The Competent Child: Alternatives in Preschool Education

In his interview, Peter Moss (2011) says that nowadays he is especially interested in the question how schools can benefit from many interesting alternatives in preschool education. In the postmodern times, it is impossible to seek for the universal truths in education, which would be constant and valid for all times and places. So the bases for our decision-making in education is the question how we – the adults, see “the child” and “the childhood”. Moss thinks that our perception of the child is an essentially ethical and political issue; the social construction of childhood influences the politics and practices in the field of education.

In my presentation, I will start from the perception of the child as powerless and help needing individual, an “empty bottle” in which we “pour” the knowledge. An alternative to this perception is the competent child, especially stressed in Reggio Emilia approach. In the research and education project on Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana (2009–2013), we encouraged about 200 Slovene teachers to introduce the Reggio Emilia elements (participation and listening to children, the advantage of learning before teaching, hundred languages of children, project work in small groups, documentation...), to their preschool practice.

I will illustrate the idea of the competent child and children’s participation in preschool with the remarkable project of children and teachers from the Globoko Preschool, made during the above mentioned research project. The children have decided to choose cartoons as their theme of interest. Their teachers knew that children wanted primarily to watch cartoons, but they were also aware that they are responsible to lead children to gain new knowledge by leading them from known to unknown. They were aware, that they should not interfere with creative process and that result must be completely in hands of the children, therefore they acted as facilitators (Vygotsky’s scaffolding), and were open to learn together with children. In process, children decided to create their own cartoon, but they did not know how. They needed help, so they wrote a letter to the professional cartoonist. In creative process they prepared the cartoon story and drawn hundreds of images. They even asked older children from the elementary school for help, who made hundreds of photos to make this project a reality. The result was impressive, a 5 minute cartoon made by stop motion technique.
Through the theoretical explanation of this practical project, my aim is to show that such experiences can be used as a motivation and challenge to embrace the idea of the competent child and children’s participation, which can fundamentally change teachers’ views and practices in preschool or school.