

# Elements and Pedagogical Value of the Project Approach in Kindergarten

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## Abstract

The integrated nature of teaching children is one of the most important features of the modern preschool curriculum, which is most pronounced in the planning of project activities and the educational process of the kindergarten. A project is a set of activities in which one or more children study a topic that interests them, in collaboration with other children and the indirect support of the preschool teacher. To provide this form of support, the preschool teacher must be equipped with certain skills. First of all, he/she must have a good understanding of the children and the meaning of their activities. In order to succeed in this, the preschool teacher must use different forms of children's symbolic expression, i.e., their symbolic languages, and understand the foreknowledge and developmental potential of each child individually. Then, they should be provided with a stimulating material environment that allows them to initiate and self-organize activities. Indirect support for learning also involves asking stimulating questions through which the preschool teacher encourages children to research, question, and discuss problems they might encounter because the ultimate goal of a project approach is to encourage children to think and solve problems rather than memorize facts. The value of a project can also be measured through the opportunities for children to participate in deciding on joint activities and the ways in which they will be included. The meaning of quality activities during the project is also to empower children to engage in democratic dialogue through active participation in shaping project development. Quality preschool teacher support also means respecting the diversity of each child and avoiding the unification of activities as well as unified standards in assessing children's achievement. In this paper, we present some of the projects that were carried out with preschool children in one Croatian kindergarten and highlight its specific elements and pedagogical value.

**Keywords:** project approach; integrated teaching; self-organized activities of children; roles of the preschool teacher

## 1. Introduction

The project approach to planning and shaping the educational process of kindergartens is not new and has been relatively frequently described in relevant literature (Rinaldi 2006; Slunjski, 2012, Katz and Chard, 2014, Chard et al. 2017). Children's project work usually involves a set of activities whereby one or more children studies a topic or problem, with the appropriate support from the teacher. It is a form of integrated curriculum in which children, according to their own interests and abilities, in collaboration with other children and with subtle assistance from the teacher, attempt various research and other activities in which they

actively gain experience and knowledges and “apply their skills, reach decisions and learn to take responsibility” (Jackman 2009, 61).

## 2. Project planning and curriculum features

Project planning correlates with the basic features of the modernly-conceptualised early education curriculum. Here we will point out the most important ones. Firstly, it follows the *integrated curriculum features*, i.e. it is characterised by the effort to avoid the antiquated practice of segmenting and fragmenting children’s activities. The holistic approach to planning and shaping children’s activities coincides with the contemporary understanding of the learning process as something embedded in each segment of their co-existence with other children and adults (Penn, 2008; Slunjski, 2011). In this sense, the great value of a quality designed project lies in the fact that it steps away from fragmented and segmented way of teaching specific content to children and replaces it with creating the conditions for integrated and holistic learning.

Furthermore, quality project planning goes hand in hand with the *complexity and unpredictability* of the educational process. Therefore, great attention is paid to devising the context in which children’s activities are performed, rather than precisely planning the course of their development. A kindergarten institution is a complex “living organism” (Rinaldi, 2006), in which participants’ actions are not entirely predictable, so it is not possible to plan them nor manage them directly. There are no two identical kindergartens or groups, therefore there are no two identical projects. This is due to the fact that early childhood settings are culturally constructed; they are dynamic and evolving social contexts, with no two operating in exactly the same way (Woodhead, 2005). In such conditions, the curriculum has developmental features, which completely corresponds with the characteristics of project planning. Such approach requires the preschool teacher to be equipped to navigate unpredictable situations and act within the sphere of the unplanned and unexpected.

Furthermore, in a quality designed project, learning occurs within the process of creating meaning and results in deepening the children’s knowledge and understanding, rather than training children to memorise and reproduce content. This implies that the teacher must be trained to discover and understand existing knowledge and experiences in children, in order to ensure adequate support to their development. Such approach stems from the constructivist theory of learning whereby children shape information from their environment, i.e. in their unique way interpret them and give them meaning, and as such incorporate them in their pre-constructed concepts of knowledge (Piaget, according to Gray and Macblain, 2015).

Learning is also a social process, which is particularly evident during projects. According to socio constructivism (Vygotski, according to Gray and Macblain, 2015, 93), learning is the “result of an aggregate of social relations embodied within the individual”. Considering the

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above, the project approach fully corresponds to the *constructivist and co-constructivist curriculum orientation*.

Project approach to shaping the curriculum encourages the so-called self-regulated learning in children, as described by Whitebread and Coltman (2007). It requires the subtle support of the teacher, which is realised, inter alia, through conversation with children based on asking open-ended and enticing questions that encourage children to question and continuously develop their ideas. As the authors explain, such learning support is realised in various forms of collaborative activities (children with each other and with the teacher), in which children have the opportunity to articulate their understandings, (self)evaluate their accomplishments and reflect upon their learning process. In doing so, the quality of the teacher's participation in the child's learning process is not proportional to the number of their direct interventions (e.g. the number of enticing questions directed towards the child), but rather the compatibility of these interventions with the learning situation, i.e. their ability to decode the level reached by the child in a given mental process.

Finally, a quality shaped project contributes to the process of developing autonomy and emancipation of children in kindergartens, whereby it presents a foundation for the development of the *humanities curriculum orientation*. Such understanding of the curriculum focuses on self-development and self-actualisation of the child, i.e. the development of their innate potential and the affirmation of their rights. In this sense, it is important to develop the conditions in which it is possible to nurture the intellectual and other forms of the child's independence. And such conditions are usually the result of the democratization process within the institution, which is neither simple nor fast. However, a valuable goal of contemporary education is the development of children's independence and their critical abilities, rather than excessive adaptability, obedience and receptiveness. Features of the curriculum related to the humanities, naturally, significantly exceed the interventions aimed at teaching children and manifest in the quality of everyday interactions, communication and the relationship with children as a whole.

The realisation of such a curriculum involves a high level of understanding children and the complex dynamics of their activities, as well as team planning of the educational process. A strong emphasis on the quality of relationship and communication between all of the participants in the educational process is particularly characteristic for the Reggio approach, which is a sort of a blend between constructivist and progressive education. Proponents of the Reggio concept (Malaguzzi, 1998; Giudicci and Rinaldi 2002, Rinaldi, 2006), consider collaboration to be one of the key cornerstones of organising the entire kindergarten educational process. In the context of the Reggio curriculum, collaboration is the central operative principle. It involves the feeling of reciprocity and togetherness that enables partners to alternate in leading the educational process and results in the practice of continuous common learning of all of the subjects involved in the process. The teacher's skills of

documenting children's educational activities and learning processes directly contributes to project planning. The teacher can only adequately support the children's activities in the development of the project insofar as they understand the way in which children understand the topic in question, what they know about it and how they reflect upon it. This is why attention is placed on training preschool teachers in documenting the educational process, which contributes to establishing better relationships with children, as well as to the development of the so-called "pedagogy of listening" (Giudicci and Rinaldi 2002; Rinaldi, 2006, Slunjski, 2020). Within "pedagogy of listening", listening is interpreted as an all-encompassing, reciprocal communication process. Its main features include acceptance, understanding and supporting all the participants, and it is focused on encouraging them to open up, free themselves and develop. Various ethnographic records, i.e. the pedagogical documentation, enables the preschool teacher to interpret and reinterpret the children's learning process, as well as the quantity and quality of their own interventions in that process. Based on this, they can more easily select the appropriate strategies for supporting children's learning.

### 3. Subject and methodology of the research

In order to research the elements and the pedagogical value of the project approach in kindergartens, we conducted a year-long qualitative research in two kindergartens located in different Croatian cities. There are 128 children enrolled in these kindergartens, and their educational approach is based on the official program concept, i.e. the NKRPOO (2015).<sup>1</sup>. Given the subject of our research, as well as the methodology it is based on, the research included a smaller number of kindergarten children of various ages (3 - 6 years of age). The number of children varied throughout the different research phases, as did the length for each child's inclusion. The research team consisted of the main researcher (external associate from a university), the kindergarten's professional team (in one kindergarten this included only the pedagogue, and in the other also a psychologist) and several teachers. The research team consisting of teachers and members of the kindergarten's professional team met once a week to interpret, i.e. analyse the gathered materials. Common meetings of all of the participants (including the main researcher) took place twice a month. These meetings, i.e. common analyses took place much more frequently (each week) in certain research phases, i.e. when this was necessary in order to monitor the development of certain activities.

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<sup>1</sup>NKRPOO is the official document that is the basis for the educational work of all kindergartens in Croatia, prescribed by the Ministry of Science and Education in 2015. Despite the document, the quality of the educational practice in various kindergartens throughout Croatia greatly varies.

The choice of the research methodology was based on the need to closely observe the various situations and activities that the participants of the educational process (children and teachers) take part in, in the actual context in which these situations and activities occur. This is why we opted for a case-study with elements of the ethnographic approach (Cohen et al., 2007). We gathered the research's empirical data mostly by observing the various activities performed by the children and their teachers, which we attempted to interpret and understand as they do themselves.

In order to be able to understand the entire context of these activities, i.e. discover their *socio-cultural meaning* (Cohen et al, 2007), we also studied the kindergartens' various conditions (physical, social, organisational), for which we presumed might have an impact on the development and the quality of projects. In that sense, we observed the organisation of the kindergartens' spatial-material environment organisation, the quality of communication between teachers and children (how the teachers "listen" to them, what actions they take in order to understand properly the meaning of their activities, do they acknowledge their interests, pre-existing knowledge and understanding, do they encourage them to reflect upon and solve problems, how they plan learning situations, i.e. project activities, etc.), as well as the amount and quality of children's social interactions, in an effort to discover the influence of these interactions on the development of the projects.

Observing and monitoring the complex, interdependent structures that determine the project's development was possible precisely due to the specificities of the selected research methodology: *understanding the meaning* that certain actions and situations have for the research participants (children and teachers), *understanding the environment* in which the participants act and the way it influences them, noticing the *unexpected and unplanned phenomena* in everyday educational practice, and *understanding (and supporting) the natural flow* of the participants' everyday activities (Maxwell, according to Milas, 2005).

During the research, we used various methods of collecting data. i.e. ethnographic records - primarily video and photo records of the children's activities, as well as the various forms of their symbolic expressions and representations. We used these ethnographic records for better understanding the children and creating a research, reflection, and dialogue culture for all of the participants in the research (children and teachers). In this sense, the ethnographic records were also used as a "means of reflecting upon the educational practice" (Dahlberg and others 1999), which might deepen the teachers' awareness of each child's development and learning process, and thereby make it easier to select appropriate strategies for project development.

#### 4. Research results interpretation and discussion

A detailed description of the research (within which a great number of various ethnographic records was collected), i.e. describing and interpreting all of the research phases,

would greatly exceed the framework of this paper. Instead, we will highlight just some of the discoveries and conclusions made in the course of the research.

## **1. The kindergarten's physical and social environment plays a great role in the development of the project**

We noticed during research that the development of the project is greatly influenced by the quality of the kindergarten's physical (spatial-material) environment. It manifests as the quantity, quality, and availability of various materials which the children can use to (independently) record their own ideas, ways of thinking, exploration results, etc. We noticed that the rise in the quality of this aspect of a given educational group's environment decreases the frequency of activities that involve direct teaching of the children by the preschool teacher. By shaping an "enticing environment" the teacher indirectly increases the children's motivation, i.e. their desire to participate, explore and discover. The kindergarten's social environment also plays a great role in the development of the project, particularly the opportunity for children to interact with children of various ages and competences. In such interactions, children correct and teach each other very successfully, and in the sphere of literacy they guide each other to the so-called "Zone of proximal development" (Vygotski, according to Gray and Macblain, 2015). Likewise, we observed that various forms of children's expressions, which are constantly available to them, encourage sharing of their knowledge and understanding (learning through discussion), and therefore indirectly contribute to the quality of their learning in the course of the project.

## **2. The quality of children's experiences, and consequently the development of the project, is greatly determined by the way in which the teacher observes, interprets, and understands their activities**

The level of children's understanding represents the foundation on which the preschool teacher shapes their educational interventions in the development of the project. During our research, we observed a great diversity in the frequency, length and quality of children's involvement in the project, depending on the kindergarten (or certain teachers' groups). These children's activities are much more substantial, diverse and rich in groups led by preschool teachers whose educational practice relies on careful observation and understanding of children and the meaning behind their activities. Lack of understanding for the potential of various self-initiated and self-organised children's activities often leads the teacher to diminish or interrupt such activities, or involve themselves inappropriately. In such cases, they interrupt the self-initiated children's activities in order to impose those that they consider more valuable. We also observed that the potential for the development of the project is greater if the level of flexibility achieved in the educational institution is higher, as opposed to the institutions where preschool teachers rigorously plan and realise the educational activities.

**3. The quality of children's experiences, and consequently the development of the project, is greatly determined by the way in which the teacher observes, interprets and understands children's expressive potentials**

Various educational interventions by the preschool teacher are also the consequence of various criteria used to evaluate various children's expressions. While some teachers consider only those children's expressions that realistically display an object, or are done formulary, to be of good quality, other appreciate the variety of artistic, graphical and other types of children's expressions. However, the manner in which preschool teachers interpret the value of individual children's expressive activities also determines whether these (or which) will be supported, stimulated and encouraged. In this way, the level on which the teachers recognise and understand children's expressive potentials directly influences the quality and the intensity of children's further expression. Children will continue with the activities that are valued and praised by the teachers.

**4. The quality and duration of children's research activities depend on the children and on the quality of the teacher's support.**

The quality and duration of children's research activities may be determined by their interest and abilities that vary on an individual level. However, their quality and duration are also determined by the manner in which the preschool teacher interpreted, objectified and supported the activity by offering various materials. The degree to which the offered activities are meaningful and purposeful for the children is also of significant importance. They usually are, if they are mostly self-organised. In that case, children are the (co-)authors. The quality of the teacher's direct or indirect involvement in the development of the children's research activities greatly varies across kindergartens and between the teachers within the same kindergarten. Some participate indirectly, while others dominate and disturb the natural logics and the development of these activities. Likewise, there is a great variance in the degree to which the teachers manage to encourage children to reflect upon and solve various problems, for example by asking enticing questions and encouraging discussions.

**5. Children's social interactions in the course of the project depend on the individual characteristics and the age of children, but also on the preschool teacher's approach.**

Children's social interactions in the course of the project have a great value for their social, emotional and intellectual development. They are facilitated by diverse interaction experiences with children of different chronological ages and abilities, etc., but also by a safe and positive group environment. The quality and duration of the social interactions in the course of the project is also influenced by the level of acknowledgment and empowerment given to children's individual features and specific abilities. It is also important to ensure an adequate amount of uninterrupted time for children's learning activities and project development. In other words, the social interactions of children are not only determined by the

characteristics of (certain) children, but also by a series of organisational conditions in the kindergarten and the whole culture of the educational group or kindergarten. This means that the quality of children's social interactions under a given teacher or in a given kindergarten is higher than in others, due to reasons that are not determined by their individual traits nor their chronological age. That is why it is important to observe and analyse the whole context and the mood of a certain group, as well as the quality of a given teacher's communication with children in their daily activities.

**6. The quality and the development of the project is determined by the preschool teacher's preparedness to recognize and acknowledge individual differences between children.**

The manner in which various learning situations are shaped greatly contributes to the development of the projects. They are determined by the preschool teacher's preparedness to ensure quality participation in various activities for children of various competences. The teacher can overcome the issue of the uniformity of children's activities by enriching the material and diversifying learning situations. Likewise, poor learning situation organisation and directive approach can encourage uniformity. In order to empower children's mutual interactions in which they share their knowledge and understanding and use that as a basis for building new ones, the teacher should not dominate. Instead, they should realise their role through observing, encouraging and providing children with indirect assistance. However, teachers' practice here varies greatly as well. While some manage to treat children as unique persons and equal members of the collective, others lean towards uniformity and unification. This means that some children are provided with a greater, and others with a lesser degree of quality in their learning experience during the project.

## 5. Conclusion

The creation of appropriate conditions for project development in a kindergarten is considered as an important part of the preschool teachers' educational role. However, this is a task with no set "formula" which would, in itself, guarantee the quality of the teacher's work. It is a skill that requires not only theoretical knowledge, but also the knowledge of one's own educational practice. In order to achieve a quality educational practice that contributes to the project development, the teacher should be able to carefully observe, document, and interpret the various children's activities together with other professionals, in order to be able to understand them as good as possible. A good understanding of children's activities, which requires the teacher to possess research and reflective competences, is the basis for shaping a kindergarten environment that contributes to the development of the project. Likewise, the quality of the educational interventions of the teacher also determines the quality of the project. These interventions vary greatly across groups and kindergartens.



This leads us to the conclusion that, although the quality of children's learning is usually linked (only) with the interests and competences of the child, it is influenced to a great extent by the teachers themselves, as is the potential for project development. The continuation of this research and conducting similar ones may provide a basis for a new understanding of the preschool teacher's role in shaping educational work focused on project planning. It is our conclusion that highly motivated and quality educated professionals are the ones who can tackle this challenge more successfully. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to revise their initial education on many levels and enable them to continuously develop professionally. This professional development would, inter alia, train them to carefully observe and interpret children and their activities. This can be achieved through those forms of professional development that are conducted in the institution where the teachers work, and that has a research and reflective character.

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