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A PEDAGOGUE'S ROLE REGARDING THE INTEGRATION OF A CHILD IN KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract

For children and their parents, starting kindergarten is an important turning point in life. In this period, it is important that parents, prior starting kindergarten, have a quality consultation with the kindergarten's pedagogue. With his/hers professional knowledge he/she is competent enough to carry out an education counselling interview with parents of preschool children. Through an education counselling interview, a pedagogue presents all aspects of the problem connected with the start of kindergarten, as well as the optimal way of confronting this event. Hereinafter, we present the results of the research which intention was to study the process, contents, and meaning of introductory education counselling interviews with parents. Further, we wanted to establish the pedagogues' role in Slovenian kindergartens regarding the integration of a child in kindergarten. We obtained an insight in problems that occur during pedagogues' work directly in practice and stressed proposals which could better their position. Based on the analysis of data gained by interviewing pedagogues employed in Slovenian kindergartens, we found out that the pedagogues' role regarding the integration of children in kindergartens is not well known yet.

Key words: kindergarten, pedagogue, integration of a child in kindergarten

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Introduction

Children's transition from home to kindergarten and from kindergarten to primary school is one of the most important steps in children's lives and in lives of their families. Therefore, cooperation between kindergarten and parents is one of the education counsellor's priority tasks. (Resman

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et al., 1999: 134) Starting kindergarten enables a child to expand his/hers social circle to a group of peers. Besides that, starting kindergarten also presents an important step of more or less painful emotional separation from parents. The child is, for the first time in this period, confronted with a fact that he/she has to expand his/hers trust from parents and family environment to a larger circle of kindergarten's pedagogical personnel. To support their activeness in the field of professional help, developmental and preventive activities, and activities of planning and evaluation, an education counselling service of pedagogues and social pedagogues was established.

Introducing children in kindergarten

Introduction in kindergarten is a process when a child and his/hers parents most need preschool teacher's professional help, until the child is able to stay in kindergarten on his/her own. (Japelj Novak, 2004) The period of introduction in kindergarten represents a great change in a child's life. It is a developmental step that the child needs to take, but is, in certain aspects, forced upon the on-going developmental processes. That is why it (can) be very stressful for the child. Child's daily separation from parents represents a form of stress and can lead to short-term effects on the child's behaviour, but it does not have long-term negative effects on the child's development. (Marjanovič Umek, Zupančič, 2004: 267) Transition to kindergarten can be less stressful for the child, if we introduce him/her progressively. Introducing a child in kindergarten life is a process that takes its time. Here, several factors are essential, but most important is that the child and his parents are well prepared for kindergarten.

Prior enrolling a child in kindergarten, parents can meet the head of the kindergarten, the preschool teacher, the preschool teacher's assistant, education counsellors and other kindergarten's employees. At the first meeting parents inform about the kindergarten, see it, tell about about their child and potential dilemmas, and ask for advice. After enrolment, most kindergartens prepare parent meetings where they present the kindergarten's programme and answer questions. Some kindergartens even organise classes about introducing the child in kindergarten, but almost all kindergartens organise a collective meeting of parents of newly enrolled children. In any case, before the child's actual arrival in kindergarten, parents have to talk with preschool teachers, for they will be in a direct contact with the child. Mutual cooperation with preschool teachers is important for a successful introduction and future well-being of the child in a group. It is important to coordinate opinions about the child's introduction, such as: approximate time of introduction, presence

of parents in the group, questions connected with the child's stay in kindergarten.

Various researches reveal that, in average, children adapt to kindergarten after three weeks of continuous visiting and that most children bond with the preschool teacher in two weeks. Meanwhile, experts state that the period of introducing and accustoming a child to kindergarten lasts approximately 4 to 6 weeks. After this period of time the majority of toddlers favourably adapt to everyday absence of parents what they express with positive emotions, integration in social activities with peers and their preschool teacher. (Marjanovič Umek, Zupančič, 2004: 267-268)

Children can also experience certain adaptable problems like crying when they separate from parents, clinging on their parents, are sensitive, restless, tired, have difficulties with falling asleep and eating, get fever, and can even reject parents. Sometimes problems occur somewhat later and not immediately afterwards starting kindergarten. Introducing children from first to third year of age is additionally worsened by the fact that the child, little before he/she reaches an age of one, fears strangers, and right after reaching age one he/she fears being separated from parents. (Retuznik Bozovičar and Kranjc, 2012: 242)

Mandič (2002) believes younger children usually more traumatically express their distress. Older children more easily start kindergarten, because they already have a refined time perspective, quicker accustom to routine, have more developed motoric skills, with more advanced communication they can clearly state their needs and wishes, and are more immune to illnesses. His findings show that younger children in crèches start kindergarten right during the sensitive period of being separated from mother with whom the child was in a symbiotic relationship and during the time of child's self-independence (in a psychological sense). How will introduction to kindergarten occur also depends on the form of child's attachment to his/hers mother.

Research question

Starting kindergarten is an important turning point in the child's life and in the lives of his/hers parents. At this point, the pedagogue's work is direct counselling to parents and preschool teachers who will welcome the child into the group and will, together with parents, progressively integrate him/her into a group of peers.

In Slovenia, children from the end of the parents' maternity leave until starting primary school integrate into a so called "common kindergarten". In kindergartens, preschool education is carried out in two age brackets.

Children from one to three years of age are integrated in units of the first age bracket, while units of the second age bracket integrate children from age three to school-age. According to the pedagogue's role regarding the integration of a child in kindergarten, we were interested in:

- What are the pedagogue's tasks in the preparation stage of children's enrolment in kindergarten?
- What are the pedagogue's tasks of integrating a child in kindergarten?

Methodology

For our research, we used a descriptive method and a causal-non-experimental method of empirical pedagogical research. The research was carried out on a non-random opportunity sample of 56 education counsellors. Regarding their professional title, 39 of all respondents are university graduates in pedagogy, while 17 respondents are university graduates in social pedagogy (in continuation we will use a common term pedagogue for both professional titles). According to the latest available data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, regarding the school year 2012/2013, there were 139 employed education counsellors in all kindergartens, 71 of them were pedagogues. All participants are females, the majority of them (96, 4 %) is employed in public kindergartens, the highest percentage of all participants (55, 4 %) shows that they have between 31 and 40 years of age. Regarding the length of the period of employment, the numerous (37, 5 %) groups were the group with work experiences up to 4 years and the group with 10 years of experiences and more. The size of individual kindergartens where respondent pedagogues are employed was defined with the number of newly enrolled children each year, where the average number of enrolled children for the last 5 years was taken into account. Almost half of all participants (44, 6 %) are employed in a kindergarten with 60 or more enrolled children per year. The least participants (16, 1 %) are employed in kindergartens where they enrol from 41 to 60 children per year.

On the basis of the survey questionnaire we gained information about the kindergarten pedagogue's work and role during the enrolment and integration of children in kindergarten. The introductory part of the survey questionnaire is intended for presenting the purpose of empirical research and for obtaining data for independent variables (sex, age, professional title, number of years of work experiences as an education counsellor, and number of newly enrolled children in kindergarten each year). The main part of the survey questionnaire consists of three different parts. These gave us an insight in the kindergarten

pedagogue's work and role in child's enrolment and integration in kindergarten and in evaluation of their own pedagogical work. Each part includes mostly closed-ended questions. All together, the anonymous survey questionnaire includes 22 questions.

The gained data was processed on a level of descriptive and inference statistics with a SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) program. We calculated absolute (f) and percentage frequencies (f %), means of assessments (\bar{x}), means of ranges (\bar{R}) and did several non-parametric tests (a χ^2 -test, a Mann-Whitney test, a Kruskal-Wallis test and a Freidman test).

Results and Interpretation

Pedagogue's tasks in the preparation stage of children's enrolment in kindergarten

The gained results show that one of the most important pedagogue's tasks in the preparation stage of children's enrolment in kindergarten is counselling and professional support for preschool teachers and preschool teacher's assistants who will carry out the process of progressive integration of children when they start kindergarten.

According to the participants' data, the first meeting of kindergarten's personnel with parents of newly enrolled children is usually organised 2 to 6 months prior starting kindergarten and is carried out in a group from at the introductory parental meeting. This way, parents gain information about the children's enrolment and the process of integrating the child in kindergarten, about education counselling interviews, and cooperation between parents and kindergarten. 78, 6 % of participants pointed out that an important pedagogue's task in preparation for enrolment is establishing a connection with parents because good relationships importantly influence the future cooperation. At the introductory meeting with parents the pedagogue's task is to assist and support professional workers in kindergarten, and to present forms of cooperation between parents and kindergarten. After the meeting, pedagogues are usually at disposal for those parents who wish to have an education counselling interview. These are most frequently connected with the progressive integration of children in kindergarten, and with kindergarten's presentation of activeness and its activities. This is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number (f) and percentage (f %) of pedagogues regarding their period of employment who answered the question: "Which subject fields are included in the introductory education counselling interview with parents of newly enrolled children?"

Subject fields of the introductory education counselling interview			Period of employment			Total	χ^2 -test results
			1-4 years	5-9 years	10 years and more		
Presentation of kindergarten's activities and its activities	yes	f	16	10	15	41	$\chi^2 = 0,152$ p = 0,927
		f %	76,2	71,4	71,4	73,2	
	no	f	5	4	6	15	
		f %	23,8	28,6	28,6	26,8	
	total	f	21	14	21	56	
		f %	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	
Progressive integration of children in kindergarten	yes	f	16	13	20	49	χ^2 (LR) = 3,900 p = 0,142
		f %	76,2	92,9	95,2	87,5	
	no	f	5	1	1	7	
		f %	23,8	7,1	4,8	12,5	
	total	f	21	14	21	56	
		f %	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	
Forms of cooperation between parents and kindergarten	yes	f	12	9	17	38	$\chi^2 = 2,838$ p = 0,242
		f %	57,1	64,3	81,0	67,9	
	no	f	9	5	4	18	
		f %	42,9	35,7	19,0	32,1	
	total	f	21	14	21	56	
		f %	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	

Children's habits such as sleeping, eating etc.	yes	f	10	7	13	30	$\chi^2 = 0,957$ $p = 0,620$
		f %	47,6	50,0	61,9	53,6	
	no	f	11	7	8	26	
		f %	52,4	50,0	38,1	46,4	
	total	f	21	14	21	56	
		f %	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	

The largest part of all participants (87, 5 %) denoted child's progressive integration in kindergarten as important contents of the introductory education counselling interview. The process of integrating children in kindergarten, problems children have with adapting to new environment, and recommendations for parents are areas with most frequent questions and dilemmas that parents have when their child is starting kindergarten. Parents experience this event very emotionally, that is why it has to be discussed and enable the parents to express their positions, wishes and worries. For the above mentioned reasons, it is appropriate that pedagogues during education counselling interview dedicate enough time to the child's integration in kindergarten. This way they learn about parents and establish good mutual relationships. Resman et al. (1999) have come to similar conclusions. They say that education counselling service has to develop cooperation with home and parents because the child's education and socialisation are primarily a matter of home and family. Overcoming child's developmental and also learning uneasiness cannot be just a matter of preschool teachers and kindergarten but mainly a matter of parents. That is why they organise various forms of cooperation between kindergarten or preschool teachers and parents. They believe cooperation between kindergarten and parents is one of the most important education counsellors' tasks. They feel that education counsellor is the one who should include in the process of diagnosing child's maturity, establishing the programme, and evaluating the child's readiness to transit from home to kindergarten and from kindergarten to primary school.

Pedagogues defined kindergarten's presentation and its activities (73, 2 %), as well as forms of cooperation between parents and kindergarten (67, 9 %) as two important contents of the introductory education counselling interview. This information is of key importance, not only for presenting kindergarten and its activities but also for strengthening the feeling of trust in parents and children. Here, Sigulin (2012) similarly

finds out that a very important factor for developing a trustworthy relationship is the first impression parents get when they first contact kindergarten. She believes that establishing good mutual relationships demands quite some effort. The child actually feels every parental mistrust and insecurity and responds in the same way. This consequently worsens the process of adapting. The results of the χ^2 -test do not show statistically significant differences between the subject field at the introductory education counselling interview and the respondents' period of employment. The finding suggests that at the introductory education counselling interview all subject fields connected with integration, child's life and his/hers activity in kindergarten are important. This can also be seen in a high percentage of positive answers of those pedagogues whose period of employment lasts for 10 or more years.

Pedagogue's tasks of integrating a child in kindergarten

The research data reveals that in the process of child's integration in kindergarten the pedagogue's work is mainly focused on counselling preschool teachers and preschool teachers' assistants who work with children with special needs. Employed education counsellors with a period of employment longer than 10 years strongly believe that an important pedagogue's role in child's integration in kindergarten is also professional counselling and support to parents through individual interviews. They also emphasise the importance of practical training in the course of university education of pedagogues. This way, pedagogues could gain various experiences and practical knowledge from the fields of education counselling process, communication with parents, working with children with special needs, and supervision.

All kindergartens where employees are participants in the survey offer a possibility of child's progressive integration. As it is shown in Table 2, the most common problems in children's adaptation to new environment are connected with painful separation from parents and accustoming to different rules and habits than at home. Children younger than 2 years usually integrate up to one month and mostly have problems due to separation from parents, emotional attachment, and accepting new daily routine. These are expressed by crying, falling ill or refusing food. Children from 3 to 4 years of age integrate a little bit faster. Problems like accustoming to new rules, communication with peers, and functioning in a group are mostly expressed with crying, refusing food, sensitivity, and inappropriate behaviour (biting, kicking). Occasionally, children older than 4 years similar problems express also with passiveness in a group and egocentricity.

Table 2: Number (f) of participant pedagogues who answered the question: “What kind of problems do children of various ages have when they integrate in a kindergarten?”

Problem \ Age	Up to 2 years	3 years	4 years	More than 4 years
Emotional attachment	6	3	4	2
Separation from parents	27	18	10	4
Trusting preschool teachers	3	3	3	4
Being accepted	2	3	3	2
Accepting new daily routine	7	4	1	0
Communication with peers and functioning in a group	4	11	15	26
Internalising new rules	5	17	15	17

The results of the research regarding children’s problems with integration at various age brackets also show that younger children more easily establish communication with peers than children who integrate in kindergarten at the age of 4. This is seen in Table 2. On the basis of this data we can conclude that when starting kindergarten younger children are more flexible and susceptible for surrounding activeness. Therefore, they quickly and more intensively develop communication skills than children who integrate in kindergarten at the age of 4 or later. This finding is directly connected with the child’s most appropriate age for starting kindergarten. Merc (2002) believes that, regarding the degree of emotional attachment, the most appropriate time for integrating children in kindergarten is at the age of three. This is also confirmed by results of other various studies. She thinks that in this way, the child strengthens newly gained identity and tests it in group relationships.

Varjančič (2007) came to similar conclusions. He says that a three-year-old child already needs kindergarten to exploit his/hers developmental potentials. Ideally, the child should be emotionally independent from the caretaker’s presence or absence. He/she should know how to regulate his/her own feelings, comfort himself/herself, anticipate unpleasant circumstances and emotionally distant himself/herself from them. The

child should also reach a stage when he/she experiences other children as helpers in play or as partners. If other children bother him/her and if he/she experiences them as objects, he/she will have difficulties integrating in kindergarten. We have to consider that the children's integration time in kindergarten varies because it does not only depend on the child's age but also on his/hers interactions with environment, the degree of attachment to parents, and partially on his/hers characteristics so far. Hence, defining the most appropriate age for child's integration in kindergarten is merely approximate. Nevertheless, it serves kindergarten pedagogues as an orientation point for providing professional support in cases of integration problems and in searching for their causes.

Conclusion

The problematic of pedagogue's work in Slovenian kindergartens is often connected with the fact that education and executive kindergarten workers still frequently misunderstand the pedagogue's actual role. Therefore, pedagogues also do those working tasks that are not a part of their working obligation. Moreover, general public is also badly informed about the pedagogue's tasks, knowledge and competences gained during the time of his/hers university education. Consequently, parents of preschool children do not take advantage of counselling with a pedagogue. Beside the unit's preschool teacher, he/she is the only one who is competent enough to give advice about the child's developmental specifics, appropriate educational procedures, and can through education counselling interview help establish a trusting relationship between kindergarten and parents. Pedagogue's education profile combines knowledge from numerous fields (child's pedagogical, psychological, didactical, physiological and mental development) and was established with the intention of training pedagogical workers who have a complete insight in the educational process, connect executive and educational personnel with children and their parents, and also cooperate with external institutions (social work centres, hospitals, and health care centres etc.). Changing legislation that would allow priority employment of pedagogical profiles in education counselling services of kindergartens and schools, would consequently better the general public's knowledge about the pedagogue's scope inside the education counselling service. But most of all, it would raise awareness among children's parents in kindergartens and schools, so that they could more often make use of education counselling interviews during the school year, more successfully solve problems and strengthen mutual cooperation.

We found out that in the kindergarten's education counselling service a pedagogue coordinates kindergarten's activities, is actively included in

preparations for enrolment where he/she prepares and arranges appropriate documentation, helps informing parents, and offers help to preschool teachers who prepare for group work. Furthermore, we also found out that pedagogues spend a lot of time cooperating with defectologists and special pedagogues in preparing programmes for working with children with special needs. In this way, they enable them a quality educational process that is adapted to deficits in individual areas, and ensure that the children's learning and gaining experiences from the environment is as productive as possible. A pedagogue is present at children's enrolment in kindergarten where he/she, through education counselling interviews, establishes contact with parents. These do not take place only during the period of child's integration in kindergarten but also throughout the whole school year, if problems appear. A pedagogue also counsels kindergarten's professional workers, cooperates with kindergarten's management, and external institutions. His/hers work encompasses numerous fields and is fastened in a system of mutual complementation between kindergarten's management and external institutions on one side, and parents, children, preschool teachers and their assistants on the other.

Findings show that there exist unanswered questions about the pedagogue's work in kindergarten. These appear mostly in the field of employment legislation, in the field of legal restrictions about the kinds of working tasks that the pedagogue should do as an education counsellor in kindergarten, and in the field of possibilities for additional education about communication skills and leading education counselling interviews. Statutory priority employment of pedagogues in kindergartens before all other profiles would allow pedagogues to implement the complete knowledge gained during the process of university education into a quality education counselling process inside educational institutions. Further, it would make sense to connect education counselling services of kindergartens and schools with universities. This would consequently enable students of pedagogy to do more working hours directly in the education counselling services of educational institutions during their study, than there are predicted in the current program of practical pedagogical education at the faculty. Similarly, it would be necessary to clearly statutory define which working tasks and obligations are a part of pedagogue's working commitment. The research actually found out that mainly those pedagogues employed in smaller kindergartens (less than 40 children enrolled per year) have working tasks which they believe do not belong in their working commitments as pedagogues in kindergarten. Thus, they do not have enough time to do those obligations that are a part of their professional tasks. Consequently, high strain and numerous working

responsibilities decrease the quality of their work. Research's results also revealed a need for additional education of pedagogues in the field of communication skills and skills of leading an education counselling interview. In this way, we would better the efficiency of counselling and establish good mutual relationships between kindergartens and parents, who would, in case of troubles, accept pedagogue's help more often.

The comprehensiveness of work enables a pedagogue in kindergarten a complete insight in all participants' activities in the process of education on a preschool level. Diverse experiences that a pedagogue gains during his/hers professional development allow him/her to be competent in the field of counselling to professional workers in kindergarten, as well as to parents who encounter numerous dilemmas, fears and hesitations when they enrol their child in a kindergarten. Here, communication between kindergarten's personnel and parents is of key importance because only in this way, it is possible to honestly exchange desires and expectations of all those present in the child's integration in kindergarten.

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