination of school-like approaches; a respect for the personality of the child and his/her interests and needs; an extension of the network of high-quality nursery schools; and improvement in the education and status of nurses. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of this resolution having had any direct effect on the decisions of the relevant bodies. Some of the requests, such as the request for pay increases, have remained unanswered to this day. The reform efforts were interrupted by WWI (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

After the creation of the independent Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, the efforts to revamp the Czech and Slovak educational systems were stepped up. The first Congress of Czechoslovak Teachers and Friends of Schools in the history of the independent country took place in 1920. Among the requirements made at the meeting was a new bill regarding nursery schools. The participants also discussed whether pre-primary education belonged in the remit of the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Social Affairs. This discussion evolved into a protracted argument that went on for several years, however, no special act on nursery schools ever saw the light of day. In the 1920s and 1930s, the reform movement peaked – many experts joined the discussion on schools, including pre-primary education. We shall now take a look at some of the authors who participated in the curriculum development efforts at that time.

**Barbora Ledvinková** translated Marie Pape-Carpantier's *Consils sur la direction des salles d'asile (Advice on the Management of Infant Schools)* and wrote a collection of essays on methodology titled *Škola mateřská (The Nursery School)*. **Božena Studničková** published a collection of games, songs, poems and fairy tales for nursery schools called *Úvahy a ukázky metodické práce v oboru škol mateřských (Reflections on Methods for Nursery Schools Including Examples)* and *Pěstounkám škol mateřských (For Nurses of Maternal Schools)* (Šmelová, 2004).

The two foremost Czech reformers – Ida Jarníková (in Bohemia) and Anna Süsová (in Moravia) – shared the following goals: bringing the nursery school closer to the family, the freedom of movement for children, room for creativity, respect for children's individual abilities and needs, the elimination of school-like approaches, and better education for teachers (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012). **Ida Jarníková** wrote *Výchovný program mateřských škol (An Education Programme for the Nursery School)*, which gave teachers methodological resources while allowing room for their creativity (Bečvářová 2003). *Příručka pro školy mateřské (The Nursery Handbook)* encouraged teachers to develop their own educational programs reflecting the reality of their institution (Šmelová, 2004). There are obvious parallels between these documents and the *FEPPE*. Jarníková also published *Index pomůcek pro školy mateřské a nejnižší třídy škol obecných (A List of Teaching Supports for the Nursery School and Early Primary School)*, where teaching support materials are grouped under rubrics like people, animals, plants and others (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

**Anna Süsová** was based in Brno. She strived to translate her reform requirements into practice as the headmistress of an experimental nursery school. She placed emphasis on physical movement and on building physical skills which, in her view, were a prerequisite of healthy intellectual development. In her paper *Kam jsme dospěli v hromadné výchově dětí* ("The State of Affairs in the Mass Education of Children"), she criticised the way teachers worked with children and proposed a curriculum for nursery schools.

**Marie Bartůšková** led the *Studovna učitelek mateřských škol* (The Resource Centre for Nursery School Teachers). The aim of the centre was to improve the quality of pre-primary education and develop programmes for nursery schools. Until then, the creation of programmes had depended on the initiative of individuals. The centre therefore sought to develop a blueprint for an educational programme for children between the ages of three and six based on reform ideas. The main forms of education were play, fun and labour; children's self-expression was not to be restricted. The resource centre became the hub of pedagogical activities in the country (Šmelová, 2004).

In order to bolster the educational system and encourage the development of curricula, in 1913 the Prague Board of Education approved the *Organizační řád pro mateřské školy a jesle hl. města Prahy* (Organisational Principles for Nursery Schools and Day Care Facilities in the Capital City of Prague). Reform efforts led to the 1938 adoption of the *Výchovné osnovy pro mateřské školy v hl. městě Praze* (Curriculum for Nursery Schools in the Capital City of Prague) which became a model for educational activities outside of Prague as well. Although the curriculum was officially approved by a vote of the municipal council and a decree from the regional board of education, it never was applicable nationwide. Some reform efforts continued after the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, but had petered out by the onset of WWII (Rýdl, Šmelová 2012).

After 1945, pre-primary education experienced rapid development, yet a unifying curriculum document was missing. To remedy this situation, the Ministry of Education issued the *Prozatimní pracovní program pro mateřské školy* (Provisional Working Programme for Nursery Schools) which was written in the spirit of the pre-war developments and became effective nationwide in 1945. After the Czechoslovak *coup d'état* of 1948, Soviet ideas on pre-primary education started to spread; Czech nursery schools came under the influence of the Soviet paedagogical school. Pre-primary education took a new direction – **sociocentrism**. In 1948, the Ministry of Education issued the *Pracovní program pro mateřské školy* (The Working Programme for Nursery Schools) which pursued the goal of educating children to become conscious citizens of the socialist state. This document also introduced, for the first time, the division of educational contents into components. The programme put emphasis on group activities and moral education, but was insensitive to children's individual needs (Šmelová, 2004).

The period from 1948 to around 1960 was marked by efforts to give pre-primary education a socialist character; the school system as a whole was used as a vehicle of indoctrination. There was a tremendous growth in the number of nursery schools established in response to an increasing number of women who were employed. There were several documents underpinning the dissemination of socialist ideas: *Prozatimní osnovy pro mateřské školy* (Provisional Curriculum for Nursery Schools) (1953), *Osnovy pro mateřské školy* (The Curriculum for Nursery Schools) (1955), *Pokusné osnovy pro mateřské školy* (The Experimental Curriculum for Nursery Schools) (1958), and *Osnovy výchovné práce pro mateřské školy* (The Education Curriculum for Nursery Schools) (1960). In 1960s, day care was incorporated into pre-primary education by the adoption of the *Osnovy výchovné práce pro mateřské školy a jesle* (The Education Curriculum of Nursery Schools and Day Care

Facilities) (1963) and *Program výchovné práce v jeslích a mateřských školách* (The Education Programme for Day Care Facilities and Nursery Schools) (1967). There were efforts to build in elements of respect for children's individual needs, to eliminate rigidity, to improve the level of hygiene in schools and to promote play-based learning. These democratic tendencies, which were not limited to the sphere of education, peaked in the 1960s. However, the 1968 military intervention by the armies of the Warsaw Pact put an end to all those processes. The ensuing reorganisation gave rise to a requirement for a new conception of pre-primary education that would systematically prepare children for entry into primary school and strengthen the ideological role of education. This period brought forth the following documents: *Pokusné osnovy pro mateřské školy* (The Experimental Curriculum for Nursery Schools) (1975), *Program výchovné práce pro jesle a mateřské školy* (The Education Programme for Day Care Facilities and Nursery Schools) (1978). During this time, there were an average of 30 children in a classroom and strict discipline was the norm. The individual needs of children were often disregarded. Although the curriculum documents of this period refer to play-based learning, the main focus was on group tasks. To solve this untenable situation, the Ministry of Education approved a new version of the *Program výchovné práce pro jesle a mateřské školy* (The Education Programme for Day Care Facilities and Nursery Schools) (1984). Against expectations, this very detailed document did not mean much positive change in the way nursery schools worked with children. The document ceased to be applied when the totalitarian regime came to an end in 1989 (Šmelová, 2004).

### **A survey of research studies performed after the Velvet Revolution**

The period of a child's development preceding entry into primary school has become the focus of a large number of studies. The tumultuous transformation of the Czech educational system after 1989 has prompted a proliferation of approaches. Before 1989, specialised literature mostly offered methodological recommendations that were based on curricula which upheld the dominant ideology (see above). Topics related to treating preschool children and working with them appeared as well. After the regime change, paedagogy concentrated on devising ways of assessing the level of a child's development and on building practical experience into the curriculum.

Older documents (published prior to 1989) offered methodological recommendations regarding the organisation of pre-primary education, identified key people in the educational process, defined the meaning of play and learning, regulated the cooperation between the

family and school and supported the development of specific skills and aptitudes – social, emotional, moral, linguistic, aesthetic, etc. (Vrána, 1947; *Předškolní výchova*, 1990 etc.).

The democratisation processes of the post-revolutionary era have caused radical changes in the way schools operate. The conception of education has undergone radical changes that have prompted experts and researchers in paedagogy to focus on updating the theoretical apparatus of the discipline of teaching in order to ensure that it reflects current best practices.

### **The post-revolutionary development – towards curriculum reform**

The demise of the totalitarian regime freed schools to act in children's best interests. The reform ideas of the earlier period were resurrected. The main strategic goals included: the depoliticization of schools; the recognition of civil rights; the establishment of private, Christian and alternative schools; an expansion of the network of state-funded schools; and the creation of a competitive environment (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2001).

In the years following the Velvet Revolution, there was no curriculum document with nationwide applicability in place. We may distinguish the three groups of nursery school teachers according to how they addressed this problem:

1. The first group of teachers completely rejected the 1984 programme as being non-conducive to positive child development and attempted to develop their own programmes. This was no easy task as there was no framework to fall back on. Some of these teachers looked to other countries for inspiration or studied alternative education, etc.
2. The second group of teachers rejected only those elements of the 1984 programme that they thought were unsuitable, but used the remainder to develop their own programmes that reflected the reality of their schools.
3. The third group of teachers completely dispensed with a curriculum and designed their paedagogical activities around the wishes of children.

The 1990s could be characterised as a decade of trial and error. During these years, the Ministry of Education came up with many suggestions in its White Papers and annual reports on the state of the educational system, for example *Školství v pohybu (Education in Flux)* (1996), *Školství na křižovatce (Education at a Crossroads)* (1999), *Zprávy o národní politice ve vzdělávání: Česká republika (The Education Policy Reports: Czech Republic)* (1996),

*Priority pro českou vzdělávací politiku (Priorities for the Czech Education Policy)* (1999), and *Na prahu změn (On the Threshold of Change)* (2000). The key strategy documents that originate from this period include the green paper *Czech Education and Europe – A Strategy for the Development of Human Resources in the Czech Republic on its accession to the European Union* (hereinafter “*Green Paper*”) and the previously mentioned *White Paper*.

The **Green Paper** (1999) was prepared with the support of the Phare programme by a Czech panel of education experts. The report compares the pre-accession school system in the Czech Republic with the educational systems of older EU member states. This comparison yielded important insights into the state of the Czech educational system as well as input for the next steps.

The *Green Paper* contains the following chapters:

- EU Education Policy and its Implications for the Czech Educational System
- Education in a Changing Society
- Problems and Priorities of the School System
- Visions and Development Strategies

The **White Paper** (The National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic, 2001)

The *White Paper* is based on the following three sources: the relevant documents adopted post-1989; the *Green Paper*; and the public discussion organised by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, under the rubric “Education for the Ten Million” which brought together social partners, school administrators, educators and educational associations.

The *White Paper* provided starting points, defined general objectives and outlined strategies for the development of the educational system in the coming period. The *White Paper* also articulated a requirement that teaching activities at all educational levels be organised according to a clearly defined national framework. By this, the *White Paper* effectively mandated the adoption of framework educational programmes modelled on the EU example.

The *White Paper* contains the following chapters:

- Starting Points and Preconditions for the Development of the Educational System;
- Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary Education;
- Tertiary Education;
- Adult Education.



The important legislation enacted during this period includes Act No. **561/2004** Coll. on Preschool, Basic, Secondary, Tertiary Professional and Other Education (The Education Act), as amended; and Act No. **563/2004** Coll. on Paedagogical Staff and on the Amendment to Some Other Acts.

### **Framework educational programmes**

Framework educational programmes are national curriculum documents. There is one framework educational programme for each educational level. These documents define the mandatory educational frameworks for all educational levels. Schools use them to develop their own educational programmes (school curriculum documents).

#### *The Framework Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education*

*The Framework Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education* provides a unified framework for nursery schools that is applicable across the Czech Republic. The document defines the main requirements, conditions and rules for institutional early childhood education. Furthermore, it defines the exit level of knowledge necessary for a child's successful entry into primary school and provides starting points for the development of educational programmes at the institutional level. As such, it is relevant to teachers, statutory authorities and other schools' partners (*FEPPE*, p. 6).

The first version of the *FEPPE* was created as early as 2001. It was then experimentally validated at selected nursery schools, reviewed and finally approved in 2004. Registered nursery schools have had to comply with this document since 1 November 2007.

#### **The key principles embodied in the *FEPPE* are:**

- the acceptance of natural developmental specifics and individual differences among preschool children.
- the education of each individual child compatible with their individual potentialities and needs.
- building key competences attainable within the pre-primary education stage.
- allowing room for the development of individual programmes and profiles of individual nursery schools.
- allowing schools to take advantage of different forms and methods of education and adjust education to specific regional conditions.

- providing general criteria for the internal and external evaluation of nursery schools.
- complementing education in the family.
- providing sufficient stimuli for children’s active development and learning.
- providing timely special-needs support and counselling (*FEPPE*, p. 6).

The current curriculum **embraces personality-based learning**. This model is based on democratic principles and the idea of children’s individuation in a group. The child’s needs and interests are the teacher’s priority. Eva Opravilová (in Kollariková, Pupala 2001) characterises this model as follows: relationship with the child, relationship with the family, relationship with early childhood education, learning through play, individuation, openness to alternatives as well as creativity and independence,.

The first champion of what is now known as *personality-based learning* was John Amos Comenius. Comenius also stressed the importance of play as a medium for learning. His periodisation of child development from 0 to 6 years of age is used – with minor modifications – to this day.

Svoboda, too, argued for *respecting the developmental specifics of children*. He said that his curriculum was *not compulsory* and that a teacher should make use of the moment *when a child shows interest in a subject*.

The approach of Anny Süssová who concentrated on the *health and physical activities of children* seems all too relevant to the contemporary situation.

The works of Ida Jarníková enabled teachers to develop *educational programmes that reflected the reality of their school* without restraining their creativity. It defined the boundaries in which they could operate.

As we have demonstrated, today’s current curriculum builds on the legacy of strenuous curriculum development efforts prior to the advent of communism. In addition, the *FEPPE* contains democratic elements and reflects the current state of knowledge.

The transformation of the Czech educational system has been a complex process that needs to be evaluated at each step. In the last 15 years, paedagogical research in early childhood education has focused on assessing the implementation of the *Framework Programme for Early Childhood Education* and its impact on a child’s development. The idea has been to assess the quality of this curriculum document and, more importantly, to determine its impact on the quality of pre-primary education.

Studies with children entering primary school may be classified into the following categories:

- Pre-primary education
- Research on nursery school teachers
- Preschool children’s level of knowledge and skills
- Conception of childhood
- Childcare

A survey of research literature reveals that other categories over and above those mentioned have been used (e.g. questions related to university education for nursery school teachers), but these are out of the scope of this paper.

Period	Research area	Author	Description
the period from 2000 to 2014	Conception of childhood	Miriam Prokešová	<b>Aim:</b> Contemporary philosophy of education <b>Results:</b> Contemporary trends in education allowing children to have fun and express themselves
	Stage of child development	Jana Kropáčková	<b>Aim:</b> The importance of key competences for successful entry into primary school <b>Respondents:</b> 578 subjects <b>Method:</b> Questionnaire <b>Results:</b> Competences arranged in order of importance – language and communicative competences, social and interpersonal competences, moral and attitudinal competences, mental and physical competences, motor skills and manual competences, information skills and cognitive competences
	Research on nursery school teachers	Věra Krejčová	<b>Aim:</b> The needs of teacher training <b>Respondents:</b> Teachers of mainstream nursery schools and teachers of nursery schools participating in the “Začít spolu” (Let’s begin together) programme <b>Method:</b> Questionnaire <b>Results:</b> The teachers of schools participating in the special programme were more likely to align themselves with personality-based learning styles in early childhood education.

	Research on nursery school teachers	Eva Šmelová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Developing a curriculum</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 34 teachers and headmistresses of nursery schools</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Analysis of class-wide and school-wide educational programmes; questionnaire; interview</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Poor goal-setting – descriptions are too verbose, generic or unsuitable</p> <p>Teachers are not confident in developing curricula.</p>
	Stage of child development	Zdeněk Matějček	<p><b>Aim:</b> Norms of child development from 0 to 6 years of age</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Norms and milestones in child development; description of children's psychological needs and the way they perceive the world</p>
	Research on nursery school teachers	Soňa Kořátková	<p><b>Aim:</b> The nursery school and children in the teacher's perspective</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 310 teachers and heads of nursery schools</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Questionnaire</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Children are inquisitive and self-confident; they take the initiative and may have speech impediments</p> <p>Nursery schools foster creativity and self-expression, cooperate with parents and respond to children's needs</p>
	Stage of child development	Helena Havlisová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Prevalence of reading and writing disabilities in preschool children</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 32 nursery schools – 488 children</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Approximately one-fifth of the subjects were diagnosed with a disability.</p>
	Conception of childhood	Martin Šístek	<p><b>Aim:</b> To describe Comenius' conception of childhood and a child's nature</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Content analysis</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Importance of warmth in relationships with children; recognition of childhood as the perfect embodiment of human nature; Concern with the role of play in the life of a child, individual differences, notions of obedience and the role of symbolism in the life of a child</p>

Pre-primary education	A group of authors	<p><b>Aim:</b> The level of pre-primary education in the Czech Republic</p> <p><b>Results:</b> An assessment of the development of early childhood education in the Czech Republic over a long period of time, published by the Czech Statistical Office</p>
Stage of child development	Jana Kropáčková and Jana Uhlířová	<p><b>Aim:</b> A preschool child</p> <p><b>Results:</b> A survey of changes in the conception of preschool children in different periods</p>
Research on nursery school teachers	Radmila Burkovičová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Goal-setting</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 106 nursery school teachers without university education</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Analysis of class-wide educational programmes; interview</p> <p><b>Results:</b> The subjects felt out of their depth when asked to develop class-wide programmes</p>
Research on nursery school teachers	Lenka Doležalová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Gender stereotypes in communication among teachers</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Ethnographic research</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Teachers propagate gender stereotypes without being aware of it</p>
Stage of child development	Eva Šmelová Alena Petrová Eva Suralová et.al.	<p><b>Aim:</b> Readiness of the child to enter compulsory education</p> <p><b>Method:</b> 10 different educational and psychological tests of school readiness</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Results of children in the average - reserves in the educational intervention. Lack of teacher competence in the diagnostic competence</p>
Stage of child development	Miroslava Bartoňová	<p><b>Aim:</b> The communicative competence of preschool children</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> Preschool children and students in the first year of primary school</p> <p><b>Method:</b> Classifications of image sets</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Insufficient grasp of the principles of subordination and superordination</p>

	Stage of child development	Eliška Zajitzová	<p><b>Aim:</b> The reading and writing readiness of preschool children</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 100 children</p> <p><b>Method:</b> observation; interview and testing</p> <p><b>Results:</b> A high incidence of pronunciation issues; the children's performances were not up to the standard defined in the curricular document</p>
	Stage of child development	Hana Kyjonková and Lenka Lacinová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Activity types and the private speech of preschool children</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 20 children</p> <p><b>Method:</b> observation</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Children are more likely to use private, imaginative and playful speech when they are engaged in open-ended activities. In closed-ended activities, they are more likely to describe what they are doing and how they control themselves.</p>
	Research on nursery school teachers	Zora Syslová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Teachers' self-evaluation and the influence of headmasters on self-evaluation processes</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> teachers from 6 nursery schools</p> <p><b>Method:</b> semi-structured interview; analysis of school documents</p> <p><b>Results:</b> An intuitive assessment of children's achievements and preferences; no evaluation criteria are in place. Evaluation techniques such as questionnaires, videotaping, photographic documentation, journal keeping, etc. are becoming more common.</p>
	Stage of child development	Ondřej Šimík	<p><b>Aim:</b> Interpretations of the word "life" by nursery school children</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 134 children</p> <p><b>Method:</b> interview</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Boys came up with better interpretations than girls</p>

	Research on nursery school teachers	Radmila Burkovičová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Basic professional duties of nursery school teachers</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> nursery school teachers</p> <p><b>Method:</b> observation</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Identification of nursery school teachers' preparatory and teaching activities; categorisation of said activities according to how much time they require and when in the day they are usually performed</p>
	Conception of childhood	Lucie Jarkovská	<p><b>Aim:</b> Research studies dealing with childhood and the world of children</p> <p><b>Results:</b> A survey of (largely) non-Czech literature presented for its potential usefulness in the Czech context</p>
	Childcare	Steven Saxonberg, Hana Hašková and Jiří Mudrák	<p><b>Aim:</b> Legislation related to childcare</p> <p><b>Results:</b> Evolution of the childcare policy</p>
	Pre-primary education	Lenka Tomcová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Cooperation between families and schools</p> <p><b>Respondents:</b> 140 teachers and 167 parents</p> <p><b>Results:</b> The analysis provides information on the average number of children per classroom and the impact of the Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education. Also discussed is the acceptance of children under 3 years of age into nursery schools and the importance of university education for nursery school teachers.</p>
	Pre-primary education	Eva Opravilová and Jana Uhlířová	<p><b>Aim:</b> Legislation related to pre-primary education</p> <p><b>Results:</b> A survey of the development of rules and regulations</p>
	Conception of childhood	Zdeněk Helus	<p><b>Aim:</b> Personality-based learning for preschool children</p> <p><b>Results:</b> An appeal to teachers to put the child and his/her educational needs first; to try to build a cordial relationship with the children and to consider the children's developmental milestones</p>

	Stage of child development	Jana Kropáčková, Radka Wildová and Anna Kucharská	<p><b>Aim:</b> Reading skills in a preschool age</p> <p><b>Method:</b> survey of existing literature</p> <p><b>Results:</b> The importance of pre-reading skills. Teachers do provide activities that support the development of pre-reading skills, but have difficulties using activating methods that build information and text completion skills and stimulate children actively to search for information.</p>
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In addition to democratisation and humanisation, which were mentioned previously, there has recently emerged another important trend in the sphere of education: namely, health education.

### Childhood and health

The many definitions of “childhood” and “health” are dependent on perspective. While the age ranges used to define childhood vary (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 2006; Vágnerová, 2000), there is a consensus that childhood begins at birth and ends at the onset of adulthood. A child’s development is thus divided into stages according to these times. As to the age at which a child becomes an adult, it is determined by the age of majority which varies from country to country (ranging from 13 to 21 years). For most countries, the age of majority is 18 years. At the age of majority, a minor ceases to be considered a child and becomes legally an adult.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines “health” as physical, emotional and social well-being. Aesthetics are a factor too, as is the environment, nutrition, disease prevention and public health interventions whose effects on well-being can be studied and measured. The WHO’s definition of health is not universally accepted. Some criticise it for being too idealistic and unrealistic. Health may be defined negatively as an absence of illness or functionally as a person’s ability to manage his/her day-to-day tasks. The most widely accepted conception of health is based on the WHO’s definition and, as such, interprets health as a state of complete physical, emotional and social well-being and harmony.

Morbidity varies widely across countries as a result of factors that affect population health and life expectancy such as the incidence of infectious diseases (AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis), malnutrition, access to potable water, hygienic conditions, access to medicine, the quality of health infrastructure, etc. The United Nations has committed itself to addressing



some of these health risks by 2015 (see the *UN Millennium Development Goals*). The Czech Republic may not face the threats mentioned above, however, even in our latitudes we cannot afford to ignore the questions of health and health education.

Health is a critical aspect of a person's life from the cradle to the grave, and especially so in childhood. A person's health is influenced by external and internal factors called the determinants of health. The external (exogenous) factors include lifestyle, the living and working environment and the quality of medical care. The internal (endogenous) factors are related to genetics. We can conceive of health as having four components (or "pillars of health"). These are:

- Physical well-being – the anatomic and functional parameters of the organism
- Mental well-being – experiences, emotions, attitudes, behaviours, etc.
- Social well-being – relationships in the family, at school or at the workplace, life roles, welfare, cultural habits and customs, etc.
- Spiritual well-being – faith, religion, church, etc. (adapted from Hřivnová, 2013, p. 8).

Health is determined and influenced by numerous factors, some of which can be controlled. A person's health depends on how dutifully he/she follows his/her principles, habits and recommendations about nutrition, physical activity, daily regimen and mental hygiene. From the onset of puberty, health may also be affected by alcohol consumption, smoking, the use of drugs and risky sexual behaviour.

Health education, especially if it is systematic and comprehensive, prompts us to realise the value of health and adopt wholesome habits, opinions and attitudes. Health education that forms a part of a comprehensive educational programme (Rašková, 2013; and others) is a social project whose object is an all-round cultivation of personality. In addition to cultivating intellect, health education seeks to impart moral and human values and an aesthetic sense that helps us appreciate health and beauty. No less important is physical education which focuses primarily on instilling the correct hygienic habits and understanding the anatomy and physiology of one's body. Physical activity, active rest and body hardening play an important role as preventive measures against neurosis and depression.

Health education should equip children with basic information and encourage them to make independent decisions. The outcomes of a health education programme include a comprehensive understanding of health, useful self-care habits and behaviours promoting good personal appearance and fitness, an ability to recognise health risks and the knowledge

of strategies for avoiding exposure to risk in various situations and in communication with unknown persons. Health education should also lead children to responsibility. It should provide them with information on addictive substances and especially on the impact of such substances on health. Children should also gain a basic cognisance of human body parts and human sexuality. They should understand the principles of physical and mental hygiene, and most importantly, the value of family and home.

Health education is an intentional learning activity that leads to a comprehensive understanding of health; the acquisition of useful self-care habits and behaviours promoting good personal appearance and fitness; an ability to recognise health risks; and knowledge of strategies for avoiding exposure to risk in various situations and in communication with unknown persons. Intentional health education occurs primarily in schools in the form of a continuous, persistent, everyday paedagogical effort. The conception and content of health education are based on national curriculum documents (framework educational programmes) and school curriculum documents (school-wide educational programmes). Health education encompasses the following topics: health, illness, daily regimen, personal hygiene, first aid, nutrition, the prevention of substance abuse, the basics of sex education and personal safety.

Framework educational programmes define a common framework and an exit level of knowledge that subsequent educational programmes can build upon. They set out the main requirements and conditions as well as the rules and regulations that govern institutional education. Framework educational programmes have been developed with curriculum reform requirements in mind. They embody the following principles: respect for the natural developmental specifics of children at different ages; provision of education to every child according to his/her abilities and needs; and an emphasis on quality including the use of didactic methods.

The conception of institutional education is geared toward building key competences from an early age and throughout the child's school attendance. Key competences represent knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and values that are vital to a person's development and social self-fulfilment. The purpose and object of institutional education is to equip children with a set of key competences that are attainable by them and prepare them for subsequent education and for assuming their role in society. The content of education and the activities that take place at school are designed to build and strengthen these competences.

Intentional health education is influenced by a range of factors, the most important of which is the family. It goes without saying that a family is crucial to a child's welfare. A family is an inseparable part of a child's life, be it constituted by a husband and wife,

registered partners or blood relatives. It is the place where responsibility, mutual dependability and affection can thrive.

Cooperation between the school and a child's family in the area of health and health education is of the essence; such cooperation cannot exist without trust. Cooperation between schools and families is now considered indispensable. Children are not influenced only by people who try to lead by example and provide guidance and loving support. If we leave aside the cases of dysfunctional families, children may also be exposed to negative influences by their peers, by the mass media, in books, in newspapers, in magazines or in films that present views that do not fit the "norm" considered legitimate and desirable.

Some children may come from less-than-ideal backgrounds or may be exposed to negative parenting. Many experts (Langmeier, Krejčířová, 2006; Vágnerová, 2000; et al.), nevertheless, insist that the family – being a mesh of relationships with its morals, habits, interests and goals – is a crucial component of a child's education. The educational mission of the family is augmented, supplemented, furthered and supported by schools. This, of course, does not only apply to health education.

The outcome of the cooperation between the school and family is determined by factors such as the attitude of teachers toward parents and the consideration for each family's specific needs and parenting styles. No less important is the attitude of the parents themselves. Teachers deal with parents who have no interest in cooperating and they also deal with parents who are proactive and open to cooperation. Communication between teachers and parents is the key to meaningful cooperation in the area of health education. Teachers should try to build strong partnerships with parents by communicating with them, supporting them or tactfully correcting them. At any rate, they must not leave the child's family out of the picture.

Parents should also be invited to discuss the educational process. Surveys indicate that these discussions are usually initiated and maintained by teachers. Teachers also determine the aim and schedule of the communication activities. As a result of curricular reform, there has been a shift in communication between teachers and children toward creating more room for children to voice their wishes and provide feedback to teachers (Stolinská, 2013). This openness is the true prerequisite of partnership between the key players in the educational process, each of whom should be committed to removing any and all communication barriers regardless of the situation.

We have mentioned that health is an important consideration in education. By that same token, health education that involves both the school and family contributes to the realisation of the child's rights. In 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the *Convention*

*on the Rights of the Child* which became one of the most important treaties on human rights in history. It was ratified by almost all countries in the world. The Czech Republic incorporated the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* into its legal order in 1991. By ratifying the *Convention*, the Czech Republic, like the other countries that are a party to it, has undertaken to integrate the *Convention* into its legal order and enforce it. Furthermore, it has undertaken to submit to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child a detailed report on the state of the youth population and the level of realisation of child rights in the country and to continue doing so once every five years.

The *Convention* is a legal document that mandates the States Parties to ensure the provision of adequate care (medical, hygiene, nutrition, material) for children and the creation of optimal conditions for the physical and mental development of all children without discrimination. The rights derived from the *Convention* may be classified into four areas:

- basic principles – the right to protection against discrimination, the right to life, the right to development;
- a child’s right to healthy development – e.g. the right to basic needs, the right to education, the right to healthcare;
- a child’s right to protection – protection against abuse, discrimination, maltreatment, protection in time of war, etc.;
- participation rights – participation in cultural, religious, political, economic and social affairs.

The process of implementing a health education programme in the spirit of child rights is influenced by a number of factors. Health education may be declared a priority, but teachers may not always promote a healthy lifestyle as a prerequisite of an active and fulfilled life. The provision of health education by schools, healthcare providers and other public services is governed by the WHO’s *Health 21* programme (“a health-for-all policy for the twenty-first century”) and by national policy (the long-term *Health 21* programme works to improve public health in the Czech Republic; The Health and Environment Action Plan), approved by the government of the Czech Republic.

Primary, secondary and tertiary prevention aimed at children is an important element in the activities designed to protect public health. These measures include disease, injury and risk prevention as well as timely diagnoses. Prevention may be classified according to the

provider (Machová, Kubátová, 2009) into the following categories: preventive medicine, social prevention and personal prevention.

## Conclusion

The present study has attempted to give a historical summary of the conceptions of childhood within the development of early childhood education context. We have presented an overview of the current state of pre-primary education as it has been shaped by the individual approaches of nursery schools and the curriculum documents underpinning them. We have summarised the important milestones in the development of the origins of early childhood education. We have also performed a thorough analysis of the relevant documents, reports and papers as well as surveyed specialised literature on the topic, including the approaches suggested by individual authors.

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## TALKING WITH CHILDREN: TEACHER'S USE OF INTERVIEWS AND GROUP DISCUSSIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

### Introduction-research rational

Contemporary approaches in the education of young children emphasize on the importance of children participating in the educational process through activities and strategies which encourage the exchange of ideas, interests and experiences. Talking to children is a process used frequently in early childhood education: it is both the medium of learning and a tool for learning as it can be utilized to activate, motivate and cultivate children's thinking and provide feedback for the teacher about the children's understanding as well (Myhill, Jones & Hopper, 2006). Therefore the classroom is the context in which talking is an important process in supporting learning, as it helps children construct their way of thinking.

Furthermore, the way we regard young children has changed: the perception that young children are objects to be studied, being regarded as incompetent, unreliable and incomplete and therefore should be passive recipients of knowledge has given its place to the awareness that children have plenty and rich ideas about their surrounding environment and they form meanings by linking language, thinking and learning. Therefore, discussions between teachers and children are often considered a cornerstone of learning development and can contribute to the improvement of the quality and quantity of children's language skills (Eke & Lee, 2009).

### 1. Theoretical framework

Children's understanding of the world and the formation of their ideas is influenced by sociocultural contexts as well as is integrated with and constituted by interactions

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with others. In the framework of the sociocultural approach, knowledge is regarded as a product of cognitive construction through social interaction processes, where individuals work together coordinating their actions and negotiating mutual meanings. Children's ideas are influenced by the framework of the activities they participate in or by the questions articulated during the educational process (Robbins, 2005). Talking and communicating supports the development of thinking, as it can help formulate initial ideas, reconstruct and clarify them, share them with others and reflect on them (Myhill, Jones & Hopper, 2006: 8). The acknowledgment of the important role of interaction processes in the development and learning of children highlights the need for educational procedures which take into account the different social and family contexts in which children learn (Fleer, 2003, Robbins, 2005). Therefore, teachers should not only be aware of children's ideas, but also be aware of everyday experiences, sources of information that they have access to, tools or artifacts that they usually use in order to make sense of the way children encounter new knowledge.

We believe that interviews and group discussions are complementary approaches that encourage the inclusion of children's perspectives and enable the expression of different aspects of children's experiences (Smith, Duncan & Marshall, 2005). Their main purpose is to allow children to articulate and explain their views and discuss in their own words their ideas, experiences and meanings. As Myhill, Jones & Hopper indicate (2006: 21) "the more each child is aware of his or her own understanding or uncertainties and the more he or she is encouraged to express those understandings, the better the classroom is as a community of learners who can see the interrelationships and connections between what they know and understand". Researchers have proposed a range of techniques being used in interviews and group discussions with children in order to facilitate communication (Chin, 2007, Clark, 2005, Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Interviews help children clarify their meanings and monitor their own thinking. They require a more purposeful kind of questioning so teachers have to think carefully about the issue under consideration and prepare key questions in advance in order to stimulate the child. Group discussions have the advantage to trigger and extend each other's ideas producing greater range of responses because when one child is speaking, other children have 'thinking time', thus also encouraging greater reflectivity in responses (Lewis, 1992: 417). Although group discussions can be less daunting for young children than one-to-one interviews,

there is also the possibility that less articulate or shy children may not have the confidence to contribute in a group situation (Clark, 2005: 492).

Questioning remains the most common strategy for eliciting responses from children during teaching. Teacher's questions can be categorized into four broad types: "*factual questions, which had a single right answer; reasoning questions, which drew on logical or sequential thought; open questions, to which there was no anticipated right answer; and social questions, which invited children to share their experiences or allowed the teacher to control the class* (Myhill, Jones & Hopper, 2006: 18)". However, the conversation that takes place in a classroom is not a form of communication which can occur in any other occasion: the teacher has a specific goal and although the conversation is not predetermined, it isn't totally spontaneous either. The nature of classroom talk is often context bounded (Eke & Lee, 2009: 20). For instance, the teacher may intend to determine what the children have understood regarding a subject or how they apply basic knowledge or procedures, to encourage participation in a group activity or to help children reflect on what they have learnt or done (Wilén, 1991: 8). "*The kinds of questions that teachers ask and the way teachers ask these questions can, to some extent, influence the type of cognitive processes that children engage in as they grapple with the process of constructing knowledge*" (Chin, 2007: 815). Additionally, the way teachers articulate their questions provides a model according to which each child will "be trained" to pose questions. If the teacher asks questions in the classroom to extend children's ideas and to scaffold their thinking, it is more likely that the children will develop similar questioning skills (Owen & Milner, 1998: 95). Such questions are more open and the teacher engages children in higher-order thinking (Chin, 2007: 818).

The possibility of children participating in interviews and group discussions increases when teachers observe (and record systematically) the fields of interest and experiences of the children and try to increase opportunities to listen to the children's ideas using different strategies (Carr, 2011: 268).

On this basis, we attempt to present the perceptions of preschool education teachers in Greece on the use of individual interviews and group discussions in the daily educational process.

## **2. Methodological issues**

### *2.1 Participants*

The research involved 14 volunteer kindergarten teachers who serve in public kindergartens in the wider area of Patras (capital of the region of Achaia in the Peloponnese). One of the kindergarten teachers is between 21 to 30 years old, twelve of them are between 31-40 and 41-50 correspondingly and another one is between 51-60 years old. Regarding their years of teaching experience, seven teachers have 2 to 13 years of experience, five have 14-17 years and two have 20-31 years of experience.

### *2.2 Data collection and analysis*

For the data collection semi-structured interviews were used as a research tool since it enables the researcher to collect more and important information through clarification questions (Cohen et al, 2009). The interview was structured around 17 questions which aimed to investigate two research questions that were also the two basic pillars of the semi-structured interview. The data was analyzed with the technique of content analysis of the texts produced by the answers of the teachers to the interview questions. The qualitative approach was chosen as the most appropriate for addressing the issues of concern

### *2.3 Research questions*

The purpose of this research was to explore how kindergarten teachers use individual interviews and group discussions in the daily educational practice and whether make use of the children's experiences through group discussions aiming to a better understanding of the way children develop their thinking. Specifically:

1. Do early childhood teachers use interviews and group discussions as a way to mediate children's thinking or as a way to "score" children's answers?
2. Do early childhood teachers integrate in group discussions processes and contexts that are familiar to children in order to understand how children develop their understanding?

### 3. Presentation of research findings

In the following unit, we present the research findings based on the teacher's answers to the interview questions.

#### *3.1 Individual interviews and group discussions: use and preparation.*

All 14 kindergarten teachers answered that they use individual interviews and group discussions in their classes depending on the occasion. However, they use group discussions more frequently, as they find it very difficult to conduct individual interviews because of the large number of children and the lack of assistance (in Greece every kindergarten teacher is responsible alone of a class that can have up to 27 children). Here are some examples of responses: *"... The individual interviews are very important, but I tell you ... when you have a class with 25 children, I will isolate a child, but again I have to be somewhere nearby and it takes a lot of effort to do so. If we had classes like in other countries, where there is a kindergarten teacher and an assistant in the class, clearly it could be done and on a daily basis, but under the circumstances here it's not possible"* and *"to do them every day? How? Because theoretically, yes, it would be ideal, but practically, how?"* Also, some teachers (4) who participated two years ago in a program where individual interviews were used frequently commented: *"There were a lot of interviews in the Fibonacci Project. There we couldn't do otherwise because it was the program that required one before and one after, but honestly we had a problem. As interesting as it was, and it was very interesting, all colleagues had a hard time, with so many children and there is no time for so many children..."*

The 12 kindergarten teachers said that they always connect the discussions they have at a personal or group level to the ideas that are expressed in various activities in class, except 2 who said that it depends on the subject: *"If they are related to the subject, we use them"* and *"It always depends, you can't always do it, I would say it depends on the subject, but generally, yes"*. Particularly, 6 teachers claimed that this process results in issues that derive directly from the children's needs. Four (4) teachers mentioned it was important in order to advance the issue and the remaining 3 believe that this process helps the children understand the subject examined. Only one kindergarten teacher said: *"Yes, of course. Why? ... Because I like it, I don't know..."*

### 3.1.1 Individual interviews

11 of the 14 kindergarten teachers use the interview as an assessment tool in order to explore the children's knowledge and experiences on the subject they are planning to introduce without being influenced by the opinions and experiences of the other children. They also use them for each child's portfolio: *"One-to-one interviews only when I want to introduce a subject I want to assess. When I want an assessment prior to the learning process and to have the child's opinion 100% without interventions of the other children so they aren't influenced..."*. Additionally, based on the information collected from the children, they will design the teaching approach.

Of the 11 kindergarten teachers, 8 apply the individual interview at the beginning of every educational intervention, one teacher at the end, one during the process and one at the beginning and at the end. Of the other teachers (3 of 14), one teacher says she uses interviews to help the children develop their language and argument skills. Another teacher mentioned that she organizes individual interviews in the context of personalized teaching: *"I don't have to do so with all the children but usually with those who miss several days of school and with some of the youngest preschoolers..."* while another teacher when something is personally troubling the child: *"...something might be troubling him or he might be upset about something that happened at home, yes, that's when I will do it..."* (table 1).

<b>Cases of making use of individual interviews</b>	<b>N</b>
Assessment tool	11
Development of language and argument skills	1
Personalized teaching	1
Personal problems	1

**Table 1: Use of individual interviews**

Regarding the preparation of an individual interview, 10 of the 14 kindergarten teachers stated that they don't have a specific plan when they apply an individual interview, or have some questions written down. They particularly stressed that they generally think what they will ask the children and according to the answers they get, the process evolves: *"I have the subject we are going to address in my mind and I ask the child questions..."*. When they were asked why they organize an interview that

way, they replied that they want to hear the children’s opinion. The process evolves depending on their answers, and for that reason they don’t have a specific plan with questions. The other 4 (that participated in the Fibonacci Project) make an accurate list of questions prior to the interview *“...I know them in advance, I have them written down, they are very precise questions because I want to see something specific”* and *“I have my questions organized in advance, always open questions, in order to leave more room for the children to develop arguments and be free to take the subject a little further”* (table 2).

<b>Preparing the interview</b>	<b>N</b>
Without a plan	10
With a plan	4

**Table 2: Preparing the interview**

All kindergarten teachers who participated in the research responded that they do not integrate individual interviews in their teaching on a weekly basis. Specifically, 5 of them could not give a precise frequency, as they say it strictly depends on the subject at hand: *“Certainly not every week, but I really cannot tell you, it depends, it depends, I can’t ... I can’t say ”*. However, 5 stated that they use interviews once a month, while the other 4 whenever there is reason to do so, one even said that may be once every three months. *“... look ... individual interview when I start a subject which I think requires me to do so, it could be every three months, I won’t lie to you...”*.

Furthermore, regarding the conduct of individual interviews, all 14 teachers inform the children about the interview process, as this is done when all children are present in the classroom. *“I take the children one by one so I inform them in advance.”* An individual interview begins with questions and it evolves depending on the children’s answers, with clarification or alternative questions. An interesting response concerning the way a teacher believes she can help children is the following *“I try to make them as understandable as possible, so they can answer and I change the question or give part of the answer.”*



### 3.1.2 Group discussions

Regarding group discussions, 7 of the kindergarten teachers use them as a means to detect knowledge, experiences and interests of the children in order to introduce a new topic *"Group discussions mostly when I want to introduce a subject, to see what they know..."* and *"... in order to ask for their experiences and their knowledge, to see what they know, what they are interested in, so I know if, how far, and of course how I will proceed..."* . Also, 4 kindergarten teachers claimed that they use them in any circumstance (at the beginning and at the end of addressing a topic) *"Children talk more about their experiences when they share them with their friends"*. Particularly one of them said that she applies them in any occasion, but she mainly uses them as an assessment tool, therefore she uses them throughout the whole educational process. The remaining 3 use them as a means to develop children's language and communication skills and help them learn to express themselves properly. *"... Children develop their language and communication skills and learn to form sentences, to express themselves, to articulate arguments ...."* (table 3).

<b>Cases where group discussions were used</b>	<b>N</b>
To detect knowledge and level of interest for the introduction of a subject	7
In all occasions	4
To develop language skills and improvement of communication skills	3

**Table 3: Use of group discussion**

All 14 kindergarten teachers stated that the group discussion begins when the children are in a designated "discussion corner". The children are quite familiarized with group discussions as they take place every day in the same place: *"They know this, they know that now we will have a discussion and that there are rules, which I have to tell you that they follow, to the extent that they can"*. Nine (9) out of 14 reported that they use various types of stimuli in order to engage the children and begin the discussion, but also in order to take the conversation further. Of these, 6 teachers use visual aids, such as images from the web or from books, videos from the internet, etc.: *"... I prepare them at home, I make a selection because we do not have a connection to the*

internet here, but also in order to control the process, and this is how I begin in many occasions... or with photographs, it depends.” and music: “... I believe that it is very nice and I also like it when they initiate a conversation by listening to music. It is difficult of course each time to find the suitable piece, but I try, I believe that it is something special” and the other three (3) use story telling or fiction. “Usually I make up my own story if I have not found something from a book...for example I received a letter asking me to do something and I do not know what to do, so the children have to help me ...” These three kindergarten teachers report that after the beginning of the discussion, they use questions based on the stories in order to advance the teaching process. The remaining 5 reported that they use questions in order to give the opportunity to the children to express themselves freely, without other stimuli limiting their imagination, but also for the teachers to understand what they truly know and what they really would want to learn. From these 5, the 3 replied that during the discussion and in order to go in depth, they use more and sometimes more difficult questions, while they also mentioned that in their effort to have progress in a common discussion, they use other educational activities simultaneously. As one kindergarten teacher reported “....after we have made the initial discussion, at the same time we do some activities and we discuss within the group...” (table 4).

<b>Preparing the group discussion</b>	<b>N</b>
Visual aids (images, video etc)	6
Story telling or fiction	3
Questions	5

**Table 4: Preparing the group discussion**

Thirteen (13) of the 14 kindergarten teachers respond to the question whether they prefer to organize individual interviews or group discussions after the elaboration of a subject that they organize group discussions. One of them said that while organizing the group discussion, she might organize an individual interview as well, depending on time availability. More specifically, 4 teachers replied that the objective of the group discussions in this case is for the children to develop their language skills (a similar statement was made by a kindergarten teacher regarding individual

interviews), but also for the children to learn to cooperate: *“It is a very good occasion for collaboration”*. The other 10 declared that their goal is to understand what the children have learned, but also to share their experiences with the group. Six (6) of these teachers emphasized on the fact that this helps them gather information on the children’s experiences in order to include them in a next topic as well as that they believe discussion can lead them to a completely new and different subject (4).

All 14 kindergarten teachers stated that they try to include prior knowledge and experiences of the children in the teaching process: *“... What is the point if we don’t use what we do? ”*, *“How do I make use of them...? I include them in the program, what else?”*, *“...Especially when it comes to knowledge, I try to design activities based on the things they know”*. Additionally, 10 of the 14 teachers feel like they can use group discussions for any subject that may occur. From the remaining 4 teachers, two believe that group discussions can be very useful in cases where there are conflicts between the children. The other two teachers use them in cases where they want to address delicate subjects, such as the arrival of a new student in the class from another country.

### *3.2 Difficulties during interviews or group discussions and ways of facilitating the children*

To the question regarding *“What they do when the children do not give sufficient answers or discuss other subjects?”*, 5 of the 14 kindergarten teachers stated that they tend to use various artifacts or visual aids in order to maintain the interest of the children: *“I can use anything, ... and I alterate things, meaning I might use more images, or tables, or I make different gestures, I change the tone of my voice, for instance I pretend to be a dragon because they like that...”*. Five (5) teachers pose different questions and use the answers of one or more children in order to motivate the others *“....there will always be a child answering, this is definite, and then I try to use the answer in order to motivate the others. I’ll give you an example.... Anna says this... what would you say? Is she right? Do you agree with her or do you believe something else?”* One of them even said that that she addresses specific children: *“The point is to encourage the shy children to participate... they might know the answer so I ask them, what do you think of that, I am sure you have heard something”*. The 4 kindergarten teachers move to other subjects, as they quote: *“There is no reason to continue if they are not interested”*, and *“I drop it because if*

they are not interested....I introduce another subject, when I see that they have the tendency for something else and I take it where the children want, also because the kindergarten curriculum is flexible and you can do that” (table 5).

Techniques	N
Use of artifacts and visual aids	5
Differentiation of questions and using some children’s answers to motivate others	5
Change of subject	4

**Table 5: Techniques used when children do not respond to questions**

In order for the children to participate and express their ideas in the individual interviews, 11 of the 14 kindergarten teachers differentiate their questions, or they use alternative questions (for example closed type questions or questions that are susceptible of multiple answers). Three (3) teachers use references to the experiences of the children from everyday school life or even information that they know about the children (table 6).

Techniques	N
Differentiation of questions, use of alternative questions	11
Use of examples referring to children’s experiences	3

**Table 6: Children facilitation techniques to participate in an interview**

Regarding the ways the kindergarten teachers facilitate the group discussions, 5 out of 14 respond that they use the experiences of the children: *“I might use something the children did in school the previous day, like when we had invited a grandmother.... this incident led us to the subject of family....”* but also any other idea given by the children during the day: *“... a child brought a post-card from a trip, I seized the opportunity, and we found the location on the map. We use anything they bring...”* The remaining 9 use several techniques and tools: *“I use a lot of artifacts and images ... they really like dramatizations...”* Also, *“With a lot of photographs either from books or from the computer, as I said before....”*, *“I always tell them to look at the*

board where I post images, depending on the subject, sometimes I even change and enrich them during the day...” (table 7).

Techniques	N
Use of children’s experiences	5
Use of tools and visual aids	9

**Table 7: Children facilitation techniques to participate in group discussion**

### 3.3 Examples of using elements from group discussions and individual interviews.

From the examples of questions that the kindergarten teachers gave us, it is evident that they mostly use open questions, such as: *“What do you know about....”, “What would you like to learn about the fish?”, “What do you think would happen if we forgot to water our plant?”, “How do you imagine a boat looks like from the inside?” “Would you like to tell us how you feel when your Mom or your Dad scold you?”, “Why do you believe that it is better to use the bicycle?”, “What things do you think you should take with you to the beach?”*. However, sometimes they use questions such as: *“Is the Earth round?”, “What do you know about recycling?”, “Your friend says this... do you agree?”* In certain cases they use closed type questions in order to help the children answer and participate in the discussion, in case they find it difficult. For example, one teacher mentions *“I prefer it and I always ask open questions so that the children can tell me exactly what they think, but when they find it difficult to answer I help a lot with closed questions, but generally speaking I prefer open questions.”*

Concerning the children’s family environment, 4 of 14 kindergarten teachers seem to use information from this context only when they are addressing relative subjects, such as the subject of family: *“Only if the child brings to the group something that is connected to the particular topic, like the topic of family”*, while 3 mention that it generally depends on the subject. The 4 teachers use such information in every opportunity given by the children, when they bring objects from their homes, for example, or share their experiences. *“... a girl brought me a towel that her mother had made, she had embroidered it and that was a good opportunity”*. The other 3 use them in any occasion and any circumstance: *“In any occasion, provided that the*

*knowledge and the experiences of the children are directly connected to the family environment”.*

Moreover, the kindergarten teachers were asked to give concrete examples where they made use of the children’s experiences. From the 14 teachers, 3 claim that they are familiar with the experiences of the children and that they ask the children to speak about that experience during the discussion. *“I already know what their experiences are. I ask the child to talk about the experience”.* Another 3 teachers say that they cannot provide a concrete example but they generally try to make use of the children’s experiences in every occasion during conversations. *“I do not have an example, I can’t think of anything at the moment”.* The remaining 8 kindergarten teachers give examples of incorporating the experiences of every day practices or habits of the children in the discussion process. Some indicative examples are presented in the following table:

<p><b>Subject: Theatrical play – Christmas festivity</b></p> <p><i>“The children watched a play at the kindergarten. The next day I asked them if they liked it etc. Then a child said that they themselves could present a play and I said: “Ok, but there must be a reason, we can’t just organize a play” “The children said “We could do it when we have some kind of festivity”, and “when is the next occasion?” and the children answered “Christmas”. Continuing this discussion process, the children decided to organize a play that they would present to their parents at Christmas, a decision deriving clearly from an experience the children had, the play they watched”.</i></p>	<p><b>Subject: Intercultural education – Integration of a foreign student</b></p> <p><i>“I child from Romania came to our school, you understand... the child could barely speak Greek and in the beginning we had a big problem, because he was isolated. So I tried in the beginning to talk about it, asking questions like: “Does anyone know a child who is from another country? Remember we saw a video with children of different color skin from us?”, My colleague and I dealt with it that way. I think based on this process and recalling memories of previous activities we did in school, it worked quite well.</i></p>
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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subject: Professions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do you know what your parent’s profession is?</li> <li>– Do they work during the day or at night?</li> <li>– Have you been to your mother’s or your father’s work?</li> <li>– Do you know what they do exactly?</li> <li>– Do you like their job?</li> <li>– Would you like to have the same job?</li> <li>– Do your father and mother spend a lot of time away from home?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subject: Family</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How many brothers and sisters do you have?</li> <li>– Are they younger or older than you?</li> <li>– Do you play with them?</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subject: Recycling</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do you recycle at home?</li> <li>– How many recycling bins do you have in your neighborhood?</li> <li>– What color are they?</li> <li>– What color is the bin for garbage?</li> <li>– Do you throw some of your garbage in a separate bag?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subject: Dental hygiene</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do you brush your teeth after eating?</li> <li>– For how long?</li> <li>– How many times a day?</li> <li>– How many toothbrushes do you have at your home?</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subject: Eating healthy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Do you eat fruit every day at your home?</li> <li>– Do you go to the grocery store with your parents?</li> <li>– Do you help cooking at your home? In which way exactly?</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subject: The olive tree</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Has anyone ever seen an olive tree?</li> <li>– Have you ever seen a tree with olives on it?</li> <li>– Is there one near your house?</li> <li>– Where do you keep olives? Perhaps in your refrigerator?</li> </ul>

**Table 8: Examples of use of elements from the family environment and everyday experience in interviews and group discussions**

## **Findings**

Teachers have to scaffold learning by listening sensitively to children, having accepted that children may bring common experiences to school, but they also bring essential differences according to their socio-cultural background. In this small-scale research we attempted to present the perceptions of the kindergarten teachers regarding the use of interviews and group discussions in the educational process, two procedures suggested by the Greek curriculum, as well as contemporary curricula of other countries.

From the data analysis it became obvious that the kindergarten teachers we studied use individual interviews and group discussions during the educational process, but the majority reports that the interviews are difficult to use. Individual interviews are considered to require a considerable amount of time and special conditions to take place, as for example help from another colleague to occupy the other children in order for the teacher to discuss with a child privately. For this reason, they mainly use group discussions. While the individual interviews mostly depend on the subject they are addressing, group discussions take place on a daily basis; it is a procedure the children are familiarized with as a frequent routine.

Concerning our first research question, group discussions and individual interviews are both used by the majority of kindergarten teachers as a tool to assess the children's knowledge (tables 1 & 3). In the case of the interviews, their objective is almost exclusively to assess the children's knowledge when introducing a new subject or in cases where the children face certain difficulties, either learning or at a personal level. Group discussions are also used by the teachers in order to elicit children's ideas and exploit them during their teaching design. Furthermore, group discussions enable teachers to understand the experiences of the children and the topics that would interest them to get involved. According to the kindergarten teachers, group discussions are useful in every occasion and easy to use, as they involve all children and have multidimensional benefits, such as development of language skills, collaboration, and exchange of experiences, opinions and knowledge by the children.

During group discussions, most kindergarten teachers use various strategies and visual aids in order to empower children to participate, while for the individual interviews they rely exclusively on questions. An interesting finding is the fact that



the teachers do not have a concrete plan for the interviews. As they reported, they have in their minds “what they will ask in general”. At this point, it is worth highlighting that only 4 kindergarten teachers prepare their questions in advance. All those 4 teachers participated in the Fibonacci training program, which provided skills to use the process of individual interviews in a systematic way. This could possibly be an issue of further investigation, specifically in the field of training kindergarten teachers.

Every one of the kindergarten teachers report that they use all the information regarding the children’s knowledge and experiences collected from the group discussions and the individual interviews in the teaching process. More specifically, exchanging experiences among the children during group discussions can lead to the development of a new topic, either when the aim is to simply approach the topic or when it is part of a project. When difficulties appear (e.g. the children want to discuss other issues or they answer with single words), most teachers try to encourage participation with visual aids or by using the answers of other children to direct the discussion. A small number of teachers are willing to change the subject and to follow the preferences of the children.

Although the kindergarten teachers claim to mainly use open questions in order to listen to the children’s ideas and understand their way of thinking, the examples they provided regarding the questions they pose and the use of experiences and daily routines of the children, involved many closed questions. It appears that the kindergarten teachers tend to use mainly factual or speculative questions instead of questions that are related to the thinking process (table 9). There doesn’t seem to be a clear understanding of what discussion is, as opposed to simply reciting what the children know on a subject (this is the reason why they mostly use it in the beginning or at the end of an educational intervention). Furthermore, the majority appears not to make use of information from every-day life and routines of the children within the family context, unless that information is connected to the subject they are addressing. Therefore, concerning our second research question, there is only a limited number of teachers that integrate information on children’s everyday experiences in their practice mainly when they need to facilitate children’s participation. The majority of the kindergarten teachers reply that they use materials that are familiar and interesting for the children (e.g. images, stories) but it is not clear whether they use mainly their

own criteria for this selection or provide opportunities to children to share their perspectives.

### **Suggestions**

Through their participation in interviews or group discussions, children can recall previous experiences and knowledge, develop new ideas, as well as reflect on and access their thinking activity. Additionally, when teachers use such procedures in their classrooms, they can organize the learning process more effectively and address the personal needs of each student individually. However, the findings of the research show, despite the limitations of the small sample, that there are issues regarding the ways teachers use interviews and group discussions in their classes: how they utilize the children's knowledge and experiences, or how they make appropriate connections are issues that should be addressed more systematically. In this perspective we propose training opportunities which won't be simply presentations of "good practices", but will help teachers collaborate, reflect and try to apply methods that will help them develop the characteristics of an appropriate learning environment as well as the pedagogical strategies that could strengthen the implementation of interviews and group discussions in kindergarten classrooms as a means of communication and a way of thinking. The most powerful changes occur when teachers recognize a need for change by reflecting on their teaching experiences, thinking through their implications, and developing new ways of supporting children's learning.

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## LEARNING IN THE CITY FROM DIFFERENT VISUAL PERSPECTIVES

### 1. Introduction

Infant Education in Spain encompasses ages 0 to 6 years and is a child's first formal contact with the surrounding environment. Although people never stop receiving stimuli and acquiring knowledge throughout their lives, it is during this stage of early childhood when the foundations for future learning are laid.

The relationship between children and their environment is strongly influenced by their perception and curiosity, and therefore, investigation and enquiry can become an educational learning tool. By taking advantage of a child's attraction to the new and the novel, we can look for spaces and materials for them to discover, so that they can acquire new knowledge or build upon previously learned information. In this way, it is interesting to consider the city as a familiar place for children, and also one which they can learn about from different visual perspectives. As a result, we will be able to transmit to our children knowledge that is usually taught in the school classroom. In addition, the city can serve as a central point from which we can introduce content related with nature, physical phenomena, human beings, art, visual elements, mathematics, health, etc. Essentially, the key to learning about the city lies in carrying out excursions and visiting specific places. However, children can also start to construct their knowledge about certain aspects of the city in the classroom, through introductory activities prior to the trip. It is an important part of a child's education to acquire knowledge in an extracurricular environment, in other words, a formal context outside of the school in places that they associate with family and leisure.

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## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Infant education in Spain

Infant education in Spain has a very recent history. The most important event was the publication of the Teaching Guidelines for Preschool Education in the General Law of Education of 1970 [*Orientaciones Pedagógicas para la Educación Preescolar en la Ley General de Educación de 1970*] (LGE, 1970). This document describes the education of children aged 2 to 5 years and the objective of developing personality at this educational stage. The law proposes an active and participatory methodology through the use of games and activities related with numbers, nature, language, and artistic and rhythmic expression. Despite the newly established education regulations set forth in the Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality [*Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa*] (LOMCE, 2013), the Organic Law of Education [*Ley Orgánica de Educación*] (LOE, 2006) continues to be the current legislative document in use for Infant Education in Spain. According to this law, the aim of Infant Education is to contribute to the physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of a child. Infant Education in Spain is not compulsory and is organised in two cycles: first cycle (0-3 years) and second cycle (3-6 years) which is free.

During this educational stage, more than any other, development and learning are dynamic processes that arise from the child's interaction with the environment. Children mature, develop and learn at different rhythms, and therefore, their emotional nature, personal characteristics, needs, interests and learning styles should be elements that determine educational practice at this early stage. During this process, family involvement and collaboration are especially important. According to current legislation, both cycles of Infant Education should focus progressively on emotional development, movement, body control, communication and language, basic elements of coexistence and social relationships, and the discovery of physical and social aspects of the environment. Furthermore, children will be helped to form a positive and balanced image of themselves and to acquire personal autonomy.

In the curriculum for the second cycle of Infant Education (MEC, 2006), particular importance is attached to learning based on the knowledge, evaluation and control that the children acquire about themselves. Another important factor is the child's ability to use available resources with a certain degree of autonomy at any given time. During this

process, it is important to acquire the skills to be able to perform common activities with a certain level of responsibility, autonomy and initiative. The child must also be able to use spaces and materials appropriately when performing different tasks in class. Interacting with their environment, improving their motor control, exploring their abilities and limitations, and differentiating themselves from others, are all processes that help children to gradually acquire independence from adults. **Together, this contributes towards “learning to be myself and learning to do” and lays the foundations for developing autonomy and personal initiative.**

In accordance with the curriculum legislation (MEC, 2006), the educational contents of Infant Education are organised into **areas** that correspond to different fields of child development and are addressed through globalised activities that are interesting and meaningful for children.

The methods of working in both cycles are based on experiences, activities and playing and will be implemented in an environment of affection and trust, in order to foster the child’s self-esteem and social integration.

The areas in the second cycle of Infant Education are:

- *Knowledge of oneself and personal autonomy.*
- *Knowledge of the environment.*
- *Languages: communication and representation.*

These areas should be considered as fields of activity or spaces of learning of any type. This includes learning attitudes, processes and concepts, which contribute to the development of girls and boys and encourage them to understand, give meaning to and actively participate in the world (MEC, 2006: 475-476).

## ***2.2 Choosing the city as a learning environment***

### *2.2.1. Introduction*

In the first place, we chose the city because it is a real, everyday context in which children can observe a lot of material that is studied in class. The urban environment is a space of reference which enables us to investigate its educational possibilities. We propose this space as a learning environment to implement in the Infant Education classroom, since we learn to understand our own identity through the culture imposed



upon us in these inhabited urban spaces. Malaguzzi (2005) describes the city as a complex nest of stories that undergoes continual change and dialogue:

A dialogue between complex languages that move through the intricate worlds of the city (physical, functional, cultural and symbolic), and which children have to learn from an early age, in order to develop and test their spatial awareness and bearings, their knowledge and information, and to their individual needs and rights (Malaguzzi, 2005, p.80).

The city can also be an alternative setting to the classroom where learning can be constructed in direct contact with a natural and urban space, a reality with which the child is very familiar. In fact, this environment provides a variety of elements that enable children to discover new feelings that broaden their perception and enrich their view of the world.

Furthermore, if we consider the connection that children make with their environment, we discover that they generally see it as a space for playing and socialising. Actually, playing is one of the most spontaneous and appealing aspects for children. Our Spanish cities offer many areas for children to play, whether it be parks, gardens or in the street. In this way, we find that games and playing have a close relationship with this dual notion of childhood and the city. On a didactic level, playing is a fundamental methodological tool in Infant Education. Games and playful activities are motivating and incorporate different types of content, processes and attitudes. Therefore, the children begin to construct an idea of the existing relationship between the natural environment (partially modified by humans, for example, a park), the urban environment (built by humans and containing features such as monuments and squares) and playing, as these are the physical spaces where the child enjoys playing in their free time.

Likewise, the didactic potential of physical space and playing is very much characterised by visual appearance, and therefore, images are very important.

One interesting proposal involves working with images of the city that depict playing and to approach this new learning space from the classroom. The notion of playing thereby serves as a way to approach the urban environment with the aim that the children understand that the city can become a setting for education, socialisation and entertainment.

The interpretation and analysis of works of art is a teaching resource that strengthens observation and develops creative thinking. In addition, it can become a central concept from which different contents can be studied in a globalised and interdisciplinary way.

Taking all of these ideas as a premise, we firstly present a number of works of art as a reference to bring the city into the classroom. Subsequently, we describe the educational possibilities offered by the urban and natural environment for each of the areas of knowledge: Experimental Sciences, Mathematics and Art Education.

### *2.2.2. Playing and games in the urban setting and their representation in art as a teaching resource.*

We have chosen a series of works that portray the city as a setting for playful activities. It is essential to select works of art that are suitable, appealing and easy to interpret so that the children can identify games and spaces in the natural and urban environment.

Working with images enables us to stimulate perception, describe images, and tell stories, and encourages the children to interpret the meaning of different works of art. We can also learn about the artist, the materials and techniques used, and different elements of the local history and geography. If we adapt these areas to the characteristics of the children, we can enrich their visual culture.

We propose some works that depict scenes of playing in the city, such as the oil-on-panel by Pieter Bruegel, which represents a large number of games and recreational activities from the time period.

The painting is referred to as the: *Encyclopaedia of games of Flemish children* (Hulin de Loo, 1907).

In the painting *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1560), one can observe games that were common during that period of history and that still exist today: playing with dolls, playing the drum, roll hoops, blind man's buff, steal the handkerchief, spinning tops, yo-yo, riding hobby-horses, playing with sand, shouting into barrels, hopscotch, marbles, bowling, water guns, stilts, riding the barrel, etc. Bruegel does not present the children in a playful and fun manner, but rather exaggerates their brutish and chubby proportions. The children are small in size with round heads which eclipse their necks and backs, bestowing them with a somewhat hunchbacked quality (Elschenbroich, 1979).

The scene depicts some games that involved tools, such as the barrel and the hoop, which itself is made from the barrel. The toys have been made by the children, for example, the windmills, the yo-yo and the masks. Only a few toys have been made by adults, such as the hobby-horses and the dolls. The interpretation of the children in this work is interesting because they are playing in the city centre, the types of games are self-made, and the interaction of the characters of all ages takes place in a city square, which is portrayed as a place of leisure. In addition, the scene almost resembles a photograph, yet, the masterful artist also manages to present a caricature of the social context.

An example of group play portrayed in art is *Breton Girls Dancing* by Paul Gauguin (1888). The painter captures the moment of three girls holding hands and dancing in a hayfield. Whilst their headdresses are well defined, the rest of the painting appears to be blurred, which serves to highlight the playful character of this piece. Gauguin's painting can be presented to children in terms of dance as a playful and communicative activity. This work can be a teaching resource as it can be related to the children's own experience with dance.

A very different style and representation can be observed in *Football Players* by Rousseau (1908). This painting demonstrates more depth, perspective and movement than is usually found in this painter's work. The somewhat disproportionate composition lends a certain infantile and naive character to his portraits and landscapes. Despite being a painter of lush jungles, exotic animals, and strange, distant lands, Rousseau always lived in France. He sought inspiration in illustrated books, photographs, dissected animals in museums, visits to the zoo and botanical gardens of Paris, in order to create his woodland scenes featuring monkeys, wild cats, birds and other fantastic animals.

Furthermore, we have chosen *Good Friday, Daisy Nook* by Laurence Stephen Lowry (1946) as an iconic representation of a mass festive scene. As a large number of people move in a lively and decisive manner around the canvas, the viewer's gaze is drawn to the centre of the scene. In this painting, the festive scene is depicted through the artist's masterful use of colour, predominated by black, white and the primary colours yellow ochre, Prussian blue and vermillion. The size of the figures in the foreground in relation to the outdoor space lends a sense of depth to the painting. The foreground is given even more prominence as the background is blurred. Lowry's skilful consideration and use of white, with its range of tonalities, highlights and

breathes life into the painting. Interpreting this painting can be an enriching and expressive process for children as they can carry out activities which are connected to their own personal experience of such festive scenes.

Another key work from the Bauhaus movement is *Portrait of a Child* by Johannes Itten (1923). The child in the painting is the artist's son Matthias, who has a ribbon with his name written in primary colours. The toys that the boy is holding symbolise space, time and the universe. This painting evokes a magical space of play which is used solely by the boy. In the same fashion, we can analyse many games in class that our children play by themselves.

The painting *Maya with doll* by Picasso (1938) is a portrait of a girl sitting on the floor and playing with a doll. Her skirt and legs are rendered as geometric blocks. Her face is shown in profile while also incorporating facial features from a frontal perspective. In keeping with the cubist style, the rest of her body and clothes are fragmented. A sense of depth is obtained by the superposition of two fields of colour: white and brown. The representation of the dolls held by Maya is more figurative than that of the girl herself. This image is highly suitable for children as they can analyse what is meant by a figurative representation and also how the cubist style plays with picture planes.

Helen Levitt is one of the great photographers of the twentieth century. She worked predominantly in black and white within the documentary genre. She used a 33 mm Leica camera to photograph the streets and inhabitants of New York. In particular, she took photographs of children who had lived through the crisis of 1929 and who use games and playing to escape from their real-life situation. The streets were turned into improvised spaces where children invented stories and dreamt up parallel worlds, which enabled them to simultaneously escape and understand the real events that they were experiencing.

One of the most important publications is *A way of seeing* (1965). In this work, Levitt presents a photographic documentation of the games played by children in the streets of New York, with an accompanying essay written by James Agee focusing on the meaning of the images. On observation, we can distinguish two types of photographs: scenes of children playing and a collection of messages and drawings about urban spaces made in chalk by the children themselves. Although this artist did not draw, she was interested in capturing the representations that reflected the thoughts of the children in the street. The children wore masks, rode tricycles, climbed walls,

laughed and had fun. Levitt went to the Spanish Harlem and Lower East Side neighbourhoods where she photographed the poor, who overcame their state of poverty through humour and an enjoyable outlook on life. Levitt's photography, like that of Cartier Bresson, has a deep social conscience.

Photography is an extremely useful resource in Infant Education and can be introduced at a very early age. As photography is so accessible nowadays, children themselves can take pictures of their games and play areas and analyse them critically.

### **2.3. Experimental sciences in Infant Education**

It is of vital importance to start teaching science to children from very early ages so that they can develop scientific literacy (COSCE, 2011). The difficulty of teaching and learning science at this early level of Infant Education has led to the publication of a plethora of studies which seek to facilitate the teacher's task. There are a number of noteworthy studies, such as Marín (2005), Brown & Stamper (1993), Gun (2008), Vega (2012), Garrido, Perales & Galdón (2008), Benlloch (1992), Caironi (2009), Freire (2011). Based on the ideas presented by these authors, it is recommended to consider using external settings outside of the classroom, such as the city, to teach science. Cities possess a vast array of spaces, environments and settings where natural science activities can be carried out. Furthermore, these are common spaces which can be approached in conjunction with other areas of knowledge. These areas are all connected as Infant Education is comprehensive in nature. In addition, taking formal education out of the classroom enables students to compare learning in a different context with their normal classroom setting. This will help to dispel the myth that learning can only take place in the school classroom.

A methodology that proposes using the city as a learning space must have a participatory design and the central theme of games and playing. In this sense, we can work with different aspects of experimental science that are already present in the games and materials used by children. In addition to the elements found in the urban environment (building materials, pillars...), toys and other objects, such as drums, hoops, sand, and balloons, can be used to study the senses and perception and to learn about the immediate effects of basic physical phenomena (forces, inertia, balance, pressure, leverage...).

Likewise, even though we make reference to places in the city, some of the activities can be conducted in the school playground, or in some cases, through photographs of urban settings that are familiar to the children, or works of art which depict a similar environment. Experimental sciences are found, to a greater or lesser extent, in the three areas of knowledge established by the official curriculum, however, our didactic proposal is very much situated in the area of Knowledge of the environment.

#### **2.4. Mathematics and children**

In the twenty-first century, dominated by media and digital technology, mathematics still has lots of doors to open. Almost all aspects of our lives are related in some way with mathematics, as its different degrees of conceptualisation form the very essence of thinking, communication, calculation, society and life (Devlin, 2002).

The process of thinking arises from an observation of the external world and the influence that this world has on a person. Therefore, each geographical and social environment presents its own unique features which have an effect on mathematical thought, even if it serves simply as a source of mathematical problems and how these are resolved. Therefore, these environmental features should be considered in relation to the teaching and learning process of mathematics.

In our daily lives, we naturally make constant use of a wide range of mathematical concepts. We are confronted with numbers at the start of the day when we look at the alarm clock, use the lift, or go shopping. Likewise, geometry forms part of our city, statistics are an integral part of media, and whenever we think, logic underlies our thought processes. In short, mathematics is an integral part of our daily lives.

Nowadays, nobody would doubt the importance of teaching mathematics to young children. As this is their first contact with the subject, it is necessary for this experience to be positive, as it will help them to “grow” by developing their abilities of reasoning, strengthening autonomy, encouraging creativity and improving their understanding of the world around them.

Mathematics does not have to be boring for children and certainly not for the teacher. It is important to highlight that the teacher’s attitude is captured by the students. Consequently, their enthusiasm or apathy towards mathematics and their profession will greatly influence the children’s motivation and learning. The introduction of the book

*Geometría y experiencias* (Geometry and experiences) includes a phrase attributed to Einstein which, to some extent, supports this appraisal of the educational process of mathematics: “Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as a hard duty” (García and Bertrán, 1991, p.7).

Mathematics forms an active part of a child’s first experiences and is at the heart of everyday, real-life situations. The different activities that arise from these situations help children to understand the need for organisation in the environment, multiple established relationships between objects, and the use of mathematical language in a vast array of contexts. Mathematics is a basic instrument that allows children to arrange and order, establish relationships, position objects from the surrounding environment in space and time, to analyse information and to measure.

In Primary Education (after Infant Education), children begin to gradually internalise several basic competences with the help of their teachers. According to Alsina and Planas (2009), to be mathematically competent means that children are able:

- To construct their mathematical knowledge: experimenting, relating concepts, working intuitively to begin to think mathematically, and dealing with abstract concepts.
- To perform deductions and inductions, to specify and generalise, to justify their decisions, processes and methods.
- To present and solve problems. The approach to solving problems can be considered as synonymous to “learning by doing”. Situations are generated to explore concepts, to learn about processes, to justify a point, to use demonstrations, to analyse and/or create applications, to investigate and, in general, to elaborate on concepts, processes, algorithms and other mathematical subjects that children should learn.
- To obtain, interpret and generate information with mathematical content. To use basic mathematical techniques (to count, perform calculations, measure, position in space, and organise and analyse data) and instruments (calculators, IT resources, and instruments for drawing and measuring) in order to perform mathematical processes.
- To use words, drawings, symbols and materials to interpret and represent mathematical expressions, processes and results. Therefore, we develop the children’s gradual use of mathematical language.

## 2.5. Art education in Infant Education

If we look at the education curriculum (LOE, 2006), the contents for art education are included in the area of *Languages: communication and representation*. The established aims are: to develop abilities of communication through different types of expression, to stimulate emotional abilities and to favour perception of the family, natural and social environment, where images become progressively more relevant for the child.

However, the curricular contents of art education are also present in other areas, since language is essentially an instrument to express and communicate ideas and concepts about something. During Infant Education, children find themselves in an educational stage that is egocentric, which is characterised by experiencing self-knowledge and creating their first drawings. The human figure and, in particular, drawing oneself, form a constant part of the child's spontaneous artistic activity and are constantly developed until the child is able to produce consistent drawings. In this sense, it is interesting to direct contents of art education at the area of *Knowledge of oneself and personal autonomy*.

The same idea can be applied to *Knowledge of the environment* which is related to sensory experience. In this context, a rich set of internal representations are gradually created which leads to the acquisition of complex vocabulary with meanings associated with biology and culture. According to Cabanellas and Eslava (2001), in this interactive space, children also develop their aesthetic attitudes. Biological aspects provide a way for children to access and experience aesthetics in order to better understand their surrounding world, whereas, cultural aspects emerge from the construction of meaning about themselves based on their actions, which provokes the use of reflexive thinking.

This aesthetic fusion of culture and biology leads children to experience emotion, significance, amazement, perception of the unique, coherence, rhythm, change, construction and transgression, and metaphorical play, in the context of their lives. Emotions gradually define the space from which we construct our understanding of reality, and therefore our knowledge (Cabanellas and Eslava, 2001, p.17).



### **3. Didactic proposals**

Taking the city as a central theme to approach different educational contents in the aforementioned areas, we have researched the possibilities presented by a practical approach in the classroom. Our didactic proposal offers a holistic approach to each of the three areas described in the education curriculum for the second stage of Infant Education. Given the difficulties of leaving the school grounds, this proposal is aimed at the second cycle of Infant Education, specifically for children aged 3-6 years.

Out of the set of proposed activities, firstly, we have chosen one that aims to discover parts of the city of Valladolid from a mathematical perspective. This activity was implemented in an Infant Education class. Then, we describe a second proposal which deals with the creation of didactic material based on the city and rural buildings, prepared by undergraduate students of the Degree in Infant Education at the University of Valladolid (Spain).

Lastly, we present a teaching proposal based on the areas of perception and sensation, which can be conducted outside of the classroom and encompasses the areas of experiment sciences, mathematics and art education.

#### **3.1. Learning situation in the context of mathematics**

According to Alsina (2011), a context (within the field of Mathematics Education) can be considered as a point of departure, that is, a line of work that generates issues, questions and problems. Learning situations in context are important as they can be interpreted from different points of view, and the children themselves can construct and reconstruct their mathematical knowledge.

##### **Example of activities in an everyday life context**

**Title: “Rediscovering parts of our city”**

*Location:* Pablo Picasso Infant and Primary School, Valladolid, Spain.

*Level:* 5-6 years.

*People responsible for implementation:* Desirée Velasco Casado and Cristina Rodríguez Morante.

*Teaching assessment:* María Luisa Novo Martín.

*Mathematical content studied:*

- Geometric shapes. Positions.
- Quantities and amounts.
- Similarities and differences.

*Aims:*

- To discover important buildings in Valladolid.
- To analyse important buildings in our city.
- To discover geometric shapes in their structure.

*Materials:* Digital whiteboard. Internet. Felt-tip pens. Images of buildings on paper.

*Description of activity:*

First stage: Previous work in class:

We searched for different important buildings in Valladolid and displayed them on the digital whiteboard. The buildings were chosen by the children. During assembly, we analysed the different buildings in order to find different geometric shapes in their structures and façades.

As the children identified different shapes, they raised their hand and went up individually to the digital whiteboard to point out the shapes. We repeated this activity with several buildings and always explained and commented on the different situations. In addition to using new technology, this activity compels children to approach the city from a different perspective.



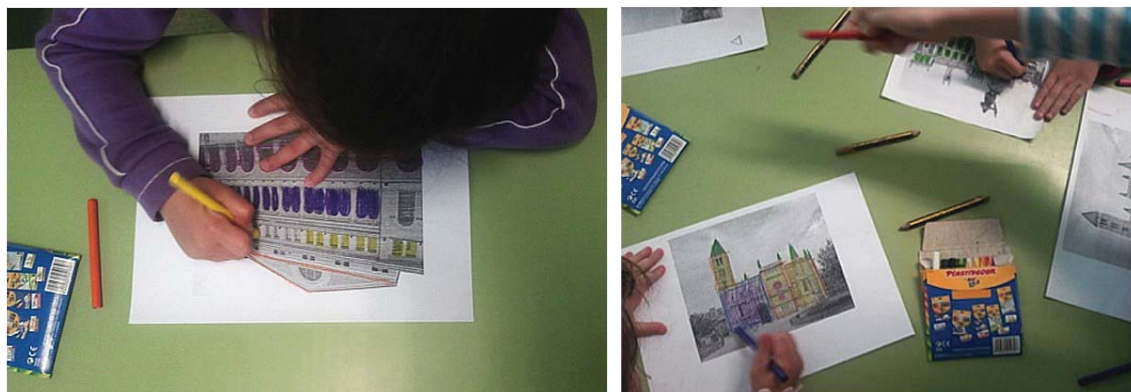
**Figure 1.** A student points out a geometric shape on the digital whiteboard. City Hall of Valladolid.



**Figure 2.** A student colours in geometric shapes. Valladolid-Campo Grande Train Station.

Second stage: Working in real settings. Trip to the city:

During the excursion, as we passed by the important buildings, we reinforced everything that had been studied previously in class. Also, new concepts arose such as the number of geometric shapes, their classification, and symmetry. In addition, we worked on spatial awareness: on the right of..., on the left of..., above, below, in front of, behind... Finally, we compared some buildings in terms of their similarities and differences.



Figures 3 and 4. Working in class on emblematic buildings in Valladolid.

Third stage: Materialising the studied content:

Once back in the classroom, we had “mathematical conversations” in order to reflect upon everything that we had seen. The children’s learning was assessed during these conversations, which focused on geometric shapes, numbers and logic. Next, the children were given black and white images on paper of the City Hall, the Church of Saint Mary the Ancient [*La Antigua*] and the Calderón Theatre. The children indicated the shapes found in the buildings, coloured them in and spoke about repeating elements and symmetry. Finally, they produced their own free drawings of each building.

During an assembly activity prior to this activity, the children were asked about their understanding of mathematics. We learnt that they thought it was difficult to “see the world with mathematical eyes”. Now, the children performed similar activities to the one that we have described, and during assembly we were able to see how they had advanced in this area. Below, are some of the children’s answers:

What is mathematics?

- It is shapes, sizes, quantities, numbers, additions, subtractions, signs, series, classifications, stories and games that we do in class or at home.

Is mathematics difficult or boring?

- I thought that it was boring, but we can learn and play with maths.
- Some things are difficult, but we have learnt other things better.
- We have played a lot and have learnt a lot of maths games.

Where do you think you can find mathematics?

- In many places.
- In my house, on the street, at school, in the playground, in Valladolid, in other cities, in bridges, in buildings, in animals, in paintings, in stories.
- We are surrounded by mathematical things.
- In subtractions and additions, in games and stories.
- In our body.

Is mathematics important? If so, why?

- Yes, it is very important to understand everything.
- It is important to learn lots of things that we need to live.
- To understand what is happening.
- Because with maths, we know and learn a lot.

The children's language is simple, however, one can understand what they are trying to express, and how their appreciation towards the subject has developed due to this initial contact.

#### *Assessment of the class activity*

In this case, the children's motivation was influenced greatly by using the digital whiteboard. They already knew several of the buildings in Valladolid, however, they had never stopped to analyse so many aspects. Initially, they concentrated on looking for geometric shapes, without stopping to consider the overall structure of the building. If we take the City Hall as an example, they identified windows, arches, circles and triangles, yet they did not consider the fact that the building could be formed by a number of triangles.

On some occasions, they confused squares with rectangles when they were pointing out shapes on the digital whiteboard. Also, in some cases, they identified a certain feature as being a square instead of a rectangle, and vice versa.

One element that turns an activity into an effective learning situation is the role of the teacher, who, by asking the students well-formed questions, can obtain a good sense of how their logical abilities are developing.

The seemingly most important element is to change the way that children perceive mathematics by carrying out activities in everyday life contexts.

### **3.2. Images of the city as a point of departure for the design of educational and artistic materials**

We will now present a number of projects designed by 4<sup>th</sup> year students of the Degree in Infant Education in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Valladolid. These students have all taken the subject *Didactic resources for the areas of expression*. In these projects, we were interested in the visual perspective of the city and urban environments (rural in some cases) that focused on real experiences, places and anecdotes that formed part of their identity.

As a starting point, each student had to choose a photograph of a part of their city, town or village (most were from the province of Valladolid). The place had to bear a special, existential meaning for the students, in other words, a memory that would provoke a personal interpretation. Together, the students discussed and shared their thoughts about the reasons that had led the other students to choose their locations, beyond the mere cultural value. In this way, we wanted to demonstrate that we can find spaces and parts of the city that speak of who we are. These are spaces which we can identify with as we see ourselves reflected in them.

Based on this first approach to the city as a reflection of our identity, we suggested that our students should create an artist book for a teacher. This would not be a conventional book, but instead, the format was flexible and could be adapted to the content, in this case, an account of their chosen space. The stories could be original, modified or invented. Most of the books included a didactic function, except for three students, whose emotional connection with the place of their childhood was so dominant that they composed a more intimate and autobiographical story.

Sara Cabria Martín appears in a photograph with the cave church of Olleros de Pisuerga, a place which holds an unquestionable historic value for her. However, this place also bears more intimate stories, for example, the members of her family have experienced numerous ceremonies in this place throughout their lives. Sara constructs the history of this chapel in three parts. A red book entitled *A little bit of history* that describes the chapel's history, a second book called *My family* which contains first-hand accounts provided by the family about the symbolism of the chapel, and a third book called *Visitors*, which presents several interpretations and opinions about this place.



**Figure 5. Artist book by Sara Cabria Martín. Cave Church of Saints Justo and Pastor, Olleros de Pisuerga, Palencia.**

On the other hand, Marina drew inspiration from the image on the left. This is a special place for her as it evokes memories of walks with her grandparents. This led her to focus her work on the concept of time and understanding the transformation of tools and objects over the years. Her book entitled *Map of the past, present and future*, displays images of the past in black and white and the present in colour. On the other hand, the future is expressed with a question, which aims to encourage children to think about how these objects evolve over time, and also to come up with an imaginary vision of the future. Therefore, we observe how a photograph of a donkey and a cart represents the

means of transport of the past, and how they transform into modern-day cars. This change can help us to speculate about what transport will be like in the future.



Figure 6. Artist book by Marina González Díez. Artesian well in Pollos, Valladolid.

This project is inspired by the Church of *San Pablo*, a place which Susana identifies with on a symbolic level. Her book transforms into a box that holds smaller boxes. Inside these smaller boxes are different representative objects, scenes and characters found on the main façade of the church. Her intention is to introduce us to an architectural space in the city of Valladolid, drawing our attention to the building's visual elements, so that we may discover their meaning. The design of this teaching resource includes a jigsaw puzzle located on the back of the small boxes, together with short stories for children about each of the interesting elements.



Figure 7. Artist book by Susana Velasco. Church of San Pablo, Valladolid

The didactic proposals of these examples demonstrate the inseparable relationship between the symbolism and history of each place. The next step will be to implement these example activities in the Infant Education classroom, using a teaching method that is both playful and meaningful for the children. Therefore, places in the city can become the underlying central concept for several different areas of the curriculum. The student's aim now must be focused on how to integrate and to adapt their activity to the specific requirements of the classroom.

### **3. Transdisciplinary didactic proposal for the city environment**

After an analysis of the different activities, we decided to design a didactic proposal that would connect the areas of knowledge of experimental sciences, mathematics and art education, with the aim to blur the lines between these disciplines. In the Infant Education classroom in Spain, teaching is predominantly characterised by a globalised style. However, at this educational stage, the subject contents are almost always studied in isolation. According to Pineau (2013), the structure of disciplines in schools does not correspond to reality and social issues, which by their very nature are interdisciplinary.

These different forms of “biodiversified” activity can be easily defined by their degree of opening and connection: a juxtaposition of disciplines for pluridisciplinarity or multidisciplinarity, interactions for interdisciplinarity, transactions beyond disciplinary borders for transdisciplinarity (Pineau, 2005, p.16).

In the Infant Education classroom, we are especially interested in the idea of transdisciplinarity, because learning is generated from connections and synergies formed between different fields. We have chosen two locations in Valladolid which are emblematic of the city: the Church of *San Pablo* and *Campo Grande* park. The first is an urban space, and the second is a natural setting which has been modified by humans. *Campo Grande* is a large park which boasts a great diversity of plant and animal species, both wild and in captivity (exotic species). The park also features a small lake. Although we have chosen two specific spaces, this project could be adapted to other places, cities and countries.





Figure 8. Panoramic view of the Church of San Pablo in Valladolid.

We present these spaces as an interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary didactic proposal for the areas of Mathematics, Experimental Sciences and Art Education.

### **1 - Discover a part of the city during assembly**

Establish a dialogue in the classroom through images in order to gather the children's initial ideas about the Church of *San Pablo* and *Campo Grande* park. This introduction aims to stimulate different interpretations or ways of looking: “mathematical”, “investigative,” and “aesthetic”. Each way of looking provides the children with keys to understanding their city from different points of view, and thereby stimulates their perception, thinking, creativity and understanding of the world.

### **2 - Excursion to play and work**

Put into practice the concepts that have been studied previously in class in a real environment, and take advantage of potentially meaningful situations that arise spontaneously and generate new learning. In this way, the children are going to be able to more effectively internalise all of their experiences and to develop their construction of mental representations. In the case of *Campo Grande* park, we would use the topic of senses as a method for teaching and learning:

#### **Sight**

The children will observe the environment and say in order the colours that they can identify and those that appear most often. They will identify and differentiate the trees, bushes and herbs. They will count the different types of trees that they recognise, and in some cases, how many trees of each type there are. They will try to relate the

appearance and shape of the trees with the geometric shapes that they know. They will identify the parts of a plant or tree (not including the roots, unless they can be seen). They will observe the type of leaves on the trees, grouping them according to their shape, type of edge or colour. What is the bark of a tree like? Does a tree have more features other than leaves? If so, identify what these features are and classify them as flowers, fruits or seeds (we recommend conducting the excursion in spring). Classify fruits by shape, size and flowers by colour. Can similar elements be observed in the bushes and shrubbery?

Count the different types of animals that can be seen. How many are there of each group? Where are these animals? Are they in the water, on the ground, or in the trees? What are they doing? How big are they? Are they small, medium-sized, or large? What colour are they?

Why do the trees move if we cannot see the air?



**Figure 9. Garden with different types of trees and the colours seen on a peacock at Campo Grande park, Valladolid**

## **Touch**

Touch the bark of different trees that have been identified, and then classify them as smooth or rough. Recognise leaves by touching their foliar limb and edge. Are they smooth? Do all parts of the leaf feel the same? Are they all the same?

We move to the lake in the park and touch the sand. Is it loose or compact? Observe the texture formed by the grains of sand. Express whether the sand feels hot or cold and wet or dry. Is it heavy? If possible, touch the water in order to demonstrate the sensation contrast between hot and cold and wet and dry.



**Figure 10. Natural textures found at Campo Grande park, Valladolid**

## **Hearing**

Listen to a variety of sounds. Differentiate natural and non-natural sounds. Listen to the sounds of the animals and express how many are identified by the children. What type of animals are they? From what direction are they coming? What sound do the trees make when they move their leaves? Is this sound the same for all trees? Does the water make a sound?

Tap rocks and tree trunks of different thicknesses. Do they make the same sound?



Figure 11. Environmental sounds and birdsong at Campo Grande park, Valladolid.

### Smell

What does the environment smell like? Is it pleasant, strong, or unpleasant? Does the air by the lake smell the same?

We move into areas of dense vegetation. Recognise different types of smells. If possible, relate the scent of a flower with its colour. Are there any smells that remind you of another place (school, home)?



Figure 12. A curious smell that can be perceived by the lake at Campo Grande park, Valladolid

### 3 - Materialise the learning experience

Once back at the school, we will conduct tasks, conversations and creative activities based on the children's experiences so that the teacher can evaluate their learning and

acquired knowledge. In addition, all of the individual and group work will be displayed in a part of the school and on its website in order to share this experience with the rest of the educational community. The display will include photographs of specific places in *Campo Grande* park: the photographer, the rose garden, the lake, the fountain of PHEME, the aviary, the swings, and the peacocks.

#### **4. Discussion**

Based on our first-hand experience of conducting this activity, we can confirm that we received positive results from the students. This has encouraged us to design interdisciplinary projects with an aim to generate connections between learning in the different areas of knowledge, and also to further demonstrate the importance of integrating knowledge. The advantage of this style of learning is that it is more enriching for the children when contents are taught in a globalised manner, integrating in this case Experimental Sciences, Mathematics and Art Education.

Evidently, this project has a rather important and inherent difficulty, namely, it involves taking the children out of the school grounds. This causes logistical problems which must be taken into account. However, this should not discourage teachers, since the experience of this activity has great teaching value. Likewise, the city is an environment that is frequented at some point by the children outside of school hours. Therefore, the content that is studied in a formal education context at school will also have continuity in their non-formal education outside school.

The importance of this idea lies in approaching curricular content in spaces that the school rarely uses. Learning experiences outside of the school are usually run by teaching departments or educational agencies which teach in non-formal contexts. However, in fact, these learning experiences can also be explored by teachers and educators.

#### **5. Conclusions**

We understand a person as a whole, and therefore, the cultural vision of any environment, in this case the city, should not be presented as separate or isolated islands knowledge. The connection that we have established with the different “ways of seeing” specific urban and natural environments could be an example of a way forward, in terms

of how to introduce young children to elements of the real world. Our conversations, suggestions and activities can help them to explore and understand the world more deeply. By listening to our children's comments about their experiences, we can also evaluate whether our teaching is on the right tracks. The children will not use complicated language but they will display their enthusiasm for new ideas and we will be able to open the doors for them to a diverse and enriching world.

Without a doubt, one of the most positive experiences with this project was having the opportunity to collaborate with teachers from different areas of knowledge, thereby sharing an educational project. In university degree programmes in Education, the curricular contents are usually taught as separate subjects, and teachers rarely have the opportunity to work collaboratively. Therefore, this experience was rewarding as it presented a diverse range of view points and demonstrated many connections between these different perspectives. This made us realise that there are no real borders in learning. It is essential that those of us who are currently teaching the teachers of tomorrow realise that we must start working with the idea of global learning in our classes. Our next step is aimed at designing a transdisciplinary experience for the university classroom in order to blur the existing lines between different subjects.

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN THAILAND TODAY AND THE CHANGING CULTURE AFFECTING THE YOUNG CHILDREN'S VISION ABOUT THE WORLD

*The research objective was to study the situations about the child's vision on the world in the mirror of children's culture in Thailand. The research methodology was mixed with qualitative and quantitative approaches, based on multi-case purposive observation in six kindergartens, followed by the interviews of 500 children and 497 kindergarten teachers.*

*The findings revealed that the six kindergartens were highly influenced by various western philosophical ideas and were moving towards bilingualism of Thai-English Program. The culture of children in provincial areas, as considered from their plays and games in the kindergarten, at home, and in general, had been strongly influenced by western culture and new technology. The kindergarten teachers had strong awareness that children should be assigned to play computer games. They strongly believed that the western tales and stories and the past experiences of parents, as well as playing keyboard instruments, would be useful for the development of physical, emotional, and cognitive growths of a child; but they should be modified to better suit the local environments of Thailand.*

**Keywords:** *Early childhood education, Children's vision, Thailand*

### Rationale

Early childhood is the most important period of development in a child's life since it is the time of rapid cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional and motor development when a child's brain depends on environmental stimulation, especially on the quality of care and interaction that the child receives. Children who are nurtured and well cared for are more likely to fully develop cognitive, language, emotional and social skills; to grow up healthier; and to have higher self-esteem (UNICEF, Thailand, 2012).

The Global Children's Vision Organization (2014) reported that Thai culture, hospitality to family is valued above everything else, in Thailand. Also, taking care of the family is more important than maintaining one's independence in life. All children in Thailand today are guaranteed by laws the right to grow up physically, emotionally, and cognitively; but rapid economic growth is causing the phenomenon of left behind children whose parents have no choice but to move to urban areas or other countries to find work.

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The family system with grandparents and other relations living in the same house with the left behind children still remains. Three million, or about 21% of Thailand's population, are left behind children being raised by extended family mostly in rural areas. Ninety per cent of them live with grandparents, most of who have only a primary school education, and are at risk of financial instability and mental health issues. These children are often behind in their language skills that affect the other studies in school including behavior problems. Age gaps often hinders the abilities of grandparents and young children to relate to the pain they feel and limits children's conversation and opportunity for personal growth.

Education and care for early childhood in Thailand has its history that went back about seven decades ago, with the blending of Thai traditional culture and western methods of children development, and yet with further change that would enable the children to live happily in the digital age. According to UNICEF, Thailand (2012) approximately 84% of children aged 3-5 throughout the nation did attend some form of organized early childhood education program. In Bangkok, however, only 66 % of children of that particular age group accessed to early childhood education, although bilingual or some types of English program kindergartens are expanded for children of the upper class.

The educational technology in school begins to accept the growing mobile culture. Potential issues are being identified in the widespread adoption of mobile technology in the classroom. The goal is for school children to "increase knowledge beyond textbooks" at a fast-growing rate and could be another step of Thailand for upcoming integration into the ASEAN Community (Viriyapong and Harfield, 2013). The focus is especially for those in remote areas who lack access to learning resources, as described by the Prime Minister, Ms. Shinawatra, during the official launch of the One-Tablet-Per-Child (OTPC) to every students Prathom 1 (primary school, grade 1), scheme on 7th June 2012 (National News Bureau of Thailand, 2012).

We should realize the importance of cultural contexts in the development and learning of early childhood, that, while growing up as members of families, communities, and the world, children learn to accept the social rules-explicitly through direct teaching and implicitly through the behaviors of those around them. The changing culture that affects their world vision in the early years, either positively or negatively should be explored so that suggestions for effective problem solving would be made urgently enough.

## **Research Objectives**

This research has three major objectives as follows:

1. To explain about the actual conditions of early childhood education in six selected kindergartens in Thailand;
2. To explore the culture and the vision about the world of children in kindergartens in three provinces in the lower-north of Thailand;
3. To evaluate the degrees of teachers' awareness concerning the changing culture and vision about the world of the kindergarten children.

## **Literature**

### **1. Cultural and Historical Backgrounds of Early Childhood Education in Thailand**

#### *1.1 Children's Upbringing in the Past*

Not until the expansion of marketing economy in 1960's, toddlers in most families in Thailand were raised at home by their parents, especially by their mothers who worked at home. According to Chancha Suvannathat (1981: 3) in the traditional Thai family, the father was recognized as the head of the family and the mother assumed a subordinate role while continuing her main task of child rearing. Children used to be the center of interest and unity of all family members, particularly the parents. The ties between parents and children were very close in the Thai family and remained so even after they grew up, got married and had a separate home, but most particularly so between children and mother. Parents displayed more love and care to the younger child than to the elder siblings and made certain that the elder siblings do the same for the younger ones.

#### *1.2 Emergence of Kindergartens and Childcare Centers*

Thailand has a long tradition of literacy and education dating back to 1292, primarily as the result of Buddhist Sangha (Fry, 2002: 4). As parents gave life, Buddhist monks imparted a way of life and knowledge which made that life worth living; both teaching and learning were therefore social and religious assets taught by *bikkhus* (monks) to everyone from prince down to peasant (Watson, 1980, cited in Fry, 2002: 4-5). Recognized that human resource development is critical to a nation's economic success and prosperity, King

Chulalongkorn Rama V (ruled from 1868-1910) was committed to creating a modern-type school system in Siam and education was seen as important in training individuals to staff the various ministries associated with the creation of Siam's modern administrative system (Wyatt, 1969, cited in Fry, 2002: 6)

During the early phase of the modernization of Thai education, a kindergarten for princes was established in 1892. Later, in 1893, a kindergarten for princesses was built. A few years later the center for orphan care was established by Princess Saisawalee Pirom (Fry, 2002: 7). Two private kindergartens were located at Mate Dei School and Wattana College where singing and picture books were adopted from the Montessori's. In 1939, the Ministry of Education appointed the Committee for Kindergarten Project, This committee was composed of Mr. Nak Tephassadin Na Ayudha who had studied Montessori Methods in Italy; Momluang Manit Chumsai who studied in England and was then the head of Teacher Training Department; and the head nurse of Sirirach Hospital. They decided to admit the children of 3 ½ years and above into kindergartens that adopted the Montessori's methods, sent a woman teacher to study kindergarten education in Japan for six months-namely Mrs. Jittra Thongtham Na- Ayudhya, and four others that included Miss Somthawil Sauysamang, Miss Benja Tungkasiri, Miss Saraswadee Wannakowit, and Miss Ermtip Premayothin (Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, 2009).

### *1.3 Kindergarten Education During World War II*

Kindergarten education in Thailand struggled a great deal during World War II. Thai people had traditionally paid very high importance to children, so the teacher training program at La-or Utis Kindergarten was still carried on until the war became up to its peak in 1944. In 1941, the institution taught for four major subjects to its students: the pedagogy for kindergarten's teachers (Wicha Khru Anubal; early childhood psychology and governance; teaching methods of Froebel and Montessori, and how to use their instruments; teaching methods for specific subjects – Thai language, Children Stories, Arithmetic, Health Education, Social Studies, Sensory Training, Songs and Music, Rhythmic Dancing; Gardening; Drawing, Molding; Paper Cutting; Origami; and Paper Weaving. In addition to the four major subjects the students were trained to creating teaching materials, to observe kindergarten classes, and to conduct practicum teaching every day throughout the school year in the morning session.

In 1943, the teacher training program was revised to cover wider areas that included: kindergarten education; early childhood psychology; children's diseases; the principles of

teaching; teaching methods for specific subjects; how to use Froebel's and Montessori's instruments; clerical work of a kindergarten; songs, games, and acting; music; drawing; molding; poster creating; paper arts (folding, pasting, cut-ting, and weaving); invention with re-used materials; observations and educational tours; teaching in front of public; story-telling and children's literature; and a three-month practicum. Integrated into all subjects and activities are Thai cultures and the positive attitudes for democracy, the nation, one's religion, and the King (Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, 2009).

The teacher training center for kindergarten education at La-or Utis was closed during World War II, just before the bomb hit its building in 1944. Later, the Ministry of Education moved the training center to Chachoengsao Province. The administration of teacher training section was separated from La-or Utis Kindergarten in 1945. Miss Somthawil Sauysam-ang became the principal of La-or Utis Kindergarten. Miss Benja Tungkasiri (Kunying Benja Saengmali), who administered the teacher training center for kindergarten education, was appointed the principal of a normal school for early childhood education in Phitsanulok Province in 1946.

The normal school where Khunying Benja Saengmali was sent to create the model for provincial kindergartens was called Rongrian Phuekhad Khruu Mool Phitsanulok. After the model kindergarten called Anubal Phitsanulok School (means the kindergarten of Phitsanulok Province) had been completely created, she returned to work in the Ministry of Education in 1947.

## **2. The Current State of Early Childhood Education in Thailand**

Office of the Education Council (2008) reported that the 1999 National Education emphasizes equal and quality education and development for all Thais. In Section 18, it stipulates that early childhood education shall be provided in an early childhood education institutions, namely: childcare centers, child development centers, preschool child development centers of religious institutions, initial care centers for disabled children or those with special needs, or early childhood development centers under other names. Several Ministries have been involved in early childhood development. Personnel involved in an early childhood education and development institution include classroom teachers (kindergarten/pre-school classes); caregivers (child development centers and other day care), administrators, and a cook are the most common staffing. The curricula for ECCD programs are separately developed by each agency in accordance with the

principles and guidelines stated in the National Scheme of Education, considered as a document of long-term educational strategies. The provision of learning experience mainly emphasizes on physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development through everyday activities.

At present, there are three types of pre-primary education depending on the local conditions: preschool classes, kindergartens, and childcare centers. Private schools usually offer a three-year kindergarten program. Two-year kindergarten and one-year pre-school classes are available at public primary schools in rural areas ([UNESCO, 2011](#)).

In Thailand, from the year 2009, pre-school education is not compulsory but free, due to the introduction of 15-year free education policy ([UNESCO, 2011](#)). The gross enrollment ratio is about 95% (in 2010), and the number of child development centers established by Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs) increased from 1,782 in 2006 to 2,774 in 2007. Still, a significant proportion of children from lower socio-economic background and/or from remote rural areas have no access to pre-primary education ([UNESCO, 2011](#)).

### **3. Trends of Kindergarten Education in Thailand**

Referring to the website of the Association of Kindergarten Education of Thailand, there were 81 provincial model kindergartens: one in every province, four in Bangkok Metropolitan, with an additional one in Phichit Province. The focal points of provincial kindergartens are similar to those in the Pre-war kindergartens, but with a more emphasis on the development of thinking skills. These kindergartens are supposed to act as models for other kindergartens in the provincial areas. Many of them are moving towards bilingualism through Mini English Program which will be explained in the multi-case study in results.

### **4. Changing Culture and Influences to Children around the World**

#### *4.1 Children's Play and Culture*

Since 1950's attention on the connection of play and culture of children has continuously increased. In the past decade, there has been increased attention to the role of culture in children's development in general and play in particular. Roopnarine et al. (1994) illuminated the need to account for the cultural variability in children's play. They drew

attention to the inaccuracies that arose when applying Western values and interpretations of play in non-Western settings. According to Brian Sutton-Smith (1986; 2001), play is thought to reflect cultural mastery; while cultural values guide and shape the expression of play, time allotted for play, and attitudes towards play (Lancy, 2002). There is still inequitable treatment in the play literature regarding the role of culture in interpreting and understanding play (Gaskins & Miller, 2009). The contemporary view of play is that it is both a universal and culture-specific activity (Lancy, 2007).

Contemporary works on children's play also focus on the cultural construction of play. Gosso (2010) focused upon children's playful consumptions in Brazil and found that these children engaged in pretend activities that imitate and mirror adult subsistence activities, and adult role models served as material that children recreated in their play. Long, Volk, and Gregory (2007) pointed that ethnographic study of children's pretend play illustrates that children were active agents in their own socialization and play is culturally constructed. These researchers concluded that play takes place in comfortable settings where children acquire universal skills such as sensitivity to others' needs and culture-specific routines.

Holmes (2012) explored children's play preferences across generations in a Pacific Rim community and her work supports the notion that play and culture are intricately linked; and that playful outcomes are dependent upon a variety of factors that include economic, technological, cultural, and historical factors. In her sample, children of both generations preferred sex-stereotyped play activities and toys.

Roopnarine, Johnson, and Hooper (1994) emphasized that children's play were both a cultural universal and culture-specific phenomenon. Singer, Singer, Agostino, and DeLong (2009) conducted one of the most comprehensive cross-cultural comparative works on children's play and experiential activities, collected information from mothers in 16 different nations located on five different continents. They found many similar trends.

For example, mothers believed that both free play and experiential learning opportunities were eroding for children. Similarly, when children have free time most of it is spent watching television. These care-givers viewed that television was an acceptable alternative as children had few safe places to accommodate outdoor play activities. Imaginative and pretend play was rare in comparison to other play activities, and the research found that setting influenced play.



#### 4.2 Children's Play and Culture in the Digital Age

Kernan (2007) raised many issues of consideration about the place of play in early childhood education and care in Ireland. She urged that a useful starting point was to raise awareness amongst the range of adult stakeholders who take decisions on behalf of children to engage with the 'newness' of childhood experience, the capacity and eagerness to explore, and the significance of the sensory experience to children in their response to their surrounding physical environment. Kernan (2007) viewed, another important approach is to pay attention to observing how young children use the indoor and outdoor environment, how they perceive it, engage with it, and to listen to children regarding the value and meaning they put on their play experiences. She states that this will serve to ensure better understanding regarding the significance of play to children's general well-being, and the multitude of factors impacting on children's ability to carve out a satisfying play life.

Bryant (2013) argued that within the digitized era we have altered the ways in which our culture represents the planet to ourselves, and thereby are further accentuating the perception of humans as separate from the natural world.

In western countries, within the past 50 years or so, the predominant site of children's free play has moved from public space on the street, to semi-public space such as separate public playgrounds, school yards and ECCE settings. The play space has most expanded indoors where technologies such as television play, video, DVDs, game consoles and computer games have proliferated (Buckingham, 2000). Virtual play is promoted as offering adventure, freedom, mental and imaginative activity (Kane, 2005). It is suggested that if appropriately used with children, technology has been demonstrated to enhance young children's cognitive and social abilities (NAEYC, 1996).

Elkind (2007) concluded that a childhood is the most basic right of children. In 2007, commenting on the greater appreciation of the importance of free, self-initiated, and spontaneous play to the child's healthy, mental, emotional and social development, he stresses that, a *playful childhood* is the most basic right of childhood. Since 1989, the conceptualization of play as childhood *right* has been enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly as it applies in the early childhood years.

### *4.3 The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills that Affect Early Childhood Education*

The *21st-century skills* such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving are generally used to refer to certain core competencies that are a growing realization that self-study is an integral and real part of children's everyday life. Revamping education in order to place more emphasis on 21st Century Skills is a daunting task.

Teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century need to know how best to integrate media and technology into their children's lives. According to Kirkorian and Choi (2013), for young children, interactions with a touch screen may improve their ability to learn from media *if those actions are specific and directed*. These researchers mentioned that young children ages 23 to 32 months were better able to successfully complete an object-retrieval task after interacting with a touchscreen than children who watched a video. Importantly, it wasn't just that children were just touching anywhere on a touchscreen to advance the hiding task; children who were asked to touch a specific part of the screen, drawing attention to the hiding event, were better able to find the hidden object. Children ages 24 to 30 months also learned a novel word better from a specific contingent interaction with a touchscreen that required them to pay attention to a particular area of the screen that was related to understanding the new word, as compared to children who watched a video demonstrating the new word.

### **Hypotheses / Research Questions**

The principal research question to examine is:

What are situations about the child's vision on the world in the mirror of children's culture in Thailand.

#### *1. Changing Culture of Children in Thailand's Kindergartens*

In this research, it is assumed that children in kindergartens in Thailand have already started to change their culture and play to involve technology and westernized games.

#### *2. Questions about Children's Culture and Vision about the World*

The changing culture of children in kindergartens in the provincial areas should be clearly identified through a quantitative research. Thus, the researchers employed the seven questions designed by Professor Dr.Laszlo Varga of Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy. The data have been collected from five hundred (500) children aged 4-7 years in selected

kindergartens located in three provinces in the lower-northern region; Phitsanulok, Tak and Kampaengpetch. The seven questions are:

- 1) What is your favourite toy or playing in the kindergarten? Why?
- 2) What is your favourite toy or playing at home? Why?
- 3) What do you like to play the most?
- 4) Do you play parlour and board games at home? If yes, with whom?
- 5) What is your favourite tale? Why? Who tells you tales?
- 6) Do you have a computer at home? Do you play any computer games? If yes, what? Why do you like to play with all these?
- 7) What would you like to work when you grow up?

### *3. Concepts of the Stakeholders about the Children's Culture and Vision*

It is assumed that teachers and parents of children in the provincial kindergartens had not much realized about the negative sides of children's cultural change and vision about the world.

## **Description of Sample**

### **1. A multi-case study of six kindergartens**

#### *Kindergarten A: a pre-primary K in a business area in Bangkok*

Located in Bangkok, on Sathorn Road near the French Embassy, Kindergarten A has been established since 1973 by a medical doctor. Today, about 120 children are admitted each year and the children are divided into four classes of K1 and two classes of pre-K. Parents are interviewed before the children's admission.

#### *Kindergarten B: an English program K in an outskirt area of Bangkok*

Located on Sri Nakarin Road in an outskirt area of Bangkok close to the industrial city of Samut-Prakarn and the Suvarnabhumi Airport, Kindergarten B has been established by a relative of Kindergarten A's owner to admit 1 ½ years up to 5 years old children, from the Nursery up to K3.

*Kindergarten C: an English Language Focused K in an industrialized province*

Kindergarten C has been located by a private body in the industrial city of Samut Prakarn since 1994, aiming at creating a good school outside Bangkok to lower the needs of children for travelling to Bangkok for good education.

*Kindergarten D: a model provincial K with Mini English Program*

Kindergarten D is the first model kindergarten for the provinces in the lower-north. It was established in 1942, as a normal school attached to the first public girl secondary school in the province. In 1943, 30 children were admitted into the normal school. In 1946, Kunying Benja Saengmali became the principal of the normal school which had been upgraded to a model provincial kindergarten. In 1955, the kindergarten was moved out of the girl school. In 1980, it was upgraded to a primary school with a kindergarten department.

*Kindergarten E: a demonstrative K in a former normal school*

As the demonstrative kindergarten of the university born as the first normal school in the lower-north, Kindergarten E has been providing practicum service to student-teachers for more than three decades. Most early childhood education teachers in the province, as well as those in the neighboring provinces, practiced their child caring and education here. The practicum used to take one semester. The time has recently been increased to two semesters.

*Kindergarten F: a private K in a private primary school*

Starting as a small kindergarten in late 1970's, the kindergarten is now a department of a Private primary school that manage a nursery, a kindergarten, and a primary school under the same name. The former principal and owner of this school went to observe early childhood education in various kindergartens and childcare centers in Japan during 1982-1988.

*2. Samples for the Study of Children's Culture and Vision about the World*

There were a total number of 500 samples comprising 176 children in Phitsanulok, 174 in Tak, and 150 in Kampaengpetch. The demographic background of the children revealed that there were more girls than boys (56.2 % and 43.8%); the largest group of children (38.2%) had parents aged 21-30 years old, followed by 31-40 year old parents (31.6%); the largest group of parents (30.8%) graduated from vocational schools; farming was the

occupation of the largest group of parents (38.0%); while most of the children had 2 to 3 brothers or sisters (34.0% and 32.2% consequently).

### *3. Samples for the Survey of Teachers' Opinions*

The samples comprised a total number of 497 kindergarten teachers, classified into 195 teachers in Kampaengpetch, 186 teachers in Phitsanulok, and 116 teachers in Tak. Of the total, 83.3% were female. Teachers ranged in age from 16 years to 57 years of age. Mostly the teachers had 2 to 6 years work experiences (74.8%), while the education background of about 58.8% was a bachelor degree.

### **Sampling**

1. A sampling of six kindergartens for the multi-case study was purposive. The first three were selected to represent kindergartens in the metropolitan area of Bangkok and its outskirt. The other three were to represent the provincial kindergartens. The selection was also based on the cooperation of the administrator of each kindergarten in the data collection.

2. A random sampling of children in kindergartens in three selected provinces in the lower-north of Thailand was made through the voluntary assistance of kindergarten teachers who would help interviewing the children in their own classes. These teachers were purposively selected among the graduate students of the Faculty of Education at Naresuan University. The interviews were conducted after the teachers had been trained by a researcher – Dr. Varinthorn Boonying.

3. A stratified random sampling of kindergarten teachers in Kampaengpetch, Phitsanulok, and Tak was made in order to identify the awareness of the teachers related to the changing culture and vision of their children. The questionnaire was constructed from the findings about the children's culture and view about the world, divided into two parts : part I – related to the teacher's awareness about the changing culture of children; Part II – related to teachers' opinions about the values of traditional stories and tales.

## **Description and Analysis of Research Results**

### **1. The Actual Conditions of Early Childhood Education in Six Kindergartens**

#### *Kindergarten A:*

This is a pre-primary kindergarten located in a business area in Bangkok. The school buildings are safe and very clean. The slogan is saying that “happy kids who love to learn and to grow up with high morality” suggests the emphasis on academic and character education. The administrative board is composed of a medical doctor, the school establisher; a manager who graduated in Education and Music from Youngstown University, Ohio, and trained at Midwest Montessori Teacher Training Center in Chicago, Illinois; and a principal who graduated from Boston University with bachelor and master’s degrees. This kindergarten has applied various methods from the west including the project learning and the Montessori’s. In 2013, the projects of K1 children were such as “Beautiful Butterflies” and “Kite Playing”. In K 2, children worked outside on the projects called “The Zoo”, “The Excursion”, and so on. School events are modified to match both Thai tradition and western characters; for example, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Buddhist Lent, Christmas, etc. The summer camp, called Kidz Arts, was held 7 times in March 2013. A few native speakers of English were employed to teach English pronunciation, singing, and speaking. Chinese language is in the plan to become an elective extra-curricular activity, in order to prepare the children for ASEAN Community. The kindergarten is quite popular among the upper and the middle classes because a large number of graduates were able to enter well-known elite primary schools. The tuition and fees for uniforms and lunch (in 2014) is about 1,500 US\$ per semester, or 3,000 US\$ per year. Comparing to the starting salary of a university graduate which is about 500 US\$, the educational cost is relatively high for average income families. Thus, most of the parents here are educated elites with the average incomes that should exceed 3,000 US\$ per month.

#### *Kindergarten B:*

This is a kindergarten located in an outskirt area of Bangkok. Here, the English program (EP) is provided in parallel with the regular one. EP offers the courses of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) starting from Nursery although the focus in nursery is less about language production, but more emphasis on listening comprehension. The story-based EFL is used for instruction of Reading and Writing in order to develop the skills through

meaningful context. The phonics program is adopted in the development of the fundamental skills for further improvement of reading and writing. In March and October, during the school holidays, the kindergarten regularly holds an optional English camp that provides a bilingual environment, using children's literature as the theme, to nurture a love of reading and stories. English immersion is applied for the instruction of science, math, arts and crafts, storytelling, cookery and music. Education at this kindergarten is based on six principles: child-center distraction; encouragement of scientific thinking and ethical thinking; promotion of natural environment preservation; experiential learning based on the philosophy of Sufficiency Economy; whole-man development through plays and activities; and children's development through close cooperation with parents and community. The location allows for a bigger space here than at Kindergarten A. The tuition and fees for regular programs are nearly the same at Kindergarten A and Kindergarten B. The tuition and fees for English program are more expensive, about three times higher.

*Kindergarten C:*

This kindergarten is located in the industrial area of Samutprakarn, a province in the outskirts of Bangkok towards the Eastern Seaboard. The school principal is a former professor in the field of Early Childhood Education at Srinakarinwirot University. Here, the whole-man development philosophy has been adopted as the educational fundamental. The education programs from kindergarten to upper secondary classes are English Language Focused (ELF). The class size is limited to 25 children per class. The kindergarten is a compound one-story houses surrounded by playgrounds and shady trees. The walkways from house to house are laid with bricks and earth on which the children can walk barefoot. The roofs are covered with dried grass. The middle walkway is wide and long enough to become an assembly hall. The playgrounds are well equipped and wide enough, so that noisy playing cannot disturb children in the classrooms. During the observation, it was found that a Pilipino teacher, with good accent of English, was using her picture cards to teach English vocabulary and pronunciation to K1 children. She sometime pretended to read the words incorrectly to check if children could notice it. Her pupils corrected the reading. In another class, another Pilipino teacher taught children to match words. She split her children into two groups to play word-matching game under two Thai mentor teachers.

*Kindergarten D:*

This kindergarten is located in a province in the lower-north of Thailand. Nowadays, the kindergarten department is a part of the primary school composed of a regular Program and a Mini-English Program (MEP) kindergarten, and a regular program and a Mini-English Program primary school. The MEP kindergarten has been introduced since 2003. Several foreign teachers have been employed. Many of them have been working here for some years. Located in an urbanized province where two national universities and many good quality secondary schools exist, the kindergarten can easily recruit children from the middle and the upper classes in the surrounding areas. Extra educational fees are not so as in Kindergarten A, B, and C, since this one is supported by the government as a special-purposed kindergarten for children in a provincial area. The Mini-English Program of this kindergarten provides the chance for children to communicate in English in real situations; through such events as excursion, camping, stage plays, singing, exhibitions, and so on. Thai teachers in the MEP are adaptive to the changing world. In April 2014, three teachers, together with their vice principal, spent 10 days on their own expense at Benedek Elek Faculty of Pedagogy, University of West Hungary to learn more about bilingual kindergarten education.

*Kindergarten E:*

This is a demonstrative kindergarten attached to a former normal school, located in the same province as Kindergarten E. Upper-middle-class families in the province seem to prefer Kindergarten E, and the admission of children are quite limited in number. The educational philosophy and the curriculum have been developed in accordance with the early education guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education. All teachers, including the principal, have been educated in the field of early childhood education. English program has not yet been introduced. The school building has just been moved from the other place, and not yet equipped with greenery and natural materials.

*Kindergarten F:*

This kindergarten is a department of a private primary school which was established about 40 years ago in the same province as D and E. The former owner, passed away about three years ago, had visited various kindergartens and nurseries in Japan during 1982 to 1988. She had adopted a few systems from what she found in Japan, such as safe playgrounds in beautiful and green gardens, health-portfolio feedback system from caretakers and parents,



learning through play and arts activity, and so on. Today, the number of children in the kindergarten is more than one thousand. Here, love for nation is strongly emphasized. The children are trained every day to chant Buddhist prayers and meditate. Drawing, painting, singing, Thai dancing, stage plays, and sports, are used for the development of emotional and social skills of the kids. English program has not yet been adopted, although many parents are eager to support it. The present owner and manager of the school was educated in Business Administration in UK. He is hesitating to adopt the MEP, but has decided to employ about ten teachers from the Philippines to work alongside with Thai teachers in the Academic Year 2015. The English language education will start from K1, to focus on communicative English, and to adopt the natural approach to teach English as a foreign language.

## **2. Culture and Vision About the World of Children**

### *2.1 Children's Most Favorite Play in Kindergartens and the Reasons:*

The largest group (151 children or 30.2%) answered that their favorites to play Lego or wooden block play; while 141 (28.2%) favored dotted line drawing and painting. Ninety-eight children (19.6%) played with plastic animal toys. Playing computer game in class as assigned by teachers was the most favorite by 48 children (9.6%). Swing play and structure climbing were the most favorite by 42 children (8.4%), while 16 children (3.2%) would rather play simple musical instruments. Only 4 children preferred Tuck-a-War game (0.8%).

Legos and wooden blocks were exciting to play with because they could be taken apart, re-used, and re-create. A child said, "... I love to play with all colours of them to build a truck. When I look at them (the blocks), I want to change their colours. I can take some colour off and change it to others." (Child no. 8). Another child said, "... I feel happy because I can build a train and play with the train that I have built" (Child no. 221).

To play with dotted line drawing and painting was in the second rank, because the children felt proud to finish the artistic task and to use the drawing instruments. A child explained that "... I was able to color the cartoon pictures, and my teacher praised me that they were very good," (Child no. 410). Another one said, "... I am happy if I can hold the pencil tightly to draw along dotted lines on the workbook" (Child no. 19).

To play with plastic animal toys made children feel like playing with real animals, and to have the toys as their friends. A child said, "... My Mha Noi (a little dog) puts me to

*sleep*". (Child no.113). Another one said, "...*I think my elephant can talk and play with me.*" (Child no. 62)

Approximately 9.6% of the children favored computer game the most. A boy explained that "... *I love computer games because it can talk and move*" (Child no. 32).

In the development of children's big muscles, early childhood educators such as Froebel and Montessori have given high importance to swing play and structure climbing. A child said that "...*my friend and I usually play the swing together, we can take turns and share*" (Child no. 403)." To him, the swing play was a tool to develop the social ethics of cooperation and sharing.

Though music sounds produced by a child can bring him amusement, creativity, relaxation, imagination, brain stimulation, or even to cure some ailments, only 3.2% favoured playing simple musical instruments. A child explained that, "... *I love to press on the key-board that has got a lot of different sounds*" (Child no. 117). Pressing on the keyboard with little fingers would help the child to develop his small muscles. But, those who preferred this type of play were so few.

The least (0.8%) children liked to play the Tuck-a-War. An interesting reason was its applicability of this game to military tactics. A boy said, "... *I have seen military tactics applied by adults when they play this game*" (Child no. 79). While adults might see only the role of Tuck-a-War as a tool for amusement and physical or social developments, the child viewed it as the means for strategic thinking development.

## *2.2 The Most Favorite to Play at Home and the Reasons:*

Two out of five children (40.0%) replied that their most favorite toy at home was human dolls with accessories. Most of the respondents were girls. Almost three out of ten children (22.8%) preferred plastic animal toys, and about 1 out of 5 (19.4%) preferred vehicle toys. Most of the children in the second and the third groups were boys. Next to the last were children who preferred to play inside their farm and community (9.2%). Finally, 4.6% of them favored computer games, especially the action games. The children in the last two groups were almost the same in number when divided by genders.

A girl who most favored human dolls and accessories said, "...*I love baby doll because I can feed the doll, bathe it, and put it to bed,*"(Child no. 256). Another girl said, "... *I love Barbie because she is very cute and beautiful,*" (Child no. 47). The answers suggested that their world about dolls have changed. In the past, Thai traditional toys could be simply created from towels or re-used materials. Now, western toys can be easily found in the

market. Barbie has been smartly designed by artists and become popular all over the world. Changeable accessories of the human dolls bring about the children's imagination, exercise eyes and fingers, and create dreams. The preference may be influenced by TV and other media from which children watch and listen to.

Boys rather preferred plastic animal toys because they could imagine about real animals. A boy said, "...I love my farm. I collect many animals in my farm." (Child no. 60). The other one explained that, "...My dogs can understand me, I love them," (Child no. 155). The two answers suggested that boys more favored pets than dolls. To the boys, animal toys could substitute pets for their homes where family members are few.

Some boys favored the colorful vehicle toys. A boy said, "...I like a Santa's train because it has a snow-man and I can go to school by the Santa's train.." (Child no. 54). The answer suggested that western toys had influenced the boy's view about the world. His dream of Santa and a snowman is probably associated with the stories heard and seen from media and department stores during Christmas season. Influence of advertisement on the child's view of the world seems to be quite strong, since he's actually living in a snowless country where Buddhist stories had traditionally been told at home.

To play in farm and community was the most favored by 9.6% of the children. A child told us that, "*My friends and I build animal farm toys from natural materials near my house. My animals are made from clay*". (Child no. 409). The answer suggested that the child felt proud to create things from natural materials in the community. The raw materials did not need money to buy, unlike using artistic clays which had to be bought from the market. The smallest group of children (4.6%) preferred computer game while staying at home. A child said, "... I usually told my mom to access the I-pad because I wanted to see the picture books with words," (Child no. 57). Another child mentioned that, "... I have fun with the computer games" (Child no. 372). The other one explained that, "... I can control the action game and I can win" (Child no. 12). The answers suggested that, at home, almost 5% of kindergarten children in rural provinces had computers and digital gadgets like the I-pad. The children's answers reveal that some parents download educational programs for children to play, while some others may be approached to action games.

### 2.3 The Most Favorite Play in General, and the Reasons:

The answers varied a lot when children replied about their most favorite play. The largest group (145 children or 29%) responded that they most favored human dolls with

accessories. Most of the children in this group were girls. The next 98 children (19.6%) said they most favored vehicle toys, followed by 90 children (18%) who preferred plastic animal toys, and there were more boys than girls. About the same number of boys and girls said they preferred Legos or wooden blocks (50 children or 10%), and playing in farms and community (46 children or 9.2%). Finally, five children (1%) preferred Tuck-a-War.

#### *2.4 Parlour and Board Games at Home:*

Most of children (402 children or 80.4%) did not play parlour and board games at home. Only ninety-eight children, or 19.6 per cent, answered that they played the game while they were at home. Among these, 32.6% played with their mothers, 27.5 % with relatives in the same neighborhood, and 20.5% with brothers or sisters, while 19.4% played with their fathers.

#### *2.5 The Most Favourite Tales, Reasons, and Story-tellers:*

Most of the children (404 or 80.8%) answered that they could not remember the names of the most favorite tales. Among those who could name the tales, 57 or 11.4% of them said that “The Hare and the Tortoise” was the most favorite. Twenty two children (4.4%) said that they favored “The Dog in the Manger”, seventeen children or 3.4% preferred “The Ungrateful Wolf”. Sixty nine (71.8%) said they were told the stories by peoples in CD/DVD. Seventeen (17.8%) were told by teachers, six (6.2%) by grandparents, and only four (4.2%) by their mothers. The tales such as the Hare and the Tortoise, the Dog in the Manger, and the Ungrateful Wolf that most of the children approached by CD/DVD, were preferred because the children enjoyed watching beautiful graphic and moving pictures. A child said, “... *I like the graphic of the story about the tortoise that never stopped walking to the destination. Finally he became the winner,*” (Child no. 12).

#### *2.6 Usage of Mobile Phones, Tablets, I-pads and Computers at Home:*

A large number of children (302 or 60.4%) responded that, at home, they had one or more mobile phone, tablet or I-pad, or a computer. All of them (100%) played games on these digital gadgets. A large number (96 children or 31.8%) assembled dolls and accessories on the ICTs, followed by 89 children (29.4%) who used the digital gadgets for printing and matching. Seventy-six children (25.2%) played vehicle games, and forty-one (13.5%) played action games, which could be downloaded onto these digital appliances.

### 2.7 Dreams about Future Work and the Reasons:

The largest group (169 or 33.8 %) said that they did not know what work they would like to do in the future. The next group would like to become teachers (133 children or 26.6%). Another group (76 children or 15.2%) wished to become policemen. Forty five children (9.0%) would like to be soldiers, thirty-nine (7.8%) preferred being nurses, twenty-two (4.4%) were anxious to become medical doctors; and sixteen (3.2%) wished to become detectives. Among the respondents, two answers suggested that the children were highly influenced by teachers who were nice and kind to them. Powerful fathers also influenced some children's view of their future occupation. A child said, "...I want to be a teacher because my teacher is very kind to me," (Child no. 167). The other one said proudly that, "...I want to become a policeman, because my father is a policeman,"(Child no. 71).

### 3. Teachers' Awareness about the Culture and Vision about the World of Children

Teachers' awareness and opinions about the changing culture of children were clustered by mean into three levels as average between 3.68-5.00; strong awareness, 2.34-3.67; moderate awareness, and 1.00-2.33; weak awareness (Best, 1977). Most teachers had strong awareness about the changing culture that children should be assigned to play computer games at the kindergarten ( $\bar{X} = 4.29$ , S.D.=0.78), and that playing keyboard instrument would be useful for the development of physical, emotional, and cognitive growths of a child ( $\bar{X} = 4.14$ , S.D.=0.67). Interestingly, the teachers had strong awareness that traditional Thai toys and play should be introduced to kindergarten children more than today ( $\bar{X} = 3.89$ , S.D.=0.97). The teachers had moderate awareness about children's play at school such as swing playing and structure climbing that they could help develop big muscles as well as social ethics such as sharing and cooperation ( $\bar{X} = 3.61$ , S.D.=0.97). They also had moderate awareness that children at kindergarten liked to play with Legos or wooden blocks more than any other toys and play ( $\bar{X} = 3.60$ , S.D.= 0.93). They had moderate awareness about the values of traditional play such as Tuck-a-War which could build up strategic thinking of children ( $\bar{X} = 2.55$ , S.D.=0.94).

Most teachers strongly believed that both the tales and stories from western countries and the past experiences of their elders could develop the world vision of children. These teachers also believed strongly that parents could help promote the desirable vision through frequent telling of the stories chosen from the story books recommended by teachers ( $\bar{X} =$

4.27, S.D.=0.61). In addition, the teachers believed strongly that the tales from western countries were more popular because they were more interesting and could bring young children closer to the developed world ( $\bar{X} = 4.20$ , S.D.=0.73), but some of the tales should be modified to better suit the local environments of Thailand.

## **Findings**

1. The field surveys about the actual conditions of the six kindergartens reveal that early childhood education in urban and industrialized areas of Thailand is moving towards bilingualism and English language focus. The movement was initiated by educated elites in private sector, supported by upper class parents who were affordable to pay extra fees. The kindergartens for the upper class in Bangkok and its outskirt areas are much more expensive and more advanced than their counterparts in provincial areas. The model kindergarten for provincial areas has already moved quite successfully towards the Mini English Program. Various difficulties exist at the other observed kindergartens in the same province, especially the lack of foreign teachers. To employ well-trained English language teachers from former western colonies in Asia like the Philippines may be an alternative for a kindergarten in the provincial area.
2. The culture of children in provincial areas, as considered from their plays and games in the kindergarten, at home, and in general, has been strongly influenced by western culture and new technology. Playing with legos and wooden blocks is not a traditional play of Thai children in the past, but it became the most favorite. The dotted line drawing and painting, as well as the plastic toy play, was not traditional either. Almost one-tenth of the children favored computer game the most, while less than 1% favored the very basic and traditional play like Tuck-a-War. At home, girls mostly favored the dolls with pretty accessories like “Barbie”, while boys mostly favored plastic animal toys and vehicle toys bought from the markets. Less than one-tenth favored playing in farms and community. At home, almost 5% of children played computer games. On the other hand, games for thinking exercise such as palour games or board games were rarely played at home. Most children could not recall the names of stories told to them. Most children who remembered said that the stories were told by people in the DVD or VCD. More than a half of the children had digital gadgets at home, such as mobile phones, i-Pads, computers with internet. The future world of children in the provincial

kindergartens was highly influenced by their teachers, since most of them would like to become teachers although four-tenths came from farming families.

3. In general, kindergarten teachers in three provinces of the Lower North had strong awareness that children should be assigned to play computer games at the kindergarten and that playing keyboard instrument would be useful for the development of physical, emotional, and cognitive growths of a child. In contrast, the teachers strongly believed that traditional toys and play should be more introduced to children in kindergartens. Most teachers strongly believed that both the tales and stories from western countries and the past experiences of their elders could develop the world vision of children. They also believed strongly that parents could help promote the desirable vision through frequent telling of the stories chosen from story books recommended by teachers; the tales from western countries were more popular because they were more interesting and could bring young children closer to the developed world; and while telling the tales, teachers should modify the stories to better suit the local environments of Thailand.

## **Conclusion and Suggestion for Implementation**

### *1. Conclusion:*

A survey of early childhood education in six kindergartens might not represent the actual conditions of all kindergartens which have different geographical locations and historical backgrounds. Nevertheless, the study shows that kindergarten education in Thailand is moving towards English language focus or Thai-English bilingual education. The strongest impact comes from the needs to adjust to globalization and regionalization. Never being colonized by the west is said to be the cause of poor English language proficiency. On the other hand, school education in Thailand has a history that dated back longer than a century which involved the mixture of western and traditional teaching and learning. The observation at the six kindergartens still reflects this characteristic of the westernized system of education. While early childhood education scholars believe that acculturation of children in their early years is highly effectively through playing and storytelling, it is found through this research that vision about the world of kindergarten children in three provinces in the Lower-North of Thailand has been influenced strongly by western games, playing, toys, and information technology. Sadly to say, valuable traditional games, plays, toys, and technology of South-east Asia are scarcely seen in the educational process of the

sampled kindergartens as viewed by the children's play. At home, too, traditional play and toys are scarce. Among the children whose one-third come from farming families, less than 10 per cent of them enjoyed playing in the farms and local community. This might be the causal factor to the answer about their dream of the future. Unfortunately, very few children would like to become farmers, though they are living in the agricultural land. While teachers rarely tell stories to the children at the kindergartens, parents and grandparents almost never do that at home either. The children know some stories from new media like DVD and VCF. They rarely play games with parents and grandparents, but almost 5 percent have digital gadgets to play with a positive finding is that the cultural identity of respect to teachers is still strong among the children.

Kindergarten teachers in the three provinces strongly believe that children should be assigned to play computer games at the kindergarten, and that playing keyboard instrument is useful for the development of a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growths. On the other hand, the teachers would like to introduce more of traditional toys and play into the kindergartens. This contradiction is in agreement with the teachers' viewpoint that both the tales and stories from the west and the past experiences of children's grandparents are equally important in developing the world vision of children. The teachers believe that parents could help promote desirable vision of their children if stories chosen and recommended by teachers are frequently told to children at home. Without research evidence, most of the teachers think that western tales are more popular because they are more interesting and can bring young children closer to the developed world. However, they still believe that the western stories should be modified to better suit the local environments of Thailand.

## *2. Discussion and Suggestion for Implementation*

Thai children used to live in extended families, to learn directly from elder people, to be surrounded with natural things that they could play with. The mothers were role models for girls, while boys looked up to their fathers as their idols. Parents would ask children to help with appropriate home chores. Normally, elder sisters or brothers were acting as teachers to their younger siblings. Playing and working together with parents and relatives at home were the most important methods for informal learning in the past. Kindergarten education which has been adopted from the west since 1982 is now expanding throughout the nation, and is moving towards English language focus which is naturally emphasizing western culture and materialism. Kindergarten education of Thailand has for some years been



influenced by Japanese philosophy of naturalism and nationalism. The swaying towards believing in ICT play and games, which is found in this research, is probably caused by some teachers' obsolete knowledge about early childhood education. The samples of 500 teacher showed the ages of teachers ranged from 16 to 57 years of age. It suggests that some kindergarten teachers in provincial areas in Thailand are less qualified, and that they should be retrained to know how best to integrate media and technology into their children's lives.

According to Lancy (2002) play is thought to reflect cultural mastery and cultural values, while Brown (2009) and Lancy (2007) view that play is both universal and culture-specific activity. Thus, it is not to be surprised that children in the provincial areas of Thailand prefer the Legos and wooden blocks introduced by their kindergartens. Unfortunately, to compare with the kindergartens in Europe, this research did not ask about the traditional plays of small children in the old days such as cooking game, family game, selling game, paper doll game, and so on. Also, the question about parlour game or board game should be revised to ask about the traditional board game of Thailand such as "Sua Tok Thang" (Tiger in the Tank).

As Holmes (2012) believed that play and culture are intricately linked, this research also found that playful outcomes of children in the provincial kindergartens are dependent upon a variety of factors that include economic, technological, cultural, and historical factors. In Thailand, too, the children aged 3 to 5 years old preferred sex-stereotyped play activities and toys. Girls preferred playing with dolls, while boys more favoured animal and vehicle toys.

Unfortunately, this research has a limitation of time and unable to explore the opinions of parents about their believing in play and experiential learning of children in the early years. It would be more interesting to know how the parents think about the influences of tele-vision, mobile phones, i-Pads, computer games, etc. to their children's culture and vision of the world.

The suggestions for the implementation of this research are: 1) to strengthen the cultural and educational values of traditional play and games, both at kindergarten and at home, particularly in the three provinces of the Lower North; Phitsanulok, Tak, and Kampaengpetch; 2) to re-train kindergarten teachers in the three provinces, as well as in the other areas, about the appropriate integration of media and technology into lives of children in the early years; and 3) to expand the scope of this research to cover the whole nation and explore deeper into the other types of early childhood institutions.

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## EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' INVOLVEMENT IN FREE PLAY TIME WITH KURDISH SPEAKING CHILDREN IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION SETTING IN TURKEY

*This research looks into classroom interactions of Kurdish speaking children in Eastern Turkey with their teachers in an informal bilingual education context. Thus the research aims to unearth the role of teachers in fostering acquisition of second language in free play time of children by drawing out classroom recordings of teachers' classes for one term. In so doing, the study employs a Vygotskian approach. The result show that teachers' low engagement with students in free play poses a serious problem in promoting students' second language acquisition and developing their linguistic skills. This not only challenges students' schooling and attainment in the future but also leads a possible exclusion and participation in accessing schooling opportunities and attaining learning. The results underlines importance of a higher quality of early childhood teacher education and an inclusive curriculum that could better address the realities of Kurdish speaking children in Turkish instructed schools.*

### 1. Introduction

There has been a worldwide recognition that high quality early childhood education (ECE) could promote whole development of children and make positive impact on early school achievement ( Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Harrison & Ungerer, 2005; Kamerman, 2005; Morrison, 2003; Olmsted & Montie, 2001). A good high quality education not only requires competent teachers who can create stimulating environment that encourages young children's active participation and responsive interaction with children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) but also should address the socio-cultural settings children are situated (Genesee, 2009).

In diverse socio-cultural setting of Turkey, the language problem of Kurdish speaking children particularly in Eastern Turkey remains a significant problem. Eastern Turkey differs from other regions in terms of ethnic origin, culture, economic development and languages spoken. Here, the locals are mainly of Kurdish origin and Kurdish is the most commonly spoken language among people and in households. Turkish is a second language only used in public institutions. The majority of children in Eastern Turkey are situated in a bilingual education context, where their mother tongue is Kurdish and they learn Turkish as a second language when they start school (AÇEV, 2002). This is because Turkey has a centralist

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education system and mandates Turkish as the official educational language. Not being able to speak Turkish properly can have negative impacts on students' attainment and schooling, impede students' academic development and exclude them from both participation in accessing curriculum and attaining learning (Cin, 2014). As some studies show (Kaya, 2009; Kirdar, 2009) the language barrier lowers achievement of students or decreases their chances of furthering their education. These studies also argue that Turkey's centric education system does not involve special strategies that could eliminate the shortcomings of the children who do not speak Turkish.

So, although mother tongue is important for their social and personal development, for these children learning a second language, Turkish in this context, is rather vital for their future live, in access to opportunities of schooling, employment and fundamental rights. In this informal bilingual education setting, high quality early education lies in connecting children's language and experiences in the home with school. It should respect the language and culture of the child at home to further the linguistic, social and academic growth of the child and create meaningful activities in the schools. In the long-term, having high quality early childhood education result in better educational and social outcomes for low-income children. Early interventions during the preschool years have positive effect on school readiness, health status, academic achievement, and special education services (Reynolds, Temple, Robertson, & Mann, 2001).

Therefore, the more early childhood education rises on the agenda of private and public attentions, the more voices are to be heard in various settings talking about its benefits. Early education enhances subsequent academic performance, ameliorates problems in later childhood and improves all domains of young children' development including language, cognitive, emotional, and motor development (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Essa, 2003) as well as the language skills of these children and their physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Therefore, in this study, we aim to look into teachers' strategies, efforts and struggles to involve in children's free play time in bilingual settings and to investigate to what extent they engage in meaningful activities valuing their cultural heritage (Kurdish culture) and (Kurdish) language and how they support the acquisition and learning of the second language (Turkish language). There are no known studies carried out with Kurdish speaking children in Turkey. Only a few research (Kirdar, 2009; Engin-Demir and Cobanoglu, 2013) conducted interviews with Kurdish parents or Kurdish speaking children regarding the problems they faced in Turkish education system. As such, the current study focused on Kurdish speaking children by looking into their classroom

interactions with their teachers and their path to learning Turkish as a second language within the school culture which is socio-culturally different than their home culture. Thus, this research aims to fill the mentioned gap in the literature, to contribute to the limited research conducted on bilingual education in Turkey and to highlight the problem of informal bilingual education problem in these areas.

This article begins with scrutinizing the relevant literature research on bilingual education context with a particular interest in early childhood education. It then engages with conceptual framework used for this study and methodological considerations. Lastly, we present how teachers support children's process of learning Turkish with cultural reference to their native tongues and conclude by discussion and some implications for teacher education and curricula.

## **2. Context of Early Childhood Education**

### *2.1. Nature of Bilingual education setting*

Mother tongue acquisition starts from birth with home and then extends to school and social environment (Yazıcı, İter and Glover, 2010). Mother tongue helps children to acquire social and cultural values of that language and shapes their social, cultural life and behaviors or the way they express their feelings (Piyade 1990; Aytemiz, 2000) and plays a role in the development of self-confidence. On the other hand, the second language acquisition is related to children's experience outside the home.

Learning or encountering another language in the pre-school education years is a challenge for the children as they have to negotiate their social and cultural values determined by their mother tongue with the culture of second language they acquire. In bilingual and bicultural contexts, these social values of home and school may conflict in areas such as gender roles, and self-confidence. If children do not feel wholly belong to either of culture, they may feel marginalized and encounter personality and identity or communication problems (Yazıcı, İter and Glover, 2010).

A further challenge in may involve is that children may lose their mother language skills if parents prioritize second language as it will be more useful for them in the future in a context where the second language is the official language of the country. In this situation, weakness in the mother tongue in adolescence can again lead to conflict between the school and home cultures or lead to emotional upsets in the home (Cummins 2001). On the other hand, bilingual education may have some benefits for children. For instance it could improve



the development of cognitive and metalinguistic skills (Vygotsky, 1962) or the performance of spatial tasks (McLeay 2003), promote skills of communication and thinking, and analytical strategies (Olmedo, 2003).

Therefore, an important responsibility falls on pre-school teachers in kindergarten where the child is exposed to second language officially for the first time as they need to establish acceleration, ensure that child gains proficiency in majority language without losing the mother tongue and relate child's language and culture to the wider society through integration for psychological adaptation (Neto, 2002). A good support of teacher in acquiring the second language in this bilingual education can create a positive exchange between the two cultures and languages (Yazıcı, İter and Glover, 2010) and improve child's self-respect and develop mutual respect, and positively influence children's expression of their feeling, thoughts, and interests (Clark, 2002). Considering that bilingualism and bilingual programs are seen vital by the European Union and Council of Europe for social inclusion and citizenship and to fight against marginalization (Council of Europe 2001), it becomes a necessary that there should be more focus on this informal bilingual education context in Turkey or both languages could be represented in the kindergarten curriculum.

In Turkey, all educational and scientific institutions, including pre-school education, are attached to the Ministry of National Education (MONE). Although there are regional differences across Turkey, national standards are guaranteed by developing and implementing common core curriculum in all public schools. The first Pre-school education curriculum was introduced in 1994. Then it was revised respectively in 2002, 2006 and 2012 on the basis feedback and suggestions taken from teachers, academicians and experts in the field of pre-school education. The improved version of pre-school education curriculum placed more emphasis on 'play' as it provides a unique and valuable context and opportunity for teaching and learning (Oers and Duijkers, 2013). Through play, children learn the world in which they live; express themselves more and gain critical thinking skills. Play is used as a main teaching technique and activity in the new curriculum to achieve goals and objectives of pre-school education (MONE, 2013). Therefore, in this research we particularly focused on the role of teachers fostering the acquisition of second language and in establishing positive links between the mother tongue and second language in free play time. Below, we focus on some of the research in supporting children's second language acquisition.

## *2.2. Role of teachers in language acquisition*

Preschoolers' language development is a foundation for literacy skills (Dickinson 2011; Dickinson and Porche, 2011). The research focusing on pre-school teachers' roles and strategies on children's language development (Meachan et al., 2013; Dickinson 2011; Dickinson, Darrow, and Tinubu 2008) focused on teachers' use of language and argued that use of complex syntax can support children's comprehension skills. Another strand of studies (Bond and Wasik 2009; Dickinson et al. 2003; Gest et al. 2006) looked into preschool teachers' verbal interactions in their classrooms and argued that conversations can promote students' oral language development if use of teachers' strategic language are based on lexical diversity, deeper conversations on a topic, responsiveness to the child's utterance and content rich conversation. These research also further investigated use of teachers' language in different teaching contexts such as storybook reading, meal time or free play during the preschool day. Use of rich language, diverse vocabulary, extended comments during free play time whereas decontextualized talk was use more in storybook reading time.

On the other hand, studies (Dickinson, 2001, 2008; Kontos, 1999) focusing on free play - as we do in this study - looked into teachers' talk in free play time when children engage in the activities of their choice such as blocks, puzzles and games. Their research indicated that teachers' talk is largely influenced by the role they take as playmate, state-manager or play-enhancer. Yet there is a dissensus on the role of teacher. Kontos (1999) argues that teachers' participation may prevent children's play and opportunities of practicing the learned language, Dickson (2011) and Maechsan et. al (2013) in their research of looking into the relationship between teachers participation in dramatic play such as use of vocabulary, syntax, types of instructional talk and children's language productivity showed that teachers' use of language was low in instructional quality and therefore children's language development was not high whereas Pellegrini and Galda (1993) argues that teachers' participation can support children's language learning as they will be tutoring.

Yet these studies have generally focused on the first language acquisition and learning of children, the research (Gort and Pontier, 2013; Echavarria et al., 2011; Kultti, 2014; Clarke, 1999) on second language learning in bilingual education and school context in preschools showed that teachers' engagement of different communicative strategies, bilingual pedagogic practices of code switching, tandem talk, bilingual recasting and translation supported children's language competencies. Use of simplified syntax, repetition, visual reinforcement of abstract and concrete concepts as well rich quality of interaction are noted be significant factors that foster learning environment, improve their second language repertoire, linguistic

and cognitive development input and promote bilingualism. However, these studies have been carried out in a context where there was an official bilingual education program and schools. Yet, Turkey is a unique case as there is an informal bilingual education context in which some students come with a low level competency of Turkish language and they are expected to learn Turkish without bilingual education programs and pedagogies. Therefore, teachers usually have little knowledge and awareness on how to cope with the second language acquisition of these children without any resources and training. In this aspect, this study is rather important to unearth the sort of strategies teachers use to support students' learning in free play time, to the extent they are successful and provide some implications on teacher-training and redesign of curricula with a more cultural, linguistic and ethnic sensitive aspects. Investigating interaction between children and teacher will also provide valuable feedback to teachers, teacher educators and policy makers in their efforts to contribute Kurdish speaking children's education quality.

### **3. Vygotskian Approach to Second Language Learning**

Vygotsky's sociolinguistic theory is core to offer deeper insight about moving beyond a general emphasis on the importance of teacher child verbal interactions to explore potential language development "subcontexts" in bilingual education context in eastern part of Turkey.

Vygotsky views the development and learning of children within variety of social and cultural context including family, peers, community, ethnicity, neighborhoods and schools. He believed that a child's cognitive constructs and capacities are built around her social interactions. These social interactions are more than simple influences on cognitive development; they actually create our cognitive structures and thinking process (Woolfolk, 2001). Vygotsky further explains function of language as a tool which frees our thought and attention from the immediate situation. Besides, words could symbolize things and events that go beyond current situation. Language both enables individuals to reflect upon the past and plan for the future. It also supports children's engagement in social life and facilitates the child's own individual thinking (Crain, 1992).

Considering the strong link between language and culture, this study embraced Vygotskian perspective. In this study, children are instructed in different language than their mother tongue which evokes the question of teachers' support to teach official language in class. This support fits into Vygotsky's concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which is defined as the distance between children's actual performance and children

performance under adult guidance or more capable peers (Crain, 1992). When ZPD is applied to practical teaching situations, it significantly influences the teacher's decisions about what kinds of learning activities she should provide or how she should decide whether children are capable of benefiting from them. For instance, a teacher who knows the sequence in which the zones of proximal development evolve in the field of mathematics can predict the next mathematical skill that a child should be capable of mastering. Equipped with this knowledge, the teacher can design learning activities for the child that will stimulate the early fruition of that skill (Thomas, 1996). Such a notion of learning readiness could be applied easily to language development since children develop oral language skills through verbal interactions with competent speakers around them. When children are exposed to new words and grammatical structures from more skilled speakers they learn those words and structures. Children's attempt at communicating with new words or grammatical structures that are just slightly beyond their own potentials to master language spoken in children's context. Besides, this effort of children is probably adequate within the context of the child's daily activities (Nelson & Welsh, 1998). Teachers should challenge children moderately and should be sensitive to children's interest to increase their motivation (Gest et al, 2006).

Some researchers argue that teachers should stand back while children are playing in order not to interfere with children's play (Pellegrini & Galda, 1993). Vygotsky supports that adults must take an active role in children's play if its learning potential is to be maximized (Berk & Winsler, 1995). When children verbally interact with competent adults, their language acquisition including semantic contingency, scaffolding, accountability procedures, and the use of routines increase as well as their early reading and writing development (Snow, 1983). It is accepted that free play provides unique opportunities for children to engage in cognitively stimulating play activities; if teachers make linguistic challenges available to extend and recast children's talk (Gest, 2006).

Vygotsky draws attention both on children's interactions with others and children's play. He has changed the way educators think about how children construct knowledge. It was once believed that children's knowledge was being constructed from personal experiences. Vygotsky argued that personal and social experience cannot be separated. The world children live in is shaped by their families, communities, socioeconomic status, education and culture. Children develop language skills and grasp new concepts as they speak and listen to adults and children in their lives. He also believed that enormous amounts of learning take place when children play because language and development build on each other. Children on the edge of learning a new concept can benefit from the interaction with a teacher. Vygotsky

referred to the assistance a teacher or a peer offers to a child as scaffolding. In the same way, teachers are expected to support children Turkish language learning in bilingual context in this study. Building on this relationship of language, culture and scaffolding, we will draw from Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development to analyze the data.

#### **4. Method**

##### *Research Design*

In this study, we aim to show how early school education teachers engage with the Turkish language acquisition of Kurdish speaking children in a non-bilingual education context in Eastern Turkey where there is officially no education materials, inputs or practices or curricular policies to support the bilingual development of children or language acquisition. The study undertakes a qualitative research of investigating teachers' interaction with children during free play time. Below, we describe context of research, data collection process, profile of participants and analytic process of data analysis.

##### *Research Context*

This study was conducted in Hacibekir district of Van, which is located in Eastern Turkey. Here, the locals are mainly of Kurdish origin and Kurdish is the most commonly spoken language among people and in households. Turkish is a second language only used in public institutions such as schools. This region was chosen as it has the lowest Turkish speaking population and therefore it could better illustrate how teachers support students' process of learning Turkish in free play time. Most students in this study entered pre-school with no or limited Turkish language skills. They started school in September and the data for this study was during the first term of the academic year from October to January. Therefore, students had already acquired some basic language skills when we started collecting data. Yet, they were not competent in language and made salient mistakes.

##### *Participants*

Six teachers participated in this study. These teachers had little experience as they were new graduates of pre-school education program. Two out of these six teachers were bilingual and could speak both Turkish and Kurdish. Van has a very low preschool schooling rate of 43, 64 % in Turkey (MONE, 2013b). Therefore, in order to increase schooling rate in Van all schools offer preschool education in two shifts; there are morning and afternoon classes. In

the schools this research was conducted, there were two morning and five afternoon classes. Two teachers were teaching in morning classes and four teachers were working in afternoon class as more children come to school in the afternoon. The class sizes are rather small since attendance in these suburb schools is low. Around 130 children were registered but only 70 children were regularly attending school. Attendance is particularly low in morning classes since parents prefer to send their children to afternoon classes. Therefore, in morning classes there were only 8 students. The schools this study is conducted is a suburb area where mostly early career teachers are sent to work. Therefore, the teachers who participated in this study had between 1 and 3 years of experience. Table 1 below presents the profile teachers who participated in this study.

Teachers	Class size	Language spoken	Years of experience	Class type
T1	7	Turkish-Kurdish	First year	Morning class
T2	6	Turkish-Kurdish	First year	Morning class
T3	12	Turkish	3 year	Afternoon class
T4	15	Turkish	2 years	Afternoon class
T5	13	Turkish	3 years	Afternoon class
T6	12	Turkish	3 years	Afternoon class

**Table 1: Characteristics of participants**

#### *Data collection*

The research is based on a qualitative methodology. Teachers' interactions with students during free play were audio-recorded for the entire term. Free play sessions took place every day and began as soon as children started school. In these sessions, children came to class one by one and chose an interest area or a toy to play which lasted between 60-90 minutes. The researchers also accompanied these newly graduated teachers during free play time with audio recorder. Each teacher was audio recorded for four times with regular intervals during the study. At all times the ethical principles followed in this research. The teachers' willingness to participate was secured in the following way. Each was informed about the process, assured of confidentiality. They were sent an informed consent, which they read and signed. Since this research was carried out in a public school of Ministry of National Education, required permissions were obtained from Directorate of National Education in

Van. With this permission, a consent form sent to children’s families to inform them about the nature of research. All parents agreed that their children can participate in the research.

*Data analysis*

We transcribed all recordings for data analysis and used Kontos’ (1999) framework to analyze. We used both deductive and inductive thematic analysis as it is theoretically flexible to analyze qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, we used inductive analysis, which means we coded the data without trying to fit it into framework not to restrain the data. Then, we employed a deductive analysis of identifying themes that are developed based on the framework. We elicited themes emerging from the inductive analysis relating to Kontos’ framework, which consists of verbalization, teacher roles, and activity setting. Yet, this study adopted only verbalization since teachers did not engage much in children’s activities in free play time. They generally dealt with paper work and prepared activities. The table 2 below presents Kontos’ (1999) categories of verbalization.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Support peer relation	<p>Statements: Describe, explain, give reason or information about a child’s interactions (e.g., “When you said that to Mary, she probably felt upset.”).</p> <p>Questions: Ask questions about a child’s interactions that can be answered with a yes/no or one-word response (e.g., “Did you ask Soo Young if he would like to play?”). Ask open-ended questions about a child’s interactions (e.g., “How do you think Lori felt when you said that?”).</p>
Support object Play	<p>Statements: Describe, explain, give reason or information about a child’s object/fantasy play (e.g., “When you mix blue and yellow paint, you get green.”), or repeat statements about objects/fantasy play (e.g., Child: “This toy is fun.” Teacher: “This toy is fun.”)</p> <p>Questions: Yes/no or closed-ended questions about a child’s object/ fantasy play (e.g., “Did you make that all by yourself?”). Can also include offering a child a choice (e.g., “Would you like to play at the water table or the sand table?”). Open-ended questions about object/fantasy play (e.g., “What is this a picture of?”).</p> <p>Participate in fantasy play: Teacher participates actively in child’s fantasy play by taking on a role.</p>

Positive social contacts	Teacher praises or encourages the child. Sometimes this involves peer relations (“I like the way you shared your toy with Trent.”) or object play (“You did a good job counting those dinosaurs.”). Also includes teachers socializing with a child (e.g., “What did you do last night?” or “I like those new shoes you are wearing.”).
Behavior management	Teacher explicitly states rules (e.g., “Elise, use your walking feet.”), redirects a child without explanation (e.g., “Tory, go over to the sand table.”), or tells a child what to do when misbehaving (e.g., “Kyle, you need to share your marker with Derrick.”). Also includes statements or questions about taking care of materials (e.g., “Put the caps back on the markers, Jana.”).
Practical/ assistance	Personal Teacher helps child obtain materials needed for an activity, assists with self-help (e.g., clothing, toileting), or performs first-aid (ice pack, bandaids). Also includes statements or questions directed at helping a child store or clean up projects (after the activity is done) or helping a child choose an activity.
Talking to adults	Teachers talks to parents, other teachers, aides, or any adult present in the classroom.
Teacher reads to child	Teacher verbalizations are from or about a book being read to the child.
Uncodable	Brief acknowledgements or responses that cannot fit into another category (e.g., “Okay,” “What?” “yeah”).

Source: Kontos (1999: 369)

**Table 2. Teacher Verbalization Categories and their Definitions**

Pre-existing categories and coding list of Kontos (1999) guide coding procedure of this study. In order to ensure dependability, researchers asked senior students studying pre-school teacher education program to code the data as a second coder. First of all, second coder did not know English thus researchers had to translate Kontos’ codes into Turkish. After second coder has grasped Kontos’ framework in a detail, two coders coded the data. Then agreement level calculated using following formula:

Total amount of agreement

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Total amount of coded verbalization



Agreement on codes was %82 for the first transcription. Then, coders compared their codes to see the similarities and differences between their codes. %18 disagreement mainly originated from coding ‘positive social contact’ and ‘behavior management’ interchangeably. After discussing the meaning of these categories, coders reached total agreement level.

## 5. Results

The descriptive analysis reveals that among eight verbal categorizations, only five categories emerged in this study. Support peer relation and positive social contact items appeared less and infrequently compared to other categories. The descriptive analysis was not rich enough to depict a deeper understanding of the teachers’ interaction with children due to little engagement of teachers with students during free play time. For this reason, representative interaction that happened between teachers and children are exhibited below. In order to prevent possible confusion quotations were represented as T1 or T6, which represents participating teachers. Again pseudo names were used to ensure confidentiality of children. We present quotations to show perspectives or experiences stated for a specific issue.

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	Total
Support peer relation	8	6	11	7	4	6	40
Support object Play	7	10	9	5	9	6	46
Positive social contacts	3	4	3	2	5	3	20
Behaviour management	20	12	21	14	21	17	105
Practical/ Personal assistance	14	12	8	9	11	13	67
Talking to adults	NOT APLICABLE FOR THIS STUDY						
Teacher reads to child	-	-	-	-	-	-	
Uncodable	NOT APLICABLE FOR THIS STUDY						

**Table 3. Frequency of Verbalization during Free Play Time**

### *5.1. Types of Verbalization between Teachers and Children during Free Play Time*

#### ***Support peer relation***

In this categorization, it is expected teachers describe and explain children’s interaction so that children would be able to express their feelings and understand the impacts of their actions on their friends’ feelings. Yet, in our study context, teachers were rather passive, and had little or no engagement with children to support their interaction until a problem emerged between children.

Children in this study can be generally described as reserved and shy. Especially when there is a stranger (a researcher) in class they become more reserved. One of the children in the class of T1<sup>3</sup> barely spoke. Whenever teacher asked a question to Meliha, usually her friends replied on her behalf. Teacher warned other children a couple of times and tried to encourage Meliha to speak out and express her feelings and wishes. However, teacher did not make an extra effort to encourage her to speak or did not push her to speak.

T1: Please! Do not reply. I am not asking you (referring to the class). I am asking Meliha.

Meliha: (She did not reply or speak)

T1: Of course she can speak. You know that. You should not discourage your friend and reply on her behalf.

Children's underdeveloped language skills hinder them to solve their problems through negotiation. Teachers encourage children to speak more with their friends so that they can understand each other's feelings and learn to express their own feelings. For instance, T5<sup>4</sup> motivate children to ask permission from their friends before they use each other's belongings since taking each other's materials and belongings are common among children during play.

Sinan: Moveeee!

T5: What is going on there?

Sinan: He is ruining my puzzle

Murat: I just want to add a piece

T5: Did you ask him before you had added a piece?

Murat: .....

T5: How do you feel if someone plays with your toy without permission?

### ***Support object Play***

Object play is a type of play in which children learn using, manipulating and mastering tools and objects (Ramsey & McGrew, 2005) and teachers usually describe, explain, give reason or information both for object and fantasy play during free play time. Yet, they only make verbalization on object play.

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<sup>3</sup> T1 stands for Teacher 1.

<sup>4</sup> T5 stands for Teacher 5.

T3<sup>5</sup>: What color is this doll's hair?

Fuat: Red

T3: Is this really red? We learned it yesterday. We did an experiment. We mixed yellow and red liquids and what color did we obtain after this experiment?

Fuat: Orange

T3: Yes we got orange.

Children's language development even affects their choices. When T4<sup>6</sup> delivered play dough to children, they either want red or green. Teacher explained this with limited color knowledge of children since they only recognize and know the names of colors of red and green. Therefore, they could only ask for these colors. Teachers also frequently repeated what children said. When children pronounced a word correctly teachers repeated it as a praise. When children pronounced the word incorrectly, teachers also repeated it to correct mispronunciation. Quotations below illustrate repetitions of teachers:

Suna: Could you give me red play dough?

T4: I will give you red play dough.

Zehra: My dad is going to buy püsküğüt (/ˈpu:sku:3:ut/)

T4: What is he going to buy?

Zehra: Püsküğüt (/ˈpu:sku:3:ut/)

T4: Oh! He is buying bisküvi<sup>7</sup> (/bis'ku:vi/)

As these children come from low social and economic background, they live in a limited environment with little interaction outside world. Therefore, teachers try to provide a wider perspective basing children's knowledge on their familiar experiences in their environment:

T6<sup>8</sup>: What are you drawing here?

Cemal: I am drawing a child?

T6: Who is this child?

Cemal: A Child

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<sup>5</sup> T3 stands for Teacher 3.

<sup>6</sup> T4 stands for Teacher 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bisküvi means biscuit in Turkish

<sup>8</sup> T6 stands for teacher 6.

T6: Why don't you draw your siblings' picture? How many siblings do you have? What are their names?

***Positive social contact***

Teacher praises or encourages the child for peer relation, object play or teacher socialization.

T4 praises a girl both for object play and teacher socialization in the following way:

Ceylan: Look I made rings.

T4: Your rings are beautiful and they look good on you.

In general teachers had to ask questions to initiate a conversation because are children are so shy about approaching teachers. If children start a conversation teachers went on talking with children as much as possible to keep the conversation and to let them speak.

Ahmet: My sister is sick.

T1: Oh! I am so sorry to hear that. What is wrong with her?

Ahmet: Her stomach is aching. My parents take her to....

T1: Did your parents take her to doctor.

Ahmet: Yes

T1: Is she ok now?

Ahmet: Yes

Children's attempt of talking is welcomed by teachers. They did not simply parry what children say but they are genuinely interested in topic and ask additional questions. T6 tried to make children speak as much as possible to practice their language skills:

Kemal: We have a robot in our home.

T6: What is your mother doing with that robot?

Kemal: She is operating it

T6: What does she put in it?

Kemal: Nothing

T6: Is it a toy robot or a food processor?

Kemal: a Toy robot

### ***Behaviour management***

Teachers need to explicitly state rules, redirect a child with firm, clear-cut and short instruction, and tell a child what to do when misbehaving occurred in class. Also teachers are required to gain children consciousness on taking care of classrooms materials by asking questions and using statements. Behaviour management was the most common category appeared in this study and a frequent misbehaviour type was children's complaints about their friends. Teachers did not give much attention to those complaints as long as children were safe.

Samet: 'Look what he is doing with foam!'

T3: It is his choice. Please do not interfere with your friend's work. You are only responsible for your own work.

Welcoming a guest is an important prosocial behavior both in Turkish and Kurdish culture. Therefore, greeting is one of the first topics and practices taught to students in preschool education. Yet, children were often confused on how to greet pre-service teachers in their class. This might happen due to lack of practice. So, children should be more engaged in conversations.

T4: Why did not you welcome our guest in class? Why did not you introduce yourself to her and meet with her?

Children replied their teachers' request all together but some of them say Welcome (in Turkish: Hoşgeldin) some of them say thank you (in Turkish: hoş bulduk).

Teachers do not always remind rules when children disregard them. However, instead they praised children when they followed the rules. As T5 did:

T5: I am thankful to children who put on sleepers before I said to do so.

### ***Practical/ Personal assistance***

Teacher helps child get materials needed for an activity. Early education covers both curricular and caring tasks. This means pre-school teachers are responsible for supporting children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development which could contribute to developing children's self-care skills as well as providing them to safety, warmth, nurture, feeding, and cleaning (Brostrom, 2006). This kind of interaction also includes statements or

questions to help a child store or clean-up projects/toys or help a child choose an activity. Yet, our transcripts show that children's self-care skills are poor in general. Teachers usually had to remind children to clean class and their hands or face all the time.

T3: Foam is messed up all over the table. What are we supposed to do?

Mehmet: We should clean it.

T3: Yes you should. How about your hands? They also look dirty.

Mehmet: I will wash

Mispronunciation is common among children. Teachers frequently assist children to pronounce a word in a proper way.

Tamer: I am going to levebo (/levebo:/)

T1: Are you going to lavabo<sup>9</sup> (/lavabo:/)

Fatma: I am painting this perguven (/pe'rgven/)

T3: You are painting penguin<sup>10</sup> (/pe'ngʊen/)

Children did not always mispronounce word. They misuse some concepts or parts of speech or used unclear and unambiguous words. Teachers corrected children's mistake.

Meral: My father has brought me an object.

T5: What is that object?

Meral: A doll

T5: Well. Your father brought you a doll, then.

### ***Talking to adults, Teacher reads to child, and Uncodable***

Researchers believed that talking to adults and uncodable categories would not provide meaningful information because there were not any adults in class other than the senior pre-school teacher education students who were recording teachers' interaction with children. Uncodable data was children's and teachers' speech of Kurdish speaking. Researchers do not know Kurdish thus verbalization in Kurdish made no sense for them. Kurdish data and data that could not be understood in audio record were not analysed. Also, none of the teachers read to children in free play time.

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<sup>9</sup> It means restroom in English

<sup>10</sup> It means penguin in English.

New curriculum suggested three types of work with children: Individual, small group, large group work (MEB, 2013). Free play time is the best time in daily schedule to work with children individually or in a small group. There are countless studies proving positive that reading a book could improve young children's language development. Still, teacher verbalization of reading to the child has never happened in this study.

There were also bunch of uncodable data in this study. Children spoke in Kurdish several times. Sometimes they spoke all in Kurdish or they used Kurdish and Turkish in the same sentence. So we cannot see the dominance of a particular language in the classroom. Therefore, researcher only coded Turkish statements in this study.

### **Cultural Heritage**

Children's cultural heritage is welcomed in class. When children spoke in Kurdish, there were not any negative reactions from teachers. All the teachers chose their example from children's immediate environment referring to their cultural practices. It is pivotal in new curriculum that children should learn their social, cultural and universal values. New curriculum further emphasizes recognition of cultural and social differences and the importance of living in harmony with all different components in society (MEB, 2013). At the end of one of the free play sessions, one child sang a song and teacher thanked him. Then, other children also wanted to sing. Teacher let them sing one by one. Last child could not sing. T4 expressed that children are free to sing in Kurdish if they feel difficulty in singing in Turkish, but the last child did not sing either in Turkish or in Kurdish.

T4: If you like to sing in Kurdish you can.

Abdullah: .....

One of the girls started school later than her peers. She did not even know basic words such as house or main colours. T2 instructed first this child in Kurdish then explained in Turkish again. T2 repeated the word several times to teach to this child.

T2: What are you doing with these triangle and square? (She asked in Kurdish)

Nurcan: .....

T2: This is house, house, house, house, What is this? House, house (She spoke in Turkish)

C: .....house

This study was carried out from early October to January. Children learned some basic Turkish words but they still struggled to speak fluently in Turkish. Teachers coming from west part of Turkey are required to teach in certain amount of time in east. It should be noted only two of the teacher in this research could speak Kurdish and the rest of teachers had no knowledge of Kurdish. Yet, it is necessary that teachers should learn some basic sentences and words in Kurdish such as “thank you, come, give, flower”. This would help to ease both teachers and children’s life in class and establish a better connection between children.

## **6. Discussion**

This study looks into teachers’ verbalization during free play time in bilingual early education context in order to depict how teachers verbally support children’s language development. In new preschool education curriculum of Turkey, teachers are expected to move the children’s language acquisition forward instead of waiting for them to make their own discoveries. Yet, the findings show that teachers separated themselves from children’s free play and did not necessarily push children’s current level to unearth their true potential. So, there was disengagement between children and teachers and therefore we could see limited guidance and scaffolding needed for language development of children. For these children, free play had a particular importance as they were mostly coming lower economic class. In this sense, even with the limited instructional scaffolding and support, the educational context which involves a classroom setting rich in engaging materials for student development is rather important as these children cannot access these at home.. For this reason, lower class children manipulate and examine materials more than the middle-class children who may have many of the preschool materials at home (Rubin, Maioni, & Hornung, 1976). As such, research of Akdağ (2014) in Van on lower income students showed that teacher usually had great difficulty in finishing free play time activities since children did not want to stop play as they did not have toys at home. Again in Van, where this study was carried out, all public ECE schools offer five hours classes throughout the day and free play time constitutes the largest portion in daily schedule in schools. Therefore, it is highly important that teachers should not miss the opportunity to involve, interact and enhance children play in free play time. Equally important is teachers’ specific roles in children play. Some researchers argue that teachers should carefully interfere in the children play and consider that not all children ready to advance their play (Saracho, 2012) whereas others advocated that teachers should engage in children play to enhance it (Bredekamp & Cople, 1997). Developmentally appropriate



practice supports increasing amount of teacher involvement in children's play. Child initiated and teacher supported play is an important part of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). According to Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog (1997), teacher role mainly includes - but not limited to - socializing, encouraging, and monitoring. Yet, teacher in this study interacted with children without involving in their play. For this reason, Kontos (1999) framework could not be genuinely employed in this study as *activity setting* and *teacher role* were removed from the analytic framework. This did not mean that the study has nothing to offer in terms of teacher's role in student play or teacher-student interaction in ECE. Following conclusions could be drawn from the analysis.

First of all, teachers' talk and interpersonal communication with children primarily focused on reminding rules or praising children verbally about the rules. Class sizes were really small so children mostly played alone during free play time with minimum support positive social contact of teachers. Teachers did not spontaneously praised or encouraged children's peer relations and object play. Thus, children showed their work to teachers to ask for attention to their teachers. However, teachers rather talked to children more about their daily life. For instance, in this study, self-care skills were poor in general so teachers recognized and praised when children carried out their daily life activities such as combing their hair or dressing up carefully.

Secondly, teachers in this study only supported object play (e.g, teacher asked hair color of doll), they did not fuel children's imagination with probing questions on fantasy play (e.g, when a child pretend to cook teacher would ask are you cooking vegetables soups). However, it is more important to support fantasy play since if a children want to turn a block into a telephone, a tablecloth into a cloak, or an empty paper-towel roll into a telescope, they exhibits creativity and teachers should support it (Englebright-Fox and Schirmacher, 2012).

Thirdly, none of the teacher read to the children during free play although majority of studies emphasized positive effects of story book reading on language development. It is a well-known fact that when children engage in story reading, conversation and exposure to novel words, their language skills develop considerably (Collins, 2005). So reading is strongly recommended to improve young children's language development (Roberts, 2008). Roberts (2008) explained how story book reading provides sociolinguistic opportunities for children. First of all interaction that happens during reading stimulates children's language expansions and productions. Beside children engage more in conceptual development by asking questions and connecting story content with previous experiences. Story book reading in early age not only reveals several benefits to vocabulary acquisition for monolingual children but also it

positively affect second-language learners' language development (Collins, 2005; Roberts, 2008). Although preschool education program has separate story book reading time in which all children listen and then discuss a story that their teachers have read them, in free play time teachers would have read to children and work individually with them. This might have offered extensive verbalization between children and teachers.

In terms of zone of proximal development theory, we could see limited dialogic nature of teaching and learning processes as well as socio-cultural activities that could accompany that. As seen, the dialogic interaction was only limited with phonological spelling of the word. Teachers only modelled the spelling and syntax of words and phrases. Locating the ZPD requires providing scaffolding that is appropriate for these learners and a close examination how each student achieves as a learner. Yet, teachers' ignorance, lack of assistance and guidance in the learning environment could be argued why students cannot access to a stimulating learning environment that could foster their second language learning. Therefore, when the first and the last transcripts were compared, it could be seen that students in this research showed a minimum level of language development both in their receptive and productive skills. This can explain why in Turkey, many Kurdish speaking students start with limited Turkish skill to the primary school even if they take early childhood education.

The study also shows that the curricula and education offered lacks multifaceted form of organized cultural activity operating at multiple levels and cultural based educational praxis. So, if it was possible to offer multicultural bilingual programmes according to the needs of the children, their mother-tongue skills and second-language skills would improve. Then those skills would enable children to get broader educational opportunities. They would also develop stronger self-esteem, self-confidence and cultural and social values, mutual respect for the cultural values of the second language (Yazıcı, İlter & Glover, 2010). When children experience disharmony between the school and home cultures their self-esteem dramatically decreases (Yazıcı, İlter & Glover, 2010). When this low self-esteem combines with low school achievement because of language deficiencies, children easily get lost in education system. So, a bilingual education with a socio-cultural perspective should look into fundamental characteristics of the ZPD as a set of interactive processes. Individual development cannot be understood or looked into without referring to the social and cultural context in which the learning is embedded.

However, it is not possible to prepare those programmes in Turkey's current centralized education system. This is because bilingual programs are not only educational matters in Turkey rather they are highly political issue due to Kurdish and Turkish conflict. Even though

bilingual education could not be implemented in Turkish public schools there is supporting evidence that informally using two languages simultaneously in class have positive effects on children's cognitive, language and literacy abilities (Garcia, 2011). Two teachers spoke Kurdish when children did not understand Turkish instruction. Although teachers' Kurdish speaking was really limited, it was very effective indeed. This show that even a bit of cultural and social interpersonal engagement plays an important role in developing the cognitive development of students at a minimum level. Therefore, it can be suggested that all teachers working in bilingual setting in Turkey should learn basic instructions such as sit, come, give, hold and this would ease teachers' struggle in class at the beginning of school year.

The research also poses significant suggestions and implications for teacher education. The population of children using two languages for communication is likely to increase in Turkey in the near future. It could be argued that Turkish educational system cannot completely accomplish teaching Turkish to ethnic groups (particularly Kurdish groups in Eastern Turkey). In addition to ethnic groups, Turkey is hosting almost two million Syrian refugees who escape from the civil war in Syria. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, 1.622.839 Syrian refugees are living in Turkey (UNCHR, 2015). Arrival of this huge population increases the needs of bilingual education program in Turkey. Preschool teacher education programs are insufficient in training teachers for children with diverse backgrounds (Akdağ, 2014). Small but effective steps could be taken by revising teacher education program. First of all, teaching Turkish as a second language should find a place in teacher education program. Teachers should be trained as being ready for diversity. Preschool education program emphasizes importance of planning educational activities based on individual differences. Yet, individual differences are an ambiguous concept in program. Turkey is a melting pot of several ethnic groups and religion sectarian but these groups has never been represented in teacher education program. Preschool teacher education program students are required to prepare several lesson plans and educational material because of the nature of the teaching young children. Prospective teachers might be required to prepare some of their lesson plans and educational materials considering the needs of diverse background of children. Besides, there must be more sources for preschool teachers who teach to Turkish as a second language.

Lastly, parents' involvement and parents education is also fundamental parts of preschool education. Teachers could teach Turkish to parents and they might learn their language in return. This would bring benefits in terms of both educational achievement and acculturation.

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## THE CHILD'S VISION ON THE WORLD

*<sup>4</sup>The aim of this study was to focus on 'The Child's Vision on the World'. This was explored through identifying a key question 'What is Important in the Child's World?' Two academics who are Senior Lecturers in Early Childhood Education and Care at Newman University, Birmingham, worked with a team of four student researcher as part of a Students as Research Partners Project. As academics and student researchers we wanted to explore what young children felt was important within their life worlds at any given time and discuss with them what made these ideas important to them. The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) provides an impetus to consider the potential for including children's views on matters that concern them, but there has, historically been a dearth of methodology resources that focus on research in relation to children. Lahman (2008:289) states that even in recent editions of key texts based on qualitative research, such as that by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), reference is not made to 'research with children'. There has been, according to Mauthner (1997:16), a surge in methodological publications which only serve to problematize the notion of researching with children in terms of who the child is and what their positioning to the researcher might be. Within the last decade however, there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of engaging young children in research, particularly in the work by Clark and Moss around the Mosaic Approach (2001:6) which establishes the notion of children as social actors who are able to be competent communicators and thinkers within the research process.*

### Literature Review

This research aims to give us a glimpse of childhood from the perspective of the child. It will hopefully give us a small window into the world of the child and what is important to them in their own world. We can never go back to our childhood but can make attempts to understand the childhood of children in today's world, but only with an adult lens. This puts considerable constraints on the research but still makes it a worthwhile area to explore. This literature review aims to explore issues of childhood, as the focus of our study, including definitions

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and the complex nature of this. It will also consider the historical discourses around childhood to contextualise the research. Other themes considered throughout include the importance of listening to children and the shift of research *on children* to research *with children*, supporting our methodological decisions. It is difficult to predict the themes that may arise from the research findings, but key issues such as technology, family and friendships, school and play will be explored as key themes we feel are important to children today. This again is with our adult lens and may be disputed within the findings!

### **What is childhood?**

The debate around childhood has continued for many years from Aries (1962) narratives around childhood beginnings and childhood discovered, to the death of childhood explored by Postman (1983). The history of modern childhood as an invention started to interest the minds of historians from the 1960's. Coster (2007:4) explores the work of Aries (1962) and how his influences of the 'discovery of childhood' were at the forefront of highlighting the socially constructed nature of childhood from the Middle Ages onwards. Aries (1962) suggested that in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist and believed that evidence indicated that once they were old enough to fend for themselves, children were simply treated as mini adults. These claims were later critiqued by Pollock (1983); however Aries (1962) claims and framework still remain fundamental to childhood studies.

Childhood is a social constructed and highly contested concept. There is no single definition of childhood; people have been developing measures and discourses around the concept of childhood for hundreds of years. Childhood is therefore seen as a construction, influenced by the social, political, economic and cultural conditions of the time. There is no one single agreed definition for the nature of childhood, however it can be seen that it is largely based on the attitudes, beliefs and values of particular societies at particular times. Mills (2000:9) shares this view stating, "it is clear that childhood, or rather childhoods, are social constructions, cultural components inextricably linked to variables of race, class, gender, culture and time". Baxter (2005:5) stated that childhood was always perceived as a dual relationship between cultural aspects within an upbringing of a child and the paradigms of the society at that time. However, Uprichard (2008:303) would argue that the individual child progresses through many vicissitudes within life, until they reach adolescence, and through these challenges they repeat the progress through the paradigm of 'being a child' and 'becoming an adult'.

Policy has attempted to define childhood in the concept of when a child becomes an adult, highlighted within the age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales of 10 years old (Gov.Uk 2014). However, even this is contradicted with laws on when a child can legally have sexual relationships at 16. For younger children the law says anyone under the age of 13 can never legally give consent. This means that anyone engaging in sexual activity with a child who is 12 or younger will be subject to penalties set out under the Sexual Offences Act 2003. Yet there is no law stating when a child can be left alone at home! The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF,1999) defines a child as everyone under 18 unless, "under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". The UK has ratified this convention (NSPCC 2015). This array of contradictions in themselves highlight the complex multi-layered discourses around childhood and the law.

### **Historical discourses of childhood**

To consider the historical discourses of childhood we need to first explore the idea of discourses and hegemony within our society. Discourses could be described as the way we use language to support or construct certain views of the world. Based on the work of Foucault (1978), discourses have become accepted but begin to be analysed and considered in more detail. What we are 'allowed' to say or 'not allowed' to say based upon culture, policy, ideology, not only changes the way we describe things but our actual lived experience of them. As Wells (2009:2) states, childhood is socially constructed and children's lives are profoundly and constantly being adapted to reflect wider society, there is no child that can merely live within the accordance of their own ideas. Foucault (1978:100) argues that understanding discourse gives the opportunity for resistance and challenge. He goes further to argue that if society can understand the hegemony and dominant discourse which are presented then they have more opportunity to resist the change and challenge society (Foucault, 1984:78).

By hegemony, Gramsci (1891 – 1937) meant the "permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations. .... To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalised by the population it becomes part of what is generally called '*common sense*' (Gramsci, no date, cited in Burke 1999). The media uses this to its full advantage exploiting words such as 'job' 'hoodie' etc to give us a view of children today, but has this always been

the case. Throughout history there have been many historical forces and discourses that have shaped the different constructs of how we view children and childhood.

The Romantic Perspective of childhood often attributed to Rousseau (1712-1778) paints a picture of children being innocent and in need of protection. The idea central to this discourse was that it was possible to preserve the original perfect nature of the child by means of the careful control of his education and environment, based on an analysis of the different physical and psychological stages which he passed from birth to maturity. Gabriel (2007) discusses this and considers the importance of recognising the influence of social and personal constructs of childhood on adults that may result in unreliable and often romanticised memories of their own childhood experiences.

This could be seen in direct contrast to the mainly Victorian puritanical discourse of childhood. Children are seen as born intrinsically evil, with parents need to rid children of evil tendencies by teaching them to be good using stern discipline. This discourse is echoed in the literature and art of the time including works such as “Jane Eyre” Bronte (1847) and “Oliver Twist” Dickens (1838). However, this historical discourse is still relevant today in many parenting programmes and the emphasis on conformist behaviour at a very early age that is rewarded with stickers and star charts. The idea of the “naughty step” also resounds here.

The Utilitarian Perspective however, gives the indication that Children are an investment in the nation's future human capital. Education is seen as a preparation for school and later for work. Children and young people are to be formed and that each stage of development needs specific policies to address the needs that arise. The suggestion that children left to their own devices have a good chance of deviant or unlawful behaviour gives some links to social policy.

Other historical discourses include, the Bowlbian discourse related to Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1971) that infants are in need of protection and care. These behaviours are shaped in order for the child to survive. The Jesuit Perspective sees children as empty vessels needing to be filled with knowledge, educational approaches were based on instruction by experts, the adults. The Neo-liberalist Perspective advocates freedom of choice for individuals and promotes economic development. Children within this perspective should be brought up in a stable nuclear family. There are constructs within this perspective around the idea of children as customers and consumers. Children are seen as competent individuals, advertising confirms this discourse, 81% of three to six year olds remember having seen the Coca Cola logo and 69% remember the McDonald's yellow M. By the age of five or six, most children are aware of the rudiments of advertising, and by the age of eight, children are aware of the promotional

and persuasive role of advertising, Ofcom (2010). The Marxist Perspective sees society as unequal and proposes that the structural inequality of society significantly affects chances in childhood. It sees education as an active process involving the co construction of knowledge as a means for the redistribution of power in society.

The developmental discourse, related to theorists such as Piaget (1929), had a major impact on education and our school system in the 1980's. It may be that passive views of children reinforced by developmental discourse that are seen as a particular feature of Early Childhood, where Early Years practitioners have often been trained to accept this view as uncontroversial (Barron, 2005 and Flear and Robbins, 2007). Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992:39-40) are similarly concerned that this set of beliefs can significantly affect how practitioners perceive children, "it has become a story with such compelling plausibility it has overwhelmingly acquired the status of incontrovertible truth, this is the way things really are".

The current debate around childhood is concerned with 'The death of childhood' Buckingham (2000). A supposed decline of literacy which is seen as the essential gateway to 'knowledge' has challenged the idea of the developmental discourse. Children and young people now access 'knowledge' both earlier and through routes not controlled by 'adults' (TV and online) leading to concerns around the sexualisation of childhood and in some cases a 'moral panic'. As a consequence mediating influence of 'maturity' is reduced, there is a move to what Buckingham (2000) calls post-literate society. This potentially 'problematizes' childhood as a threatening or dangerous time that needs to be controlled by adults to maintain order (Coster (2007), Postman (1983) & Buckingham (2000)). The following themes considered here are discerned by the adult researchers and may not relate to the perspective of the child.

## **Childhood Themes**

### **Technology**

The debate around loss of childhood and children growing up too fast may hide deeper fears around sexuality and consumerism, of all the anxieties about a modern childhood, one of the greatest is focused on technology. Much debate is centred on whether the mass media "harm children and 'poison' or 'take away' their innocent childhoods turning them into greedy passive consumers (Palmer, 2007) or else enrich children's lives, liberate and 'empower' them through engagement, mainly through the internet, and also fashion, magazine and music

(Kehily 2003, cited in Alderson, 2008:104). According to Miller (no date, cited in Curtis, 2013) children should be allowed to embrace technology, but only as a part of a broader existence, and in the knowledge that it will change and shape them for better and for worse”. In this sense Branston and Stafford (2010:139) argue that technology has changed from one to one (telegraphy, print) to one to many (broadcast speeches, radio, TV) to many to many (social media). One of the key concerns within modern attitudes towards technology is its impact on children and how this anxiety leads to an “emotive call for action” according to Jones (2009:25). The Romantic discourse around a child being innocent and in need of protect is forefront here but contradicts the perspective of the child being a threat to themselves, each other and to adults. Data by Ofcom (2014:2) shows an increased trend in the usage of technology especially the tablet from ages 3, but is this a threat to childhood?

The outcome of the collision between technology and childhood is emergent and at this stage still uncertain. Technology has begun to create shifts in the character of childhood and children’s positions within a discourse. Prout (2005:124) suggests that the internet and TV offer opportunities for children to extend the reach of their own experiences in a way never conceived before and thus multiplying the information they encounter. Technology will no doubt impact upon childhood, but we must remember that childhood does not occur in a social vacuum and as McDowall Clark (2013:132) asserts the anxieties of technology are a wider part of society and reflect a much broader cultural unease. The idea of dissatisfaction with modern childhood is augmented, according to McDowall Clark (2013:131), by the media and technology. Never before has the child held so much power in rhetoric including children’s rights, increased choice and a command of what they experience and when due to the technological age. Children defy the developmentalists and make their own paths. However, they are still bound by an education system that undervalues them and stilts their creativity. Bakan (2011) considers “Childhood under Siege” with the perspective of the child as the consumer and the ruthless manipulation of children by big business, and on society’s failure to protect them. Children are seen as having agency and in the same breath being a threat to the very fabric of society. With all this in mind, it is vital to research children’s views on their own childhood and really ‘listen’ to their perspectives.

### **Family and Friendships**

Family and friendships are seen as crucial to children, from the theoretical perspective of Bronfenbrenner (1979 cited in Palaiologou 2013) and the family around the child to the research studies around children and friendships (Carsaro 1979, Corsaro and Eder, 1990,

Dunn 2004, Ladd 1990). Many studies use friendships as a way to predict successful transitions , such as Kingery et al (2011) and discuss friendship as peer acceptance. In theoretical terms friendship begins with the ideas around attachment presented by people such as Bowlby (1971), Ainsworth and Bell (1970) and Harlow (1959) among others. This has been developed in recent terms with research around relationships between children and parents attributional styles (Goldner et al, 2015). Family has been seen as influencing children's education and life chances (Sylva et al 2004). Friendships with schools are discussed in research by Te One (2011) when making an attempt to explore children's perspectives, however this research is limited. The focus has mainly been from the adults' perspective and how practitioners support friendships within settings rather than the children's own accounts. Work by Danby et al (2012) tries to redress this balance offering an insight into the strategies children use to make friends. Rogers and Evans (2006) puts forward the idea of friendships being more important than the content and nature of play when they explore role play from children's perspectives. From this, it would be expected that friendships and family appear as a dominant subject in this research and a key theme from the children's drawings.

### **School and play**

As this research was conducted within schools it was an expectation that school, in some form, may appear within the drawings made by the children. Hamilton et al (2011) highlights the point that research has increasingly identified the perception of school environment as an influential factor in children's lives. Positive correlations have been found between perceptions of school and self, and school achievement (Burton et al, 2005, UNICEF, 2007) and the importance of positive perceptions. Daniels et al (2001) explored young children's perspectives on learning and teacher practices in different classroom contexts and discussed the implications for motivation. The main conclusion drawn was that it is important to consider children's perspectives of teaching and learning contexts. Although this research had a focus on motivation it still highlights the importance of children's perceptions of school and their impact.

Play has long been a subject of debate, but it is widely accepted that play makes a valuable contribution to the development of children (Moyles, 1989, Howard et al, 2002). It has been studied from many angles including philosophical, psychological and pedagogical, with much discussion around the definition of play (Wood and Attfield, 1996). Many ideas around play come from an adult notion of play and observational research, rather than an



engagement with children to make an attempt to understand their perspectives. Although this is not within the scope of this research we hope to elicit whether play is important to the children and in what forms. Wiltz and Klein (2001) may a good attempt to explore children's perceptions of a sample of 122 children. This study highlighted that play was the favourite activity of all children in all classrooms. Children offered many more positive than negative perspectives, revealing an optimistic outlook that did not depend upon the quality of the setting. However, the theme of play may not arise within this research due to the idea put forward by Manning and Sharp (1977) who propose that children cannot distinguish play from other activities. This is supported by the theoretical perspectives of Isaacs (1932). If this is the case children may not identify this as being important to them within they drawings, as it is who they are rather than something they do!

## **Methodology**

### **Paradigm, Approach and Research Questions**

In terms of undertaking social research there has been much controversy over the most appropriate model to utilise and consequently the most appropriate methods to employ (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995:2). This stems from opposing views around the idea that research should be concerned with 'systematic inquiry' and positivists argue that this therefore implies the nature of the inquiry should be scientific. This contrasts with the view of non-positivists who insist that researching the social world can still incorporate systematic inquiry but this inquiry does not have to be of a scientific nature (*Ibid*).

This particular study focusses on empirical research and considers the 'Voice of the Child' with the aim of the research being to explore 'The Child's Vision on the World'. In order to deconstruct this broad aim a focus was taken therefore which explored 'What is Important in the Child's World?' Given the nature of the study an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm was utilised. This paradigm draws on ideas from Lincoln et al. (2000 cited in Creswell 2003:8) which assume that 'individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work.'(Creswell 2003:8). From an ontological and epistemological stance it acknowledges that realities are developed socially and experientially (Guba 1990:27 cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2011:103) and that meaning and reality is constructed based on our interactions with others and our surroundings. The philosophical underpinning of this paradigm is congruent with the aim of the research and therefore enabled the researchers and research participants to co-construct, elicit, interpret and understand how meanings and ideas

are constructed around the phenomenon of interest (Lauckner, et al. 2012:7), in this case around significant aspects of children's life worlds . This paradigm is synonymous with qualitative research which is a commonly used approach in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care within England. For the purposes of this study qualitative research has been defined as a method of inquiry that involves an interpretative approach to research undertaken in a naturalistic setting, in this case children's school settings. Adopting a qualitative methodology enabled in this instance the researchers to learn from first-hand experience about the child's life worlds, which are investigated through involvement and participation, focussing upon in detail what individual child participants say and do (Hitchcock and Hughes 1995) and capturing the child's individual point of view. It is concerned with eliciting rich, detailed in-depth data in non-numerical forms (Blaxter et al 2001). A case study approach was used to frame the research as it enabled the researchers to undertake a detailed examination of a specific phenomenon within four different educational settings, which in this instance was investigating what was important in children's life worlds. The typology of the case study used here can be categorized as a partially ethnographic case study as outlined by Stenhouse (1985 cited in Cohen et al 2011:291) as each researcher was attempting to build their own 'case' through engaging with children in four different school settings, coming to an understanding of what they perceive as is important within their worlds and consequently attempting to draw meaning from what children state in order to make sense of the social setting and social relationships. It was intended that this approach would enable the researchers to seek to contextualise the research 'problem' within wider contexts and allow an in-depth picture to be built up from the individual cases being studied. It was not the intent to generalize the findings as according to Bassey (1999) this may be problematic in terms of external validity, however the findings from the case studies could possibly be discussed in terms of 'reliability' indicating that themes that emerged from the research in terms of what is important in children's worlds may bear resemblance to children's opinions across other settings. Elements of a Grounded Theory approach were also evident. The key question was very broad as we did not want to influence the children's responses in anyway, i.e. getting them to discuss what was important within their home, their school, their leisure time. It was therefore difficult to predict themes that may emerge from the data. Instead we wanted to let the data 'speak for themselves' (Denscombe 2003:111) and allow theories and concepts to emerge from the data without having a rigid set of ideas that would frame the research prior to undertaking the data collection.

### **Research Settings, Sample and the Role of the Researcher**

The research was undertaken within three Primary Schools in major conurbations of the city of Birmingham in the West Midlands, England, namely Wolverhampton, Solihull and Handsworth and additionally in one primary school in Worcester. The schools were selected by the student researchers who were all either in their second or third year of undertaking a BA (Hons) degree in Early Childhood Education and Care and who either had previously undertaken a placement within that setting, were parents of children who attended the setting, were a parent Governor of the setting, or worked within the setting alongside studying for their degree. All schools had a diverse population of children from different ethnic backgrounds such as children from Afro Caribbean, White British and Asian backgrounds. Specific year groups within each of these settings were selected to fit in with the remit of early childhood research;

- Two students researchers based their research in Reception classes with children aged between 4 and 5 years old
- One student researcher based their research in Reception, Year one and Year two classes
- One student researcher based their research in Year 2 with children aged between 6 and 7 year olds.

Due to the fact that the aim of the research was to identify ‘what was important within the child’s world’, it was decided that children would be the main participants. However in some settings practitioners also expressed an interest in the study and so informal conversations with some practitioners were also noted. In total 41 children were involved within the research study.

Much consideration was given to the sampling process as we wanted all student researchers to be consistent in their approach but we were also mindful of the fact that some student researchers were very familiar with the setting and already knew the children well, whereas other researchers were less familiar with the setting and the children. Due to the limited time available in order to gain data, and as a result of the pilot which showed that for some students gaining consent from parents initially was a problem, it was identified that a convenience sampling strategy would be undertaken. This was based on identifying children whose parents had given consent, where children had given assent, and children who were

available to take part on the day and were able to participate without this interrupting the naturalistic flow of the day to day activities.

Parents were approached in order to gain written informed consent for their child to take part in the study. Parents were informed that they had the right to withdraw their child from the study at any time and that data would remain confidential and anonymity would be assured through not naming either children or the settings within the study. The sample selected in terms of age and gender can be seen in the table below:

<b>Age of Boys in Years</b>	<b>Number of male participants</b>	<b>Number of female participants</b>	<b>Total</b>
4	7	8	15
5	4	3	7
6	9	9	18
7	1		1
			<b>41</b>

This study was undertaken collaboratively between two Academic staff at Newman University, who coordinated the project and four undergraduate students who were either in their second or third year of their Early Childhood Education and Care degree programme. Students were responsible for undertaking the data collection and were guided by the Academic staff. It was important to consider the role of the student researchers whilst gathering data as participatory research with children as opposed to undertaking researching *on* children is a relatively new concept. We wanted children to feel that they were ‘experts in their own lives’ (Clarke and Moss 2001) and meaning makers therefore it was important to consider the relationship between the researcher and the child and for the researchers to realise that this is ‘a delicate process....characterized by intimacy and negotiation’( Mauthner 1997 21:22).By undertaking this approach it was hoped that the research would help us all to understand childhood and children in the context of understanding how children’s experiences influence their life worlds.

## **Research Methods**

Data was generated through two main methods, children's drawings and semi structured interviews, however some informal conversations were undertaken with practitioners. Punch (2002: 321-341) raises an interesting question that if as researchers we uphold the view that children are competent social actors within the research process, then why is there a need to include 'child friendly methods'? The rationale for using children's drawings in this instance was that this was a task based method that was fit for purpose by being 'participant friendly' (Fraser,2004: 25 ) and not simply 'child friendly', it was also a method that undergraduate researchers felt comfortable with undertaking. The drawing of pictures also allowed for an opening to another method of data collection, in this case semi structured interviews. Each child was asked to draw a picture of 'What is important in your world?' Researchers were careful not to lead children in their drawings by asking questions around specific areas such as what they liked to do at school or home as we did not want to steer the research from this perspective. Clarification was given on occasions to children on the word 'important' and 'world' with agreed prepared responses of 'something that means a lot to you' and 'in your life'. Ethical considerations were of paramount importance. Children's assent was gained through asking each child if they were happy to be involved in the study through drawing a picture and answering some questions about their picture. No time limit was given for children to complete the task, but researchers were mindful that if children looked disinterested or reluctant to continue then the children would be asked if they wanted to continue and if not the research was stopped. Continuing assent is vital in research with children and children were asked if their drawings could be shared with other people. It was important that children did their drawings in a naturalistic situation and were not withdrawn from the class or from an activity or lesson that they would have preferred to be involved in as again this could have skewed their responses. By researchers approaching the task in this way it ensured that there was reliability and validity in this method used as all researchers had a shared understanding of the aims of the research. It was important to discuss with the children *what* they had drawn and *why* this was important to them. A brief semi structured interview was undertaken therefore with each child individually and responses recorded using a Dictaphone. Children were prompted on occasions in order to co construct a discussion and subsequent understanding of the responses given. Consideration was given as to whether children should be questioned about their drawings whilst undertaking the drawing itself or post drawing. It was agreed that the interview would be conducted post drawing if possible as this would not then interrupt the engagement of the child in the task and it was the product

that we wanted to discuss and interpret with the child and not the process of drawing. However in some cases children seemed unsure of what to draw and so did need prompting in order to support the drawing process. A total of 41 drawings and 41 accompanying interviews were generated in total with children aged between 4 and 7. These methods allowed children to become engaged in the process and enabled the researchers to view the world through the lens of a child in terms of acknowledging children's perspectives on issues and events that were relevant to them.

### **Findings from the study**

For clarity, the findings are presented from each individual setting and from each student researcher in turn. Due to word count restraints it was not possible to include information from all 41 interviews and drawings, however, the dominant themes that emerged throughout the study are discussed. These are presented in slightly different formats for each setting, but each tells the 'story' of what is important in children's life worlds.

### **Findings from Setting one – A Reception Class – Children aged four and five**

Findings are presented from a total of 8 children – 6 boys and 2 girls.

There were four main themes occurring from the eight participants around 'What is important within your world?' These were; family and friends where children highlighted the importance of their immediate family and their close friends, whom they played with at school or regularly saw at home; travel and going places, which they described as holidays or being taken to places which were outside in the sun; school and learning which was discussed through topic links made from what they had previously learnt in school, books and specific curriculum subjects that they enjoy; play and imaginative play that occurred as a description of what they enjoyed doing with their friends but also appeared in the format of characters they aspire to become. It is also relevant to mention that this research was carried out just prior to Christmas and therefore children's excitement, along with the activities both at home and at school may have influenced the images they drew.

Five children within the study discussed family and friends as one of the most important things in their world. Two children highlighted their mothers as the most important person in their life;

Researcher: (asks child N about his drawing) 'So who's that?'

Child N: Mummy

Researcher: 'So mummy is the most important thing to you?'

Child N: Yes

Researcher: 'That's lovely, and why is mummy special to you?'

N: 'Mummy....because she buys me sweets'

Researcher: (asks child O about his drawing) 'Is there anything else that is important to you or special in your life?'

Child O: 'err, daddy and mummy, my mummy's the best. I love my mummy the best.'

Two children made a direct correlation between parents and going places as the justification for their importance, thereby identifying their parents as the gatekeepers to their travelling experiences;

My parents are important because;

Child O: 'They take me everywhere.'

Child M: 'Because we get to go out.'

Two of the children expressed that their younger siblings were one of the most important things in their world;

Researcher: 'So what have you drawn?'

Child M: 'My sister.'

Researcher: 'And why is your sister important to you?'

Child M: 'Because she is poorly, and I'm looking after her.'

Researcher: (asks child N about his drawing) 'Why is your brother important to you?'

N: 'Because he plays with me.'

Two children indicated that their friends were one of the most important things in their world;

Researcher: 'That's a lovely picture, who's this?'

Child L: 'Susan'

Researcher: 'And who is Susan?'

Child L: 'My friend, she's five.'

Researcher: 'Wow she's five! Any why is this important to you?'

Child L: 'Because she is my friend and I like her'.

Researcher: 'Who's that then L (pointing to another character in the picture)'

Child L: 'Milly'

Researcher: 'And who is Milly?'

Child L: 'My friend.'

Researcher: 'And why is she important to you?'

Child L: 'Because she plays with me'.

Researcher: 'What are you drawing there?'

Child M: 'Me, Nicky and Alan. This is going to be me.'

Researcher: 'Why are you three important?'

Child M: 'Because we are best friends.'

Two children highlighted holidays and being taken places as one of the most important things in their world;

Child M: 'I went to Scotland. I'm going to draw Scotland and I'm going to put me on there....with my Mom, my auntie, one of my uncles and my Nan'

Researcher: (pointing to a picture of the world) 'This is the world? Why is the world important to you?'

Child O: 'Because we can go different places, Greece and Portugal, that's Portugal, that's Greece and that's Spain.'

Six children identified toys and play in its various forms as one of the areas they felt was important to them in their world, three of their responses are captured here;



Child J: 'I'm going to draw a pirate ship.'

Researcher: 'And why is a pirate ship important to you?'

Child J: 'Because I like them.'

Researcher: 'Is that the flag?'

Child J: 'That's the flag; I need to do it bigger...there that's my pirate ship. Can I write my name on it, but I'm going to write Jonathan because that's how the school like me to write it.... oh there one more thing, but I need loads of green for this. It has four legs, it's got a very long neck, it's a diplodocus.'

Researcher: 'And why is a diplodocus important to you?'

Child J 'Because I like dinosaurs. He has a purple tail I think; I think diplodocuses have a purple tail.'

Researcher: (Asks Child A about his drawing)

Child A: 'It's like a key, it's to do with Power Rangers

Researcher: 'Oh, ok, you like Power Rangers?'

Child A: 'Yes, argh how can I draw him, he's got gold, black and silver...the most important thing on him is the silver.'

Researcher: 'Why is this important to you?'

Child A: 'So I can be all the Rangers. I want them all for Christmas.'

Two of the children who identified toys and play within their pictures as the most important things in their world may have been influenced by the time of year and seasonal topics.

Child M commented that bikes were important as 'We get to ride them like this..' (And did an impression of riding a bike).

Only one child made direct links about what was important within his school world within his picture.

Researcher: 'So what else is important to you?'

Child M: 'Writing

Researcher: 'Why is writing important to you?'

Child M: 'Because you get to write your own words.'

Researcher: 'What else is important to you?'

Child M: Hmm, let me think. Learning, learning new sounds in phonics, and key words, because I get to write....and my teachers and the classroom because I like learning.'

Books were identified as important by three children; the types specified in this particular piece of research were story books and memory books;

Child M1: 'Books are important ...because you get to read them'

Child M2 talked about his drawing of an elf 'we have to find the elf.... if I had magic I would escape.'

Researcher: 'Escape from where?'

Child M2: 'From a bear home in the forest like in the book.'

Researcher: 'What have you drawn?'

Child O: 'My long time ago book.'

Researcher: 'Can you tell me about your long time ago book, why is it important?'

Child O: 'Daddy when he was little he had a book that was important, a little book....he has ten books, they have another one so it is from when they were married and (pointing to another picture) that's a big book I had when I was little from when I was a baby. It was a really really long time ago'

It can therefore be seen that family and play are the two most consistent themes within this research as they are occurring most frequently within the responses. The results from the research carried out provided an interesting insight in to the daily influences that affect the children's perceptions of their world, however due to the gender inequality and small sample size this is an unrepresentative sample and therefore is not generalizable.

### **Findings from Setting two– Reception/Year 1/Year 2 -Children aged four to seven.**

Findings are presented from a total of 9 children – 5 boys and 4 girls.

The main themes that were found from this group of children were family, education, leisure and nature.

Out of the nine children, seven referred to family as important within their world. However, three of the children discussed why their parent/carer/family was important, two

mentioned their siblings being important and two referred to their home as being important in their world.

As mentioned, three of the children within this research stated that either their mum/dad or both were important in their world and child A (aged 6) stated that:

‘My mum and dad are special because I love them’.

Child B (aged 4) was extremely enthusiastic about drawing what she felt was important in her world, and drew her family which included myself, the researcher. She wrote a message saying ‘I love you’, and a heart and when asked why this was important she said:

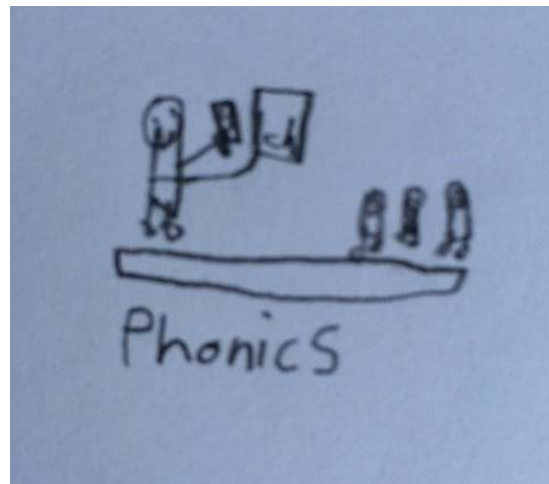


‘..Because that means you love your family’.

In addition out of the two children that discussed why their siblings were important to them, one stated:

‘Because he’s more little than me, and I need to take care of him or he gets hurt’.

Another common theme within this group was the importance of ‘Education’. More than half of the children referred to education being important and this was a total of five out of the nine children, four being boys and one girl. Child C who was 7 years old stated:



‘This is phonics, if we don’t do phonics, we don’t know about new words’....he also drew himself doing his maths homework and said, ‘If I don’t do it, I’ll be in trouble because I didn’t do homework’.

The other three children drew books and all said that reading was important because they either liked it or enjoyed reading.

Another theme which five out of nine children related to was the theme of 'Leisure'. All five children drew a certain activity they enjoyed doing, such as 'playing with their friend', 'painting at home' or 'playing an instrument'.

Some other themes that arose but were not very common were 'religion' and 'technology'.



Child D, who was aged 6 drew his house within a castle along with his parents. When asked why this was important to him he said:

'..Because they are Muslim'.

This theme was not very common but was the only idea that Child D explored which indicates that it

was important to him.

Similar to the religion theme, 'technology' was only referred to once. Child E (aged 6) was very reluctant to draw anything at first, but once he started, he put in a lot of effort to draw a computer and once asked to talk about it, he said he used it for research.



In addition, Child E also drew his pet insects and mentioned scientific facts about them.

When asked what sort of topics he liked to research he pointed at the drawing of his insects and said that it was important.

Although these themes were not as common as family, leisure and education it was evident that

they were still very important to certain children.

### **Findings from Setting Three – A Year 2 Class Children aged six and seven**

Findings are presented from a total of 16 children – 6 boys and 10 girls

The main theme, taken from the analysis of the drawings and the discussions with children was the importance of family. Children either drew just one parent or the family unit

or sometimes included themselves. Another dominant theme that emerged from the children's drawings was that of nature and the outdoors. Eight children included images of outdoors, sun, rainbows, rain clouds, flowers and butterflies. Food was another theme with five children drawing images of their favourite types of food. Other items of importance for the group, but not in such high numbers, were things such as; hobbies (three children), the time of year (Christmas) (three children), holidays (three children), dinosaurs (one child), the Queen (one child), reading (one child), and school (one child).

It must be noted that not all children concentrated on any one particular theme and that some of the analysis shows a mixture of preferences by the children.

For those children who chose 'family' as being the most important aspect to their world it was apparent, through discussion, that they felt they could not survive without the love and care of those within their immediate family circle, parents and siblings.

Child D: 'I've drawn my family because I cannot live without them.'

Researcher: 'Who have you drawn?'

Child B: 'My mum.'

Researcher: 'Why is your mum important to you?'

Child B: 'She makes food for us...and she does vacuum cleaning the house and she tidies up.'



Of the eleven children, who chose family, two boys included their homes within the designs as this played an integral part of their family unit and offered them security. One of the other



boys chose to draw his family unit outside the family home, their garden (child 'I'), as he expressed how much pleasure the family gained from spending time having barbeques, parties and playtime.



Child I 'This is me in my garden.'

Child G 'A house is good for me or I would have nowhere to live'.

Seven of the children, six girls and one boy, randomly drew pictures of their parent(s) with no specific background or situation. These were literally drawn at any point of their choosing within their designs. One child, female, drew both of her parents walking her to school on a winter's day. Five of the children, three girls and two boys, included their siblings within their interpretation of their family unit and consequently deemed them as equally important to them.

'Nature and the Outdoors' came second to that of 'families' as a theme for the research and as can be seen previously some have linked their families to outdoor environments, walking to school, playing in the garden etc. Others chose elements such as; butterflies, flowers, the beach and jumping on a bouncy castle. Only one child referred to school within their drawing.



**Child N: 'School is important to me because I like work'**

**Findings from Setting four – A Reception Class - Children aged four years**

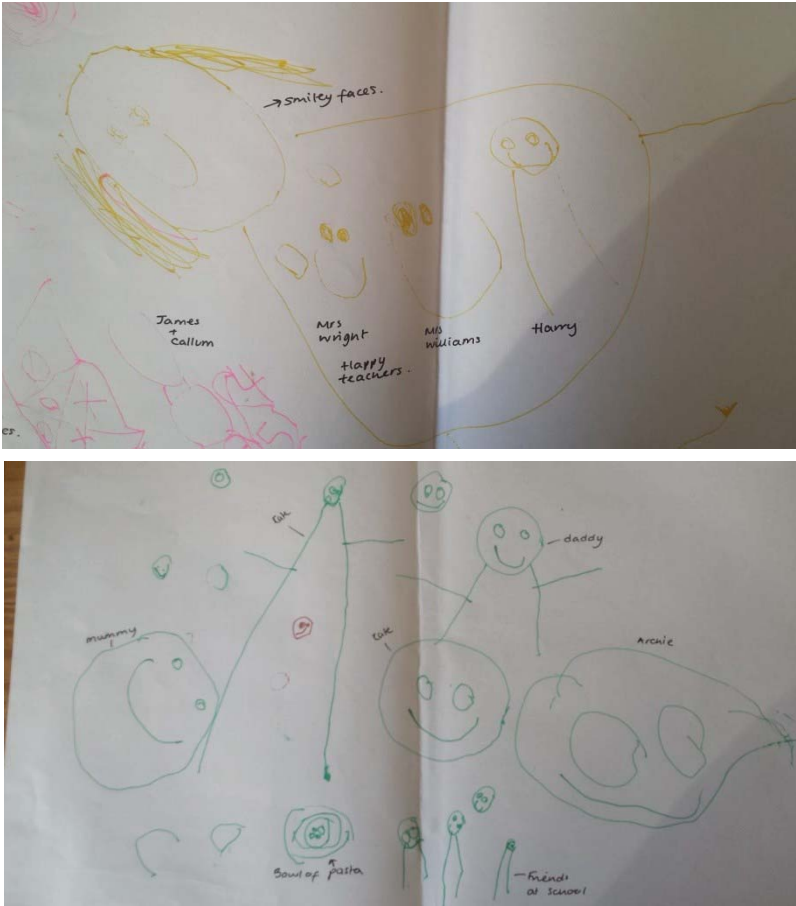
Findings are presented from a total of ten children – six boys and four girls

Upon analysis of these drawings it was identified that seven of the children drew their families; within this four children drew their pets as they considered them to be members of the family. It was not just the immediate family that were drawn but also included extended members of the family for example grandparents and cousins, whom the children had close connections with and saw on a regular basis. The children described why each of the family members were important to them - for example one boy explained that his dad worked away in other countries for long periods of time and when he comes home it ‘made his day’, they spend all their time together and that they enjoy building dens and playing games and walking their dog in the fields. He explained that when his dad has to leave to go away he is very upset and his mum tells him off because he can be naughty, but this was backed up with him saying ‘I am only naughty because I don’t like him leaving me’. Upon having a conversation with the class teacher she said it is evident that his father is an important figure in his life as his behaviour changes within the school and upon the first few days of his dad leaving he often does not want to leave school with his mum at the end of the day. The boys when talking about their parents referred to playing with them, be it football, helping clean the car or playing rough. Whereas with the girls they described spending time with equally their mothers and their fathers to baking cakes and playing ‘mummies and dollies’ - they drew the picture of them playing a more nurturing role. All of the children that drew family members described and referred to them being important because they cared for them, they looked after them when they were poorly and there was a strong emphasis on emotional and physical attachment.



**Girl A’s drawing of the importance of family members, pets and objects**

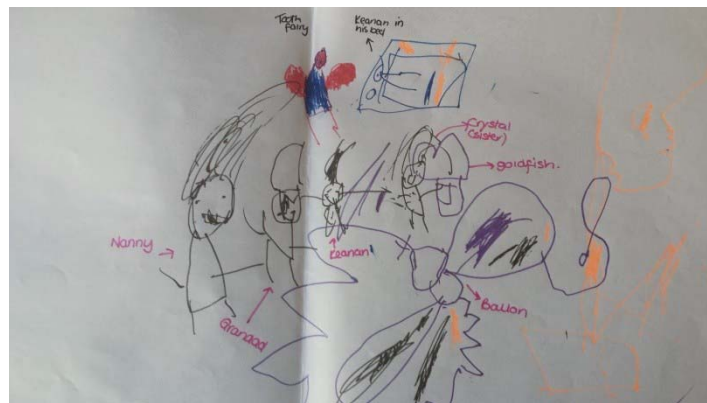
One child drew his picture on the importance of people being happy and not shouting; his picture contained many drawings of smiling faces, they included his immediate family and the teacher of the reception class and the teaching assistant. As he was discussing his reasons for this he said that ‘I like it when everyone is happy because then they are not cross or angry and they don’t shout, there is shouting at home and it makes me sad and I really don’t like it and I get upset - but when everyone is happy then I am happy and I smile’. His comments were noted down and upon discussion with the teacher she brought to light that he is a ‘sensitive soul’ and that his parents are in the middle of going through a difficult separation and that he has taken a lot of it to heart and is struggling with the understanding and emotions of it all. The teacher also said that time is being spent with him for him to come to terms and have a better understanding but that the school recognise that this is at the forefront of his mind.



**Child B’s drawings of the importance of everyone being happy and not sad**



Other themes that were shown throughout were of food and objects, for example toys or objects that had recently been purchased that provided the children with pleasure and enjoyment, for example one child had spent the weekend with their grandparents and cousins having a sleepover and they had gone to the zoo and were all bought a balloon and this balloon was drawn of importance to them.



**Child C's drawing of a memorable weekend and the balloon they had bought them.**

### **Discussion and Analysis of Findings**

A series of key themes common to all settings was evident from the data collated. These were the themes of Family and Friends. Other less dominant themes were that of School and Play.

Evidence from all four settings highlighted that Family was an overriding dominant theme that emerged from the study. Children's drawings and discussions referred to parents, siblings, the family home, pets and extended family such as grandparents. The theme of Family is not an unexpected theme and we can draw upon Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory here which acknowledges the importance of the Microsystem and Mesosystem and the impact this has on the child's world (Bronfenbrenner 1979 cited in Palaiologou 2013). The main reasons given for Family being important in a child's world were situated around ideas of emotional security, love and well-being. There are links here to the Bowlbian discourse of childhood related to Attachment Theory (Bowlby 1971) in that children stated or implied that they needed to feel protected and loved. Children acknowledged that their family was 'special' and there was evidence of children's desires to care and protect younger siblings. It was interesting to note that where there had been a breakdown of a family the child in this instance included his teacher and teaching assistant in the drawing as potentially 'family' members. This indicates the powerful role that professionals can have within the life of a child and how attachments can be formed with significant others, not just parents. Elfer

(2006) and Page and Elfer (2013) refer to this notion as ‘professional love’ within studies on young children and attachment within settings and the importance of warm, responsive and individual relationship with adults in settings.

Children also commented on playing with their families and enjoying undertaking leisure activities such as holidays and barbecues, and going out with their families. Given the ‘enormous asymmetry in power and competence between adults and children’ (Maccoby 1992) it would seem parents still have a powerful and unique role in childhood socialisation.

The idea of friendship was a key theme which reiterates the research of Te One (2011) and Rogers and Evans (2006). This was seen in close conjunction with the theme of play, playing with friends outdoors, at home and at school. The concept of play and friends was a theme that was strongly evidenced from all four settings. Rogers and Evans (2006) explored the concept of friendships being more important than the content or nature of play; however, it is difficult to explore this in any depth with the data that was gathered. Much deeper investigation would be needed to delve into this further and produce any meaningful results.

References to play made by the youngest children were situated around playing with friends and with family. Some children, notably boys, also referred to specific toys that they liked to play with. The youngest children found it difficult to articulate as to why their friends were important, it was simply enough that they were ‘best friends’ because they played with each other. The role of play in a child’s world has, as previously mentioned, long been a subject of debate (Moyles, 1989, Howard et al, 2002). It is no surprise that play is a dominant theme that has arisen from the research. This contradicts early views by Manning and Sharp (1977) and Isaacs (1932) who proposed that children could not distinguish play from other activities. This is clearly not the case in this research as participants from all settings clearly distinguished between play and school or education. Whether this can be seen as a positive or negative shift needs more debate than this article will allow! It would also benefit from further research from children’s perspectives as it seems children no longer see their work as play (Moyles, 1989) but as two distinctive elements of their lives.

The concept of school and learning was not a dominant theme throughout the study even though all of the children involved in the study were at school full time. It was important not to ask leading questions around whether school was important to children as this would have skewed the data. Interestingly the comments explicitly made around school focussed on a very narrow perception of Education and Curriculum. These were Literacy (reading, writing and phonics) and Mathematics. In terms of phonics, this has been on the education agenda in England historically for many years however it is as a result of the Rose Review (2006) that

there has been the dictate to teach 'systematic synthetic phonics' on a regular and sometime daily basis, to children from a very young age. Recently much coverage has been given to the introduction of a phonics test for children aged six, the data from which is made available to Ofsted to use in inspection (Clark 2013). The teaching of phonics was therefore considered important in the life worlds of some children probably due to the frequent exposure that children have to this aspect of literacy in schools. This raises some interesting but concerning issues around what is defined as Education within our school settings in England.

Nature, outdoors and pets were important to a small number of children but these seem to be linked with other key themes of friendship, family and play rather than distinct themes in their own right.

The theme of technology was, by the researchers, considered a dominant influence on children and childhood; however, only one child drew anything to do with this theme. The child in question was an older child, age 6 years old, within the research and this may have been the influencing factor. It seems that technology does not dominate the world of these children proposed by Jones (2009) and it is difficult to explore what impact technology and media has had on their childhood (Palmer, 2007). Research with older children, including teenagers may have resulted in different data but may have supported Prout's (2005) ideas of widening opportunities rather than a loss of childhood projected by Buckingham (2000).

In summary, it seems that key themes arising from this research family, friends, play and school illustrate somewhat of a romantic discourse around childhood from the adult perspective. However, this should not be taken lightly in the form of the innocence of childhood as all children were knowledgeable and able to articulate their own identity and value of things within their own lives. As stated previously, never before has the child held so much power in rhetoric including children's rights, increased choice and a command of what they experience and when due to the technological age. Children defy the developmentalists and make their own paths. However, they are still bound by an education system that undervalues them and stunts their creativity. Children are seen as having agency and in the same breath being a threat to the very fabric of society. With all this in mind, it is vital to research children's views on their own childhood and really 'listen' to their perspectives.

## Conclusion

This research aimed to give us a glimpse of childhood from the perspective of the child. It has given us a small window into the world of the child and what is important to them in their own world. We can never go back to our childhood but can make attempts to understand the childhood of children in today's world, but only with an adult lens. This put considerable constraints on the research but still made it a worthwhile area to explore. We have uncovered key themes of family, friends, play and school but these thematic headings are, of course, adult interpretation and adult led. It was difficult to predict the themes that would arise from the research findings and this attempt to predict may have been a flaw in the research itself. However, key issues such as technology, family and friendships, school and play were explored as key themes that we felt were important to children today. These were generally supported with the exception of technology, discussed earlier.

The research data gathered was a total of 41 drawings and 41 accompanying interviews children aged between 4 and 7. These methods made an attempt to allow children to become engaged in the process and enabled the researchers to view the world through the lens of a child in terms of acknowledging children's perspectives on issues and events that were relevant to them. However, on reflection, how much we have achieved this is limited due to our own interpretation of the children's voice and also familiarity with the children. Although we wished children to work as research partners in terms of listening to the voice of the child, it is felt that children were within a school environment and power relationships were still evident between the child and the adult, and that children possibly felt that their position as a social group were inferior to that of adults (Punch 2002 cited in Worley, Goodman, Melton, Ben-Arieh and Cashmore (2014:555). Further research would be needed to establish a thematic approach using child perspectives and children being much more involved in the research. This would support the importance of listening to children and the shift of research *about children* to research *with children*, strengthening our methodological decisions. It would be interesting to replicate this research with older children to explore whether the theme of technology is more dominant with older children and also the different themes that may arise.

We feel that we have only just touched the surface of the data gathered and it will need deeper examination over time. We have not considered issues of size, colour, proximity or orientations of any of the drawings, or any age, culture or gender differences.

In conclusion, this research has strengthened our student staff relationships, consideration of research with children as a methodological stance and our interest in research especially around the area of the children's own vision of the world. We feel this may only be the beginning!

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**PERSPECTIVES ON READINESS:  
OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPING CHILDREN'S CONCEPTUAL  
KNOWLEDGE**

(Chapter in *The Child's Vision of the World in the Mirror of Children's Culture*)

**Research Objectives/Rationale**

The move toward greater standards at the early childhood level has resulted in appropriate attention placed on the content and skills that guide young children's instruction. Early education standards, such as those in our home state of New York (New York State PreK Foundation for the Common Core (PKFCC), 2011), include domains that are crucially important for young children's school adjustment and success such as approaches toward learning, social-emotional development, communication, language and literacy, and cognition and knowledge of the world. These domains, as well as more traditional child variables, influence educators' and laypersons' conceptions of school readiness.

We are interested in the impact of these perceptions on children's development and learning, particularly how content knowledge related to major concepts, can be supported by teachers and caregivers in developmentally appropriate ways. General knowledge and concept knowledge links closely with the standard domain of our state entitled "cognition and knowledge of the world." We hypothesize that there may well be a "gap" in general knowledge between children living in poverty and those in families of higher means. This idea is an important tenet of our current research agenda. Recently, we have written about teaching strategies that support the development of young children's knowledge as anchored by important concepts (Noel and Lord, 2014) and investigated recurring history concepts assessed on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and included on the States' standards (Lord, Noel, and Slevin, in press).

The current research described in this chapter supports our work by providing necessary baseline information about educators' attitudes toward general and concept knowledge as compared to other domains of learning and development present in our local standards document. In addition, we provide and analyze exploratory data about teachers' instructional

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practices related to specific social studies (history, geography, civics, and economics) concepts. We originally presented portions of this research at the annual meeting of the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association in 2014 (Noel and Lord, 2014; Lord, Noel, and Slevin, 2014). In this chapter, we offer a discussion of results of two portions of this study and our explanation and hypotheses about how educators' perceptions are related to their instructional practices.

## **Standards for Early Childhood**

Most states have established early learning standards (Lesko, Martella, Milburn, and Scott-Little, 2007). For instance, our state adopted the PreK Foundation for the Common Core (PKFCC) (NYS Education Department, 2011: 5) as an “effort to provide a clear, comprehensive, and consolidated resource for early childhood professionals.” These standards, organized around five domains, include (1) approaches to learning, (2) physical development and health, (3) social and emotional development, (4) communication, language, and literacy, and (5) cognition and knowledge of the world. This fifth domain, in particular, pertains to what children need to know and understand about their world, and how they apply what they know. Students’ prior knowledge is critical for school achievement (see Fisher and Frey 2009; Hirsch 2003; Marzano 2004), and "what students *already know* about the content is one of the strongest indicators of how well they will learn new information relative to the content" (Marzano, 2004: 1).

### *Oral Language Supports Comprehension*

Early oral language ability supports later literacy success (National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), 2008). In addition to vocabulary and grammar, oral language ability includes *comprehension of spoken language*. Therefore, engaging young children in oral language activities by developing their ability to comprehend and produce spoken language is recognized as a key component in early childhood instruction (NELP, 2008: viii). Background knowledge, i.e., cognition and knowledge of the world (PKFCC, 2011), facilitates children’s comprehension (Kintsch, 1997).

Language skill develops well before preschool. Even by 18 months of age, researchers found disparities between children living in high-SES environments and children living in poverty. By the time these children reached two years of age, there was already a 6-month gap in language ability (Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder, 2013). Since language develops

before word recognition skills, it is critical to recognize children’s language capacity before they enter the elementary grades. For instance, eighth-grade students with poor comprehension (but adequate decoding skills) also displayed language comprehension difficulties in kindergarten, second, and fourth grades (Catts, Adolf, and Weismer, 2006; Nation, Cocksey, Taylor, and Bishop, 2010). Unfortunately, difficulties in language often remain undetected in the early grades because teachers focus on decoding and fluency, and early reading materials are linguistically simple (Catts et al., 2006).

### *Concept Knowledge in Early Childhood*

In preschool classrooms, educators must address *cognition and knowledge of the world* in an intentional yet developmentally appropriate manner. Some children simply have not been exposed to experiences and/or language needed to support learning in school (Hart and Risley, 1995). Therefore, educators must identify opportunities to build knowledge that supports subsequent learning.

Concepts are mental representations of a person’s “organized information about objects, events, actions, qualities, or relationships” (Klausmeier, 1992: 268), and conceptual learning is at the foundation in early childhood instruction (Gelman, 2009). Concept knowledge supports children’s efficiency in organizing information. Intentional concept instruction, therefore, is a logical and important consideration.

By fourth grade, students require knowledge of various concepts, and this knowledge supports their understanding of various topics and events encountered in history, civics, and geography instruction (Lord et al., in press). Since this knowledge develops over time, students must learn many of these concepts well before fourth grade. Thus, early childhood concept instruction lays the groundwork for learning in later grades.

Opportunities exist to deepen young children’s conceptual understanding of key ideas encountered in the elementary grades. Early childhood teachers already introduce many history, civics, geography, and economic concepts during preschool. For instance, children learn about diversity, e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and traditions. In the areas of citizenship, children learn about responsibilities and specific rights, how to make and follow rules, and the consequences when rules are not followed. They learn about money, the roles of various community workers, and the attributes of cooperation, respect, and empathy. Children also experience aspects of exploration and discovery (NYS Education Department, 2011).

Intentional instruction devoted to teaching these concepts provides opportunities to prevent and bridge the knowledge gap. Noel and Lord (2014) offer an example of teaching the concept of exploration that helps young American children understand this recurring idea beyond the notion that only Europeans explored. Children's limited understanding of exploration is often reinforced during most US history classes. Utilizing read alouds of children's literature such as *Miss Rumphius* (Clooney, 1985), *Rooster's Off to See the World* (Carle, 1972), or *Jamie's Journey* (Ebbers, 2012), young children can connect these stories of fictional characters' explorations to those Christopher Columbus, Sally Ride, and their own playground explorations (Noel and Lord, 2014).

### *Teachers' Perceptions*

In the United States, national reports have touted and elevated the importance of conventional literacy skills that include phonological awareness, book/print concepts, and phonics (NELP, 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). It is likely that these recommendations have impacted early childhood teachers' perceptions of what is most important for young children to understand before school entry. Since teachers' perceptions drive instructional practices, and changing perceptions is difficult to achieve (Pajares, 1992), it is critical to determine current perceptions. Therefore, before offering effective, manageable, age-appropriate, and intentional practices that prepare young children for subsequent learning, acknowledging teachers' beliefs is a necessary first step.

These pre-literacy skills are of critical importance when teaching children *how* to read. The NELP (2008: 16), however, does not provide educators with sufficient guidance in supporting students' knowledge development. As Neuman argues, "to be successful, children need to learn *both* code and content knowledge." Teachers must understand the essential link between content knowledge and literacy.

The domain in the Pre-K standards document, *cognition and knowledge of the world* (NYS Education Department, 2011), opens the door for a dialogue regarding effective knowledge development. Researchers must work with teachers to identify strategies that develop children's knowledge of the world such as authentic play-based activities, read alouds, and the characteristics of purposeful discussions. These critical instructional practices, that develop general knowledge, must reach practitioners, administrators, and parents.

### *School Readiness*

Over the years of the late 20th century, definitions of what makes a child "ready" for school have gradually changed. The work of Gesell (1930), Ilg (1948), and Ilg, Ames, Haines, and Gillespie, (1978) suggested that certain child characteristics indicated readiness. Parents were encouraged to give children, who did not show these characteristics, more time to naturally mature before sending them to school. Variables such as a child's birth date in comparison with other children and/or the cut-off date for school entry, and the physical characteristics of children (such as size and stature) were linked to natural maturity. As such, the responsibility for readiness was placed squarely on the shoulders of the children themselves (Gesell, 1930; 1948; Ilg et al., 1978). While the literature related to readiness has more recently embraced a view that places responsibility for readiness on the school and larger community, the maturational view continues to impact the decisions of American educators and parents (Noel and Newman, 2003; 2008). Educators who posit contemporary definitions of readiness argue that the school needs to change to meet the needs of all children and that communities must support schools to create classrooms that encourage the school entry of all children (Biggar and Pizzolong, 2004; Dockett and Perry, 2009; Noel, 2010; Stipek, 2002).

Interestingly, the PreK Foundation for the Common Core document of our home state (NYS Education Department, 2011) outlines domains that are related to child variables. Approaches to learning, development and health, social emotional development, communication, language and literacy, as well as cognition and knowledge of the world all refer to knowledge, skills, and dispositions that children should possess prior to school entry. As such, these standards represent a more traditional view of readiness. Absent from the document are standards related to how schools and communities should be structured or otherwise meet the needs of diverse children. However, an introductory comment does mention the need for "an environment that coordinates comprehensive services and provides information and support to families" (NYS Education Department, 2011: 5).

### *Theoretical Framework*

Our work in this research is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). We are attracted to the thoroughness of this theory in acknowledging that variables related to children impact their outcomes within a larger social and political context. For example, teachers' attitudes about teaching are impacted by variables related to their education and social experiences, but these may in turn be influenced by current political policies, which dictate the amount of funds available to

educational institutions or schools. Variables that impact a child's family, school, local community, country, or the world all exert influence on child outcomes. It is crucially important that researchers and policy makers take this complexity into consideration when designing studies and interpreting findings.

The principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009; National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), n.d.) are especially important to our work and serve as an example of how policies and professional recommendations in the larger system influence young children's learning and development. Position statements, such as the one on DAP published by NAEYC, guide American early childhood educators' practice to meet the needs of young children. This includes the development and implementation of early education standards such as the PKFCC (NYS Education Department, 2011), how learning environments are designed, the role of play, the impact of family culture on learning and development, as well as how practitioners are trained and the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that teachers should possess.

We are particularly interested in the role of content/concept knowledge in school adjustment and success. However, we approach this work with a certain amount of trepidation. We worry about the potential of educators, policy makers, or the public to focus on content knowledge instruction without a thorough understanding of DAP and/or without an understanding of the importance of all the domains of learning (including approaches to learning, social emotional development, physical development and health, etc.) at the early childhood level.

### *Research Questions*

The current study was designed around the following research questions:

1. What do early childhood teachers and administrators think about the relative importance of four selected domains of the New York State standards document (2011)?
2. Do these educators believe children's level of general knowledge is more, less, or equally important than their pre-literacy skills?
3. Which concepts do early educators teach to young children, and how do they teach these concepts?

### *Survey Design*

In order to collect data from large numbers of educators and administrators, we designed a survey to answer our research questions. We piloted the first version of the survey with the educators at our campus childcare center and edited it as per their feedback. Then we created an online survey using the Qualtrics (2013) Research Suite [version 37,892]. This allowed us the flexibility to post the link to the survey on a web page or email it directly to educators and administrators. The Qualtrics software also permitted us to direct specific questions to specific groups of respondents. This was important, since some questions were appropriate for only sub-groups of respondents, and others were appropriate for all respondents. To answer research question 1, we were interested in all respondents' views on the relative importance of children's social emotional development, approaches toward learning, pre-literacy skills, and level of knowledge of the world. All survey takers were therefore directed to this question. However, some questions were only appropriate for the care providers and teachers.

Our first demographic question asked respondents to indicate in which capacity they worked with children. Choices were childcare providers, pre-k teachers, kindergarten, first- or second-grade teachers, parent/family educators, college faculty, students, or administrators. There was also a choice labeled "other." For the data we analyzed for this chapter, we grouped the childcare providers, pre-k, kindergarten, first- and second-grade teachers into one category labeled "care providers/teachers." This category included approximately 191 respondents. Approximately 62 respondents identified themselves as administrators.

The domains investigated for research questions 1 and 2 include approaches to learning, social emotional learning, pre-literacy skills, and knowledge of the world. All are grounded in our New York State Pre-K Foundation for the Common Core (2011). Respondents to our survey could choose either "very important," "moderately important," or "not important."

For research question 3, we analyzed only the responses of the 191 care providers/teachers. We asked respondents to choose one concept from a list and explain how they teach this concept to young children. The concepts included were citizenship, community, exploration/discovery, human rights, local area and environment, trade/exchange/compromise. We selected these concepts based on previous research (Lord, 2008) and our Pre-K Foundation for the Common Core (2011).



### *Sampling*

Initially, we distributed the survey at the 2013 annual meeting of our professional organization (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)) and provided the link where the survey could be accessed. This method proved unsuccessful resulting in fewer than 10 completed surveys. Our graduate assistant directly emailed the link to our professional contacts, Head Start educators, and childcare centers. This strategy resulted in the large amount of data that we present in this chapter.

### *Analysis*

We used the descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages to present the demographic data about the respondents. The reporting function in Qualtrics (2013) allowed us to easily create such data tables. When analyzing results for research questions 1 and 2, we placed all childcare providers and teachers into one group, which we titled "early care provider/teacher." To understand differences between groups, we calculated Chi Square tests of independence using Preacher's (2001) online tool.

For research question 3, we asked respondents to choose one concept from the list and write an example of how they teach this concept. We analyzed this qualitative material in the following manner. First, we read each participant's answer and noted which concept she/he chose to respond to. Next, we listed all instructional practices that related to each concept and made comparisons across the different concepts. We applied a method of defining concepts that we had used in previous research. This entailed identifying two layers of concepts: global and specific. Global concepts include comprehensive ideas, whereas specific concepts represent examples of global concepts (Lord et al., in press). For example, citizenship is a global concept and examples of related specific concepts include rules, responsibilities, participation in decisions, and supporting others. We grouped practices according to specific concepts and then identified common practices. See Table 1 for global and specific concepts.

<b>General concepts</b>	<b>Specific concepts</b>
Citizenship	Rules, responsibilities, participation in decisions, supporting others
Community	Families, diversity of families, jobs, dependence on others, community diversity
Exploration/discovery	Observation, prediction, experimentation, interpretation, classification
Trade/exchange/compromise	Trade; compromise
Local area/environment	Home, directionality, topographical features, environment
Human rights	Diversity; fairness/respect

**Table 1: General and specific concepts**

## **Results**

### *Participants*

A total of almost 500 people responded to our survey. We were interested in the data provided by early childcare providers and teachers, which we compared to data provided by administrators. We grouped the results of those who identified themselves as a caregiver or teacher of children younger than 8 and called this group care providers/teachers. This group contained 191 completed surveys. The administrator group included data from 62 administrators. Table 2 provides detailed demographic data about each one of these groups.

<b>Description of participants- Care providers/teachers (N=191)</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
School location		
Urban	92	48%
Non-urban	98	52%
School demographics		
Poor	154	81%
Non-poor	37	19%
ELL population		
High	67	35%
Moderate	56	29%
Low/no	68	36%
Gender		
Female	188	99%
Male	2	1%
Region		
Northeast	137	72%
Southeast	24	13%
Midwest	13	7%
Northwest	14	7%
Southwest	2	1%
Other	1	.5%

<b>Description of participants:</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Administrators (N=62)</b>		
Gender		
Female	59	95%
Male	3	5%
Region		
Northeast	44	71%
Southeast	5	8%

Midwest	11	18%
Northwest	1	<2%
Southwest	1	<2%
Other	0	

**Table 2: Demographics for care providers/ teachers and administrators**

*Research Question 1: Ratings of Each Domain*

In general, both care providers/teachers and administrators indicated that they believed all the domains were very important or important to children's ability to succeed in kindergarten and later in school. The most variation existed within both the care provider/teacher and administrator groups about the importance of size and physical maturity and age at school entry. The differences between how administrators and teachers viewed approaches toward learning, social emotional maturity, pre-literacy skills, or child size and maturity were not significant. However, there were significant differences between how care providers/teachers and administrators rated children's levels of general knowledge ( $p=.02$ ) and their age at school entry ( $p=.03$ ) in relation to school readiness and later academic success (see Table 3).

Construct	Very Important		Moderately important		Not Important	
	Teacher	Admin	Teacher	Admin	Teacher	Admin
Pre-literacy skills	161 (84%)	47 (76%)	29 (15%)	13 (21%)	1 (<1%)	1 (2%)
Disposition toward learning	173 (91%)	57 (92%)	17 (9%)	4 (6%)	0	0
Social-emotional maturity	179 (94%)	58 (94%)	12 (6%)	3 (5%)	0	0
General knowledge	*100 (52%)	*43 (69%)	85 (45%)	18 (29%)	5 (3%)	0
Size/physical maturity	29 (15%)	8 (13%)	115 (60%)	41 (66%)	45 (24%)	12 (19%)
Age at school entry	*55 (29%)	*15 (24%)	110 (58%)	45 (73%)	22 (12%)	1 (2%)

Note. \* denotes significant difference  $<.05$

**Table 3 Perceptions of care providers/teachers (N=191) and administrators (N = 62)**

*Research Question 2: General Knowledge vs. Pre-Literacy Skills*

Next, we took a closer look specifically at these educators' beliefs about whether children's levels of general knowledge were more, less, or equally important to their pre-literacy skills. In this sample, there was indeed a significant difference between how care providers/teachers and administrators viewed these two domains ( $p=.00$ ) with teachers indicating that pre-literacy skills were of greater importance than general knowledge ( $p = .00$ ). Administrators believed that pre-literacy skills and general knowledge were equally important. Their ratings of the two constructs were not significantly different ( $p=.323$ ), as the data in Table 4 below reveal.

Construct	Pre-literacy skills		General knowledge	
	Very important	Moderately important	Very important	Moderately important
Teachers and Administrators (N=253)	*208 (82%)	*42 (17%)	*143 (57%)	*103 (41%)
Teachers (N=191)	*161 (84%)	*29 (15%)	*100 (52%)	*85 (45%)
Administrators (N=62)	47 (76%)	13 (21%)	43 (69%)	18 (29%)

*Note.* \* denotes significant difference  $<.01$ ; data not included from educators who perceived constructs as “not important.”

**Table 4: Care providers’/teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of pre-literacy skills when compared with general knowledge**

*Research Question 3: Instructional Practices*

This section provides a preliminary analysis of educators’ classroom practices. Teachers’ responses to their practices offer a glimpse into which concepts teachers address.

**Citizenship.** Fifty-five teachers shared practices of citizenship. Most teachers conveyed that they introduce classroom rules. Only one teacher mentioned how rules occur beyond the classroom, and a few teachers indicated that their children help determine classroom rules. Many teachers reported establishing routines and helping children learn responsibilities in the classroom. Teachers also shared that children learn cooperation and respect for one another.

**Community.** Forty-two teachers explained classroom practices that address an aspect of community. The majority of these practices include teaching family composition and diversity of families. Many teachers also shared that they help children understand the various jobs within a community. Only a few teachers shared that they teach their children

how people depend on one another for services, while only one teacher explained how children learn about diversity of different cultures.

**Exploration/discovery.** Twenty-five teachers explained one instructional example that addressed many specific concepts (e.g., observation, prediction, experimentation). That is, teachers explained that exploration is a daily child-directed activity, and their children explore through open-ended or hands-on activities, or sensory experiences and/or science experiments.

**Trade/exchange/compromise.** Twelve teachers explained classroom practices, referring to sharing when explaining trade/exchange, and conflict resolution when addressing compromise.

**Local area/environment.** Only ten teachers explained classroom practices associated with this concept. They address the local area by explaining various towns, cities, state, and country. Children walk around town to visit community businesses. Two teachers shared that they teach mapping skills of the areas. Two teachers address weather and climate.

**Human rights.** Five teachers explained classroom instructional practices that address standards related to human rights through ideas of friendship, i.e., being kind and fair to each other.

### *Discussion*

These results contribute to our understanding of teachers' and administrators' opinions about several major domains of children's development and learning, age, and size and their relationship with school readiness and later academic success. In addition, the results provide exploratory information pertaining to how early childhood teachers support children's concept knowledge. In general, care providers, early educators, and administrators expressed agreement that children's approaches toward learning, social and emotional development, pre-literacy skills, and levels of general knowledge are all important to a child's ability to succeed in early education. However, these professionals disagreed on the relative importance of content knowledge. Our results also showed that educators value a child's age (proximity of the birth date to the school cut-off date) as more important to the question of readiness and later success than his/her physical size. Finally, our analyses of teachers' qualitative responses to the question about their instructional practices of selected concepts revealed that children are routinely learning various concepts in daily practices through, for example, establishing

classroom rules and routines, investigating aspects of community jobs, hands-on exploration, and so on.

We were particularly interested in the diversity of opinions care providers/teachers and administrators expressed about the importance of general knowledge, especially in comparison with pre-literacy skills. Current research with older elementary-age children has shown that a child's level of general knowledge exerts substantial influence on later literacy achievement. We found statistically significant differences ( $p=.00$ ) when we compared care providers'/teachers' and administrators' attitudes of the importance of pre-literacy skills and general knowledge. Pre-literacy skills were indicated to be "very important" by eighty-two percent of these educators (208 vs. 42) while general knowledge received the rating of "very important" by only 57% of respondents (143 vs. 103).

General knowledge was also seen to be of greater importance by administrators than early care providers/teachers. It is possible that care providers/teachers are focusing primarily on developing children's skills that were identified by the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) as highly correlated to later literacy achievement. As Neuman (2010) argues, the Panel made recommendations based on available research. It is quite possible that several variables that correlate highly with later success were not included within these recommendations due to a paucity of available research. It makes sense that educators may be focusing on the things that are known to have an impact.

Since the publication of the NELP recommendations, some well-designed research has shown support for the impact of general knowledge (Grissmer et al., 2010). These studies should be expanded, results replicated, and then widely distributed to become part of early educators' training and professional development. We need to know which particular environments, parenting styles, activities, and so on support children's growing general knowledge. It may be that instruction long advocated by early educators, that contains authentic play-based experiences and holistic thematic units rich with content from read alouds, is effective in helping young children develop stores of knowledge on which later achievement rests. If this is the case, instruction focused mainly on pre-literacy skills may hamper achievement of some children. The educators in our study valued general knowledge less than pre-literacy skills, when in fact they may be closely intertwined.

The definition of school readiness provided in the international literature has focused in recent years on the responsibilities of the school and greater social and political context in preparing children for school. Within the definition of "readiness," focus has turned away from individual child characteristics. Yet, documents such as the New York State PKFCC list

characteristics, skills, dispositions, and knowledge that form the "foundation for the common core," and thereby insinuate that all children should possess these before they begin formal schooling. In this study, we provided information about educator's opinions of the salience of approaches to learning, social emotional development, pre literacy skills, and general knowledge, age and size. However, these results do not address the responsibilities of the greater school, communities, and political/social institutions to help all children develop the necessary skills, dispositions, and knowledge. Documents that only address variables related to children are incomplete. Complementary documents are needed to outline the characteristics and responsibilities of social and political institutions.

Child characteristics, which may not change at school entry, still impact educators' ideas about children's potential school success. Our research shows that there is much variation in how important care providers/teachers and administrators perceive variables such as children's size, maturity level, and age relative to other children at school entry and the impact of these characteristics on success in kindergarten and later. We also found that administrators were more likely ( $p < .05$ ) than care providers/teachers to identify kindergarten entrance age as "very important." We interpret this to mean that much disagreement still exists about how relevant the "maturational" view of readiness is. Scholars and professional organizations tend to promote on time school entry for children (as per local school district guidelines) (Stipek, 2002). This practice promotes an important idea; the school should change to meet all children's needs as opposed to children changing to meet the institutions' needs.

### *Instructional Practices*

Teachers must accommodate the needs of all children. Some children come to school with varied experiences that support their developing knowledge base. As one teacher shared, "those that have travelled related well to the concept of local area vs. out of area. Others have a hard time..." Prior knowledge provides the foundation for students to learn new information. Since prior knowledge supports subsequent learning (Kintsch, 1997; Marzano, 2004), are there practices already evident in classroom instruction that can easily foster and deepen children's knowledge of key concepts? For example, we found that many teachers address the global concept of citizenship with the daily use of classroom rules and routines. The opportunity exists for ensuring that children learn this concept well. Children can participate in making rules, learning consequences of breaking the rules, and understanding that rules occur beyond the classroom. Teachers can also connect what happens in the



classroom to police work and teach children that rules/laws are in place to protect people. These intentional additions to classroom practices provide a foundation for learning about citizenship, and government.

Teachers also explain how families differ, and some of these differences result from movement. This presents an opportunity to study immigration and the traditions/customs that families bring from their homelands (Lord et al., in press). Furthermore, communities depend on various services (e.g., shelter, transportation, government), and elementary-grade children lack basic understandings of these cultural universals (Brophy and Alleman, 2009). Since all students utilize electricity, cable, buses, and so on, these everyday experiences provide meaningful instructional opportunities.

Many early childhood teachers incorporate science experiments, hands-on projects, and sensory activities to address exploration. These natural experiences of discovery provide opportunities to deepen students' knowledge of this important concept. Teachers can connect explorers from the past to present-day explorers (Noel and Lord, 2014). For instance, children can learn that explorers discovered America, astronauts travel throughout space, and archaeologists uncover fossils.

While only a few teachers shared practices pertaining to trade/exchange and compromise, they clearly encounter instructional opportunities daily. Incorporating vocabulary associated with these two familiar concepts (i.e., trade, exchange, compromise, negotiate, cooperate) provides opportunities for language development through "knowledge networks" (Neuman and Wright, 2014: 9).

The standards recommend that children learn about local area: home, directionality, topographical features, and environment. Teachers reported successful practices associated with mapping the neighborhood and learning about the neighborhood pond. Extending these practices to include directionality and local topography can be incorporated in an intentional manner that deepens knowledge over time.

The concept of human rights pertains to standards of fairness, empathy, and accepting and appreciating differences. Even though human rights issues address, for example, slavery, women's rights, and the rights of migrant workers, and these ideas are not appropriate for young children, learning how to treat one another fairly and with respect regardless of differences is developmentally appropriate.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

This study reported on data obtained from a survey of a large number of American early care providers, teachers, and administrators. While useful information was gleaned from the survey data, respondents were overwhelmingly from northeastern United States. In order to obtain results that can be generalized to a larger population, the survey should be replicated using more careful sampling techniques. We also acknowledge that results from one of the main the survey questions would have been more useful if respondents could have chosen from five choices instead of three. Respondents were able to answer "not important," "moderately important," or "very important" when they evaluated children's approaches to learning, social emotional development, pre-literacy skills, content knowledge, size, and age in relation to readiness and later school success. We should have utilized a five-level Likert scale. This would have allowed us to provide a more thorough examination of the data by analyzing the variance among groups.

After reviewing teachers' instructional practices (e.g., rules, routines, exploration), their examples do not clearly articulate how these instructional practices transpire in the classroom. For instance, teachers explained a specific concept while others provided experiences (e.g., neighborhood walks, family picture walls), but few teachers expanded our understanding of how they teach the concept. The implementation of these practices requires further investigation.

When responding, most teachers failed to include extensions beyond activities used in the classroom. One teacher shared that her/his children connect the rules in the classroom to the American flag, and another shared that her class have pen pals to learn about the climate of different area of the country. It remains unclear if children learn how the concept happens beyond the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

It is critical to understand how teachers' beliefs influence their perceptions, since perceptions drive classroom practices and teachers' interactions with children. Changing beliefs about teaching is not an easy feat (Pajares, 1992). However, a first step is to reveal these beliefs and then introduce effective practices.

Conventional literacy skills are necessary for young children. However, we agree that content knowledge has a certain "staying power." By this, we mean that content knowledge impacts and interacts with how children develop later abilities and skills. Neuman (2010: 16)

explains that both content as the “headline star” and literacy skills as the “supporting cast members” are needed. In the recent past, our field has focused heavily on the value of teaching skills, with the hope of assisting all children, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances to succeed. However, it is quite possible that children from poverty also need more general academic content knowledge. Teachers must consider how they can make useful and relatively easy changes in their curriculum to support young children's developing general knowledge (see the example provided in Noel and Lord, 2014). Finally, our conceptions of readiness for further school learning need to be revisited in light of Grissmer et al.'s. (2010: 1008) identification of general knowledge as “a new readiness indicator.”

Many states in the United States are on the cusp of offering pre-kindergarten to all children. Other countries around the world have already instituted or are in the midst of developing high-quality early childhood programs. We must all carefully consider professional development in both preparing new teachers and supporting existing teachers. What will teacher training and professional development focus on? How will we help care providers and teachers develop or maintain developmentally appropriate teaching practices while simultaneously supporting the development of children's content knowledge and pre-literacy skills? How will we meet the needs of children at all levels of the income spectrum? Our preliminary research is an important first step. Educators' perceptions impact the planning and modification of their instructional practice. By understanding and recognizing teachers' perceptions, we present a necessary baseline for our own and others' future research.

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**H. LINDSEY RUSSO<sup>1</sup>**

**EXPLORING PLAY, PEER RELATIONSHIPS, AND LEARNING  
THROUGH THE LENSES AND VOICES OF CHILDREN**

International Research Group 2013-2015

The Child's Vision on the World in the Mirror of Children's Culture

April 2015

*The primary purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the relationships that develop when preschool children are engaged in play and to examine the connections among peer relationships, socialization, academic learning, and play through the lenses and voices of children. The study, conducted with a group of 4- and 5-year old children over a period of 3 months, is in response to a climate of increasingly academic expectations experienced by many early childhood educators in the USA. Entry into the classroom was achieved using an interactive strategy developed by Corsaro (2005). Data, collected in two phases, included field notes, videotapes, audiotapes, researcher journal, and informal interviews and conversations with the children. Using a recursive method of data analysis, categories such as group acceptance and rejection, play entry strategies, and role within play episodes began to emerge. These categories were broken down further building a picture of how learning was supported within the children's play.*

*Changes in the curriculum to meet increasingly academic demands had a clear influence upon many different aspects of the classroom environment. The children constructed an important peer culture. This strong, supportive environment became the foundation for the development of those social skills that scaffolded academic learning. Labels like "work" and "play" were of no concern to the children if the activity was enjoyable. Even when an activity was fun it immediately became "work" if an adult intervened. They often identified peers with very specific skills, invited them to join the group in order to increase the complexity and duration of a play episode. As they engaged in play episodes of their own creation, they expanded their learning and skill acquisition across many developmental domains.*

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## Introduction and Rationale

School in the early childhood years used to be filled with opportunities to play. Today we appear to view early childhood education from a very different perspective than that of Frederick Froebel (1898), who created the first kindergarten and introduced the idea that play was a young child's natural way of learning and self-expression. Early childhood educators are now, more than ever, being required to validate the use of play in the curriculum. Play has to compete not only with increased academic curricular demands but also with public, parental, and political opinion, as to its value and significance for learning (Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, & Singer, 2006; Mann, 1996; Plevyak & Morris, 2002). As intimated by the work and writings of educators and theorists such as Vygotsky (1978), Froebel (1898), Piaget (1962), Paley (2004), and others, the diminishing role of play in early childhood classrooms and curricula is a cause for concern.

Even though the value of play in all aspects of the curriculum is identified and supported by research in the field of early childhood education it is often viewed by administrators, policy makers, parents and even some educators as being "*just play.*" A common thread running through a great deal of the research identifies a lack of social and emotional skills among young children and, as a result, a decline in the quality of learning environments (National Research Council, 2001; Steinhauer, 2005; Tyre, 2007).

The relationship between play and learning in early childhood classrooms in the USA fluctuates between an academic focus that emphasizes rote learning, worksheets, utilizing little or no play and a more whole-child approach that identifies and embraces play as the most appropriate vehicle for learning across all developmental domains (Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006). A quality education requires a balance among academics, social, and emotional development and this goal can be achieved through "*normal, creative, interactive play*" (Steinhauer, 2005, p. 2). As stated by Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2004) the reading, writing, and number readiness skills being stressed in many curricula are "*only one aspect of cognitive development, and cognitive development is only one aspect of human development*" (p. 21). While these academic skills were very important they are "*so intertwined with the physical, social, and emotional systems it is*

*shortsighted, if not futile, to dwell on the intellect and not its partners”* (p. 22). It would appear this approach, the whole child approach, that addresses all developmental domains, is being challenged by curricula that focus upon very specific cognitive skills (Bergen, 2002). Ironically, due to the synergistic relationship between the developmental domains, this shift to a concentration upon academic learning adversely affects the acquisition of those academic skills being highlighted in today’s early childhood curricula (Ravier & Zigler, 2004; Zigler & Bishop-Josef, 2006).

The foundations for social relationships are laid in the early years. This is the time when children discover the rules for getting along in society, how to form peer relationships, and the consequences for not following societal rules. The only way to learn these concepts is to engage actively with others (Corsaro, 2005; Lindsey & Colwell, 2003; Mann, 1996). The skills and/or behaviors acquired through socialization make important contributions to a child’s ability to function in a learning environment such as the classroom (Corsaro, 2003).

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore and describe the peer relationships that develop when preschool children were engaged in play and to explore the connections among peer relationships, socialization, academic learning, and play. I examine these possible connections through the lenses and voices of the young children chosen to participate in this study. Their perspectives are key to understanding the significance of play in the early childhood classroom. Young children have valuable contributions to make to the conversation regarding play and academic learning. Unfortunately their voices do not often find their way into a large body of research (Birbeck & Drummond, 2005). Birbeck and Drummond (2005) acknowledged the significant contribution that children’s perceptions and reflections could make to research studies. King (1979) asserted that most educational research was written from an adult perspective and young children were not being asked to define play in a school setting. She used interviews, open-ended conversations, and reflection activities to identify children’s personal thoughts on play, its definition, and place in the classroom. Children’s voices are a central component of this study. With careful planning and building upon the experiences of researchers such as Birbeck and Drummond, (2005); Corsaro, (2003, 2005); Dyson, (1995); Genishi & Dyson, (2009); Genishi, Dyson & Fassler, (1994);

Howard, Jenvey and Hill, (2006) and King, (1979) the perspectives and reflections of young children were an integral and important part of this study. Their voices need to be heard (Corsaro, 2003).

### **Research Questions**

In response to this climate of increased academic expectations experienced by many early childhood educators, my research questions aim to address if and how the relationships and peer cultures formed during play are related to academic learning and to explore children's perceptions of play in their classroom.

1. What is the nature of peer relationships in a group of 4- and 5-year-old children as they engage in play in a preschool classroom?
  - a. How do peer relationships in this group develop through play?
2. How do the children's social skills contribute to their learning?
  - a. In what ways do children appear to be learning from each other during play?
3. What are the children's perceptions of play?

### **Review of Literature**

Historically, play has been identified as an extremely important part of young children's development and learning. Young children develop relationships through play that contribute to the peer cultures they form inside and outside of the classroom and become an integral part of the classroom community and learning environment. Research identifies play as the foundation for life-long learning across all domains and content areas and as being essential for the development of those social emotional skills required for not only learning but a successful and happy life. It is often described as "a child's work". Although there is a huge body of research to support its value an increased focus upon academics in early childhood curricula in the USA is clearly influencing its inclusion and role in early childhood classrooms and curricula.

This qualitative case study is informed by Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theory (1978) and Corsaro's (2005) social theory of interpretive reproduction. Vygotskyian theory stresses the child's active role in the construction of cognitive skills and focuses

primarily upon developmental stages. Vygotsky (1978) views play as a developmental activity that progresses from one stage to another and as an adaptive mechanism that promotes cognitive growth. He asserts that cognitive skills and patterns of thinking are not primarily determined by innate factors but are the products of the activities practiced in the social institutions of a culture in which the individual grows up (1933). He uses the term Zone of Proximal Development to describe what he identifies as the place where the child and adult meet; the difference between the level of solved tasks that a child can perform with the guidance and help of an adult or peer and the level of independently solved tasks.

*A child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that will tomorrow become his basic level of action and morality. It is in play that a new relation is created between situations in thought and real situations.*

(Vygotsky, 1933, p. 17)

Corsaro's social interpretive reproduction theory (2005) builds upon Vygotsky's linear model of individualized cognitive development by identifying that children develop social skills collectively as active members of both peer and adult cultures. He claims that sociological theories of childhood must break free from individualistic doctrine that regards the child's social development solely as passive, private, internalization of skills and knowledge (Corsaro, 2003). Children are active creative social agents who produce their own unique cultures by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer cultures (Corsaro, 2005). The theories are interrelated and supportive of each other. Independently they did not address all facets of my study but as a collaborative team they strengthened and gave depth to my investigation of play.

Many of the spontaneous and improvised play scenarios that children engage in address important socio-emotional needs in early childhood. According to Corsaro (2003) when children engage in an activity within their peer culture such as "*let's pretend there's a rain storm*" their activities were constituted within the social interaction itself. As both Vygotsky (1978) and Corsaro (2003, 2005) have shown children develop ideas and concepts at a very young age that help them to make sense of their worlds.

There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that high quality play is an important facilitator of higher-level cognition and that there are also clear links between play and social and linguistic competence. Many cognitive strategies, such as negotiation and problem solving are exhibited during play (Bergen, 2002). Bailey (2002) identified the likelihood that play engaged many areas of the brain because it involves emotion, cognition, language, and sensori-motor action. In this way it promotes the development of dense synaptic connections. Children act upon their natural curiosity (Raban, 2001). They explore, play, and thereby learn through the experiences. Curiosity drives exploratory play and this expands their experience. Bodrova and Leong (2005) linked play to growth in self-regulation, memory, oral language, an increase in literacy skills, recognition of symbols, and other areas of academic learning. Play is the core of developmentally based practice that encompasses all domains and not just the area of cognition (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). It follows that there are many positive advantages to be gained from the inclusion of play in the early childhood curriculum.

Research in child development increasingly demonstrates a strong relationship between social/emotional and cognitive development. According to Stelegin (2006), social/emotional skills were the common threads that tied the entire curriculum together. In the preschool years children are highly motivated to play and through play consolidate their understanding of the world, their language, and their social skills (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Play interactions are shaped by, and in themselves, shape children's understanding of the social and environmental expectations of situations. Children's lives in preschool are embedded in a particular social context whose impact cannot be ignored without neglecting children's interests, self-direction, and motivation. Social skills influence cognitive skills just as cognition plays a role in children's social understanding. They are related to academic achievement and learning and are necessary domains of early childhood pedagogy.

*"To learn about children's cultures, from their perspectives, we need to shed our adult point of view and get inside children's worlds"* (Corsaro, 2004, p. 42). A great deal of educational research conducted with young children is written from an adult perspective (King, 1979). In this particular study King (1979) examined how

kindergarten children defined play in their classroom. The children were observed for extended periods of time and this was followed up with a series of informal interviews and casual conversations. They were found to be perceptive and sophisticated in their analyses of their classroom settings and, while their perspectives differed from those of the adults in the classroom, they were extremely relevant, informed, and instructive. Children clearly and distinctly categorized their classroom activities as being either play or work.

King (1979) found that categories identified by the children followed a general pattern from child to child and from kindergarten to kindergarten despite the very different environments of the schools in which the study was conducted. While the majority of the classroom activities were identified by the children as work it was evident that an activity categorized as play on one occasion could just as easily be categorized as work on a different occasion. "*The children did not indicate that play was fun and work was tedious*" (King, 1979, p. 84), and the definitions of "*play*" and "*work*" depended upon the context in which the activity was carried out. King (1979) found that while neither pleasure nor tediousness appeared to differentiate play from work for the children, all play activities were viewed as being voluntary and all activities, without exception, assigned by the teacher were identified as being work. The more control and decisions that the children had in the implementation of an activity the more likely children were to describe it as play. Any teacher involvement or direction immediately designated the activity as being work. Play activities were more significant for them but they do not see them as being directly related to the curriculum. According to King (1979) we incorrectly assume children view classroom work from a negative perspective and teachers therefore attempt to use play activities to entice them to participate. From her conversations with children for this study it appeared that this strategy does not work since the children simply redefined play activities such as these as work. King (1979) stated that most of the play observed in a kindergarten classroom was actually "*the illusion of play*" (p. 86) and only appeared to be play from the observer's perspective. "Children who seem to be playing in kindergarten may in fact be children who are enjoying their work (King, 1979, p. 86).

Howard, Jenvy, and Hill (2006) also conducted a study of 92 children between the ages of 4 and 6-years to identify what young children perceive as being play, and the motivation for their study was similar to that given by King (1979). They completed the Activity Apperception Story Procedure. The children were asked to sort through photographs using them as stimuli to decide which represented play /or not play and learning/or not learning. Howard et al (2006) stated that most of the literature researching play and learning was presented from an adult perspective and based upon observations rather than conversations and interviews with young children. They claimed that in order to successfully facilitate and implement a play-based curriculum we first needed to understand the children's perspectives of play. Their findings coincided with those of King (1979) in that the children described play activities as being those where an adult or teacher is absent but where peers are present. Howard et al. (2006) also concluded from their study that children made decisions about play based upon teacher absence. They also claimed that the involvement of a teacher reduced the likelihood that the children would perceive the activities as play and that this lack of children's willingness to accept adults into play had pedagogical implications for the ability of the teacher to enrich and extend play activities.

I wanted my interactions, observations and conversations to be as authentic as possible and therefore adopted Corsaro's reactive entry strategy to address these needs. The data I collected was used to document and describe the social interactions that occurred during play episodes throughout the day. Through the use of appropriate methodological procedures and data analysis I aimed to capture the individual and collective experiences of the children.

## **Setting**

The preschool I chose for this study is located 65 miles northwest of New York City in a rural area. The participants, a group of 4- and 5-year-old children, were carefully chosen using pre-determined criteria that aligned with the research questions and purpose of the study.

The preschool chosen for this study offers half-day programs that are 2.5 hours in length for 3- and 4-year-old children. The 4-year-olds are enrolled for 3 days a week, in either morning or afternoon sessions.

The “4-year-old” program continues to develop skills. Students have group interaction and play, learn independence and develop self-confidence. Students participate in show and tell, field trips and special projects. There are seasonal celebrations with performances on the stage. Students are introduced to kindergarten readiness, including ABC’s and numbers, through play and developmentally appropriate practices. (Preschool Handbook, 2008, p.2)

According to the preschool handbook (2008, p.1) “*the curriculum is gently structured allowing the teacher to individualize their instruction.*” There are 13 children enrolled in the class led by two co-teachers. There were thirteen children in this class, seven girls and six boys. They come from very diverse backgrounds with respect to culture, ethnicity, socio-economics, and religion. Their developmental profiles are similar in the areas of fine and gross motor skills but there are identifiable differences with regards to social/emotional and cognitive development. Many of the children in this class were also together in the 3-year-old class last year and as a result they have developed and formed a strong peer culture with the classroom. The following mini-biographies of the children are based upon my initial interactions with them during the first days of my observations and data collection as I began to identify the diversity within the class.

	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Status</b>
Bella	4	Girl	Caucasian	Returning
Ethan	4	Boy	Caucasian	Returning
Grace	4	Girl	Caucasian	Returning
Jackson	5	Boy	Caucasian	Returning
Kieran	4	Boy	Hispanic	Returning
Milesky	4	Girl	Mexican	New
Na Dei Dei	5	Girl	African American	New
Nicholas	4	Boy	Caucasian	New
Robert	5	Boy	African American	New
Sabrina	5	Girl	Caucasian	Returning



Savanna	4	Girl	Caucasian	Returning
Vivienne	4	Girl	Caucasian/Irish	New
Xavier	4	Boy	Caucasian/Greek	New

### **Characteristics of the Student Population**

Bella is one of the taller children in the class with dark brown hair and enormous brown eyes. She is very sociable, interacts a great deal with her classmates, and is often observed initiating play.

Ethan is one of the smaller boys in the group with light brown hair and a serious demeanor. He is constantly engaged in one activity or another but is just as content to remain on the periphery of a play episode as he is to be a part of the group.

Grace is an active participant at rug time and spends a great deal of time engaged in solitary play. She is one of the smaller girls in the group and is blonde with strikingly blue eyes. She enjoys puzzles and the reading corner but is frequently invited to play with her classmates.

Jackson wears very thick corrective glasses that he is constantly removing and misplacing. He particularly enjoys the company of the adults in the room and frequently walks around the room with his *“ocean creatures”* book tucked under his arm. He is very sociable and often steps in to scaffold a play episode with a creative idea.

Kieran is always eager to please the teachers and his classmates. It is sometimes difficult to understand him because of a speech delay but he is able to communicate with his peers and is frequently observed playing with many of the other children. He is very small with dark hair and eyes and an infectious grin.

Milesky is the smallest girl in the class. She speaks Spanish at home and English is her second language. The children support and scaffold her and, as a result, while her conversational English is not strong, her comprehension is good. She is very quiet but always included in the play episodes that occur in the classroom.

Na Dei Dei is very tall and looks a lot older than the other children in the group. She has dark hair and dark eyes. Na Dei Dei is shy and very quiet. It is unusual for her to initiate play in any form but she is very happy adopting a supportive role within the group.

Nicholas is a small bundle of energy. Although he has speech impairment, this does not inhibit his communication skills. He likes to tease and play tricks on the other children and is the most social child in the class. He is always smiling and laughing and ready with an idea for a play episode.

Robert is the tallest and oldest boy in the class with curly black hair and a booming voice. He is continually hugging his classmates and the teachers. He usually attempts to take on a leadership role in any play episode. The other children, however, often discontinue their play with him because he often finds it difficult to collaborate and loses his temper.

Sabrina moves from group to group and from play episode to play episode never remaining engaged in any one activity for very long. She has very long light brown hair and blue eyes and is almost always wearing something from the dress-up area.

Savanna is one of the taller girls in the class. She has long curly brown hair and an engaging smile. She is very quiet and plays almost exclusively with Nicholas. If he is not in school or joins a group or activity that she does not have an interest in, she will either play alone or sit at the project table with the teachers.

Vivienne is very quiet and serious. She rarely smiles but when she does her whole face lights up. She is small with dark hair and dark eyes. Like Grace, she enjoys puzzles and reading in the quiet area. While they are often at the same centers they usually engage in parallel rather than cooperative play.

Xavier is the youngest and smallest child in the classroom. His speech is very difficult to understand and as a result he is often frustrated when his peers or the teachers cannot understand him. However, when attempting entry into a play episode he is patient and will make numerous attempts to be understood until he is successful.

When you enter this classroom there is a feeling of harmony and collaboration. The children are usually all engaged in free play activities, are enjoying themselves, and, while the noise level could be described as high, it is a productive atmosphere and one that draws you in and invites you to participate in the classroom activities. I spent the first 2 weeks at the site observing the class as a whole and it became apparent that the children had formed their own peer culture within the classroom.

The community center that houses the preschool is situated in the middle of the village in an area populated by lower income families and senior citizens. The preschool aims to keep its tuition low so that low-income families can afford to enroll their children in the programs. Additionally the community center relies upon grants, donations, and outside funding. As a result the budgets for toys, classroom supplies, and facilities like playground renovations and equipment are limited. The preschool program therefore attracts families based upon its reputation for providing a quality educational experience rather than its physical appearance and the teachers are dedicated to the program rather than their salary. The teachers explained to me that older children use the playground as a place to congregate after school. The number of vandalism incidents has recently been on the rise. As a result, the majority of the outdoor equipment is either out of use or unsafe. This has limited the amount of outdoor play that the children engage in but fortunately the classroom is adjacent to a large hall that can accommodate indoor activities.

Across the hall from the classroom is a well-equipped kitchen that is shared with an Afterschool Program and Teen Center. The classroom is light and spacious with a wall of large windows running across one side. It has its own bathroom and large sink. When I discussed the layout of the classroom with the teachers they stated that they had spent a great deal of time over the past couple of years modifying and adapting the physical environment to meet the needs of a play-based curriculum. While the previous director was a strong supporter of the inclusion of play in the classroom they felt that the space could be utilized more effectively to encourage the development of play episodes.

*We wanted to provide the children with a space that encourages them to move around the classroom but also does not encourage them to engage in rough, noisy or disruptive activities. In the last year or so we have not been able to use the outdoor play ground as much as we would like and the Hall is not always available in the afternoons because of the Afterschool Program so we want the children to be as free as possible to move around the classroom and not be too restricted.*

(Ms. Karen, 11/19/2014).

The classroom space is divided into very specific learning centers each with storage space for the appropriate manipulatives and equipment used for the different activities that are set up there for the children each day. The furniture is portable so that it can be easily moved to accommodate different spatial needs. It is positioned so that the teachers are able to clearly observe the children wherever they are in the classroom, to discourage running but to also allow the children to move around the classroom freely in order to encourage group activities, peer interactions, and socializing. Each child has a cubby situated along the back wall of the classroom. There is a large meeting area in one corner with a colorful rug on the floor decorated with ABC's and a large blackboard running across the wall. This is one of the most popular areas for the children. They like to congregate here to draw pictures, "*write*" messages for each other and play "*school*." The rug is used as a meeting area and for blocks and large manipulatives during free play. There are beanbags and floor cushions in a small quiet area located in another corner of the classroom with bookshelves running around the wall space closest to this area. Two small tables each with four chairs are used for activities that; support the exploration of pre-reading and writing skills, numeracy skills, fine motor skills; accommodate solitary, constructive, and cooperative play; and encourage conversation, collaboration, and cooperation. There is a small Lego table and a train table in the center of the room and a dress-up/dramatic play area, kitchen with a table that can be used for "*cooking*" and "*entertaining*", and dollhouse in the third corner.

The curriculum was project based and, while the teachers had topics in mind that usually followed holidays, seasons, and other special events, the activities used to achieve their learning goals and objectives were, more often than not, child initiated and directed, and implemented within the children's play. The room was organized with learning centers focused upon math, science, English language arts, fine motor skills, and an arts and crafts area. Each of these centers had three or more activities that changed throughout the week and the children moved freely among the centers and were allowed to choose the activity they wanted to complete. The teachers moved around the classroom spending time at each of the centers scaffolding the children's play and skills. The schedule was flexible but usually comprised of free play, morning meeting, learning centers, outdoor or free play, snack, and rug time.

## **Methodology**

### *Data Collection*

I used a range of data collection procedures for this qualitative case study. These included observations, field notes, informal interviews and conversations with children, audio and videotapes, and a researcher journal. Qualitative research is richly descriptive and focuses on process, meaning, and understanding. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning that people have constructed, how they make sense of their world, and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998). They “*study a social setting to understand the meaning of participants’ lives in the participants terms*” (Janesick, 1994, p. 210). Based upon this premise, this qualitative case study focused upon understanding the social interactions that occurred within the chosen setting rather than making predictions about the setting. I chose to address my research using a case study because, as stated by Genishi (1991), “*case studies allow us to see what kind of contexts support children as they develop and control play and the playful interactions that provide direct evidence of how play functions in settings where children learn*” (p. 81). As a constructivist researcher my aim was to observe naturally occurring social behavior. I participated in the daily routines of the setting, developed on-going relationships with the members of this community, observed the initiation and development of social relationships during play, and identified the academic learning of the participants. Collecting evidence about how children behave, think, and feel helped to develop insight and understanding (Almy & Genishi, 1979).

In order to incorporate children’s voices it was important that I formed positive relationships with the participants and was able to engage them in informal conversations. The study incorporated the voices of children through their conversations and interactions with peers and researcher. It was necessary to establish strong, positive relationships with the children, teachers, and school community (Hatch, 1990). My entry into the classroom community was in accordance with Corsaro’s (1985) reactive entry strategy. According to Corsaro (2003), adults tend to initiate conversations but are uncomfortable with the minimal responses and silences that often occur. I made myself

available for interactions but allowed the children to initiate any contact and aimed to make these conversations more valuable and child-centered. This was a gradual process and was achieved during an initial period of “*casing the joint*” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

I visited the school once a week for 2 or 3 hours and constructed maps of the classroom, school, and its location in the community. These maps were used for the collection of data, to identify where the children sat, congregated, socialized, and whether there were specific areas set aside for social interactions. As identified by Marshall and Rossman (1999) I felt it was necessary to become an accepted presence in the classroom so that day-to-day activities and interactions would continue to take place without interruption, just as they would if I were not in the room.

As the children became more and more accepting of my presence during my subsequent visits, I adopted the role of a participant observer. This allowed me to experience the activities directly and to record my own perceptions (Spradley, 1980). As a participant observer I sometimes engaged in parallel play with the children and, later fully engaged in play with the children, as intimated by Dyson and Genishi (2005). This was achieved in accordance with Corsaro’s (1988) reactive entry strategy.

Field notes were the central method of data collection for this phase of the study. As intended they were systematic, detailed, and descriptive written records of my observations and experiences at the site. They were be organized in chronological order and transcribed as soon as possible after each observation while fresh in my memory.

During this initial phase of my observations my field notes consisted of anecdotal notes and the event sampling of play episodes. Observations were made both inside and outside of the classroom and incorporated episodes of outdoor play whenever possible.

As the need arose I developed and incorporated checklists into my observations. As researchers we are interested in understanding behavior from the subject’s own frame of reference and collect data through sustained contact with people in settings where subjects normally spend their time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

I conducted two informal group interviews with the children; one at the beginning and another at the end of the study. These were held during rug time. On further consideration I decided not to proceed with informal individual interviews as I had initially planned but engaged with the children in numerous casual conversations and

informal interviews. These informal conversations ranged from one-on-one conversations with one or two children to conversations with small or large groups. I became involved in these casual, spontaneous conversations whenever presented with an opportunity. This included times when I moved around the classroom conducting observations, sat with them at the project table, during snack time, clean-up time or waiting with them for their parents or caregivers to pick them up at the end of the day, and sometimes, when invited, joined in their play. I found these conversations to be much more interesting and valuable than the informal interviews. The children were more relaxed and willing to share their thoughts and reflections.

While these informal interviews and conversations took the form of what Spradley (1979) described as an ethnographic interview or friendly conversation they did however have an explicit purpose and direction. The open-ended nature of this approach allowed the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from one structured by prearranged questions. Consideration was given to the fact that the way the interview context was structured with young children had a powerful effect upon the children's response (Hatch, 1990). I videotaped the children and their play-related activities for approximately 20 minutes, once every 3 weeks. This allowed these episodes to be analyzed within a larger context of the environment. The permanence of videotape permitted me to review an event, interaction, or play scenario, repeatedly change my focus, and observe things not identified at the time of taping or on previous viewings.

However, this form of data collection had its limitations (DuFon, 2002). Videotape did not enable me to identify beliefs and perspectives. It was therefore essential that triangulation with other data collection methods took place. Triangulation was incorporated within the study in terms of data sources and methods of data collection. It was supported with the implementation of observations, field notes, interviews, video and audiotaping, and a researcher journal. In addition to data triangulation I utilized interdisciplinary triangulation through the use of sociological theories to inform and broaden my understanding of method and substance of my data. The transcription and analysis of the data collected by means of videotape was very time consuming so this method took on a supportive rather than a leading role in my data collection.

As my relationship with the children progressed and I engaged in both parallel and cooperative play with them I began to audiotape most of the dialogue that occurred. I used a small digital recorder that was relatively inconspicuous and the children soon became used to me carrying it around in my hand, placing it upon a table, or in another appropriate location.

The informal interviews and conversations with children were also audiotaped and I transcribed all tapes as soon as possible. These transcripts were especially useful for those occasions when I found myself concentrating upon a particular child or group of children and was unable to hear and record either the conversations of other children around me or an interaction between the teacher and one or more of the children. This method of data collection, as did the videotaping, freed me up to observe and record field notes related to body language and physical interactions. However, as the study progressed I found that I relied upon and utilized the audiotapes more than I did the videotapes that I made during the study. Researcher journals offer an effective way to reflect and raise awareness of observations that have occurred during the research process. I made an entry in my journal at least once or twice a week noting relevant observations, thoughts, and reflections. It was written in a narrative form and addressed assumptions that arose, considered any next steps to be taken, and contemplated any changes that appeared appropriate to the research plan. It helped to scaffold and inform my participant observations and aided in data analysis by enabling me to begin the identification of categories. I also used the journal to reflect upon my role within the classroom and to identify how my interactions and relationships with the teachers and participants effected my data collection and analyses.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of this analysis was to achieve direction, make possible analogies, and identify concepts. It was important to describe rather than label. As stated previously I used a recursive method and conducted three levels of reflections upon my observations. I used a recursive method and conducted three levels of reflections upon my observations. The first level took place at the time of the observation and influenced what



I included in the field notes and the second when my field notes were initially reviewed and here I began to code the data for developing themes or patterns. The third level was implemented when I returned to my notes for further analysis several weeks later. At this time I revisited the data and generated further categories, identified possible overlapping themes and patterns, and tested for emergent understanding. I used descriptive codes for the social interactions and learning that were observed taking place in the play episodes. For example during the play episodes I coded for leadership role, supportive role, scaffolding of peers, use of negotiation, collaborative interaction, sharing, successful play entry, and unsuccessful play entry.

The informal interviews and conversations were audiotaped and I allowed the conversation to make its own directions within predetermined parameters. The process of analysis for the data recorded during this initial interview involved writing down thoughts, ideas, and speculations, making additional comments in the margins, and circling key words and phrases used by the participants. I underlined important sections, searched through data for regularities and patterns, and for topics that the data covered. I then recorded words and phrases to represent these topics and patterns. These became my coding categories. When coding the transcripts codes such as the use of positive phrases regarding their view of project table, negative phrases regarding their view of project table, welcomes adult into play episode, and does not welcome adult into play episode emerged.

In summation, the analysis of qualitative data was inductive, grounded in particular pieces of data that were sorted and interrelated in order to understand the dimensions and dynamics of the phenomena being studied (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). According to Seidman (1998), it is difficult to separate the processes of collecting and analyzing data. As a result of this process, I developed assertions about what occurred in relation to my investigation and research questions.

## Findings

We cannot discount the voices of young children. We must embrace what they have to say and find a better way to listen, understand and interpret their meaning (Birbeck & Drummond, 2005, p 595). It has long been assumed by some educators that children are either unable or not entitled to have a point of view (Greig, Taylor & McKay, 2007). Despite the valuable contribution by researchers such as Corsaro, Genishi, Haas Dyson, and Paley who counter these claims the younger the child the less likely they are to be heard in the classroom. To develop thick descriptions of children's actions I need to go beyond simply detailing what they are doing and this involves exploring meaning and action. The optimal way to achieve this is through interviews and conversations with the children.

I initially intended to conduct individual interviews and conversations with the children. I decided to begin my interviews with Ethan, Robert, and Jackson because they were the children who appeared the most comfortable engaging in conversation with an adult. The data I collected was interesting but as I wrote entries in my researcher journal when I reflected upon our interactions and their responses to my questions, it became obvious that instead of relating their own thoughts and opinions they were in fact, to some extent, telling me what they thought I wanted to hear.

Researcher: So, do you like doing the projects with Ms. Karen?

Ethan: Sometimes.

Researcher: What kinds of things do you like doing with her?

Ethan: Lots of things. We have to do them right? That's what we come to school for!?

Researcher: Are they fun?

Ethan: Yeh, Ms. Karen says we have fun in school. They are fun, right.

Researcher: What's your favorite part of coming to school?

Ethan: Playing firefighter but I like the projects too. They're fun too. My mum likes the projects too. That's what we come to school for right!?

Even though the children are extremely comfortable with me and, since I had been careful to use Corsaro's (2003) reactive entry approach when "casing the joint" initially (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), did not identify me as a teacher, I was still an adult. It appears that, from their perspective, when adults ask them a question they are looking for a very specific answer in response. In fact there is only one right answer and they carefully reflect and search for it before giving their answers. By this point in my research, I knew the children in the class very well and had listened to numerous conversations at the blocks, doll's-house, kitchen, dress-up area etc. The thoughts and feelings they express to me in our conversations have very little in common with the free-flowing natural conversations that I hear when they are talking amongst themselves. Some of the responses correlate but many do not.

During our conversations they constantly look for reassurance that they are responding "correctly" as illustrated by my conversation with Ethan described earlier. I am faced with a dilemma. I feel that given more time and interactions with the children, or possibly by conducting my research under different circumstances, such as spending more time in the classroom with them over an extended period of time I would have eventually been accepted into their confidence. Unfortunately I did not have enough time to wait for this to occur naturally.

After careful consideration and further research on the topic of conducting interviews appropriately with young children I decide to move forward with group interviews as this strategy promises to be more successful and relevant. Group interviews rely upon a format that the children are much more comfortable with, talking with other children. The children know the rules for this kind of interaction and they are rules that they have control of (Graue & Walsh, 1998). This method allows me to sit back and really listen to what the children were saying. I initiate the discussion with a question that I hope will take them in the direction I am aiming for.

Researcher: Who did you play with in school today?

Nicholas: Ethan, and other kids.

Savana: You played with me too.

Nicholas: Yeh, I know I always play with you.

Bella: You played with me too – we played bus drivers.

Savanna: I was on the bus too. I was with Nicholas.  
Bella: Lots of people were on the bus.  
Savanna: I was with Nic.  
Robert: I was with Nic too. He was the driver and I collected the tickets.  
Savanna: I was in the bus with Nic too.  
Nicholas: Yep but so was Robert. You just came for the ride. He was collecting tickets. I played with you but I played with him too.  
Savanna: You're my friend, right?  
Nicholas: Yeh, so's Robert and Bella and Ethan and Xavier and Grace.  
Researcher: You have friends too, right Savanna?  
Savanna: Yeh, Nic's my best friend.  
Robert: She always plays with Nic.  
Savanna: No I don't!  
Bella: Yes you do!  
Ethan: You do!  
Savanna: No I don't. I play with you too!  
Ethan: Yeh – if Nic does too!

I allow them to continue their conversations with only some gentle interjections on my part in order to move the conversation forward or take it in a new direction. This is more time consuming and a little disconcerting because of the lack of control that results. However, this form of interview capitalizes upon social interactions and therefore generates rich information since children's worlds are social and their communication with their peers is much more real than that with adults. Also the children tend to keep each other on track and truthful.

I conducted two scheduled informal interviews with the class as a group during rug time. One took place at the beginning and the other towards the end of the study. The first interview was a general discussion to get the children used to this form of conversation and an initial way to identify categories as they began to emerge. The second interview was more focused and utilized information gathered from and built upon other data collection methods.

These conversations were audiotaped and took place in many different locations; during numerous play episodes; at the project table; on line for the bathroom; waiting for

the parents to pick up at the end of the day; while sitting with them on the rug during circle time; during a cooking activity; any time and any where. Sometimes I initiated the conversations and at other times the children initiated them. They were very relaxed interactions and the children moved in and out of our conversations freely. Initially I took field notes but found it was more appropriate to use audiotaping as the primary source of data collection for these conversations. There were even some occasions where I just let the recorder run while the children engaged in conversations between each other while I made secondary field notes.

### *Play and Work*

From my conversations with, and observations of, the teachers it appears that when they transform children's play activities into projects and learning centers they hope that the children will not identify them as work but as play and therefore be more motivated and engaged. They state that they felt more like "teachers" when they are in control of the topic. From my conversations with the children however it is apparent that they do not view play and work through the same lens.

*Young children have distinct ways of perceiving and expressing that differ from those adults who instruct and interact with this age group.*

(Ranz-Smith, 2007, p. 274)

These are just some of the comments made by the children in our conversations about play and work.

Sabrina: Play is not work. Playing is not the same as working.

Ethan: Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do like writing your name – coloring a picture and not scribbling outside the lines.

Kieran: Work is when Ms. Karen tells you what to do.

Robert: Work is when you do something you don't want to do when you would rather be playing.

Jackson: She tells us what to do and won't let us get up 'til we finish it.

Ethan: When I play I can leave to do something else if I want to.

Bella: Playing is getting to do whatever you want.

Robert: Teachers tell us we are going to play a game but it's not a game it's work.

All our conversations bring me to the same conclusions as King (1979). Play is play and work is work for young children. They have very definite ideas about what play looks like. It is fun. It is not adult directed. In fact as far as the children in this classroom are concerned, adults have no role in play whatsoever. It seems from my conversations with the children that they perceive the only purpose or value of having an adult within a play scenario is to provide the materials that they need and possibly to help resolve conflicts outside their control.

Researcher: It looked like you were having fun at the Lego table today. What were you doing?

Grace: We were building a movie theater.

Researcher: Wow, that must have been fun! Did you watch a movie afterwards?

Bella: No it took lots of time to build. We needed lots of bricks.

Grace: Ms. Karen helped us.

Researcher: What did she build?

Bella: Nothing she helped us find the blue pieces for the seats.

Researcher: She must have had fun. I wish I could have played too.

Bella: She didn't play with us she just helped us find the blue ones.

Grace: She was the brick person. She doesn't play with us.

Bella: Yeh, she was a helper!

## **Conclusion**

The detailed observations, conversations, and interviews collected for this qualitative case study explore and describe the social skills, peer relationships, and learning initiated and developed during play. Many studies indicate that play can be used to address increased academic demands and expectations of early childhood curricula but there is an absence of research addressing the peer relationships and social interactions that take place during play and how they contribute to academic learning. The voices of the

children are included in the study so that they may become part of the dominant discourse by sharing their experiences, adding credence to the value of play, and taking ownership of their learning experiences. As the study progresses the importance of the group, its contributions to the study, and implications for the findings become increasingly apparent. At the beginning of the data collection period, it is apparent that the children in this classroom have come together in response to the changes that have been made to the curriculum.

From my conversations with the children it is apparent that they are beginning to develop a negative attitude towards any form of organized academic activity. Some of the children feel that because they are continually removed from their play episodes to do projects and academic activities they prefer to simplify their play rather than organize complex play episodes. There are definite signs of frustration and, sometimes, even anger on the part of the children when they are pulled out of a play episode they have worked especially hard and long to develop. On completion of the project the children sometimes find that they are unable to gain reentry into the play episode. Their role may have been eliminated from the play episode or another child may have acquired it. At other times they find the play episode has come to an end and their peers has moved on to a new episode where they did not have a role.

As my observations continued it became apparent that each child in the class has unique skills and developmental advantages in certain domains. As identified by Corsaro (2005) children have the ability to distinguish the skills that are characteristic to each of their peers. The children in this study have taken this a step further. They purposely select and invite very specific children into their play episodes in order to scaffold their play, give it depth, add interest, or extend it. The group is very self-sufficient in that they successfully initiate, develop, and maintain creative play episodes throughout the day with little or no facilitation from the teachers. Within their group they identify each other's skills and developmental profiles. They use this knowledge to adopt and delegate roles in ways that extend, and enrich their play. As a result they scaffold the learning of their peers across all areas of the curriculum.

The conversations and informal interviews that I conducted were not only some of the most enjoyable experiences of this study but they also contribute some of the most

interesting and informative data. The children's responses to my questions and inquiries provide insight in to their capabilities to see multiple perspectives and their developing communication and reasoning skills. While some struggle to express their thoughts and feelings verbally they are all comfortable enough with my presence in the classroom and within the relationship we have established to engage in open dialogue about issues that are relevant to the study as well as topics they raise independently.

They have strong opinions about many classroom and curricular issues. They express clear definitions of play and work and how play is included in the curriculum. They are not happy with the introduction of the project table to the classroom or their schedule but have negotiated within the group ways to address this and still be able to engage in the play episodes that are the focal point of their day. Their perspectives are key to understanding the significance of play in the early childhood classroom.

Every child identifies frustration with having to leave a play episode to sit at the project table and complete an assignment. In most cases it is not the completion of the project that concerns them it is the interruption to their play. Many of them actually enjoy the project and, in particular, the opportunity it provides for interaction with the teacher in a one-on-one situation. If this activity was introduced or scheduled in a different way the experience would be more successful and productive. Two main themes arise as our conversation develops; the peer relationships that they form in the classroom, and the identification of an activity as being either play or work.

As stated by Wing (1995) they tend to have a general script that describes their day. The children have very clear expectations for their classroom experiences and the kinds of activities that they will engage in. While they develop positive relationships with each other they usually gravitate to specific groups within the larger group, based upon common interests and needs for role-play within the episode. In our conversations they are able to identify areas of expertise for each child and this supports my own observations. When faced with a problem to solve or a task to complete that is outside their skill level they readily admit that they will use this knowledge to recruit a peer who has the expertise that they need. They often state, with confidence, that after being helped or scaffolded by a peer they no longer need help the next time a similar situation arises.



The children express an awareness of “fitting in” or “not fitting in” in different situations and environments. They are capable of identifying these occasions for themselves and, in most instances, will accept the decision of their peers to exclude or include them in their play. If this situation arises they initiate a new play episode, attempt entry into another play episode or even engage in solitary play. The children develop these social skills over time and it is apparent from our conversations that they have arrived at this point over the past months through trial and error and a series of negotiations. They have acquired a knowledge base to help identify how they interact with different peers, their own interests and those of their peers, the roles they and their peers adopt in different types of play scenarios, and the probability of them being accepted or rejected by groups containing specific peers. This knowledge gives them the confidence to attempt entry into an existing play episode, move on to another or develop one of their own. The acquisition of these skills is something that needs to be taken into consideration when we consider their socialization into kindergarten or the addition of a new student to the class.

In our conversations the terms “play” and “work” are used continually as we discuss the activities that the children engage in while in the classroom. As stated by King (1979) any teacher or adult intervention in an activity is immediately identified and perceived by the children as being work. Activities conducted at the project table, in fact any of the tables situated around the room, are viewed as being work even if they have fun completing them or they are presented in the form of a game. In addition the type of material used in the activity identify it as being play or work. They feel that if they are asked to write or draw as part of these activities this also classifies it as being work. It appears that if the activity is not spontaneous or organic, it does not qualify as being play.

The fact that the teachers model and identify the time spent on the project as being “work time” or “getting ready for kindergarten” supports their identification of any activity taking place at the tables as being work. A great deal of emphasis is placed by both teachers on the fact that the project needs to be their “best” work, and is preparation for kindergarten. Stipek (2006) states that pressures such as these produce negative attitudes and this was certainly the case here. The pressure to complete the project in a very specific way is disturbing for many of the children. All of the children dislike being

taken away from their play to complete their projects. They often protest and try to negotiate with the teachers.

It is, however, possible for the children to have fun and enjoy an activity that they identify as being work even though they still categorize it as work rather than play. As long as the activity is enjoyable the label is of no concern to them. Even though our conversations allowed me to identify the characteristics used by the children to recognize an activity as being play or work we did not discuss their definitions of the terms in any detail nor were we able to discuss what they perceived as the outcomes or goals for “play” and “work”. As identified by (Wing, 1995), they are convincing in their descriptions of the roles adults play in their classroom experiences and how this affects their views on play and work. They are very clear in their opinion that teachers and adults have no direct role in their play. They view the teacher’s role as supportive and facilitative. Many of them feel that even this is invasive and only necessary if they cannot achieve their goals for play within their group.

### **Implications for Practice**

The observations I made for this study have numerous implications for practice. It is apparent that the perceptions of the children regarding play and work and the role of the teacher in their play episodes have relevance for the way play is used in the classroom. Teachers need to be aware of these perceptions and take them into consideration when developing the curriculum and identifying their role within the play episodes that take place in the classroom. If they are to use the relationships that are developed within the peer culture of the classroom to support the children as they scaffold their own learning they will need to carefully plan the strategies, space, and materials that they provide for this purpose. As identified by the children in our conversations, there is definitely a place for “work time” in their day. It is acceptable to label play and work separately as long as both are enjoyable and appropriate (King, 1979). The children are more willing to accept the need to participate in activities that are adult directed and identified as work if they are scheduled outside the time allocated for play and are more motivated to complete them successfully under these circumstances.

From our conversations it became apparent that the label is not really a cause for concern with the children. They accept the association between work, play, and teacher direction in these circumstances as long as they are having fun. However, play is purely play and any interruption or involvement of a teacher or adult is not acceptable. They need to have ownership of their play, directing and facilitating it from within their peer culture or group, even, if in essence, it is work as defined by an adult. As both King (1979) and Wing (1995) stated it seems that when we observe children playing and having fun they may simply be enjoying what we perceive as work. There is an ongoing and increasing struggle in this classroom for the teachers to integrate play and academic learning in the curriculum and to validate their relationship for parents and administrators. This has a direct effect upon the role of the teachers in the play that occurs in this classroom. The children respond by developing a schema within their peer culture that supports their play and scaffolds their learning. This raises a number of questions. If teachers are being pushed to decrease their involvement in play how can we utilize the ways that children scaffold their own learning within their play episodes and also how do we identify when and if they arrive at a point where further scaffolding is not possible without teacher facilitation.

### **Implications for Research**

There are several implications for research that arise out of this study. The peer cultures that children develop within their classroom environment are extremely interesting and valuable. A critical component in children's increasing ability to interact with others is their ability to coordinate their own perspectives with those of other people. The children in this study develop and utilize these skills to create, sustain, and expand upon the peer culture that they form within the classroom. This peer culture becomes the focal point of social-emotional and academic learning for the children in the study.

My study has highlighted for me the joy that play brings into the classroom and the play episodes observed in this study illustrate for me just how much fun learning can be for everyone, including the teachers. The complex play episodes that I observe in this classroom really highlight the complexity of the relationships, interactions and use of

social skills that take place in a very short period of time when the children are engaged. The children are comfortable in the roles that they adopt and this facilitates and strengthens the play experience for them.

Children do have many, many contributions to make. No matter how young they are or their level of development it is possible to communicate effectively with truly informative outcomes if conducted appropriately and with respect.

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## TEACHER CANDIDATES' VIEWS ABOUT PLAY AND ITS ROLE IN THE KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

*This research examined teacher candidates' views about play and the role of play in the kindergarten classroom. Teacher candidates in a teacher education program in Southwest Florida were asked to complete a survey with open ended questions. The data were analyzed qualitatively to gain in-depth insights into the candidates' perceptions about the role of play in the kindergarten classroom, and their pedagogical knowledge. The findings indicated teacher candidates' limited understanding of the nature and value of play as essential learning medium for 5 year olds. This paper provides implications for teacher education programs in terms of curricular decisions to facilitate teacher candidates' understanding of their critical role in promoting play in early childhood.*

### Introduction

Play is a memorable and essential foundation of the childhood. Theorists and researchers have offered much evidence for the value of play in brain development, physical development, literacy development, and social-emotional growth. Specifically, play is a natural environment and an activity in which children refine gross and fine motor skills, develop language and literacy skills, increase planning skills and creativity, expand their social skills, learn self-control, and manage emotions (Berk, 2012; Holmes and Geiger, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978). Although, play is a powerful and natural behavior that contributes to children's learning and development, play activities and experiences are disappearing in kindergarten, the classroom for 5 year olds (Walston, 2013). Reasons for the significant decrease in both structured and free play include organized activities such as sports and computer and video games, and most importantly an emphasis on the academics, fueled by a misconception of the risk of falling behind. With the intention of preparing children for the global market and competition, the kindergarten curriculum in many schools focuses on structured reading and math instruction, and often content for higher grade levels and standardized tests (Wienerman, 2009). With a secondary

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emphasis on visual arts, physical education, and other non-academic areas, the learning standards for kindergarteners also tip the balance in favor of the academics. Regardless of this trend, kindergarten teachers can incorporate play in the curriculum and utilize play-based curriculum to meet these standards. As Brown and Vaughan (2009: 101) noted “*Play isn’t enemy of learning, it’s learning’s partner. Play is a fertilizer for brain growth.*” Teachers using play-based curriculum understand the value of play and advocate for “holding on to play” through reflection and professional development” (Wood, 2014: 48). In addition, teachers’ views and beliefs are the best predictors of the nature of their classroom practices. These views, however, are molded during the teacher education years. Because teacher candidates’ (TC) understanding of play and their actions related to play-based curriculum are vital for keeping play in the kindergarten classroom, it is meaningful to investigate TCs’ views about play. In this study, we explored the views of TCs on the role of play and its incorporation into the kindergarten curriculum. The nature of TCs’ understanding of play will inform teacher education programs about possible areas for curricular changes in preparing TCs to effectively infuse play into the Kindergarten curriculum.

## Literature review

*Go out in nature and build a snow house, a sandcastle, a fort, or a tree house, or dam a creek. Get your hands dirty and your feet wet and remember the sheer joy of it all. Then come in and warm up and relish the pleasure of that, too. Play engages all our senses and gives us courage to be fully human again.*

(Almon, 2009: 44)

Play is an activity that young children naturally engage in, regardless of their backgrounds. Play is “as fundamental a human disposition as loving and working” (Elkind, 2003: 46). The following features differentiate play activities from non-play behaviors: (1) intrinsically motivated and self-initiated, (2) process oriented, (3) non-literal and pleasurable, (4) exploratory and active, and (5) rule governed (Isenberg and Quisenberry, n. d.). Others have offered additional criteria to describing authentic play, such as (1) flexible in its processes and rules, (2) self-sustaining and not dependent on adult direction, (3) can involve one or more participants (Stephens, 2009), and (4) the players determine the meaning of activities and objects (Brewer, 2007 as cited in Riley

and Jones, 2010). Some researchers have emphasized a continuum of play based on the ratio of play and other motives it is blended with. For example, Bergen (1998) identified a continuum of play that ranges from free play to work. This continuum represents play blended with increasing amounts of teacher-imposed rules and directions and a decreasing level of flexibility children have in their decisions to participate, and in planning and carrying out their activities.

Regardless of the diverse focus in the definitions of play, theorists agree that play is an essential component of childhood because of its contribution to child development. Play is beneficial for children in constructing and refining skills in all developmental domains (Fromberg, 2002). Recent brain research suggests that play is a critical initiator and tool for children's learning as well as a good indicator of the level of brain development (Bergen and Coscia, 2000). Brain development is enhanced by play experiences linked with sensorimotor, cognitive and social-emotional experiences (Bergen, 2007). In particular, there is a strong relationship between age-appropriate play and attention, problem solving, memory and language (Jensen, 2000; Roskos and Neuman, 1998). In addition, play experiences contribute to literacy development. For example, socio-dramatic play in which children and adults engage in conversation, offer an opportunity of mastering tasks and skills at the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Literacy-rich play centers allow children to explore authentic experiences with print and to develop oral and written literacy skills (Ferguson, 2007). As a result, children master language skills in their native language, and often develop skills in another language (Szecsi and Giambo, 2007). Furthermore, play activities are important for the development of cultural and linguistic skills. During play, children practice skills, concepts and dispositions toward themselves and others, along with appropriate social and moral behaviors (Berk, 2012; Bodrova and Leong, 1996). In addition, through all the experiences during play and interactions with others, young children construct their identity (Katz, 1982).

Productive and effective classroom instruction is partly determined by teachers' beliefs and their willingness to examine their views about play and its role in effective instruction for young children. Although research shows that teachers consistently value the importance of play in the classroom, teachers' practices tend to be negatively impacted by other, often external factors (Chervenak, 2011). According to Chervenak time and the standards are two of the most common factors that inhibit teachers from implementing play-based learning activities. Ranz-Smith (2007) also found that curricular expectations were perceived as a common barrier to teachers'

classroom practices to include child-initiated play in the curriculum. In addition, teachers' perspectives of play differ widely, in particular cultural differences in individuals' perspectives on play and the role of play in learning are well documented (Fung and Cheng, 2011; Hyvonen, 2011; Izumi-Taylor, Ito, Lin and Lee, 2014).

Regardless of the current emphasis on the importance of play in early childhood, there is an existing gap in the examination of TCs' perceptions of play and the infusion of play in kindergarten (Izumi-Taylor, Ito et al., 2014). Research on TCs' understanding of play-based curriculum has also been limited. Although some studies were conducted in Australia (Ridgway and Quinones, 2012) and Japan, Taiwan, and the USA (Izumi-Taylor, Ito et al., 2014), more research is needed that explores TCs' perceptions about play and its implementation in the elementary school curriculum. Sharing TCs' knowledge about play and how it can be incorporated in the kindergarten curriculum would complement our understanding of effective preparation of teachers. Therefore, our study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do TCs define play?
2. What do TCs perceive as appropriate play infusion in the kindergarten curriculum and why?
3. What understanding do TCs hold about culturally appropriate play in kindergarten?
4. What barriers do TCs perceive to play inclusion in the kindergarten classroom?

## **Methods**

### *Context*

This study took place in the state of Florida. The educational system in the United States is determined by each state, therefore there are major differences in the educational systems among the fifty states. In Florida, children who turn six years of age by February 1<sup>st</sup> are required to attend school regularly during the entire school term (Florida Department of Education, 2015). In addition, children who turn five years of age by September 1<sup>st</sup> of the school year are eligible for public kindergarten admission. Children are considered full-time kindergarten students if they attend a minimum of four hours per day for 180 school days. In Florida, school districts can offer a full day of instruction to kindergarten students; however each district school board locally

approves whether a full or part time kindergarten is offered (Florida Department of Education, 2015).

The state of Florida has provisions in place regarding statewide kindergarten screening and kindergarten readiness rates (Florida Senate, 2010 ). Public schools are required to administer the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) to all entering kindergarten students in the school district. This screening tool focuses on physical development, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, language communication and emergent literacy, and cognitive development. (Florida Department of Education, 2014). The Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards for Four-Year-Olds (2011) provides a set of competencies that children are expected to master by the end of a voluntary prekindergarten (VPK), which is a state-funded three-hour-per-day program for children aged 4. In addition, the kindergarten teachers are accountable to meet the Florida Standards, including 73 language arts, 31 mathematics, 19 science, 27 social studies, 19 dance, 19 health education, 20 music, 40 physical education, 18 theatre, and 25 visual arts standards (CPalms, 2014). The state does not require standardized assessments in kindergarten; however the districts might decide to use standardized assessments for monitoring kindergarteners' progress and for measuring teacher effectiveness. Kindergarten teachers in the Florida public schools must hold either a professional or a temporary certificate in Prekindergarten/Primary Education (ages three through grade three) or Elementary Education (grades Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade) in addition to a bachelor's degree (Florida Department of Education, 2015).

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were 35 TCs in a teacher preparation program in Southwest Florida. The program held the highest national accreditation by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. During the study, all participants were enrolled in an early childhood course, while simultaneously completing the semester long, two-day-per-week internship in various grade levels.

In this teacher preparation program, TCs complete five semesters, taking both foundations and methods courses. Their field experiences include a semester-long, two-day-per-week teaching internship, followed by a semester of full time student teaching practicum. Both TCs majoring in Elementary Education and Early Childhood Education pursue a certificate that

allows them to teach in kindergarten. Therefore, to develop competencies for kindergarten classrooms, they take one of two early childhood courses (Cognitive experience for young children or Play in early childhood), and one of their internship placements takes place in a K-2 classroom. In addition to the teaching certificate, TCs graduate with reading and ESOL endorsements.

TCs who graduate the program typically teach within the two counties that are geographically closest to the university, although others may move to other areas. These school districts have a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. In one of these school districts, 54% of students in Pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade come from homes where languages other than English are spoken (Collier County Public Schools, 2014). In the other district, 28% of students come from homes where languages other than English are spoken (personal communication, E. Rivera, Coordinator, ELL, and Multilingual Education, School District of Lee County, October 14, 2014).

Among the participants there were 33 (94%) females and 2 (6%) males. This reflects the Florida State demographics for elementary teachers, which indicates 90.5% female and 9.5% male (Florida Department of Education, 2013). The participants ranged in age between 20 and 30 years ( $M=22.2$ ,  $SD=2.1$ ), and they represented three majors: elementary education (83%,  $n=29$ ), child and youth studies (14%,  $n=5$ ) and early childhood education (3%,  $n=1$ ). At the time of the study, six TCs (17%) were in a kindergarten classroom for their internship. Thirty (85.7%) of these TCs indicated their ethnicity as white, non-Hispanic, 4 (11.4%) as Hispanic, and 1 (2.9%) as African-American. These data are similar to the demographics of elementary teachers in the State of Florida, which shows 72.16% white, non-Hispanic, 11.99% Black, and 13.87% Hispanic elementary teachers (Florida Department of Education, 2013).

#### *Data collection and data analysis procedures*

After receiving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we recruited participants via an email invitation. Participants were asked to fill out a short, 20-minute survey on Checkbox, an on-line survey system. Participation was completely voluntary, and participants could decide to leave the survey at any point, or skip any questions they chose not to answer. The survey included questions related to demographic information, including gender, age, major, race,

ethnicity and internship location. It also included the following five open-ended questions, which were developed based on the research questions:

1. What is play? Give a comprehensive definition.
2. In what kinds of play activities are kindergarteners usually engaged in the classroom? List and describe at least three that are the most common.
3. Give at least three specific examples for the kinds of play that you would design for kindergarteners in the classroom. Give a short rationale for each.
4. Give at least three examples for culturally appropriate play in the kindergarten classroom. Give a short rationale for how these play activities address cultural appropriateness.
5. What are the barriers to play in the kindergarten classroom?

A week after the surveys were completed, participants were invited to a 30-minute focus-group meeting to participate in an activity. The purpose of this activity was to gain additional insight into TCs' perceptions about appropriate play infusion in the kindergarten curriculum. They were given a picture and a three-column chart. In the picture, children in a kindergarten classroom were portrayed in 14 different play activities, e.g. jumping a rope, painting, role playing and building with blocks. On the activity sheet, participants were requested to (1) name all 14 play activities, (2) identify 2-3 skills that children develop during the given play activity, and (3) select 5 out of the 14 play activities and match them with the appropriate Florida kindergarten standards. Altogether 22 activity sheets were completed, because TCs had a choice to work alone or with a partner.

Participants were each coded by a number to maintain anonymity in the data analysis. The demographic information was analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe the sample. The answers to the five open-ended questions on the survey and the responses to the activity during the focus-group meeting were analyzed qualitatively, following the 'data analysis spiral' as described by Creswell (1998, 2003). The model suggests the following sequence of steps: (1) data management; (2) initial reading and memoing; (3) coding, describing, and interpreting data; (4) data presentation and interpretation. This process involved evaluating the qualitative responses provided by TCs based on detectable similarities and differences. The patterns that were found in TCs' responses provided the criteria for coded themes in this research.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Definition of play*

In order to explore how the TCs in this study think about play, they were asked to provide a comprehensive definition of play. Although all TCs attempted to answer the question, the themes, which emerged after a close reading of their answers and an examination of the sophistication of their responses, indicate a limited understanding of play. Twenty-five of the participants (71%) specifically noted that play is an activity that children or students engage in. The remaining 10 TCs either did not specify in their definition who usually engages in play, or they clearly mentioned that any person (adults too) can engage in play. It is important to note that play is not as common an activity among adults as it is among children due to adult responsibilities (Gray, 2008). Most TCs gave definitions that described one or two ingredients they felt were important to play. However, these TCs' definitions were not comprehensive. Fourteen of the TCs (40%) mentioned the importance of pleasure. For example, one TC noted, *"Play is something that someone likes to do, and has fun doing it"* (TC 26). In addition, 12 TCs (34%) defined play through stressing the importance of imagination. For example, one TC noted, *"In order to play, someone must have the ability to make believe"* (TC 33). Furthermore, 10 TCs emphasized the learning and development that results from play, and nine TCs mentioned the importance of exploration. According to one TC, play can simply be defined as a process *"where children have learning outcomes through playing"* (TC 4). Another TC gave a more elaborate answer, detailing the kinds of skills children may learn through play:

*Play can be in any situation, and can be a solid foundation for learning vitals skills. Children learn how to count, what different colors mix into, and how balance and gravity works while playing. It can be used as the integral part of an early childhood, and even kindergarten classroom to have children discover basics of the world. (TC 33)*

Although learning is not a defining feature of play, it is a valuable result of play that many of these TCs recognized. In addition, many TCs' definitions emphasized one or two aspects that they felt were important to play; as the above examples show, and only some TCs wrote comprehensive definitions. These definitions included multiple aspects of play, highlighting the

features that researchers include in definitions of play, such as (1) intrinsically motivated and self-initiated, (2) process oriented, (3) non-literal and pleasurable, (4) exploratory and active, and (5) rule governed (Isenberg and Quisenberry, n. d.).

*Play is fun and carried out for the pleasure of doing it. Play is voluntary and it requires the player's involvement and the suspension of reality. Play is a behavior that allows players to treat objects as though they are something else. Children learn many things through play and all areas of development are enhanced through play (TC 28).*

Finally, in their definitions, 11 TCs indicated the social aspect of play. Although five of these TCs also emphasized that play can be individual, some TCs seemed to have a misconception that play may not be individual activity, but it has to involve multiple students. In particular, one TC defined play as “*being able to socialize with another student in the class*” (TC 7). Another clear misconception that emerged from the data related to the voluntary nature of play. One TC’s definition included activities “*that either a teacher tells students to do, or something that the students come up with on their own*” (TC 22). Contrary to this, definitions of play point out that play is not dependent on adult directions (Stephens, 2009). In addition, research shows that teachers’ decisions to include child-initiated play in the curriculum may be negatively impacted if they define play as an activity that could be directed by an adult (Ranz-Smith, 2007).

#### *Perception of appropriate play infusion in kindergarten curriculum*

Two questions on the survey were included to elicit answers from TCs that inform about their perceptions of appropriate play activities in the kindergarten classroom:

1. In what kinds of play activities are kindergarteners usually engaged in the classroom? List and describe at least three that are the most common.
2. Give at least three specific examples for the kinds of play that you would design for kindergarteners in the classroom. Give a short rationale for each.

The TCs’ answers to these two questions are discussed simultaneously. Our rationale for these two questions was, on the one hand, that we wanted to be able to describe what TCs perceive to be the three most common types of play in kindergarten based on their experiences. On the other



hand, we wanted to explore their ideas about (1) the types of play they wanted to include in their kindergarten classrooms, (2) whether those were different from what they perceived as common types of play, and (3) their reasoning for including each type of play in a curriculum for kindergarteners.

A total of three TCs did not respond to the first question, and seven did not respond to the second question. It is reasonable to assume that the four TCs who responded to the first, but not the second question, did so because their response would have been the same to both questions. In fact, 13 of the 28 TCs who responded to both questions provided the same response to each. Of these 13 TCs, four gave the exact same response to both questions, while nine added a rationale to their choices in the second question, as they were requested.

Based on an analysis of the responses of the TCs to the two questions, nine categories emerged: dramatic play (make-believe play), educational play (such as math manipulatives, literacy games), construction play (Building blocks, Legos), arts and crafts, computer play, puzzles and board games, hands-on/sensory play (play dough, sand, water table, etc.), large motor play (active, physical), and music (singing, dancing). Table 1 summarizes the types of play activities and the frequency of each based on the TCs' responses. It is important to note that many TCs gave less than the requested three examples, and some of them gave more than three. In addition, the response of three TCs did not fit the categories that were identified. Their responses did not include specific examples for types of play activities, but their answers were general. One TC focused on the various levels of social involvement during play, from solitary play through observing others' play to playing with a partner. The other two TCs took the purpose of kindergarteners' play into consideration. One of them emphasized that an activity may look like play, but the focus is on learning. The other TC noted that "Younger students are usually engaged in investigation play, exploratory play, free play, and really any kind of play that involves them using their imagination" (TC 22).

<b>Type of play activity</b>	<b>Number of TCs who indicated this play activity in kindergarten</b>	<b>Number of TCs who would design this play activity</b>
Dramatic play (make-believe play)	21	18
Educational play (such as math manipulatives, literacy games)	15	12
Construction play (Building blocks, Legos)	14	8
Arts and crafts	10	8
Computer play	6	3
Puzzles and board games	4	6
Hands-on/Sensory play (play dough, sand, water table, etc.)	4	4
Large motor play (active, physical)	3	3
Music (singing, dancing)	2	3
Total responses	75	58

**Table 1 Types of play**

Although the total number of responses for the two questions differs greatly for the reasons described above, some trends can be seen in the data, which may be used to draw conclusions. It is clear that the types of play TCs indicated that kindergarteners tend to play generally match the types of play they intend to integrate in the curriculum. Research shows that teachers' practices tend to be in alignment with their prior experiences (Ranz- Smith, 2005). The frequencies indicate that according to these TCs the most common play activities in kindergarten are dramatic play, educational play, construction play, and arts and crafts activities. Fewer TCs listed computers, puzzles and board games, hands-on activities, musical activities, and physical play. In addition to the categories of play identified by these TCs, Miller and Almon (2009) offer an

additional five categories in their 12 key types of play: mastery play, rules-based play, symbolic play, risk-taking play, and rough-and-tumble play.

Upon close examination of TCs' responses to the second question, it was found that the TCs struggled with providing a rationale for the types of play activities they would include in their classrooms. Out of the 28 TCs who answered the third question, only 13 included the benefits of the types of play. However, overall their responses were short and general. For example, one TC shared:

*A dress up center because it allows students to express their interests. A water or sand exploration table so that students can learn and explore through play. A puzzle center because it supports play along with critical thinking and possibly teamwork. (TC 30)*

Most TCs did not explain their rationale, but many of them provided specific examples for each kind of play activity they listed, and they used what the activity was about as the rationale for the activity. For example, one TC explained:

*Dramatic play is having children act out something. They could have a situation where they were at home and had to pretend a parent. They could act out an argument and have to solve it. (TC 27)*

Interestingly, the focus group activity indicated TCs' more in-depth understanding about the value of play. Their answers for developmental accomplishments promoted by play showed that TCs can recognize the skills and competencies that are increased in a given play activity. In particular, 82% of the labels which TCs assigned to a play activity described the skill properly. For example, for a picture in which children were jump roping, TCs identified: gross motor skills, cooperating with others, interacting with others, hand-eye coordination, physical balance, imagination, concentration, counting skills, awareness of rhythm, attention, and self-regulation. Overall, this example manifested TCs' awareness of how physical activity such as jumping has the potential of promoting cognitive and social-emotional skills appropriate for kindergarteners. Another example for TCs' awareness of the variety of skills a play activity can involve was two pictures in which kindergarteners were drawing and painting. In addition to recognizing the fine motor skills, they also mentioned skills related to personal reflection, color coordination,

creativity, and using symbols. With 18 % of the labels coded as inappropriate, TCs only named an activity such as playing roles, sinking and floating, play, hands-on, dramatic play, and literacy rather than identifying a specific skill. Based on these results we concluded that TCs displayed appropriate competences in identifying the value of play, when they were given a specific play scenario/picture.

*Understanding of culturally appropriate play*

The question related to cultural appropriateness in play seemed to be challenging for TCs. Fourteen TCs (40%) did not answer the question, one even wrote “I do not know what it means” (TC 33). In addition, nine TCs’ response (26%) had no reference to culture, which indicated their unfamiliarity with culture specific play. Only the remaining 12 TCs (34%) addressed the play as representation and/or context of culture. Table 2 summarizes the types and the frequency of ideas related to culture.

<b>Types of play activities</b>	<b>Frequency of recommendation</b>
Celebrating culture day and holidays	2
Roleplaying stories from cultures with ethnic dress up	6
Sharing stories and objects about your culture	7
Creating culturally diverse environment with maps, visuals, and books	5
Cooking ethnic meals	1
Total	21

**Table 2 Culturally appropriate play**

All responses, except for two, targeted the surface level of the culture such as food, ethnic clothing, and holidays. This focus on the visible features of the culture might indicate that TCs

perceive cultures only at a surface level, without exploring culturally specific values and beliefs that can guide play activities and play participation. This limited lens on surface culture might also suggest that TCs believe that kindergarteners can demonstrate and access culture only in a tangible form. On the other hand, the suggestions that delved into the deep level of culture proposed socio-dramatic play as a medium to teach tolerance and the incorporation of the native language as part of a culture:

*Teachers should allow children to use phrases, idioms, or any other form of speech used by the child's native culture. Discouraging the child from using the same terms or figures of speech that the family does will show disrespect toward that child's culture, and could consequently cause the child to lose respect. Singing songs that go with lessons, in different languages: this promotes the child to use and respect his/her native language, but also provokes the interest and understanding of that culture by other students. (TC 29)*

This TC understood the importance of the native language and its link to the culture. Suggestions for incorporating the native language in activities have the potential to promote a culturally responsive environment. However, no TCs mentioned the impact of culture on play participation, play objects and acceptable play activities (Roopnarine, Lasker, Sacks, and Stores, 1998; Szecsi and Giambo, 2007). None acknowledged that children from diverse cultures bring their own “*funds of knowledge*” about play into the classroom, and these diverse cultural capitals should be respected and considered by the teacher (Gonzales, Moll and Amanti, 2005). A similar lack of awareness and understanding in culturally appropriate play is reported by Sanagavarapu and Wong (2004) among early childhood educators in Australia. In their study, teachers noticed the differences in play behavior, but they accounted it for the children’s proficiency in English rather than their culture. These teachers had a similar struggle with the concept of culturally appropriate play and noted numerous barriers for not implementing it. The lack of attention and focus on how culture determines play might be a reason for the teachers’ limited understanding (Kirova, 2010). She also argues that culture is not an additional component of “*a universal play but, rather the origin of what children do in play*” (Kirova, 2010: 80). To demonstrate this notion, she examined the incorporation of cultural scripts in play among refugee children, and found that

this intercultural approach can contribute to the heritage culture maintenance while creating a common culture in early childhood settings.

### *Barriers to play in kindergarten*

The fourth research question addressed the TCs' perception related to barriers to implementing play in kindergarten. Many TCs did not mention any barriers, while some recognized barriers in the kindergarteners' micro and macro context. In particular, twelve TCs (34%) did not answer the question. The high number of 'no response' might be interpreted in various ways, e.g., TCs' lack of awareness of any barriers, and/or TCs' lack of interest in considering the possible barriers. We assume when TCs recognize some barriers as important ones, they would include them in their responses. Research shows that although teachers believe that play is important, there are outside factors that negatively influence the amount of play they incorporate in the curriculum (Chervenak, 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007). It is reasonable to assume that not recognizing and/or not caring about such barriers to the inclusion of play in the classroom might further jeopardize teachers' ability to infuse play in the curriculum in a time of heavy push for academics.

Responses related to barriers showed four major themes (1) child-related barriers (2) parents' and administrators' perception of play as waste of time, (3) barriers in the physical environment, and (4) extreme and sole emphasis on academics and standards. Seven TCs (20%) discussed barriers related to the child such as different maturation level including intellectual and social skills, various levels of play skills, and the lack of skills in solving conflicts occurring during play. Some TCs only stated the possible barrier without pointing out the teacher's role in overcoming the challenge. On the other hand others proposed solutions such as making accommodations for children with special needs and setting up clear rules to avoid and resolve conflicts.

Another barrier was parents' and administrators' perception of play as waste of time. One out of seven TCs (20%) who thought that parents and administrators disagree with the inclusion of play in curriculum, stated: "*Kindergarten has a set schedule to follow. It has a curriculum to stay with, just as many other grades do. This makes it hard to give playtime, because many schools feel that playing is not an acceptable way to learn.*" (TC 33) Several TCs recognized parents' and administrators' resistance to play, but only a few TCs expressed clearly an

incongruity with these views, and stated: *“The barrier is that the play needs to be educational and not a waste of time. Many people think that play in a classroom is a waste of their education. However, these students can still learn while playing.”* (TC 34) Similarly, teachers in Hong Kong tend to share this concern about parents’ negative perceptions about play at school (Fung and Cheng, 2012).

Elements of the physical environment such as safety hazards, insufficient space for play, lack of money and resources e.g. toys were perceived as a barrier. Four TCs (11%) seemed to be more proactive in terms of how teachers can change the barriers and create an environment conducive to play. One noted:

*Making sure there is sufficient space for play, making sure that all students are able to play, instructions must be simple and clear, and give time for students to play daily. That would be the order I chose because first, there needs to be enough space for everyone to play and move around the classroom freely and safely* (TC 7)

Finally, fifteen TCs (43%) discussed the overwhelming emphasis on academics, standards and testing which hindered the inclusion of play in kindergarten classrooms. They described the kindergarten environment as a highly regulated and supervised space with limited opportunity for teacher- initiated individualized instruction and interaction. One noted:

*The idea that everyone needs to be doing the same thing at the same time. The idea that every activity has to be structured in a way that the learning goal is obvious to anybody that walks past the room because the teacher is constantly being evaluated and judged by passersby.* (TC 21)

These TCs referred to the strict accountability for kindergarten standards and testing as barriers. However, they did not shed light on how the standards can be met through play activities; they only conveyed convey an excuse for eliminating play activities. For example, the following response indicated the TC’s limited understanding of making content accessible and comprehensible through play: *“The barriers would be that there are many standards that the teachers have to meet that are content based. This makes the teachers lecture more than allow the students to play”* (TC 20). Furthermore, some TCs separated teaching and playing as if

playing would not be part of the learning process. One TC noted “*there are certain times of the day teachers have to teach and little time for play.*” (TC 16). Only one TC stated the value of play for initiating learning and meeting standards “*...play is a great way for children to learn through exploration and work on independent decision-making skills*” (TS 29). Overall, most TCs were aware of the emphasis on standards; however they failed to mention play was a medium for kindergarteners to develop those competencies in the standards. Other studies also reported on the pressures teachers feel from standards, curriculum and high-stakes testing (Chervenak, 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007)

To gain a deeper insight into TCs’ perception on Florida kindergarten standards and play, the picture-based focus group activity was examined. TCs were requested to select five out of the 14 play pictures and assign three standards to the pictures. The most frequently selected play activities were (1) role playing with 15 responses, (2) playing with shapes with 15 responses and (3) painting at easel with 14 responses. The least frequently selected play activity was playing at the sand/water table with five responses. This frequency pattern was similar to the frequency of the types of play activities TCs would include in the curriculum based on their responses to the second question on the survey. The pattern might indicate that TCs are more aware of the link between, for example playing with shapes and math standards, and role playing and theatre standards than the link between experimenting at the sand/water table and science standards. A closer examination of the type of standards that TCs selected shed light on their relatively limited awareness of how academic standards such as math, language arts and science can be addressed in play activities. In particular, they assigned the language arts standards exclusively to a picture of a child playing with letter blocks, without articulating the potential of role-play and socio-dramatic play to promote literacy skills. Similarly, most math standards were spotted for a picture in which a child was playing with shapes, disregarding role-play and socio-dramatic play as facilitator for math skills. Overall, TCs selected 41% of standards from the area of language arts (22%), math (12%), and science (7 %), while the majority, 59 % of the selected standards represented other areas: visual arts (23%), physical education (21%), theatre (13%) and dance (2%). These numbers suggest that TCs recognized how play can promote artistic skills, though they perceived these play activities less appropriate for promoting academic skills such as reading and math. The findings on barriers in this study are aligned with Baker (2014) who also found that kindergarten teachers in Abu-Dhabi recognized the pressure to focus on academic



goals and the use of worksheet learning in literacy and mathematics imposed by parents rather than play activities.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

This preliminary study explored TCs' views on play in kindergarten. This investigation is important because the expectations for kindergarten in the United States have changed significantly. The sole focus on standards for academic achievement and accountability has modified the landscape of kindergartens, and as a result play inclusion would need justification and advocacy (Goldstein, 2007). Given the small number of TCs in this study, we strived to gain in-depth insights into their views rather than gaining more generalizable findings. Therefore, the findings in this preliminary qualitative study cannot be generalized beyond the context of the study. For more generalizable findings, it would be meaningful to examine a larger and random sample.

In this study, TCs' definition of play focused on the importance of imagination and the social aspects of play. At the same time, some TCs held misconceptions such as perceiving teacher-directed activity as play activity. Although teacher-directed activities possess various benefits to child development and learning, play which is intrinsically motivated and self-initiated, exploratory and active (Isenberg and Quisenberry, n. d.), targets additional areas of development. Thus, teacher-directed activities cannot serve as substitute for play. Furthermore, teacher candidates in this study seemed to recognize the value of dramatic play, playing with manipulatives, and construction play with more frequency than the value of puzzles, sensory play and play outdoors. However, they struggled to make connections between skills embedded in play activities and learning outcomes. When prompted by pictures, TCs provided a more elaborate and detailed insight of their perceptions of play. These findings might suggest that less frequently mentioned play activities might be overlooked and less present in these TCs' classrooms, while at the same time traditional academic areas such as reading and math might dominate the classroom. To address these gaps in TCs' perceptions of play, in this teacher preparation program it would be essential to incorporate a deeper inclusion of topics on sensory play and outdoor play via simulation activities in the courses, and extensive exposure to diverse types of play in the internship classrooms.

TCs in this study had a limited understanding of culturally appropriate play with a sole focus on surface level of the culture. A possible reason for this may be that although the study took place in Florida, where cultural diversity is the reality of life, the majority of TCs were Caucasians. However, the context of the study makes it even more important to immerse these TCs in culturally appropriate and culturally relevant play activities. When new knowledge and skills are based on funds of knowledge, kindergarteners can benefit from an optimized learning situation (Gonzales et al., 2005). Therefore, course content and field experiences in which TCs can observe and engage in culturally specific play might have the potential for expanding their competencies in scaffolding culturally relevant play.

Finally, TCs in this study struggled with recognizing and acknowledging factors that hinder play inclusion in kindergarten. It is important to guide TCs' attention to different barriers in the micro and macro context of education, so that they can overcome them. As Wood (2014: 49) argues, teachers must become play advocates who are able to “keep play alive and keep at bay the bullies from inside and outside the classroom door.” This study indicates that these TCs have developed some understanding about play and its value in kindergarten; however, they will need further professional development to solidify their skills and ensure proper and consistent infusion of play in kindergarten curriculum.

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## THE CHILD'S VISION ON THE WORLD IN THE MIRROR OF CHILDREN'S CULTURE

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