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Original scientific paper
UDK: 37.018.26
DOI: 10.17810/2015.60
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PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE QUALITY OF KINDERGARTEN

Abstract: This paper presents the research conducted with parents of preschool children on quality of preschool education practice. Preschool education is, aside from practice, made of elements such as the preschool education system, legal and programmatic framework, cultural framework, etc., but practice is what parents see and understand, and that is why we discussed this topic with them. In this paper preschool education practice will be scrutinized through the analysis of various functioning aspects of kindergarten. We understand the quality of the preschool education practice as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon and as such we analyze it from the perspective of socio-cultural theory and postmodernist approach to scientific research. The complexity of this phenomenon is reflected in the fact that it is possible to identify various levels and aspects of quality, which are intertwined with each other. Multiplicity is reflected in the fact that the preschool education practice quality changes its meaning depending on the approach and perspectives from which it is viewed. In this paper, the focus is on understanding parent's perspective on the kindergarten practice quality because we consider that understanding parent's perspective is the first step in the process of allocating responsibility for preschool education and respecting the rights of parents to participate in all aspects of educating their children. These processes are fundamental for establishing and developing the quality of preschool education practice. The socio-cultural approach to the study of chosen phenomenon implies the understanding that language is not a stable system of meaning, but meaning is created in context, while knowledge is socially constructed and contextual. The postmodernist paradigmatic framework and qualitative character of the research process have directed this research towards the field of accomplishing mutual understanding by creating common meanings. This research tends to establish a dialogue between researchers and participants which will open the space for (co)construction of meanings and the common understanding of numerous aspects of the preschool education practice quality.

Keywords: quality, preschool education, preschool education practice, parents' perspective.

Introduction

Lately, in the scientific, professional and political circles, the quality of preschool education is increasingly discussed. The concept of quality in education has become popular in the last decade of the previous century, and we can say that to this day it has remained one of the

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main topics of discussions. Everyone agrees with the conclusion that quality is important, however, when it comes to clearly defining what quality in preschool education is, and how we should accomplish it and develop it, discrepancies are revealed (Malovic, 2017). Best interests of the child are always in the first place, but careful analysis of established education strategies and measures (in Serbia) can reveal contradictions, due to different starting points and expectations of education (Krnjaja & Pavlović-Breneselovic, 2011).

Differences in the contextualization of quality in education reflect different social values. When defining quality, we first need to answer questions such as: How do we understand the nature of children and childhood? What attitudes and skills do we want to support in children? Who is responsible for raising children?, etc. (Malovic, 2017) In order to answer these questions, we can rely on pedagogical and psychological knowledge, but we must bear in mind that scientific knowledge and social action are connected, and that these issues are essentially political and cultural (Ber, 2001). Social policies are often built on the basis of scientific knowledge, but research is often done by "order" with an aim to answer questions important for creating educational policies. However, the interests of different stakeholders play a major role in policy making. A starting point of this paper is the assumption that in the process of creating educational policies, parents' voices must be heard and respected.

Parents have the right and responsibility to be asked and to contribute to all matters concerning them and their children (UN, 1989). Parents are most interested in the well-being of the child and they can, with their knowledge, experience, skills, talents, dedication and energy, contribute greatly to the well-being of their and other children. Parent's perspective on the quality is shaped by the influence of the society in which they live, as well as by their personal experiences and implicit pedagogies, and therefore can be distinguished from the perspective of researchers, practitioners and experts in the field of education (Malovic, 2017). This paper is an attempt to highlight the parents' perspective on quality, and thus contribute to the building of meanings related to the important and complex concept of quality in preschool education.

Theoretical background

The question of quality is ubiquitous in this historical context. „We live in an age of quality. Every product and service must offer quality; every consumer wants to have it. In this historical context, quality has become reified, treated as if it was an essential attribute of services or products that gives them value, assumed to be natural and neutral. The problem with quality, from this perspective, is its management. How can quality be discovered, measured, assured and improved? What goals, to be achieved by technical means, will enhance performance and increase value? (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008:3)“ In determining the concept of quality in this paper, we proceed from the understanding that quality in preschool education is determined by the context, and meanings attached to it in this context. In addition, quality is not a one-dimensional phenomenon and must be viewed through numerous levels and aspects, which are intertwined (Malovic, 2012).

The complexity of the concept of kindergarten practice quality can be seen by analyzing various approaches to the concretization of this idea. For example, in the OECD documents (OECD, 2012), we find that the minimum quality standards first relate to the provision of healthcare and safety for children, but goes a step further by determining the following aspects of quality: the ratio of the number of practitioners to the number of children, employees qualifications and competencies and their professional development, salaries of

the employees, quality of programs, quality of the physical environment, the diversity in terms of employee gender. When concretizing the idea of quality, UNICEF (2000) discusses the quality dimensions that are interconnected, consisting of: participants (who are healthy physically and psycho-socially, who are willing to actively participate in the learning process and who cooperate with the family and the community), environment (which is healthy and safe, and which provides adequate learning resources), content (which is in accordance with the curriculum and supports the development of reading and mathematical literacy, life skills and knowledge on socially significant topics), processes (in which well-trained practitioners support learning through direct and indirect work with children) and outcomes (which reflect knowledge, skills and attitudes that are in line with the national educational goals and positive participation in society).

By reviewing the literature on quality, we can conclude that there are different definitions and conceptualizations of quality, which are shaped by different theoretical approaches to preschool education. If we look at the two approaches by Moss (2008), we note that in the approach called "market standardization", which makes technical practice first practice, quality is established through standardization measures. On the other hand, the approach called "democratic experimentalism", which characterizes the understanding of preschool education as a context in which children socialize, build relationships, and thus become part of society, presupposes establishing quality first by setting principles and values to be respected. Similar to Moss's point of view, Myers (2006) points out that when considering quality, we can understand it from a "modern" or "postmodern" perspective. A "modern" perspective implies the understanding of quality as inherent and objective reality, which can be studied using logic or through research. Such a perspective draws its roots from the "industrial tradition", which implies setting quality standards in the form of desired products, as well as developing instruments that can be applied in different situations in order to assess the situation in practice. Contrary to this perspective, there is a "post-modern" perspective, which relies on the fact that quality is related to the context, that it is relative and subjective. Considering general and universal quality settings does not make much sense in the "postmodern" perspective, because meaning can only be learned from context. Additionally, setting standards and national targets, as well as devising standardized instruments for evaluating the situation in practice, are not valid mechanisms. The only way to set up generalized goals is by agreeing on the meanings.

Attempts to understand the concept of the quality of kindergarten practice become more complicated when considering the fact that there are various stakeholders in preschool education, such as parents, practitioners, researchers, educational policies makers who bring in their own values, beliefs, needs and goals (Ceglowski & Bacigalupa, 2002). Considering the multi-perspective nature of quality as a phenomenon arising from different stakeholders, we can recognize the following perspectives: the perspective of child development (which includes the perspective of researchers, evaluators and all actors involved in children's education), a regulatory perspective (that directs national standards and shapes the national framework of quality in preschool education, as well as monitoring compliance in practice), the perspective of education policy (which is realized through certain measures and actions at the state level), the parent's perspective (which can be individually different due to cultural differences, differences in educational approaches and beliefs), the perspective of social and educational services (of all the actors in the education, contributing through social donations), a children's perspective (based on the everyday experiences of children in kindergarten), the perspective of the kindergarten staff (which includes relationships between employees, children and parents, as well as the satisfaction with working conditions), a cultural

perspective (that determines quality through social norms, values and beliefs in a particular community) (Mahony & Hayes, 2006).

The concept of quality can be understood as a subjective concept based on values, or an objective one that is value and context – neutral. Therefore, there are authors (Sheridan, 2007) whose views we accept in this paper, who advocate for quality access through an interactive perspective, trying to overcome the disagreements that exist between understandings of quality as a subjective or objective concept, shifting the focus on the connection between them and interaction with each other. In this paper we will try to bring together the perspective of the researchers, based on the theoretical perspective on the quality of the kindergarten practice with the parents' perspective on this issue in the process of mutual understanding and joint creation of meaning.

The kindergarten represents a social construct originated primarily in order to solve the problem of care, education and upbringing of children of the pre-school age. Therefore, we must bear in mind the social context that carries certain ideas about childhood within itself (Miškeljin, 2012). After numerous socio-historical developments, which led to change of the concept of kindergartens, the kindergarten should now be "an opportunity for implementing parental functions on the social level and place of common life and equal decision making opportunities for children and adults" (Marjanovic, 1987, cited in: Miskeljin, 2012 : 19) ". Contemporary socio-historical context brought us the paradigm which conceptualizes the kindergarten as a learning community, when it comes to establishing a relationship between family and public education, where the role of the family is seen as equally important as the role of professionals, so the responsibility for achieving wellbeing of the child is collective - it is shared between family and society (Pavlovic-Breneselovic, 2012). This paper is based on the idea that in sharing responsibility for achieving the welfare and wellbeing of a child between kindergartens and families we first need to hear and understand the parents' perspective, that is necessary, but not a sufficient condition.

A detailed analysis of the literature dealing with the issue of preschool education quality we found that studies dealing with the parents' perspective on this issue are almost non-existent (Malovic, 2017). However, we found one conducted in the Republic of Ireland that dealt with the issue of the preschool education quality from different perspectives (Mahony & Hayes, 2006). This research was carried out with the idea of including the parents' perspective in the average of the creation of educational policies. The aim of this research was to understand the concept of preschool education quality from the perspectives, experiences and approaches of key stakeholder groups in preschool education - creators of educational policies, key participants that contribute to the development of quality at national and regional levels, practitioners in preschool education, parents and children. The research included, among others, parents of children from 28 kindergartens (44 of them in total). Exploring the parents' perspective on the preschool education quality, the researchers focused on several key issues - program selection criteria, aspects that contribute to good quality in the kindergarten, aspects that contribute to poor quality in the kindergarten, short-term and long-term quality effects in the kindergarten, the role of state institutions in quality assurance in pre-school education, the perspective on the National Quality Framework, the importance of different quality elements in preschool education, the relationship between parents and practitioners, the most important aspects that contribute to quality. This research has shown that there are similarities in terms of how different stakeholders identify and understand quality aspects, but that there are differences in terms of set priorities.

Methodology of research

The paradigmatic position on which this study is based is postmodernism, which is reflected in the shift from the positivist approach to scientific research, based on the mechanical view of the world and the phenomena in it (Pavlovic-Breneselovic, 20015). This research is based on the principles of a qualitative methodological approach, therefore it does not strive for the search of accurate answers and the discovery of the "truth" about the quality of the kindergarten practice, but it strives for understanding the different aspects of quality from the parents' perspective and the attempt of a common construction of meaning. The importance of linking scientific knowledge and experiences of social practices can be understood by building a field of understanding that should be reached through discussion that relies on the basic concepts and principles of scientific research (Marjanovic, 1984).

The subject of the study is parents' perspective on the quality of preschool education practice. The quality of a kindergarten is not an unambiguous notion and the understanding of this phenomenon depends on the perspective from which it is observed. We consider the problem of quality from parents' perspective as an important topic that could contribute to the distribution of responsibilities for preschool education and respecting the rights of parents to participate in all aspects of the upbringing of their children.

This research aims to understand and describe parent's perspective on the quality of kindergarten practice. Accordingly, the following research questions arise:

1. How do parents understand the importance and function of the kindergarten?
2. What are the most important aspects of the quality of the kindergarten practice from the parents' perspective?
3. How do parents understand their role in building the quality of kindergarten practice?

This is a descriptive survey (Mukherji, Albon, 2015). The research technique we used is an in-depth interview. The instrument we used is a semi structured interview (with a pre-determined set of open questions and 9 scale-like questions used as a complement to the in-depth interview technique) (Appendix 1 and 2).

The method used in data analysis is an inductive method, an open encoding technique (Roberts-Holmes, 2014) - all the answers were first encoded, and after that the response categories were created for research questions and sub-themes within them. Although we pre-compiled a set questions, we did not mean that parents answered each one in a given order, the questions served to the researcher as a reminder of which topics would be useful to cover in the interview. Questions were selected after a comprehensive analysis of the theoretical background on the quality of institutionalized preschool education and the identification of different quality indicators.

Participants in the research were parents of preschool children. The research included 10 parents whose children stayed in different kindergarten groups - 7 parents of children aged 4 years (middle kindergarten group), of which two parents have two children in kindergarten (in both cases another child is aged 6 years and goes to the preschool group), and 3 parents of children aged 5 years (an older kindergarten group). All ten parents who participated in the research were mothers. The criterion for the selection of participants for the research was the willingness to cooperate in the research process. In accordance with the ethical principles of

the research process, an informed consent (Mukherly & Albon, 2015) is implied for participation in the research.

In order to understand the context of the research it is important to note that the research was conducted with parents whose children are going to the kindergarten "Zlatni Bor", which is part of a pre-school institution "Dr Sima Milosevic", the municipality of Zemun in Belgrade. The research was not carried out on the kindergarten premises, but in a pleasant and informal atmosphere, which contributed to a more open attitude towards the researcher (the second author) and the richness of the answers received. Most of the parents who participated in the research knew each other, which helped to form a group of participants, but may have contributed to the similarity of the answers received. The fact that all research participants were unemployed is important for understanding the wider socio-economic context.

This research was conducted in the period August-September, 2017. The second author conducted interviews with the research participants, lasting between 80 and 130 minutes. Each conversation was audio recorded. After the first part of the interview that was based on discussion on a variety of topics, the researcher presented to the participants a set of scale-like questions related to the assessment of some quality criteria, according to which parents gave their assessments on the importance of each of the criteria. Prior to the evaluation, the researcher discussed with the parents what each criterion implied, since most of the criteria had already been mentioned in the conversation.

Presentation and analysis of data obtained by research

The importance and functions of preschool education

Socially (institutionally) organized forms of child care and education began to appear with the development of industry, with an emphasis on the social-protective function, and organized according to the model of maternal care (Dahlberg, et al., 2007). While at the time of the birth of the kindergarten its primary function was taking care of children whose parents were employed (Miskeljin, 2012), today we have kindergartens whose focus is not only on the social need for childcare, or just child education, but also the overall wellbeing of the child and family needs, so we can recognize protective, emotional, socializing and educational function of kindergarten (Malovic, 2017). The functions of kindergarten recognized by parents can be classified into the following categories: (1) The kindergarten's pedagogical function, which refers to providing opportunities for children's learning and play, but also strengthening the skills of parenting (2.) The economic function of the kindergarten was recognized in the responses concerning the care of the children of employed parents (3.) The social function of kindergarten, determined by supporting social justice, greater social integration and the creation of equal opportunities for learning, was not found in the parents' direct answers to the questions asked, but the later features of upbringing that take place in a quality kindergarten, such as developing cooperation, respecting diversity and supporting tolerance, can be understood as a social function of the kindergarten.

Elaborating the concept of preschool education quality through the potential benefits, Malović (2012) presents the following aspects of benefits that high-quality preschool education can bring: promoting child's well-being; establishing a lifelong learning system quality; achieving equality and justice in society; addressing poverty in society; economic progress of society. The importance of institutional preschool education is recognized by parents through numerous benefits, but their primary focus was on benefits the kindergarten

brings to children and parents. In the table below (Table 1) we present parents' responses regarding the well-being of a child attending a kindergarten.

Table 1: Benefits for children attending kindergarten

Why is it important that children attend kindergarten?	N=10
Socialization of children	10
Becoming independent	9
Respect for authority	7
Forming habits	4
Learning	3
Getting prepared for school	2

When it comes to the benefits that a child can have from high-quality preschool education, the most commonly referred to (Myers, 2006) is the support and encouragement of child development, which is reflected in the ability of the child to deal with ever more complicated physical, intellectual, social and moral demands, and to address them appropriately. The most important benefit for the child, pointed out by all parents, refers to the socialization of children (which according to parents can be recognized in many ways in the kindergarten: “through meeting and socializing with other children”, “playing with other children”, “respecting other children”, “adapting to the environment”, “cohabitation, sharing, solving problems with other children”, “meeting with other adults”...) Nine out of ten parents also pointed out independence as a child benefit, explaining that in kindergarten child learns how to do things independently and how to spend time separated from parents. Respect for authority, first of all for teachers, 7 parents identified as benefit for a child, while two parents additionally linked the importance of respecting authority with the readiness of children to go to school.

Benefits for the parents are conceptualized as better quality time, in the sense that parents have more time for themselves and their peace in the house while children are at the kindergarten (4 parents stated this answer). Also, two parents stated the importance of taking care of children while parents are at work (just a few answers pointing out this benefit can be linked to the characteristics of the group - the parents who participated in the research are unemployed). One parent also recognized that parents are being helped in the education process of the child, if their child is attending kindergarten.

Answers obtained by a scale of assessment relating to elements of quality that are outcome-based are presented in the table (Table 2), and we can confirm that in parents' opinion the socialization of children is the most important benefit from preschool education.

Table 2: Assessment of the importance of outcome-based elements of quality

Outcome-based quality elements	N=10		
	Irrelevant for quality	Relevant for quality	Very important for quality
Preparing children for school	0	8	2
Developing social skills in children	0	0	10
Better understanding of children development by parents	1	8	1

The most important aspects of quality in the kindergarten

European Commission Childcare Network (Balageur, Mestres & Penn, 1996) stated out the following aspects (criteria) of quality in the kindergarten: accessibility and usage (which refers to the process of enrolling children in a kindergarten, that must be such that it gives equal opportunity to all children); environment (covers a wide range of interior and exterior features); learning activities (considering the issues of adult-led activities and activities led by children, that is, the role that children have in the learning process and the different ways they can be expressed, as well as the issue of learning content); relationships (children - practitioners relationships, relationships between children and relationships between adults); parents' view (which refers to the way of understanding the attitudes of the parents and the impact they have, as well as the nature of the partnership between parents and practitioners); the community (which refers to kindergarten openness to community and levels of cooperation); valuing diversity (refers to the support, understanding and acceptance of diversity); assessment of children and outcome measures (refers to the monitoring and evaluation of child development, as well as the educational process); cost benefits (covers issues of the financial aspect of the functioning of the kindergarten); ethos (this quality criterion is described as a balance between the above criteria, and the way in which they are interconnected; the kindergarten culture is built through values that are promoted on a daily basis).

In attempt to answer the second research question, we first asked the parents what are the criteria that are most important for them personally, when choosing a kindergarten. In addition to reviewing personal experiences when choosing a kindergarten, we asked parents to imagine a situation in which they could choose between numerous different kindergartens and give us the characteristics that would be crucial in choosing.

Table 3: The most important criteria for selecting kindergartens from parent's perspective

What are the most important criteria when choosing a kindergarten?	N=10
Skills of the preschool teacher	9
General atmosphere	8
Pedagogical approach to work (by preschool staff)	8
Location	6
Interior	5
Exterior	5
Program	5
Price	3
Safety and hygiene	2

Most parents (9) indicated the professionalism of practitioners as the most important criterion when choosing a kindergarten. Parents also stated that the professionalism can be assessed through interaction with the practitioners, and that good practitioners can significantly contribute to the good quality of the kindergarten. Parents (8) also pointed out the general atmosphere in the kindergarten as an important factor that would influence the choice of kindergarten (while in their opinion good atmosphere means “happy, smiling children”, “good relations between employees”, “a sense of being welcome”). Parents also stated that a good atmosphere can be felt in the relationship between practitioners and parents, and in the information parents receive from the practitioners (two parents stated that the negative impression was left by the fact that the practitioners first began to emphasize the ways of payment, as the most important information about the kindergarten's work).

Pedagogical approach is another important criterion when choosing a kindergarten, which was pointed out by 8 parents (in this criterion, we have found answers such as: “warm attitude of the preschool teachers towards children”, “supporting children's play” “participation in play with children, organizing and observing”, “knowing how to set rules”, “knowing how to maintain discipline”, “knowing how to work with problematic children”, etc.). The location of the kindergarten, which is located close to the home was pointed out by 6 parents, as an important criterion.

After listing the criteria that parents pointed out as important when enrolling a child in kindergarten, we asked them whether and in what way these criteria contribute to the good quality of the kindergarten. Parents agreed that all of these criteria influence quality, and we then asked them: *How can we recognize that some kindergarten is good? And could you list some characteristics of a good kindergarten?* The answers given by the parents are listed in the table (Table 4).

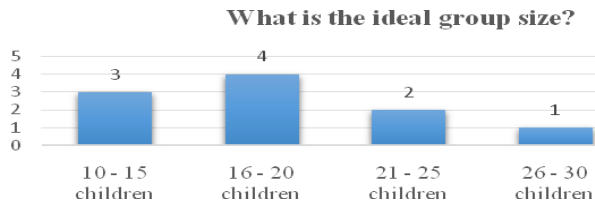
Table 4: Parent's perspective on criteria of good quality of kindergarten

List some criteria for a good kindergarten?	N=10
Pedagogical approach to work by preschool teacher	10
Professionalism of preschool teachers	10
Preschool teacher's personality	9
Interior	6
Yard	6
Program	5
Openness of the kindergarten	4
Cooperation with parents	4
Toys and equipment	4
Variety of activity	3
Professional associates	3
Safety and hygiene conditions	3
Small groups	2
The satisfaction of the preschool teachers with their job	1

Answers given to the question about the characteristics of a good kindergarten partly coincided with the answers to the previous question, but the parents added some other important criteria of good quality in the kindergarten. All parents pointed out the professionalism and pedagogical approach to work of preschool teachers, while others (9) also identified the personality of the preschool teacher as an important quality criterion. From this we can conclude that preschool teachers with their knowledge and skills are seen as the ones that have the most important influence on the quality in kindergartens. One answer indicated that the satisfaction of the preschool teachers with their job is important for quality (and that satisfaction is affected by *whether preschool teachers like their job, whether they have good relations with their colleagues and whether they are satisfied with the financial aspect*). More than half of the parents (6) identified structural quality elements, such as the interior space in the kindergarten and the yard. A small number of parents (3) pointed out the work of professional associates in the kindergarten as a quality aspect, and as we learned from further discussions with parents, many parents do not recognize the importance of professional associates, as they did not have the opportunity to see associates working with children, help and supervise.

We also asked parents what is the ideal size of the group and the ratio between the number of children and preschool teachers in the group. One of the important requirements regarding the establishment of the quality of preschool education is to determine the ratio between the number of children and adults in the group, which should be defined so that one practitioner is in charge of the minimum possible number of children, so that optimal attention is dedicated to each child (CRRU, 2004). Parents' answers regarding this issue are shown graphically (Chart 1).

Chart 1: Parents' perspective on ideal group size in kindergarten



There are a lot of arguments that parents have advocated for small groups (“for preschool teachers to give more attention to children”, “it is easier to work in smaller groups, easier to organize space and activities, children are safer in smaller groups”, “in a group of over 30 or even 40 children preschool teacher cannot keep an eye on them all”, “preschool teachers better follow children and can have better focus on each child separately”). One parent stated that a group should have up to thirty children (“more socializing opportunities among children and gaining more friends”). All parents think that the size of the group and the ratio between the number of children and adults affected the quality of the kindergarten, as it mostly affects the work of the preschool teacher and their interaction with children.

We asked parents what kind of materials for learning and playing we have in a good kindergarten, and how important materials are for the quality of the kindergarten. The parents' responses to material characteristics were similar (parents said that good materials should be natural (such as wood, foam, rubber, sand), safe (that children cannot be injured), diverse (to be interesting to children with different interests), usable for different activities (like Lego cubes), interactive, "smart" (they develop basic elements of literacy and mathematics in children)). One parent said that the amount of material and toys is not important for quality and creative play, but diversity is important so that every child can find the toy for himself. Also, a couple of parents said that the way toys and materials are used is more important than how many materials we have, and that the role of preschool teacher is important in encouraging children to use materials creatively.

Elaborating concept of quality in preschool practice, Mahony and Hayers (2006) categorize elements of quality in categories: category of *structural elements* (which include physical and structural characteristics of the environment, such as safety and hygienic conditions, equipment and materials that can be used by employees and children, as well as other quantitative characteristics - group size, ratios, education and professional development of employees) and category of *process-based elements* (which are more difficult to determine and measure, and therefore require the development of appropriate observation methods, this elements can be presented as a pedagogical approach of employees, everyday experiences of children, communication styles and relationships). At the very end of the

interview, we asked parents to evaluate the importance of some of the structural elements and process-based elements of the quality. The answers obtained are shown in the tables (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5 – Parent’s perspective of the importance of the structural elements of the quality

Structural elements of quality	N=10		
	Irrelevant for quality	Relevant for quality	Very important for quality
Preschool teacher’s professionalism	0	0	10
Safety and hygiene conditions	0	2	8
Incentive physical environment	0	6	4

Table 6 – Parent’s perspective of the importance of the process-based elements of the quality

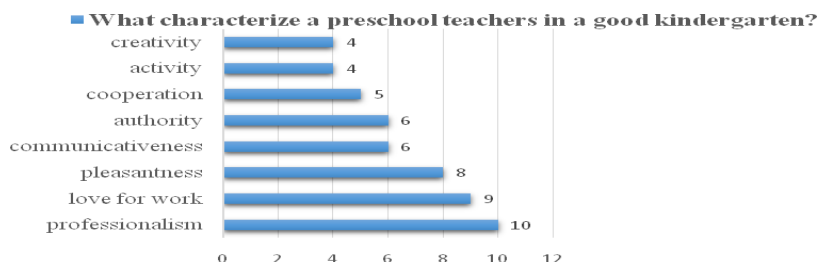
Process-based elements of the quality	N=10		
	Irrelevant for quality	Relevant for quality	Very important for quality
Warm attitude of preschool teachers towards children	0	0	10
Respect for children’s interests	0	3	7
Respecting parents’ educational goals and values	0	6	4

Characteristics of a preschool teacher as a quality indicator

Explaining elements of a quality democratic preschool education practice Moss (2007) stated that in good kindergartens preschool teachers play an important role in establishing quality. According to Moss, practitioners in good kindergarten must be highly qualified, professional, and cooperative, they should be willing to discuss, argue, exchange experiences, reflect - in short, to be capable and willing for dialogue with all stakeholders, especially with parents. Withal, there is a need for a quality system of education and professional development for practitioners, as a support for improving their practice.

According to the answers to previous questions we can conclude that certain characteristics of preschool teachers are the most important indicators of good quality in kindergarten. During the discussion with the parents we wanted to learn more about these characteristics, and we asked parents: *What characterize a preschool teachers in a good kindergarten? What are they doing and what are they paying the most attention to? As well as: What characterizes their relationship with children?* Answers to the first question are shown in the chart (Chart 2).

Chart 2: Characteristics of a preschool teacher as a quality indicator



We learned about the daily activities of preschool teachers in kindergarten through the question *What does the preschool teacher do in a good kindergarten?*, where we received various answers from parents, classifiable into several categories: (1) activities related to children's play; (2) learning activities; (3) activities related to everyday organization; (4) administrative activities; (5) activities of cooperation. The diverse and rich answers indicate that parents are well versed in preschool teacher responsibilities in kindergarten. According to parent's answers, good preschool teacher pays the most attention to *children, activities with children, monitoring of child development, finding children's affinities and interests, stimulating children*. Therefore, the focus on the child should be the main focus of the preschool teachers on the everyday level according to the parents' opinion.

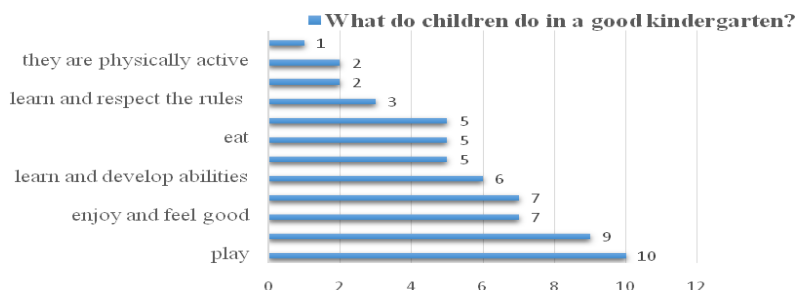
Elaborating elements of quality relationship between preschool teachers and children, Pavlovic – Breneselovic (2012a) stated that preschool teacher should encourage: (1) involvement (can be recognized in: sensitivity to children's unique needs and individualized approach; understanding the child's perspective; reflexivity); (2) support, as reinforcement (can be recognized in: maintaining balance when creating conditions in which children learn; carefully modeling their relationships and understanding the world; unobtrusive support to the child's learning and development; expansion of child's experiences and activities through communication); (3) respect (refers to the process of building a mutual relationship of respect and appreciation).

Regarding the relationship between preschool teachers and children, 8 parents stated that a good preschool teacher firstly builds a friendship with children. We can judge the quality of their relationship if we look into whether the children love and respect them. A warm and caring attitude towards children is an important aspect that contributes to good quality, according to all parents. Seven parents mentioned relationships based on respect as an indicator of a good quality, respectful relationships can be related to the respect for the authority of the preschool teacher by children, and on the other hand respect for children by the preschool teacher and respecting children's opinions and interests (*one parent stated that children's interests should be respected, while children's habits gained at home should be respected only to the extent which does not harm the collective, for example, when a child climbs to a table and sits on a table while lying, as he does at home*). Relations between preschool teacher and children should be based on mutual understanding. The creativeness was pointed out as an important characteristic of a good preschool teacher by three parents (with the explanation that the preschool teacher is *“the driving force of creative activities”*).

Children's activities as a quality indicator

We learned about the activities of children through the question: *What do children do in a good kindergarten?* And we especially focused on children's play by asking: *How important is it for children to play in kindergarten?* We will present parents' answers to the question about the activities of children in kindergarten graphically (Chart 3).

Chart 3: Parent's perspective on activities of kindergarten children



Children's play is the driving force of the all the potential of a human being for a change, that has no external goals set by adults. It is a process in which children acquire important life experiences through action, engage in all dimensions of development, establish relationships with others and question their behavior patterns, and all of this with a sense of satisfaction (Krnjaja, 2012). In the answers of all parents, a child's play was pointed out as an important element of quality (parents described the importance of the play in some of the following ways: "children need play because they learn through it"; "children enjoy the play and feel good while playing"; "children need play because they do not comprehend it as an obligation, everything that is obligated it's hard, everything that goes through play goes smoothly"; "play is important in the kindergarten, because through it children socialize and learn the rules"; "children express themselves through play and show different behaviors").

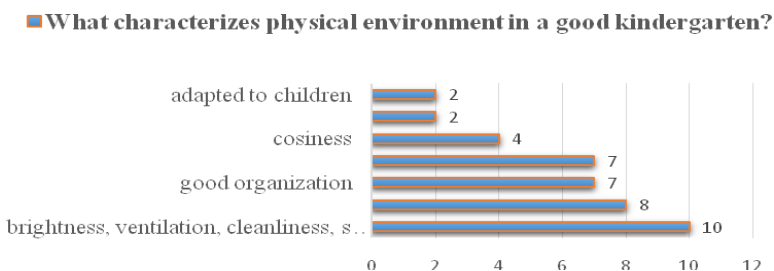
We find socialization of children in a large number of parents' answers (9), which we discussed in the previous section. Seven parents stated out that children enjoy and feel good in the kindergarten, deriving it from the positive reactions of their children to going to the kindergarten (!they rejoice when they go to the kindergarten, when I pick up a child from a kindergarten, it tells me -you've already come-"). Seven parents stated that children co-operate among themselves in kindergarten, in group activities or in team activities, as well as in play. Learning and developing skills was highlighted by 6 parents, while half of the parents pointed out creative expression through various activities (*drawing, painting, playing, and creating*) as important. In parents' responses regarding kindergarten education (learning process), as mentioned above, we have found that parents think children learn most through play, regarding everyday life situations and the world surrounding them, as well as the skills of teamwork while working with other children, they are learning the rules of behavior and tolerance, and respect for the authority of the preschool teachers. Parents consider it important to respect children's interests as it helps children in learning, but parents' answers vary somewhat in understanding how to respect children's interests: 6 parents have stated that children should not be forced to participate in some activities unless they are interested ("my child does not like draw, so he does not even have to draw it if he does not want"), while 4 parents stated that children should still participate in group activities, even if they do not want to and thus learn to cooperate ("they should not always do what they want, but the teacher should find a way to engage them in activities he finds important"). We can conclude that preschool teachers are seen as a key factor, contributing to respecting children's interests through personal approach and organization of activities, in both cases - if a child is not interested in a given subject, to allow him to do something else, or to interest him in a certain way and thus involve him in joint activities.

Discussing relationships quality in kindergarten from children's perspective Pavlović-Breneselović (2012) state same important aspects as: safety (child must feel safe in a kindergarten), continuity (child needs a continuity in relationships with significant grownups), participation (child have right and feel the need to be active participant in all activities and decision-making processes). Relations among children parents described as friendly (9), but complicated ("there are a lot of "small" characters, from different families, environments, all children have different traits, habits, frustrations, the task of the teacher is to bring it all together"). Parents also consider that children in kindergarten should get along well and play together (7), but they also have to bear in mind that this is not always possible, and it is important to consider the role of teachers in solving conflicts among children. 4 parents stated that when it comes to conflicts, the teacher should sometimes let the children solve them among themselves ("the teacher should not always be a judge, but let the children agree, defend themselves, choose for themselves their place under the sun").

Physical environment as a quality indicator

In previous questions about important aspects of quality in kindergarten, 6 parents pointed out that the internal space and yard are important aspects of quality, while 4 parents stated that the stimulating physical environment is very important for the good quality of the kindergarten. Wanting to deepen these answers, we asked parents: *What characterizes physical environment in a good kindergarten?* The answers obtained are shown graphically (Chart 4).

Chart 4: Parent's perspective on physical environment as a quality indicator



Quality environment Pavlović-Breneselović (2012) describes as safe, familiar and predictable, personalized and adequate simulative. Although in pointing out the most important aspects of quality, most parents did not mention the safety and hygiene conditions in the kindergarten, we think that this aspect of quality is important for parents, and to a certain extent it is expected that this conditions are met. Regarding the size of the room, the parents have indicated that it should be large enough in respect to the size of the group, but two parents have stated that it should not be too big, because *it will then look empty and will not have a "kindergarten spirit"*. Seven parents have also stated that, in addition to a large enough space, it is very important how it is organized. Seven parents stated that the design of the space is important (with descriptions of the space as *"alive", creative, beautifully decorated, of various colors, with a nice inventory and arranged so that the children feel "at home"*). Parents think that it is very important for a kindergarten to have a yard, and when it comes to the characteristics of the yard in a good kindergarten (the parents gave us following descriptions: *the yard must be safe, creative, have green spaces, nicely decorated and have props that are*

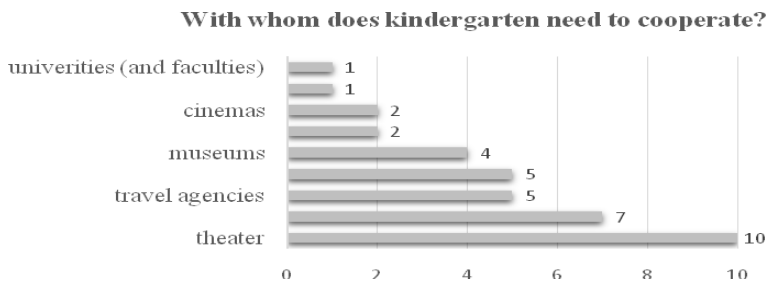
suitable for children's age - climbers, swings, slides, homes ...) Parents have also pointed that the yard can be simple and yet good. Nine out of ten parents stated that if a kindergarten does not have a yard, it affects poorly the quality, while one parent said that with the good organization of the preschool teachers, the lack of a yard can be replaced by excursions to nearby parks.

Openness of kindergarten as a quality indicator

Elaborating openness as a kindergarten characteristic, Aleksandra Marjanović (1987) operationalizes openness as a concept through openness of the kindergarten to the outside (implies connection with family and community), and openness of the kindergarten to the inside (which involves making all kindergarten resources available to the children).

Openness of the kindergarten to the outside, meaning its connection with the family and local community was recognized as an important aspect of the preschool education quality (OECD, 2012). Parents' answers regarding the cooperation of kindergartens with the local community are presented graphically (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Openness of kindergarten as a quality indicator



In order to understand the parents' perspective on the kindergarten's openness to the inside, we asked them: *Who else is presented in a good kindergarten, next to children and practitioners?*, and: *With whom does kindergarten need to cooperate?* All parents stated that a kindergarten should be one of the expert associates (logopedist – “that parents should not have to go to the health center if their child needs a speech therapist”; pedagogue and psychologist – “to be in groups with children, to monitor their behavior and development, affecting behavioral problems, monitoring, evaluating the work of teachers, helping them work, monitoring children with special needs”, pedagogical assistant / defectologist – “to would work with children with special needs”), then English teacher (“to teach English language”), parents (“to work with preschool teachers and participate in some activities with children”).

When it comes to importance of cooperation, we got different answers from parents. All parents agreed that the openness of kindergarten and cooperation are important aspects of quality, (because “it provide new experiences for children”, “teach them about the world”, “help them fit into society”, “prepare them for school, enable them to learn”, “create tolerance and respect for diversity”; one parent pointed out that “the lack of openness of kindergartens leads to children being taught and turning into a closed group, so neither groups in the same kindergarten interact with one another; even the preschool teacher in the yard divide children by groups and do not allow them to associate with each other”).

The role of parents in building quality

Parents are primary caregivers and educators of their children. Therefore, they have great responsibility in achieving children's well-being, health and development. Family is a basic unit of European society, regardless of cultural, social, socio-economic or religious diversity. Parental participation should be encouraged in all aspects of caregiving and educating of their children, while the role of kindergarten is to enable parents to participate through establishing partnership based on trust and mutual respect (European Commission, 2014). Trying to understand how parents see their role in building quality in kindergarten, we asked them: *Whether it is important for parents to be involved in the work of the kindergarten?* And then we wanted to find out in which aspects of the kindergarten practice the parents think they should be involved and in what way. All parents agreed that parents' involvement and cooperation with practitioners is important for the good quality of kindergarten, and in their responses we noticed that parents recognize that cooperation brings profit: (1) for children (*"children understand that kindergarten is not separated from home, children develop greater respect for preschool teachers because they see their parents respect them"; "upbringing practice at home and in kindergarten are adjusting because there is communication between parents and practitioners"*); (2) for parents (*"building trust"; "learning about the behavior of a child in a collective that is not the same as home behavior"; "seeing what is not good in child's behavior, with the possibility of correction"*) and (3) for preschool teachers (*"transferring information about the child's tendencies, frustration, defects, interests"; "parents can help the teacher to better understand the children, which can make his job easier"*).

From parents' response to the manner of their involvement, we have adopted conclusions on the aspects of the kindergarten's work in which parents think they should be involved (Table 7).

Table 7 – parents' perspective on their involvement in the kindergarten's work

How should parents be involved in the kindergarten?	N=10
Sharing information about a child	10
Joint activities in kindergarten	9
Participation in the decision-making process when they concern what is important to the child	7
Participating in the selection of content and activities for children	7
Participating in decision making on excursions	3
Helping preschool teachers to solve problems with children	2

All parents agreed that sharing information is important for good cooperation with preschool teachers, and that good communication must be two-way, open and honest (they described good cooperation as *very important, even decisive for quality, relationship should be open, based on mutual understanding and respect, professional*). Parents also see the importance of good cooperation in harmonizing educational practices that occur at home and in kindergartens, among which there must be no discrepancy. Regarding the involvement of parents in activities with children in kindergarten, 9 parents stated that kindergarten should organize various events (*various creative workshops with parents, socializing events, playgroups and workshops, parties for children's birthdays*).

When it comes to parents' participation in decision-making, we identified three groups of responses: (1) Parents believe that they should be consulted regarding the content for the children in kindergarten, and sometimes they can help in its realization; (2) parents should be

involved in making decisions that are relevant to their children (parents have stated that when it comes to educational procedures, parents should be asked, "if I do not like something, I should be able to express my opinion and influence the decisions by suggesting something better", "parents do not want to be in position that they cannot do anything, because their hands are tied"); (3) Parents should be asked when it comes to punishing children and other disciplinary procedures.

When it comes to obstacles that can be encountered in achieving cooperation between parents and educators, we found couple of problems in the answers, which we summarized in three categories: (1) problem in preschool teachers (*either they do not want to take into account the opinions of the parents or they are not competent to achieve good co-operation or they are uninterested/unwilling to cooperate and to conscientiously do their job*); (2) problem in the kindergarten program (*parents' participation and cooperation are not implied by the program*); (3) problem in parents (*parents may be uninterested in cooperation, may be unprofitable, or maybe they do not have time*).

We also asked parents: *How to overcome obstacles in cooperation between parents and kindergarten?* Parents indicated the role of professional associates (pedagogues and psychologists) who should listen to both sides and try to solve the problem. Also, some of the parents stated that the initial education of preschool teachers is not good enough to prepare them for work with children in the group, and there should be organized practices and training and professional development for them.

At the very end of the conversation, we asked parents: *What kindergartens can do to promote parent involvement?* The answers referred to the following forms of cooperation that kindergartens can organize and promote: (1) organization of playgroups and socializing with parents; (2.) organization of children's activities to further connect with parents (*making greeting cards, gifts, drawings*); (3.) Promoting friendship among parents (*"parents are a model of children, so if they interact with one another, children will adopt this model of behavior, and if parents are only focused on their jobs, the children will adopt a model of loneliness and isolation"*); (4.) bulletin boards in kindergartens.

Conclusion

The answers obtained in research tell us that parents are actually "professionals" for their children rather than "pedagogical ignorant" or "laity", and that they have a broad picture and good understanding of the aspects of quality in preschool education practice, although there is linguistic variability in relation to experts from the field of education, who have a task of finding ways of reaching common meanings (Malović, 2017).

After the completion of the research, we also have in mind that "the data of scientific research is not a literal imprint of practice, but rather more or less approaching it, they are a better or worse model of upbringing practice (Marjanović, 1984: 404)." If we add to this idea understanding of quality as subjective phenomenon that changes meaning within the perspective of different participants in education, we consider that the role of professionals dealing with this topic is to enable these different perspectives to be heard and appreciated. This research proves that parents can be competent participants in the dialogue in which it would be possible to jointly build the quality of the kindergarten practice, through the process of reconceptualization in which the kindergarten will become the common living space of children, parents and practitioners (ibid).

In parents' responses, we recognize the indicators of the quality of preschool education practice, as well as the elements of constructive criticism of the existing practice, which could be used in the process of establishing and improving the quality in preschool education practice. We believe that in the future, research of the same or similar character could be carried out that could be a part of a wider process of monitoring and evaluating the work of kindergartens aimed at quality improvement. The problem of establishing and developing quality is often, in the domain of theoretical considerations and in the domain of practice, and especially at the level of education policies, reduced to standardization issues and standardized measures. The practice shows that standardized measures are not sufficient, and, at some levels of practice, they are inadequate for the establishment and development of quality. High-quality preschool education should start from the child and family, from the child's preferences, experiences and abilities. High-quality preschool education should be organized so as to enable every child to make maximum use of their potential, staying in a pleasant and supportive environment and meeting the needs of the family. In such a context, children and adults are partners who together plan and jointly decide. Children and their parents should feel safe and accepted, regardless of their individual, family, cultural or other differences (Malović, 2012).

Appendix 1: Set of open questions for in-deep interview with parents

<p>Research Question 1: How do parents understand the function and importance of kindergarten?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is preschool education for you? • How do you understand the term preschool education? • What is your general opinion about the institutionalized preschool education? • Why is it important that a child goes to a kindergarten? • What is the most important benefit that a child can gain from attending kindergarten? • What influenced your decision to enroll your child in a kindergarten? • Do you think it is important for the kindergarten to prepare a child for school? Why? • How would you like / how should the kindergarten prepare a child for school? 			
<p>Research question 2: What are the most important aspects of the quality of kindergarten practice from the perspective of parents?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the criteria that are most important to you personally when choosing a kindergarten? • Do you think that these criteria contribute to good quality of a kindergarten? Why? • How can we know / recognize that a kindergarten is good? • Can you list some characteristics of a good kindergarten? • How can we know / recognize that a kindergarten is bad? 			
<p>1. Characteristics of a preschool teacher as a quality indicator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What characterizes preschool teachers in a good kindergarten? • What do preschool teachers do in a good kindergarten? • What are they paying the most attention to? • How are they 	<p>2. Children's activities as a quality indicator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do children do in a good kindergarten? • How important is it for children to play in the kindergarten? • What do children learn in a good kindergarten and in what way? • Which topics are being addressed? • What 	<p>3. Physical environment as a quality indicator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What characterizes a psychical environment in a good kindergarten? • What are the materials for playing and learning like in a good kindergarten? • Are they important for the quality of a kindergarten? 	<p>4. Openness of kindergarten as a quality indicator</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who else is present in a good kindergarten, next to children and preschool teachers? • Who should kindergarten cooperate with? • Are various kindergarten co-operations important for quality?

<p>towards the children?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What teachers should not do in a good kindergarten? • In your opinion, what is the ideal number of children in the group? • Do you think that the number of children in the group affects the quality? In what way? • What is the ideal ratio between the number of children and the number of teachers in the group? • Do you think that the ratio between the number of children and the number of teachers in the group affects the quality? In what way? 	<p>characterizes relationships among children in a good kindergarten?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it important that children's experiences and interests are respected at the kindergarten? Why? 		
<p>Research question 3: How do parents see their role in building the quality of the kindergarten practice?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it important that parents be involved in the work of a kindergarten? Why? • How should parents be involved in the work of a kindergarten? • Whether and to what extent is the involvement of parents in the work of a kindergarten important for quality? • What does the involvement of parents depend on? • Is it important that parents can express their views on values and educational goals for their children? • What characterizes the cooperation/relationship between parents and practitioners in a good kindergarten? • What are the obstacles to achieving this cooperation? • How to overcome obstacles in achieving cooperation between parents and kindergarten? • What kindergartens can they do to promote parent involvement? • How can parents contribute to the quality of the kindergarten practice? 			

Appendix 2: A set of scale-like questions used in the end of interview (related to the importance of some aspects of quality)

Note: 1-Irrelevant for quality/ 2-Relevant for quality/ 3-Very important for quality/ X - no answer				
(I Structural elements of quality)				
1	Preschool teacher's professionalism	1	2	3 X
2	Safety and hygiene conditions	1	2	3 X
3	Incentive physical environment	1	2	3 X
(II Process-based elements of the quality)				
4	Warm attitude of preschool teachers towards children	1	2	3 X

5	Respect for children's interests	1	2	3	X
6	Respecting parents' educational goals and values	1	2	3	X
(III Outcome-based quality elements)					
7	Preparing children for school	1	2	3	X
8	Developing social skills in children	1	2	3	X
9	Better understanding of child development by parents	1	2	3	X

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