INTRODUCING SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF REGGIO
EMILIA CONCEPT IN SLOVENE CURRICULUM FOR PRESCHOOL
EDUCTION

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Abstract

"Professional training of educational staff for implementing special educational principles of Reggio
Emilia concept in the field of pre-school education in the years 2008-2013" is the title of the project,
which Faculty of education of University of Ljubljana obtained and is funded by the European Social
Fund and Ministry of Education and Sports. The project is based on the analysis, development and
integration of individual elements of the Reggio Emilia concept in the kindergartens in the Slovenian
environment. Through the project we would like to include in kindergartens those elements of Reggio
Emilia concept, which we can recognize as an upgrade or elevation of the National curriculum for
preschool education [1]. In this text authors: (1) represent the basic positions or certain elements of
Reggio Emilia concept in Slovenian kindergartens and focus mainly on items such as: cooperation
between kindergarten and the environment in which it operates, kindergarten, which co-designs the
culture of the local environment and the children, who learn about tolerant and respectful attitude
towards others and different and (2) present the results of the research (N = 331 and N=42) among
the preschool teachers and professionals working in local community, who are responsible for the area
of preschool education, on the discussed topic. The research results show that just over 60% of
preschool teachers have already heard of the Reggio Emilia educational concept however only one
third of them know special elements of this concept and only 5.2% of them know the Reggio Emilia
concept as a whole. Results for local community show that more than 80% of professionals working in
local community had never heard of the concept of Reggio Emilia preschool education or are very
poorly known. The results also show that the enforcement of Reggio Emilia special educational
principles in the Slovenian area will not be possible without a comprehensive approach that would
include self-evaluation, research and partnership cooperation.

Keywords: educational concept, Reggio Emilia, local community, cooperation, culture of the
environment

1. INTRODUCTION

Taking up the achievements of preschool education in the world it is impossible to overlook the
modern conception, which was launched already in the year 1963 and is today implemented in 22
kindergartens in Reggio Emilia. Model - the Reggio Emilia approach was born in the town of Reggio
Emilia. With the exceptional display of children's creativity and achievements they provoked the
attention of professional, cultural and lay public. Reggio Emilia model was on a global competition,
which was in 1991 carried out by the American weekly Newsweek, seen as the best, most advanced
pre-school institution in the world. For this high recognition and reputation, which this concept enjoys
in the world today, the first credit goes to its founder professor Malaguzzi, but today progress and
development "concerns" Rinaldi with her colleagues’ and preschool teachers, pedagogists, atelierists
etc. Reggio Emilia model is already introduced in the work with preschool children in many countries
around the world (e.g. in Sweden, America, Australia, Croatia, Slovenia ...).
The purpose of this paper is to establish whether preschool teachers and representatives of the local community are aware of the special educational principles of Reggio Emilia concept in the field of preschool education and to consider the views of professionals in kindergarten - preschool teachers, preschool teachers assistants and representatives of local communities, who are responsible for the functioning of preschool education in the local community, on the importance of mutual cooperation and co-creating culture in the local community. In other words, we wanted to determine whether kindergarten co-creates cooperative social environment.

2. THEORETICAL STARTING POINT

2.1. Preschool education in Slovenia

As it is written in the Preschool institution Act [2] pre-school education in Slovenia is performed by public and private pre-school institutions and it is not compulsory. It admits children from 1 to 6 years of age when they enter primary schooling. The aim of pre-school institutions is to support the parents in bringing up the child, to improve the quality of family life and to create good conditions for the development of the child’s physical and intellectual abilities. The main principles of pre-school education are democracy, pluralism, autonomy, professional competence and responsibility of the employees, equal opportunities for children and parents, regard to diversity of children, the right of option and distinctiveness and the principles of maintenance of balance of various aspects of the child's physical and intellectual development.

In the last decade important changes in the concept of preschool education have been made. While the former concept was based on group routine, activities are nowadays organized in smaller groups which stimulate the child’s individuality and respect the child’s right to privacy. New programmes also strongly emphasize the right to choose, the right to play and the right to creative expression. Much attention is paid to the equal progress opportunities, which apply to all: children with special needs, Roma children, and children from socially deprived families. The National curriculum for pre-school institutions accepted in 1999 is based upon appreciation of individual differences in development and learning, as well as on appreciation of the child’s integrative and balanced development. The curriculum is open although its objectives, contents, and activities are designed separately for the first and the second age group of children. For the sake of better transparency they are divided into various fields: physical exercise, language, art, society, nature, study, and mathematics, which are all placed into the context of the children's every-day life in a pre-school institution. These activities also integrate interdisciplinary activities like ethics, health care, safety and traffic education. The curriculum contains the objectives and principles of pre-school education, which importantly affect every-day activities, communication and classroom arrangement. In planning routine activities (eating, resting, sleeping, tidying up), the differences between children must be taken into account (gender, social and cultural origin, philosophy of life...) and such conditions must be created that those differences can be expressed.

Among private pre-school institutions in Slovenia we also have a few that follow special education principles like Montessori concept or Waldorf pedagogy. We do not yet have a preschool institution which would follow the principles of Reggio Emilia concept, but we are on the track of getting there with implementation of the project called "Professional training of educational staff for implementing special educational principles of Reggio Emilia concept in the field of pre-school education in the years 2008-2013" which is carried out by Faculty of education University of Ljubljana and funded by the European Social Fund and Ministry of Education and Sports. The project is based on the analysis, development and integration of those elements of the Reggio Emilia concept which we can recognize as an upgrade or elevation of our National curriculum for preschool education.
2.2. Reggio Emilia approach

Reggio Emilia approach has in over more than 40 years evolved its own distinctive and innovative set of philosophical and pedagogical assumptions, methods of school organization and principles of environmental design. As Edwards [3] writes, young children are encouraged to explore their environment and express themselves through all of their available “expressive, communicative and cognitive languages”: words, movement, drawing, painting, building etc. Loh [4] explains that Reggio approach is not a formal model with defined methods (such as Waldorf and Montessori), teacher certification standards and accreditation processes. But rather, the educators in Reggio Emilia speak of their evolving “experience” and see themselves as a provocation and reference point, a way of engaging in dialogue starting from a strong and rich vision of the child. In the words of Malaguzzi [5], Reggio Emilia approach is a postmodern concept of preschool education, which eclectically integrates not only different theories and knowledge, but also the knowledge of its own historical and cultural environment. LeBlanc [6] points out, that from the start, the Reggio early childhood programmes reflected spontaneity and responsiveness to new ideas. In new preschool programmes there was a conscious embracing of surprise, of not-too-much-certainty, an acknowledgement that as life itself is unpredictable, so must education be. So it was natural and also revolutionary, that the Reggio curriculum was created as a fluid curriculum, without prescribed outcomes. So as one of the main advantages of Reggio concept we can certainly indicate their so called “emerging” curriculum, which, in Malaguzzi’s [5] words constantly meets and constructs itself. Educational process is therefore not preplanned, because they believe that is better if the curriculum is a result of collusion between children and teachers and children among themselves. Loh [4] also emphasizes, that their curriculum has purposive progression but no scope and sequence. Teachers follow the children's interests and do not provide focused instruction in reading and writing. Reggio Emilia approach has a strong belief that children learn through interaction with others, including parents, staff and peers in a friendly learning environment.

But emerging curriculum is not the only key principle that makes Reggio Emilia concept as famous as it is. In Insights and Inspirations from Reggio Emilia: Stories of Teachers and Children from North America, [7] Gandini also highlights the following key principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach:

- The image of the child: All children have preparedness, potential, curiosity;
- Children’s relationships and interactions within a system;
- The role of parents: Parents are an essential component of the program—a competent and active part of their children’s learning experience;
- The role of space: amiable schools;
- Teachers and children as partners in learning;
- The power of documentation;
- The many languages of children;
- Projects: Projects provide narrative and structure to the children's and teacher's learning experiences.

Overall the Reggio Emilia approach builds on the knowledge that children need the support of adults in order to combat the accelerating pressures and haste to make them grow up, which is not only a treacherous sign of the subversion of biological, psychological, and cultural relationships that is currently in vogue, but also a sign of deep insecurity and a loss of perspective [6]. Reggio Emilia approach has a tradition of community support for families with young children which expand on Italy’s cultural view of children as the collective responsibility of the state [8]. Spaggiari [9], director of education in Reggio Emilia explains that from the 1970s on, the idea of community participation in education has been official blackening. It has been viewed as a means of fostering innovation, protecting educational institution against the dangers of excessive bureaucracy and stimulating cooperation between educators and parents. Community based participation goes back a long way. In 1971 the idea of participation was formalized with the passage of national laws governing infant-toddler centers. This concept gradually evolved during the years and finally led to legal formalization of community-based management. The demand was for the national government to provide public funding, the regional governments to take care of overall planning and the municipal governments to be responsible for community-based management. Such community based management now encompasses all the process of participation, democracy, collective responsibility, problem solving and decision making processes all integral to an educational institution. Community-based management embodies the theoretical and practical synthesis of the interrelationships forged among children,
families, service providers and society at large and it seeks to promote strong interaction and communication among educators, children, parents and the community. The participation of the families is just as essential as is the participation of children and educators. Obviously such “three-party” system is part of the community at large, which in turn becomes the fourth component, having its own particular influence and worth. In short community-based management is a philosophical ideal permeating all aspects of the entire educational experience.

We can conclude, that in Reggio Emilia, the infant/toddler and preschool program is a vital part of the community, as also reflected (among other things) in the high level of financial support. Community involvement is also apparent in citizen membership in La Consulta, a school committee that exerts significant influence over local government policy. The parents’ role mirrors the community’s; at both the school wide and the classroom level and they are expected to take part in discussions about school policy, child development concerns, curriculum planning and evaluation [8]. However, as Katz [10] writes, Reggio Emilia approach can also be seen as a communal activity and sharing of culture through joint exploration among children and adults. The fact that Reggio children assume responsibility for some of the chores involved in group life throughout the day, such as setting the tables for meals, working with the cooking staff, sharing responsibility for keeping the art materials in good order, strengthens the atmosphere of communal life. The communal feeling is also enhanced by the participation of the entire staff in all aspects of the program and long meetings of all concerned, including parents In Reggio Emilia approach children, parents and local community participation in the life and work of kindergarten is essential [5]. Rinaldi [11] also points out that this kind of participation develops the sense of belonging to the kindergarten and local community in which kindergarten is located. The founder of the Reggio Emilia concept, Malaguzzi [12] considers kindergarten to be a space which reflects and creates culture. It is a living organism the structure of movement, which is constantly adjusting and is open to the environment and in the environment. From kindergartens life is expanding to families and from there to the local community, which is to accept children as promoters and users of special rights. Preschool institutions are in his view never neutral, they are impregnated with culture, and they are laboratories of culture. It’s a system, that connects all the elements and it’s an area of communication for three basic entities: children, teachers and parents. Rinaldi [13] summarizes, that kindergarten is a system of relations and communications, embedded in the broader social system.

When introducing special educational principles of Reggio Emilia concept in our own we must emphasize, that public preschool institutions in Slovenia are also founded and financed by local communities; their budget provides funds for personnel wages, for material costs in accordance with norms and standards, for extraordinary maintenance and for investments in real estate and equipment for public preschool institutions or preschool institutions with concessions. Similarly, the local community is also obliged to initiate the procedure of setting up a pre-school institution if there is sufficient interest of the parents [14]. However, we believe, that Reggio Emilia approach success lies with their view of cooperation as an element of collegiality and integration of different wisdoms, instead of viewing participation as a threat [9].

3. PROBLEM DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this paper is to present a display of results of a larger research, which was carried out within the project “Professional training of education practitioners for the implementation of elements of specific pedagogic principles of the Reggio Emilia concept in pre-school education 2008-2013”, conducted at the Faculty of education, University of Ljubljana. We will present the views of preschool teachers, preschool teachers’ assistants and representatives of local communities on specific elements of Reggio Emilia concept. We will highlight elements “kindergartens cooperation with local community” and “kindergarten which co-creates the environment of local culture.”

Research questions which we tried to answer in the research are:

1. Are preschool teachers and preschool teachers’ assistants’ teachers familiar with the elements of Reggio Emilia concept from Italy?
2. Are professionals who are in the local community responsible for the area of preschool education, familiar with the elements of Reggio Emilia concept?
3. What do representatives of local community think about kindergarten connection with the place in which it operates? Or what do they think of the kindergarten cooperation with local community and representatives of the local community?

4. What is the opinion of representatives of local community about the fact, that kindergarten co-creates the culture of local community?

The research, which was carried out from April to November 2009, included 251 preschool teachers and 79 preschool teachers assistants (together 331) from 97 kindergartens (out of 349 public kindergartens in Slovenia), which were included in before mentioned project and 43 representatives of local communities (out of 210 local communities in Slovenia). The researcher used two survey questionnaires, first one for preschool teachers and their assistants and the second one for local communities. Questionnaires included grading scales, scale positions, closed and open ended questions.

In research we used the descriptive and causal experimental method of teaching research. Statistical processing was performed using SPSS program. Data is presented tabular.

4. INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Knowledge of Reggio Emilia concept

First, we wanted to know whether preschool teachers and their assistants in kindergartens are familiar with elements of Reggio Emilia the concept for preschool children. As we can see in tab. 1, the most preschool teachers and their assistants (60.0%) have heard about the pedagogical concept of Reggio Emilia, but have little knowledge of it. One third of all surveyed teachers and preschool teachers assistants (32.6%) know individual elements of the concept, 5.2% of them notes that they know Reggio Emilia concept as a whole and seven preschool teachers or their assistants (2.2%) answered, that they have never heard of this concept.

Table 1: Knowledge of preschool teachers, preschool teachers’ assistants and representatives of local communities about the Reggio Emilia concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Preschool teachers</th>
<th>Representatives of local community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Know as a whole</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know several parts</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hear of it but don’t know too well</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never heard of it</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When comparing this data to the data of representatives of local communities, therefore those professionals in the local community, who are responsible for preschool education, we unfortunately see that almost half of them (41.9%) have never heard of the Reggio Emilia concept. Just as many has namely heard about it, but know little of it. We may assume, that the municipal professional services, responsible and accountable for pre-school education (kindergarten establishment, financing, management strategies, etc.) mostly follow only certain so-called “legal frameworks” and the state trajectories (here we have in mind prescribed program for public kindergartens), then certain new developments, although Reggio Emilia concept is not new and but it is precisely this concept, that strongly emphasizes kindergarten cooperation with the local community and vice versa, even more – concept advocates partnership relationship between all players - kindergarten, parents and the local community...
4.2 Kindergarten cooperation with the local community and co-creating culture of the local environment

Cooperation between kindergarten and the local community is as a principle enshrined in the National curriculum for kindergartens [1] and is one of the important principles of the pre-school education. Hočevar and Kovač Šebart [15] write that the Slovene documents use a word phrase “kindergarten cooperation with the environment,” while Edwards and others [3], when talking about Reggio Emilia educational approach, use the phrase “connection of the kindergarten with the place in which it operates”. The very integration of kindergarten with local community is one of the important and essential features of the Reggio Emilia concept. Social environment “participates” in life and work of kindergarten and kindergarten “participates” and helps co-create the culture of social environment.

Engagement of the kindergarten in the local environment Malaguzzi [12], the founder of the Reggio Emilia educational concept, sees in the accounting of the local environment as a factor, which affects the child's relationship with the living reality, which provides for the creation of new educational content and practices, and new problems and their solutions. Kindergarten creates this so called thematic/substantial/content/target base of children's learning, which through exploration, games, self-expression, projects and many other activities introduce children to systems of significant symbols, and skills of adults, to gain a deeper sense of their history, heritage and cultural tradition.

The arguments presented in the tab. 2 are somewhat more oriented to the local environment and the integration of kindergarten with the environment. Arguments consist of two general arguments about connecting kindergartens with local community, connection to the place where it operates on a general level and a level of co-creation of culture of local environment. These are followed by two arguments about the active preschool activities in the local environment, participation in local events and presenting products to the general public in local communities. The specific argument is intended to assessment of the informing the local community with the recent findings of preschool education. The last three arguments and measuring opinions of professionals in local community responsible for the area of preschool education, on the contribution of kindergartens: (a) to the quality of life in the community - to improve the living conditions of young families, (b) to the promotion of contemporary eating habits and hygiene standards, and (c) to development of living culture and the proliferation of social networking.
Table 2: Kindergarten – community connection and the impact on the environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>f(1)</th>
<th>f(2)</th>
<th>f(3)</th>
<th>f(4)</th>
<th>f(5)</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>f(1) (%)</th>
<th>f(2) (%)</th>
<th>f(3) (%)</th>
<th>f(4) (%)</th>
<th>f(5) (%)</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>St</th>
<th>KV (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Association with the environment.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>4,8</td>
<td>4,8</td>
<td>42,9</td>
<td>47,6</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>0,79</td>
<td>18,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Co-creation of culture of local community.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>9,3</td>
<td>9,3</td>
<td>48,8</td>
<td>32,6</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>0,90</td>
<td>22,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Active participation in local events.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>9,3</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>51,2</td>
<td>37,2</td>
<td>4,2</td>
<td>0,87</td>
<td>20,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Kindergarten presents products to lay public in the local community.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2,3</td>
<td>14,0</td>
<td>7,0</td>
<td>41,9</td>
<td>34,9</td>
<td>3,9</td>
<td>1,10</td>
<td>28,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Kindergarten actively notes lay public in the local community with recent findings in preschool education.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7,0</td>
<td>18,6</td>
<td>37,2</td>
<td>27,9</td>
<td>9,3</td>
<td>3,1</td>
<td>1,06</td>
<td>33,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A contribution to the quality of life in the local community – improving living conditions of young families.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>24,4</td>
<td>24,4</td>
<td>46,3</td>
<td>4,1</td>
<td>1,08</td>
<td>26,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A contribution to the promotion of advanced nutritional and hygiene habits.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2,4</td>
<td>4,8</td>
<td>7,1</td>
<td>31,0</td>
<td>54,8</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>0,98</td>
<td>22,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. A contribution to the development of culture of living and proliferation of social networking.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0,0</td>
<td>4,9</td>
<td>14,6</td>
<td>29,3</td>
<td>51,2</td>
<td>4,3</td>
<td>0,90</td>
<td>21,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>2,1</td>
<td>8,3</td>
<td>13,3</td>
<td>37,3</td>
<td>39,1</td>
<td>4,0</td>
<td>1,45</td>
<td>35,9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- From not true 1 to true 5
- N – total
- P – average
- St – standard deviation

Tab. 2 shows how argument "Kindergarten is associated with the environment in which it operates" (statement was estimated the highest) and claim "Kindergarten co-creates the culture of the environment" are evaluated by representatives of local communities respectively professionals in local community who are in charge of preschool education. 90.5% of representatives of local communities believe that kindergarten is associated with the environment in which it operates and 81.4% believe that the kindergarten co-creates the culture of local environment. As we can see there are almost no major differences between the "kindergartens" and representatives of local communities, because almost all preschool teachers (94.3%) also evaluated the claim that the kindergarten is associated with the environment in which it operates, as true and the majority of them (84.6%) believes that kindergarten co-creates the culture of local environment.

Overall, these claims stand out: 1 (association with the environment) and 2 (co-creation of culture of the local community), 3 (active participation in local events), 7 (a contribution to the nutritional habits) and 5 (a contribution to the development of culture of living) with a good estimate of grades 4 or 5 in more than 80%. Therefore, the highest rate got the association with the environment and contribution to the local environment (with the exception of the contribution to the quality of life in the community). Among these, a bit more bad ratings got argument 2 (co-creation of culture of the local community) and 3 (participation in local events), but the differences are not statistically significant.
The results of argument 4 (product presentation) and 6 (a contribution to the quality of life in the community) were at mean for both arguments relatively highly estimated, the proportion of good grades 4 and 5 was > 71%). The professionals working in the local community, responsible for assessing preschool education estimate, that kindergartens are very well associated with the local community, that they are active and contribute to the development of local communities. Between local communities there are also such, where the opinion of professionals working there is quite contrary and these are certainly the environments where it would be necessary to act immediately. In our research there was an anonymous survey, so we don’t have the data on the results for individual local community, but it would certainly be sensible to carry out studies of individual communities and on the basis of the results evaluate opportunities for improvement and identify steps for improvement [16].

Worst estimated claim was the claim 5 (a contribution to the development of culture of living), where the proportion of good grades 4 and 5 was only 37.2% and the proportion of poor ratings 1 and 2, 25.6%. The result confirms that the communication with all participants in an important set of opportunities for improvement.

5. CONCLUSION

Kindergarten is an integrated and living organism, a place of life and relationships between children and adults, associated with children's parents and place in which it operates. The local community is not a legal concept, is a social phenomenon. Local community on a given narrow territory is due to the necessity of joint exercise of certain common interests of people, conditioned with cohabitation in the area. Kindergarten and local community should be because of their mission inconstant mutual interaction.

With the obtained results presented in this paper, we get a deeper insight into the work of the professional employees of local community responsible for the area of preschool education on the development of preschool education and the work of kindergartens in the local community. The research results are an important contribution to understanding the management problems of preschool education in communities and provide some opportunities for development. The findings that the professionals in local community, responsible for the area of preschool education, are not familiar with its modern trends are not the most welcome information. Implicitly our survey results show that at least half of the professionals in local community expect from kindergartens, that they will acquaint them with the novelties of preschool education.

Development activities of preschool education in the local community can only be achieved with high-quality, comprehensive approach. For sustainable development only knowledge of the legal and formal frameworks of activity in a given area is not enough (in our case, knowledge of applicable law and preschool program by local professionals responsible for preschool area). Sustainable development is not without knowledge of the innovation areas (substantive, conceptual or target), not without solid and quality partnerships, not without the participation of all participants.

6. REFERENCES


