

TEACHERS' OPINIONS ON RECOGNISABLE ASPECTS OF THE INSTITUTIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION CULTURE

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Abstract

The paper analyses the findings of an empirical research of teachers' opinions on the early childhood education (hereafter ECE) culture. The opinion of teachers - graduate students of ECE Department (ECE) ($N = 61$; $n = 121$) on recognisable aspects of institutional culture and identity within the teaching process was investigated. The sample was not representative and the tendency to give desirable answers cannot be ignored. Based on the relevant literature, the measuring instrument Questionnaire Dimensions of Culture and Identity of the ECE Institution ($\alpha = .84$) was constructed. Factor analysis of the subscales used as the most important dimensions of the ECE institutional culture highlighted: the relations (as latent variables), the artefacts (material and social), and the work openness as visible dimensions of the culture. Cooperation, individual development, professional development, and focus on outcomes were singled out as developmental dimensions of identity. The findings partly correspond to the interpretations of the educational institution culture as a construct of educational values, organisation and relationships. The role of society (public education policies and funding) in this study was not recognised as a significant factor in the ECE institutional culture. As the most important dimensions of the educational institution culture, the research participants single out the quality of the relationship between teachers and children ($M = 4.65$; $SD = 0.64$), respect for diversity ($M = 4.64$; $SD = 0.58$), and acceptance of children as active stakeholders ($M = 4.55$; $SD = 0.83$). The least significant was networking with scientists ($M = 3.21$; $SD = 1.73$). Responsibility for the quality

of the educational process has been attributed primarily to teachers, and the least amount of responsibility was ascribed to society as a whole. In the educational process, the most significant findings were: the encouragement of children's expression ($M = 4.78$; $SD = 0.417$) and the focus on children's needs ($M = 4.75$; $SD = 0.44$). No significant association of assessment with age and work experience of participants was found.

KEYWORDS: *educational process; professional development of teachers; wellbeing, quality of pedagogical practice*

Introduction

The quality of institutional early and preschool education (hereinafter ECE) is determined by the interactive relations of public education policy, system structure and personal pedagogical paradigms of stakeholders, learning and teaching strategies, and authentic conditions for the implementation of educational process (*Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2014). Professional development of teachers stands out as a predictor of the development of institutional quality and culture (Domović, 2011; Višnjić Jevtić, 2019).

Culture can be interpreted as a way of life of an individual community. It is based on values and norms, and is recognisable in communication, common behaviours, customs and rituals, ways of distributing authority and solving problem situations, and artefacts (Visković, 2018). The culture of an educational institution is, as a rule, a construct of particular cultures of stakeholders (children and adults) and traditions (previous experience) that should be the starting point for understanding. Fullan (1991) emphasizes that the educational process cannot be understood and developed if the institutional culture is not understood as the framework of that process.

Aasebø, Midtsundstad and Willbergh (2017) interpret culture as a construct of attitudes, communication, focus, and engagement of all stakeholders. Authentic culture, determined by the conditions and relationships of process stakeholders, represents the identity of an individual ECE institution. It is a developmental process recognisable by its learning environment, behaviours and interactions, and sense of connection and security (Visković, 2018). The dimensions of identity quality positively correlate with the development of the identity of each individual, especially children.

Senge (2001) believes that identity is precisely the diversity of a particular culture. It is based on values and is shaped by the circularity of social interactions (Roccas & Sagiv, 2010; Schwartz, 2010). Social interactions can lead to behaviour modification

(Arieli, Grant, & Sagiv, 2014) and redefining value orientations (Bardi & Goodwin, 2011). This emphasizes the importance of shared learning as a predictor of development (Markić, 2014). The involvement and engagement of the individual in this process is related to his/her values, and refers to educational outcomes (Schwartz, 2010).

The identity of ECE institutions of early and preschool education is constructed and developed through the interactive action of all stakeholders in the process. Teachers are recognised as significant factors in this process (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009). Their competencies and personal paradigms constitute a part of their professional identity (Hedges & Cooper, 2014). Understanding personal identity is a predictor of accepting and appreciating the diversity of others (Gunn, Bennett, Evans, Peterson, & Welsh, 2013). The possibility of redefining values and modifying behaviour through shared learning justifies teachers' opinion research in ECE institutions.

Methodology

The conducted empirical research aimed to single out recognisable aspects of culture and developmental dimensions of the ECE institution's identity. A positive correlation between the age and work experience of the participants and individual assessments was assumed.

The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Split provided the consent needed for the research. The purpose of the research was explained to potential participants in the research - all (part-time) students of the Early and Preschool Education Department (ECE Department) graduate study, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Department in Čakovec. The research preceded the discussion as a learning modality. Participation was voluntary. Participants were guaranteed anonymity, and they were free to drop out of the research at any time.

The collected research data were processed using the statistical program *Statistical Package for the Social Science* (SPSS 20). For the purposes of general description, measures of central tendency (arithmetic mean / M) and scattering measures (standard distribution / SD, rank, frequencies / f, percentages) were used. The application of the *Scree plot* and the matrix of components singled out the underlying factors. The existence of a statistically significant difference in assessment was investigated using *t-test* and *One-way analysis of variance* / ANOVA. The relationship between independent demographic variables and estimates of individual dimensions was investigated using the *Spearman's rho Correlation Coefficient*.

Data

Convenience sampling was used to obtain the data. The sample includes teachers - students of graduate study of the Early and Preschool Education Department at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split and the Faculty of Teacher Education, University of Zagreb, Department in Čakovec, who are already working in kindergarten ($N=61$; $n=121$). The sample included 59 women and 2 men, so the gender variable was not taken into further processing. The average age of study participants was 27,8 years ($SD=7,13$) ranging from 21 to 50 years of age. The length of service of the participants is 6,75 years ($SD=5.31$) ranging from 1 to 27 years. Most of the teachers in the research (78,7%; $N=48$) work in ECE institutions in the city (places with more than 10,000 inhabitants), and others in smaller places (places with less than 10,000 inhabitants). The majority of survey participants (83,6%, $N=51$) are employed in institutions founded by local self-government units (hereinafter LSU). A smaller part of the research participants (13.1%, $N=8$) are employed in ECE institutions founded by natural or legal persons, and only 3,3% ($N=2$) in ECE institutions of religious communities.

Research Instrument

Based on the analysis of recent literature, the Questionnaire on the Dimensions of Identity and Culture of the ECE Institution / Q-DICI was constructed. The questionnaire includes residential variables (age, length of service, place and founder of the ECE institution where the participants are employed) and 3 assessment scales. Participants were able to provide estimates on a 5-point Likert-type scale with a zero point (3 = neither agree nor disagree). The reliability of the measuring instrument was determined by applying the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and is ,84 for the whole instrument. The assessment Scale of the ECE institutional cultural aspects or / S-IC has 23 items ($\alpha = ,83$), the Institutional Identity Development Dimensions Assessment Scale / S-IIDD 19 items ($\alpha = ,89$) and the ECE Cultural and Identity Participation Assessment Scale / S-CIP, 8 particles ($\alpha = ,86$). All particles of the scales used have a high saturation and the exclusion of an individual particle does not significantly increase the reliability of the instrument.

Results

The Importance of Certain Aspects of the ECE Institution's Culture and Identity

When it comes to assessing certain aspects of the educational institution's culture (Table 1), teachers in the sample attach the most importance to relationships, and the least to material aspects (architectural solutions and financial possibilities). As the most important aspect of the institution's culture, participants single out the quality of teachers' relationship with children ($M=4,65$; $SD=0,64$), which can be interpreted as a fundamental value.

TABLE 1 Importance of certain aspects of the ECE institution's culture

		M	SD
1.	quality of teachers' relationship with children	4,64	,659
2.	respect for diversity	4,59	,588
3.	cooperation of members of the professional development service	4,59	,642
4.	acceptance of children as active stakeholders in their personal education	4,56	,807
5.	forms of communication	4,52	,622
6.	cooperation with family	4,44	,719
7.	teacher's creativity	4,43	,741
8.	spatial and material environment adapted to children	4,43	,618
9.	ways to solve problem situations	4,41	,642
10.	leadership style	4,39	,759
11.	developing partnerships with parents	4,38	,662
12.	inclusive practice	4,36	,708
13.	clearly agreed norms of behaviour	4,31	,593
14.	nurturing rituals	4,31	,743
15.	nurturing tradition	4,20	,813
16.	power distributing ways	3,95	,884
17.	symbols	3,93	1,014
18.	presentation of educational achievements	3,90	,768
19.	work publicity	3,80	,928
20.	the name of the kindergarten / educational group	3,67	1,165
21.	financial possibilities	3,62	,934
22.	architectural setting	3,61	,862
23.	advocating uniformity (e.g. use of uniforms)	3,28	1,213

As the most important procedures that can contribute to the development of the specific identity of the ECE institution, teachers in the sample highlight the procedures of focusing on children and their needs, and teachers' professional development (Table 2).

TABLE 2 Procedures that contribute to the development of ECE institutions' identity

		M	SD
1.	promoting children's freedom of expression	4,80	,401
2.	focus on the needs of children	4,77	,424
3.	teachers' professional development	4,75	,471
4.	exchange of quality practice	4,69	,534
5.	joint evaluation	4,67	,507
6.	flexibility in structuring the educational process	4,64	,578
7.	teachers' creativity	4,61	,640
8.	using different learning sources	4,61	,585
9.	inclusion of children with disabilities	4,59	,588
10.	action research of personal practice	4,59	,559
11.	children's choices of learning content	4,57	,562
12.	documenting the educational process	4,57	,618
13.	equal cooperation of all employees of the institution	4,56	,533
14.	friendly relations	4,51	,566
15.	early identification of gifted children	4,51	,744
16.	equal involvement of parents in curriculum construction	4,48	,622
17.	clearly distinguished work responsibilities of employees	4,38	,610
18.	focus on children's (measurable) achievements	4,36	,932
19.	networking with scientists	4,23	,716

Research participants were asked to assess the extent to which individual stakeholders in the educational process contribute to the development of culture and the building of a specific identity of the ECE institution (Table 3).

TABLE 3 Contribution of process stakeholders in the development of culture and building the identity of the institution

	f / %					M	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
teacher			1 1,6%	16 26,2%	44 72,1%	4,70	,495
members of the professional service			2 3,3%	22 36,1%	37 60,7%	4,57	,562
kindergarten principal			4 6,6%	12 19,7%	45 73,8%	4,67	,598
parents			9 14,8%	20 32,8%	32 52,5%	4,38	,734
children	1 1,6%	2 3,3%	6 9,8%	17 27,9%	35 57,4%	4,36	,913
management structures		39 63,1%	20 32,8%	2 3,3%		2,39	,513
public educational policies	1 1,6%	44 72,1%	16 26,2%			2,24	,475
community		2 3,3%	11 18%	13 21,3%	35 57,4%	4,33	,889

It is noticeable that the teachers, participants in this research recognise themselves as the main creators of the culture and identity of the ECE institution. At the same time, participants do not recognise the importance of public education policy and governance structures (governing councils, founders) as cultural factors. It is questionable whether this means ignoring the legislation, or a kind of acceptance of the specific conditions in which the institutional ECE is organised.

Culture and Identity of the ECE Institutions

All used scales have high reliability and internal coherence, and are suitable for factor analysis. By applying the principal components method, with Varimax rotation of the basic solution and, based on the Scree plot and the level of explanation of the common variance, the main factors were singled out. Conduction analysis and extracted latency variables were achieved by factor analysis.

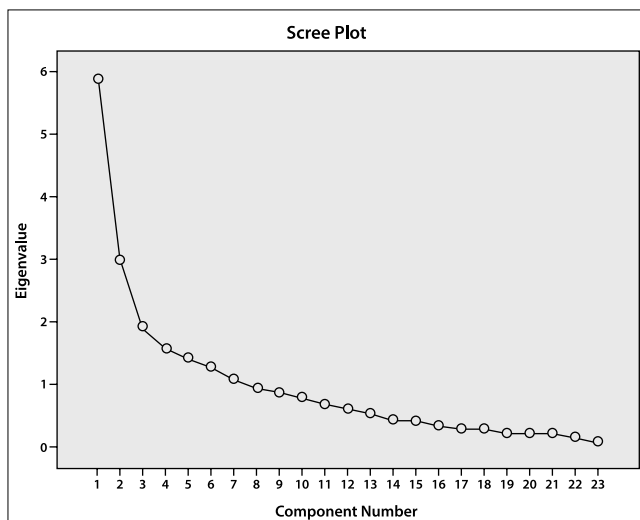


FIGURE 1 Scree Plot Particle Scales

The first subscale on institution's culture, *S-IC Cultural Aspects Assessment Scale* (KMO= ,679; $\chi^2=618,94$; $df=253$; $p \leq ,000$) has 3 main factors that together explain 59.34% of the common variance. It is possible to interpret them as latent variables - relationships (recognisable by cooperation and focus on children's wellbeing); visible variables - symbols, rituals, uniforms, publicity of work as socially constructed artefacts and dimensions determined by legislation such as funding and spatial conditions and inclusiveness (Table 4). It is interesting that teacher creativity appears as a dimension of the relationship and as a possible response to legal determinants.

TABLE 4 Factor structure

	components		
	1	2	3
cooperation of members of the professional development service	,737		
developing partnerships with parents	,697		
forms of communication	,685		
ways to solve problem situations	,683		
cooperation with family	,635		
leadership style	,617		
way of distributing power	,605		
the quality of the relationship between teachers	,591		
clearly agreed norms of behaviour	,482		

	components		
	1	2	3
spatial and material environment adapted to children	,466		
respect for diversity	,452		
acceptance of children as active participants in their personal education	,493	-,509	
advocating uniformity (uniforms)		,743	
work publicity		,600	
presentation of educational achievements		,583	
the name of the kindergarten / educational group		,505	
symbols		,483	-,401
nurturing rituals		,360	
nurturing tradition		,373	
financial possibilities			,669
architectural setting			,652
teachers' creativity	,430		,471
inclusive practice	,426		,447

The Institutional Identity Development Dimensions Scale / S-IIDD (KMO = ,779; $\chi^2 = 606,753$; d f= 171; $p \leq ,000$) has 4 main factors which together explain 63.36% of the common variance. They can be interpreted as cooperation, individual development, teachers' professional development and focus on outcomes (Table 5).

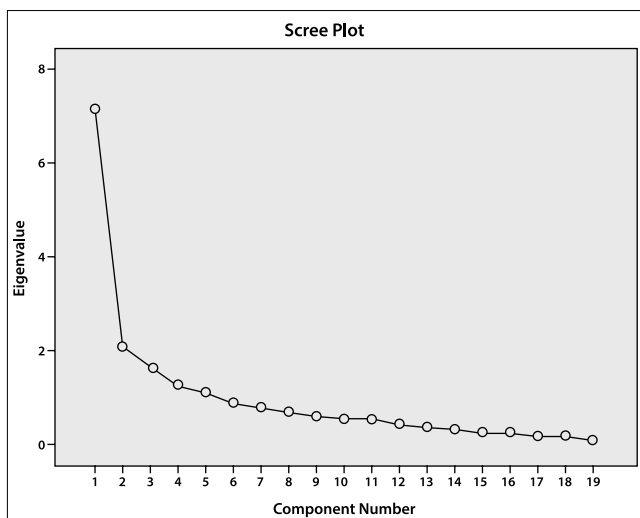


FIGURE 2 Scree Plot Particle Scales

TABLE 5 Factor structure

	components			
	1	2	3	4
equal involvement of parents in curriculum construction	,797			
equal cooperation of all employees of the institution	,663			
professional development of teachers	,661			
action research of personal practice	,570			
focus on the needs of children		,840		
promoting children's freedom of expression		,714		
children's choices on learning content		,686		
teachers' creativity		,667		
flexibility in structuring the educational process		,535		
using different learning sources		,529		
networking with scientists			,804	
exchange of quality practice			,756	
joint evaluation			,704	
clearly distinguished work responsibilities of employees			,476	
documenting the educational process			,453	
early identification of gifted children				,864
focus on children's (measurable) achievements				,638
inclusion of children with disabilities				,607
friendly relations				,499

The ECE Cultural and Identity Participation Assessment Scale / S-CIP, ($KMO = ,768$; $\chi^2 = 226,914$; $df = 15$; $p \leq ,000$) has only one factor (participation) that explains 64.88% of the variance. No statistical correlation was found between the age and length of service of research participants and the assessment of the importance they attach to the dimensions of culture and identity development of the institution (Table 6). However, the estimates of the score scales used are statistically significantly correlated with each other: S-IC and S-IIDD ($r = ,48$; $p = ,000$), S-IC and S-CIP ($r = ,419$, $p = ,001$).

TABLE 6 Correlation of demographic variables and assessment of cultural and identity dimensions

	Σ S-KU		Σ S-RD	
	r	p	r	p
age	,079	,546	,097	,455
length of service	,068	,602	,091	,485

No significant difference was found in the teachers' assessments according to the founder's position (city, smaller place), for the Institutional Culture Scale (S-IC) ($t = -0,136$; $df = 59$; $p = ,892$), as well as for the Scale of the Developmental Dimension of Identity (S-IIDD) ($t = -0,349$; $df = 59$; $p = ,728$). In relation to the founder of the institution (LSU, natural or legal persons, religious community), one-way analysis of variance revealed no significant difference in teacher assessment for S-IC ($F_2 = 1,165$; $p = ,319$) or (S-IIDD) ($F_2 = 2,626$; $p = ,081$).

Discussion

The findings of this research partly correspond to the interpretations of the culture of the educational institution as a construct of pedagogical quality, organisation and relations (Stančić, 2006). The role of society (public education policies, community and ways of financing ECE activities) is not recognised as a significant factor in the ECE institution's culture, which is contrary to the report *Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for ECEC* (EU, 2014).

However, the research of Piante, Downer and Hamra (2016) also does not find a connection between children's wellbeing in the ECE setting and the regulations and political infrastructure designed to support ECE (e.g., finance, program accreditation). Teachers, participants in this research take responsibility for development and quality mostly on themselves, which corresponds to the research of Brodin and Renblad (2014). As the main predictor of the quality of attitudes towards children and, indirectly, the wellbeing of children, some studies highlight the development of the professional identity of teachers (Dalli, 2012).

Recent research on the identity of an educational institution links identity to a culture recognisable by professional leadership (Hargreaves, 2014), a learning environment (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013), the relationships of all stakeholders (Aasebøi et al., 2017), and a sense of security (Gase, Gomez, Kuo, Glenn, Inkelas & Ponce, 2017). Quality as a dimension of the culture of an educational institution is associated with current and long-term academic achievements of the

individual (Aasebø et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 2014; Sammons, Thomas, Mortimore, Walker, Cairns, & Bausor, 2006). The identity of the institution positively correlates with the development of the personality and affirmative identity of children (Hopmann, 2008). The predictor of group identity development is a relationship based on trust, recognisable through constructive dialogue (Sammons et al, 2006).

Research participants emphasise the importance of mutual relations between teachers and the support of members of the professional development service. ECE institutions also recognise cooperation with parents as a significant factor in the development of identity, which is in line with recent research (Castro Silva, Amante & Morgado, 2017). Research by Ailwood (2008) and Waren (2014) emphasizes that it is the relationships between teachers, children and parents that are crucial for quality. Understanding the importance of collaborative relationships contributes to the development of the quality of the educational process in the best interests of the child (Ritchie, 2010). Collaborative culture, based on educational values of identity, can initiate children's self-perception (Raburu, 2015). The development of children's identity is therefore linked to the culture and identity of growing up communities - families and ECE institutions (Brooker, 2008). Collaborative culture does not mean uniformity but respect for diversity (Barron, 2009).

Conclusion

The culture of the growing up community is a reference framework for the development of children's identity, the adoption of fundamental life and educational values, acceptance of norms and the creation of socially acceptable behaviours. The findings of this research point to the importance of relationships as one of the fundamental aspects of community culture. Cooperation, individual development and professional development of teachers are recognized as dimensions of development. Although research participants emphasize personal responsibility when it comes to development and quality, the responsibility of society and public education policies as a reference framework for ECE should not be overlooked. The findings of this research point to the need for systematic research into the culture, identity and quality of the ECE institutions, as well as the role and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the process. The limitations of this study are recognizable in the specificity of the sample. Participants in the research - teachers at the graduate study of the ECE Department are focused on the research and analysis of the quality of the educational process, as well as the institutional identity and culture. At the same time, it can be interpreted as a development potential.

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MIŠLJENJE ODGAJATELJA O PREPOZNATLJIVIM ASPEKTIMA KULTURE USTANOVA RANOG I PREDŠKOLSKOG ODGOJA I OBRAZOVANJA

Sažetak

Rad analizira nalaze empirijskog istraživanja mišljenja odgajatelja o kulturi ustanove ranog i predškolskog odgoja i obrazovanja. Istraženo je mišljenje odgajatelja – studenata diplomskog studija RPOO (N=61; n=121) o prepoznatljivim aspektima kulture i identiteta ustanove. Istraživanje je provedeno u okviru nastavnog procesa, pa uzorak nije reprezentativan i ne može se zanemariti tendencija davanja poželjnih odgovora. Temeljem relevantne literature, konstruiran je mjerni instrument Upitnik dimenzije kulture i identiteta ustanove RPOO ($\alpha = .84$). Faktorskom analizom korištenih podskala kao najznačajnije dimenzije kulture ustanove RPOO izdvojeni su odnosi (kao latentne varijable) te artefakti (materijalni i socijalni) i javnost rada kao vidljive dimenzije kulture. Kao razvojne dimenzije identiteta izdvojena je suradnja, individualni razvoj, stručno usavršavanje odgajatelja te usmjerenost na ishode. Ovi nalazi djelomično korespondiraju s tumačenjima kulture odgojno-obrazovne ustanove kao konstrukta odgojnih vrijednosti, organizacije i odnosa. Uloga društva (javnih obrazovnih politika i financiranje) u ovom istraživanju nije prepoznata kao značajan čimbenik kulture ustanove RPOO. Kao najznačajnije dimenzije kulture odgojno-obrazovne ustanove sudionici istraživanja izdvajaju kvalitetu odnosa odgajatelja s djecom (M=4,65; SD=0,64), uvažavanje različitosti (M=4,64; SD=0,58) i prihvaćanje djece kao aktivnih dionika procesa (M=4,55; SD=0,83). Najmanje značajnim procjenjuju umrežavanje sa znanstvenicima (M=3,21; SD=1,73). Odgovornost za kvalitetu odgojno-obrazovnog procesa pripisuju ponajprije odgajateljima, a najmanje odgovornim procjenjuju društvo u cjelini. U odgojno-obrazovnom procesu najznačajnijim procjenjuju poticanje dječjeg izražavanja (M=4,78; SD=0,417) te usmjerenost na potrebe djece (M=4,75; SD=0,44). Nije utvrđena statistički značajna povezanost procjene s dobi i radnim stažem sudionika.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *dobrobit, kvaliteta pedagoške prakse, odgojno-obrazovni proces, profesionalni razvoj odgajatelja*