

The Developmental and Contextually Conditioned Nature of Teaching and the Design of an “Outside the Box” Curriculum

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Abstract

Recent research in the field of early and preschool education curricula indicates that the quality of children's care and education is largely determined by the context of their life in the kindergarten. The context of the kindergarten institution is a combination of interactions of different structural and cultural dimensions of the kindergarten, i.e., their unity. The kindergarten is a complex living system whose functioning cannot be fully predicted or controlled. Nevertheless, in the preschool practice of the Republic of Croatia, curriculum design is still largely based on outdated ideas of uniformity and unification, as well as the assumption that this process can be thoroughly planned and precisely managed. In order for such an inadequate approach to be abandoned, it is necessary to "go beyond" the outdated conception of the child, educational practice, and curriculum. Teaching "outside the box" involves relativizing the power of planned influences in the educational process in favor of accepting events whose impacts and outcomes cannot be accurately and completely predicted. In this sense, opportunities for activities are planned, i.e., learning situations instead of their precise methodological course. It is an *open, i.e., developmental curriculum* that offers only framework instructions enabling creative realizations. At the same time, the emphasis is placed on the spontaneity, creativity, and initiative of the child and the preschool teacher. Some particularly developed preschool conceptions, such as the Reggio concept, emphasize the contextual conditioning of the curriculum in addition to its developmental nature. In order to shape the developmental and contextually conditioned curriculum, particular attention is given to the development of a tool for a good understanding of the child, the meaning of his/her activities for himself/herself, and the features of the context in

which they occur. In this sense, a curriculum is gradually being developed that positions the child at the center of the educational process, enabling him/her to co-author his/her own activities and learning process. At the same time, preschool teachers are continuously monitoring, observing, and trying to understand the child's activities as much as possible; this is important in order to ensure the natural flow of the educational process and curriculum. It is a theoretical concept that is continuously emerging, i.e., developing beyond predefined and strictly defined dimensions; we call it curriculum *outside the box*.

Guided by these ideas, we undertook joint research and development of educational practice and curricula in four Croatian kindergartens. It is an action research, which is a methodology of simultaneous research and change of educational practice, which is focused on the development of the research and reflexive skills of preschool teachers; it is also a scientifically based change in the pedagogical process in which the main organizers and creators of the process appear simultaneously as researchers. The paper presents the characteristics and the progress of the research and the changes achieved, i.e., the results we have obtained, which are presented through several cycles of research and supported by original ethnographic records that were collected during the research. The basic findings are that continuous professional learning of all kindergarten employees, through direct research into their own practice, is a possible tool for establishing a self-sustainable change in the kindergarten educational practice and the development of an "Outside the box" curriculum.

Keywords: developmental and dynamic curriculum, kindergarten context, „outside the box“ teaching, action research