HOČEVAR Andreja
Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
KOVAČ ŠEBART Mojca
Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana
LUKAN Mojca
Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana

WHERE DO CHANGES LEAD IN IDENTIFYING AND ENSURING THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE IN SLOVENIA?

Abstract: In recent decades, early childhood education and care (hereafter ECEC) has been recognized globally primarily as an investment in people, with the aim of achieving "improved human capital" and higher economic growth. In this context, international (financial) organizations (e.g. OECD, WB, EU) report the need to increase the efficiency of ECEC and thus help countries to be more productive and adaptable to rapid global economic change. In order for early investment in a country's "human capital" to pay off, ECEC needs to develop the skills to adapt and respond to new circumstances (especially in the labor market), a starting point that can also influence ECEC evaluation models that focus on assessing the systemic efficiency and profitability of ECEC. In this way ECEC identifies and ensures the quality (hereafter IEQ) for the sake of the child's comprehensive development and learning. The chapter analyses the conceptual changes in the IEQ of ECEC which have been happening in Slovenia as a Member State of the European Union. We show that an IEQ model has been implemented which is in line with global trends, especially at the level of the European Union, and differs from the model that was designed years ago and allowed to create a comprehensive picture of the quality of ECEC. However, the current IEQ model leads to changes in the planning and implementation of the educational process in the direction of schoolification, and reduces the quality of ECEC to its efficiency in terms of monitoring and evaluating children's learning outcomes.

Keywords: Early childhood education and care (ECEC), Quality, Slovenia, Human capital, Effectiveness

Introduction

Quality of education has been a subject of debates internationally since the 1980s, and the quality of ECEC has been a subject of debate internationally since the end of the 1990s. At the beginning, experts in the field argued that quality assessment in ECEC – while taking account of the basic premises that apply to all levels of education – needed its own model of quality assessment and assurance. They argued that the model should be formulated according to the formal and conceptual organization of each country and should therefore be developed independently by each country (cf. Marjanovič Umek 2002, p. 12). In fact, expert analyses and empirical research (Moss 1996, Woodhead 1999) have shown that ECEC systems and programmes vary widely across Europe and the world, and that they also differ in their target orientation, all of which leads to differences in educational practices. Other factors, such as the social and cultural environment in which ECEC takes place, also influence the quality of the educational process, the quality of children's everyday life in ECEC settings and their development and learning (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This is why ECEC quality is a complex concept, generally defined by two interrelated areas: process quality and structural quality (Phillips and Howes 1987, Vandell and Wolfe 2000, Cassidy et al. 2011, Marjanovič Umek 2014).

Process quality refers to children's day-to-day experiences in ECEC settings and encompasses the social, emotional, physical aspects of children's activities and interactions with ECEC educators; their sensitivity, interest and participation in children's play and learning activities; their attitude towards children and their implicit views about children's development and learning; children's interactions with peers, and adequate didactic materials that are seen as the proximal determinants of child development and learning (Howes et al. 2008, Pianta et al. 2005, Thomason and La Par 2009, Phillips and Howes 1987, Vandell and Wolfe 2000, Cassidy et al. 2011, Marjanovič Umek 2014). It was well established that process quality is crucial as it reveals the strongest effects on children's development and learning (e. g. Melhuish et al. 2013, Slot 2018). For instance, high process quality has been shown to be positively correlated with children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Garcia et al. 2016, Hall et al. 2013, Mashburn et al. 2008, Melhuish et al., 2013, Vandell et al. 2010) and ECEC educators' warmth and sensitivity have been shown to be associated with children's social functioning (National Institute of Child …2003).

The structural characteristics of ECEC quality, such as group size, children-to-educator ratio, and ECEC educators' qualifications (Howes et al. 2008, Thomason and La Paro, 2009) are the distal and regulable aspects of ECEC, and are regarded as important preconditions of proximal process quality (Cryer et al. 1999, Phillipsen et al. 1997, Pianta et al. 2005, Vandell 2004). Generally, research has shown that structural aspects, such as smaller group sizes and more favorable children-to-educator ratios, are associated with higher process quality (Barros and Aguiar 2010, Deynoot-Schaub and Riksen-Walraven, 2005, Thomason and La Paro 2009). In short, experts agree that the conception of the IEQ model of ECEC was to be guided by a reflection on the high quality of ECEC at both structural and process levels. This was based on the requirement to ensure the conditions for the comprehensive development and learning of preschool children, as well as their safety and well-being in ECEC settings (cf. Slot et al. 2016).

Around two decades ago, there was a breakthrough in the thinking and expectations of international institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and institutions of the European Union (EU)) with regard to ECEC quality. Decision-makers were not interested in the experts' reflections and findings on the process and structural factors of ECEC quality, but rather in the early investment in human capital and the return on financial investment in ECEC systems. In other words, they were not interested in ECEC quality for the sake of preschool children themselves, their comprehensive development and learning, or their well-being in ECEC settings.

An important element of this shift was the publication of research in the USA by Nobel laureate James J. Heckman (2006), which showed that the participation of children in quality ECEC brings a country a 13% return on investment per year. In this context, the return on ECEC and added value are measured and evaluated in terms of children's later school performance and the adaptability of individuals to the demands of the labor market, facilitating their employability (Heckman and Masterov 2007, pp. 4–5). The return on investment of an ECEC system is thus measured by comparing, on the one hand, the achievements in different areas of learning (in international knowledge assessment tests) of the children who have been included in ECEC and those who have not, and by asking whether children's achievements relate to the financial investment that countries make in each area (Lundgren 2006, Paananenn, Kumpulainen and Lipponen 2015). If funders see financial investment as adequate or high, but the comparison of children's achievements shows that the differences between children who have been included in ECEC and those who have not large enough, ECEC is judged to be lacking or even ineffective (cf. Campbell-Barr and Nygard 2014, Paananenn, Kumpulainen and Lipponen 2015).

Since then the criteria listed have been increasingly becoming part of the debate on the quality of ECEC in the political arena, particularly in international financial institutions, for example the OECD and the WB. They have also been adopted by decision-makers at the EU level – the

European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union (cf. European Commission 2006, Council of the European Union … 2019), who have identified ECEC as a means to achieve the EU's stated economic and social objectives and its global competitiveness. Investment in quality ECEC has been recognized as a cornerstone of an effective education system and as a means to maximize the medium- and long-term return on public budgets (Education and Culture DG 2008, p. 1). Spending on ECEC is namely a high return early investment in human capital (Council of European Union 2018, p. 5). They advocate the establishment of a systematic and EU-wide comparable way of evaluating the efficiency of the design and implementation of ECEC programmes, their outcomes and the results of ECEC policies (European Union 2014, p. 66). This leads to expectations for comparable models for evaluating ECEC quality at the international level such as those that provide information on the efficiency of financial investments in ECEC through the measurement of children's achievements. However, they do not consider whether the expenditure per child for the quality of ECEC is high or at least appropriate when related to the quality of children's lives and in ensuring and implementing the conditions for the comprehensive development of personality and education of children, factors which are not and cannot be measured with only the results of knowledge assessments later on in children's education. ECEC quality evaluations no longer seek »in-depth understandings of complex early childhood systems, develop meaningful systemic evaluation« (Urban 2018, pp. 93–94, cf. Roberts-Holmes in Moss 2021). The quality of the educational process is thus essentially judged in terms of, or reduced to and equated with, its (in)efficiency.

We can conclude that we are witnessing a double shift away from the "traditional" conception of IEQ models that we presented in the introduction of this chapter. The first shift concerns the design of the evaluation model, which – to put it simply – does not take into account the differences between the formal and conceptual organization of ECEC in each country. The second shift relates to setting up a common IEQ model and efficiency of the education system through measuring the outcomes of preschool children. An IEQ model which meets economic requirements and which does not address the differences between ECEC and schools or consider the specificities of these two educational institutions. An IEQ model that requires national policies to measure the achievements of preschool children. At first, this may not seem problematic, but we should be aware that such expectations are fundamentally changing the "traditional" objectives of ECEC and educational practice itself, which now follows measurable outcomes, that is, children's achievements in the educational process, and leads to the schoolification of preschools (cf. Vallberg Roth 2014, Lundgren 2006, Otterstad and Braathe 2016, Paananen 2017).

We will now show that the expectations of international institutions regarding the added value and efficiency of ECEC have influenced the design and IEQ model of ECEC in Slovenia.

What about the IEQ Models of ECEC in Slovenia?

… A Glimpse into the Past

In the 1990s, in 1996 to be precise, Slovenia adopted legislation regulating ECEC, namely the *Organisation and Financing of Education Act* (Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1996) and the *Preschool Education Act* (Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1996a). Neither of the acts originally included provisions on the IEQ model of ECEC. The central aim of education is defined in the acts as the comprehensive development of the individual (cf. Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1996, Art. 2), that is to say the comprehensive development of children in different areas of development (cf. Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1996a, Art. 4). The *Preschool Curriculum* (Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1999), a document that is still in force today, includes among its principles the principle of critical evaluation, which ECEC educators are required to follow in planning and implementing ECEC at the level of daily interpersonal interactions, at the level of planning the individual areas of ECEC activities, content

and methods of work, the daily routine in the ECEC group, the provision of the necessary conditions for the implementation of ECEC, the monitoring of the development of the ECEC group and of the individual child, etc. and at the level of the rights and responsibilities of parents, the preschool, the local community and the ECEC's founder (Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1999, p. 16). In short, formal documents are based on providing an appropriate and supportive environment for children's development and learning, and on ensuring the conditions for a safe and healthy childhood. They aim to optimize the development of children's physical and cognitive abilities, which contributes to a higher quality of life for children and a better quality of life for families.

In line with the concept of evaluation indicated by the *Curriculum* (Ministrstvo za šolstvo 1999), its objectives and the ECEC objectives in the two above-mentioned legal acts, the IEQ model of ECEC was developed in Slovenia at the beginning of this century in the research and development project *Assessing and Assuring the Quality of ECEC* (2000–2002). It was designed according to the specific characteristics of this level of education (for more on that, see Kovač Šebart and Hočevar 2019). Its design includes the self-evaluation of structural, process and indirect levels of quality; the latter includes relationships in which children are not directly involved, but which have a significant impact on the work of the ECEC setting and, indirectly, on children themselves (e.g. ECEC educators' professional development and job satisfaction, cooperation among preschool staff, cooperation between the preschool and parents, etc.) (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002, p. 40).

In *Assessing and Assuring the Quality of ECEC* (2000–2002) and the research project *Self-evaluation of ECEC: Quality Assurance* (2003–2005), measurement tools for assessing all levels of quality in preschools were developed and tested, and published in *Kakovost v vrtcih [Quality in ECEC settings]* (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002) and *Pogled v vrtec [Looking at the ECEC setting]* (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja and Bajec 2005). These tools provide ECEC settings with »the possibility to monitor their work for longer periods and independently« (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002, p. 53). The analysis of the data collected from the measurement tools »allows the ECEC educator or team of professionals to reflect on whether the ECEC setting is creating the conditions to foster children's development and learning in multiple domains« (ibid, p. 51). Using the tools, ECEC teachers also assess the children's involvement in activities that relate to the quality of their activity (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002, pp. 123–129), but do not assess individual children's achievements (cf. ibid.).

We conclude that the presented IEQ model (Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002, Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja and Bajec 2005) is based on a detailed knowledge of the objectives of ECEC in Slovenia, following the *Curriculum* (1999) to enable ECEC educators to monitor the quality of their work and focus primarily on the best interests of children, their comprehensive development and learning, and the development of their autonomy and critical thinking (cf. Marjanovič Umek et al. 2002). The design of IEQ is based on research conducted internationally (Layzer et al. 1993, Barnas and Cummings 1994, Howes and Olenic 1986, Pascal et al. 1999 in ibid.), which recognizes the importance of the quality of ECEC for the comprehensive development of each child, their well-being in ECEC setting, and quality play and learning there.

There is no information on whether and how the IEQ model has been put into practice. This is probably due to the fact that for decades the responsible Ministry has not allocated funds for the self-evaluation of the quality of ECEC settings.

However, policy makers in Slovenia became interested in the development of the IEQ model for the entire education vertical, including ECEC, a few years ago, when the country obtained funding from the European Structural and Investment Funds (Javni razpis … 2008).

In the remainder of the text, we will therefore look into the projection of the expectations of EU institutions on the IEQ model of ECEC in Slovenia.

… A Glimpse at the Present

In 2017, the responsible Ministry adopted the *National Framework for Quality Assessment and Assurance in Education* (Ministrstvo za izobraževanje … 2017), which includes criteria and procedures for self-evaluation in preschools at the national level. The IEQ model follows the expectations of international institutions, more specifically EU institutions, as outlined in the introduction, and this is consistent with the fact that the EU funded the projects on which it is based.[21] The document states that the IEQ model should be seen as part of a broader collective effort of the countries of the world, and in particular of Slovenia's involvement in the activities of developed EU countries (ibid., p. 2); that it is part of an effort to assess the quality of the education system through internationally comparable instruments and mechanisms (ibid., p. 13). It will draw data from international knowledge assessment programmes (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS) (ibid. pp. 13–14). This will enable comparisons to be made between the achievements of children who have and have not been included in ECEC in international knowledge assessment tests between countries, thereby enabling the efficiency of a country's education system to be determined at the individual level and as a whole (cf. 7).

In short, it is an IEQ model that does not evaluate the quality of ECEC at the process, structural and indirect levels for the sake of the quality of education and life of children in ECEC settings. Rather, it requires the identification of learning and teaching achievements in the planned and implemented curriculum and their monitoring to verify the efficiency of ECEC settings in achieving them and for international comparisons. It is an IEQ model that evaluates the efficiency of ECEC in the manner described in the first part of this chapter.

The problem with the common systemic IEQ model when used for the ECEC level is that, having been developed for all levels of education, it completely ignores the specific features of ECEC. An even bigger problem is its formulation, which contradicts the systemic and conceptual design of ECEC in Slovenia. It introduces compulsory self-evaluation of learning and teaching in ECEC practice, even though today, according to formal documents, ECEC educators do not *teach* children. The IEQ model also includes the measurement of children's learning outcomes (ibid., p. 9), although all this is contrary to the formal and content design of ECEC. It is modelled on this – despite the fact that ECEC in the country is conceptualized and formalized in such a way that ECEC does not directly prepare children for school, nor does it track children's outcomes. An IEQ model has been created which contradicts the curricular and formal structure of Slovenian ECEC.

Conclusion

This is the context in which we can answer the question asked in the title of the chapter about where the changes in the IEQ of ECEC in Slovenia are leading. They are leading away from what has traditionally been advocated by the profession in Slovenia, away from what is laid down in the legislation and the *Curriculum* (1999) and therefore away from the currently established concept of ECEC, away from the focus of the educational process on providing quality conditions for children's comprehensive development in various areas of development and learning, their safety and well-being. They are leading towards the "added value" and "efficiency" of ECEC. They are leading towards a change in the educational process in ECEC settings in the direction of its schoolification.

[21] European Structural and Investment Funds financed two projects related to ECEC in Slovenia. The goal of both was to »develop and implement a quality model of ECEC settings and schools, and the definition of quality indicators at the national level (external evaluation) and at the level of ECEC settings and schools (self-evaluation)« (Javni razpis … 2008, p. 2).

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IKONOMOSKA Angela
Collaborator at the Institute of Pedagogy,
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje

ANALYSIS OF THE CURRICULA AND TEXTBOOKS FOR I AND IV GRADE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Abstract: Textbooks occupy a central place in the educational process and they are one of the dominant means for the realization of the curriculum. For these reasons, it is more than necessary to raise the standards for their development, because the existing evaluation methodology does not meet the basic and modern criteria for their evaluation. Namely, the textbooks cannot be evaluated with an universal methodology, due to the fact that each subject and adult year has its own specifics. The teaching and scientific contents in the textbooks need to be didactically classified. Viewed from several aspects, we can come to an established view that: the quality of education depends on the quality of textbooks.

The educational system in our country is subject to changes that occur in educational policy. In accordance with the new Concept for primary education (2021), new curricula and textbooks for I and IV grade have been prepared for the realization of teaching. From here, the purpose of this paper in to analyze the curricula and modern trends for the preparation of a textbook. We will see how all the components for the textbooks are represented to be modern, whether they encourage analytical and critical thinking, whether the adoption of new concepts is systematic and whether the students are trained for practical use of the acquired knowledge.

Keywords: Modern textbook, Curriculum, Textbook evaluation

Introduction

The prehistory of the textbook begins with the appearance of the letter, and the use of the first textbook is considered to begin with the appearance of the first school. The textbook activity in our country begins in the middle of the XIX century, with the appearance of the Enlightenment