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## **INNOVATIVE MODELS FOR MOTIVATING AND CONNECTING THE COMMUNITY FOR BETTER EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT**

**Abstract:** Current social developments as a result of the global health pandemic have imposed very serious consequences on the educational system and the quality of early childhood development. With the closure of schools and kindergartens, educators took upon the responsibility to organize and implement the program requirements in a different way. Furthermore, parents met with a new parenting dimension – creating a stimulating environment at home and taking on some of the tasks in working with their children. This process of mobilization of educators, teachers and students imposed the need of implementation of ICT in education as a very important opportunity for distance learning.

This paper will present several innovative models aiming motivation and connection of the community involving educational work in the area of early childhood development, in process of development of resources for strengthening the capacities and competencies of educators, as well as models of co-creation and practical application of available materials through the collective portal “EDUINO”.

Through this portal we will conduct a research with the users (educators, parents and children from aged 3 to 10 years old) in order to determine the practical application of the open library of digital educational materials, video lessons, resources, games and educational activities to support the educational process and the effects on the socio-emotional development of children.

**Keywords:** Innovation, Co-creation, Early childhood development, Digital educational materials

### **Factors Affecting Early Childhood Development**

Every child is born with certain genetic predispositions, which are the starting point for its development. It is known that in early childhood personality development is most dynamic, and therefore, it is the subject of numerous researches. How well the child’s genetic potential will develop depends on several factors that are part of the community of the environment in which the child develops. One of the most important factors is the family, as the most responsible for the proper growth and development of children. Parents/guardians play a significant role in building the personality through their own models of behavior and action, as well as in the developing of basic habits and skills for introduction into practical life. The extended family (relatives and their communication), as well as the social environment in which the child grows up

(friends, environment, peers, media, etc.) also have a significant impact on the child development. Of course, educational institutions providing significant support in early childhood development have a huge influence and role. Through system and program setup, educational workers have a direct influence on the educational activity of the children who are included in the system, but also indirectly on the general public, through their professional activity in counselling centers, media, papers, etc.

All these factors directly or indirectly affecting the child's development represent a community, in the midst of which is the most significant triadic relationship: child-parent-teacher, which should act in sync in the interest of better early childhood development.

## **Changes and Challenges the Participants in Early Childhood Development Face with**

Living in a time of dynamic social and technological changes and development, all participants in the educational activities encounter numerous challenges in their activities. Some parents, faced with professional and life responsibilities, often lack the time or experience to devote themselves to their children, so they leave the overall responsibility to the institutions, thus neglecting the development of the basic life habits that are established within the family, as well as the emotional experiences. On the other hand, others burden themselves with various information about the children's development and show an extremely protective attitude towards children and unwittingly prevent them from social relationships. Educators and teachers are in a constant dynamic of changes with regards to the program objectives, training for such program objectives, project tasks, following new educational models, developing digital skills and, of course, implementing them in the practical work with children. In these processes, it is of particular importance to establish good communication between all participants in early childhood development, so that they can harmonize and coordinate for better quality.

## **Challenge of the New Age – Needs and Changes in Educational Systems**

In the last two decades, education in our country has gone through certain reforms that follow European Union models, world globalization and the need for implementation of information and communication technology in all systems.

These reforms had a positive effect on the educational workers, allowing them to independently create the educational practice and continue their career advancement, which are imperative for high quality education, focused on the learning process itself. All of this redefines learning from a traditional, one-way and passive transmission of knowledge to a process of finding information, constructing and reconstructing knowledge and applying it.

The focal point in all transformations of the educational systems is the explosive development of information and communication technology, which tends to preserve the tradition of acquiring knowledge in the educational process, but also highlights the need for developing skills for continuous expansion, upgrading and application thereof. Hence, the need to change teaching and learning approaches that should follow the constant development of technology, which should be an integral part of the entire educational process, is emphasized.

## **Communication and Cooperation in Time of Pandemic**

The global educational system faced with a huge challenge deriving from the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. the educational process was "conditioned" to adapt to distance learning. The pandemic imposed the need to use information technology, strengthen the digital skills of educational workers and apply creative solutions in order to realize the educational process. In all of the

world's developed countries, distance learning has been present for years in all subsystems, but in our country it caused uncertainty regarding its implementation in relation to the educational platforms used up to that moment and the digital competence of educators and parents, as well as the technical equipment in institutions and homes. The parents faced with certain difficulties, they assumed the role of parents and teachers in conditions of a pandemic. Guided by the experience of other countries, the entire situation with the educational systems, the challenge faced by educators, parents and children, with the support of competent institutions, the non-governmental sector and the involvement of educational experts and practitioners, educational platforms were provided and created in support of the whole educational system in order to improve the communication between all affected parties.

## **EDUINO – a Model Encouraging Mutual Cooperation and Support**

EDUINO is a collective portal for digital educational content, professional development and collaboration of educators, creating space, resources and tools for quality education through joint creation, innovation and creation of the EDUINO community. It is owned by the Education Development Bureau (EDB), and the project is financed by the Government of the United Kingdom through the British Embassy in Skopje, with the support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and UNICEF, and is implemented by SmartApp – Laboratory for Social Innovations Skopje. The portal consists of two platforms:

EDUINO Teaching that enables online teaching with digital open content and resources intended for educators and students, i.e.:

- E-entertainment, preschool education
- E-school, primary and secondary education
- Video tutorials, webinars and resources intended for educators, students and parents
- Resources for personal growth and development, intended for students
- Professional development for educators

EDUINO Early childhood development to encourage social emotional development and learning through play in children from 3 to 10 years of age

- Educational activities and games
- Educational resources
- Professional development for educators
- Add an educational activity

EDUINO Early Childhood Development is an educational platform for educators, class teachers and parents. The platform contains quality and tested educational materials, games and activities for children of preschool age and grade school, i.e. from 3 to 10 years of age, with the aim to encourage game-based learning. "Through play, the child tries out its capabilities for certain functions, develops, combines and perfects his abilities. Developing specific skills and behaviors, the child gains experiences, discovers, learns and creates through play." (Damovska, 2021) This platform provides free educational resources, created by educators, teachers and professionals, verified by experts in the field, intended for learning through play and fun in preschools and schools, but also for home settings, to encourage quality education.

Additional literature, manuals, educational texts, reports, researches, brochures, etc., intended for educators, class teachers and parents, are available in the resources section. The opportunity for professional development of educators is also supported through collaborative work and continuous webinars.

The entire concept of the platform enabled the creation of an EDUINO community, which counts more than 25,000 educators and 33 EDUINO Ambassadors, who contributed to the creation of more than 4723 video lessons, 71 tutorials and over 1200 educational play activities. In doing so, this community contributes to the creation of a national digital library of inestimable value to students and future generations.

## **An Innovative Way to Motivate the Community**

The EDUINO Playathon is an innovative way to motivate the community to apply in practice the educational activities from the EDUINO Early Childhood Development platform.

The playathon is a creative challenge to learn and play through selected activities and games placed in the open library with educational activities intended for children from 3 to 10 years of age and the focus is put on the process of learning through play in children. The library features activities designed for learning and play, created by a number of dedicated educators across the country. These games and activities are from the practical experience of educators and have the possibility of qualitative applicability. They provide an opportunity for fun time spent at home, creating a different class at school or enriching play activities in kindergartens. The first EDUINO Playathon was held in November 2020, intended for parents/guardians and children from 3 to 10 years of age in home conditions, in which over 160 families actively participated. The great interest in the playathon encouraged its expansion, i.e. including children from 3 to 10 years of age in kindergartens and schools. The second playathon (November 2021) was attended by over 1200 participants, and in the third one (February 2022) was attended by 1000 participants from all three categories (home conditions, kindergartens and schools) with implemented educational activities.

## **Capacity Building through Participation in Eduino Activities**

According to the analysis from the quantitative and qualitative research with the participants, it was established that the implementation of the EDUINO Playathons gives very positive results, i.e.:

Strengthening of social emotional competences, self-awareness and self-confidence was noted in children from 3 to 10 years of age, as well as the feeling of belonging to a group and cooperation between members. The parents/guardians stated that the playathons enabled them to mobilize the family for preparations and games, while spending quality time with the children and learning new approaches with lots of smiles and positive emotions at home. Educators and teachers believe that with the application of educational activities and participation in playathons, they had the opportunity to use new creative approaches in practice, which encourage the development of children in all aspects, establishing good communication, excellent cooperation and positive emotional experiences in the educational group/department.

## **Conclusion**

The EDUINO platform gives meaning to all participants in early childhood development by valuing the processes of their actions, provides support for continuous development and upgrading of the existing potentials, and thus the platform itself grows and develops as a living curriculum open to new challenges. Eduino is a positive example of an innovative model that strives for better early childhood development, motivating and connecting the entire community.

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