

Internationale Sozialarbeit

Bd. 7

Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Christine Rehklaue und Prof. Dr. Ronald Lutz

**Friso Ross
Stephanie Treichel
Ronald Lutz
(Hrsg.)**

Sozialarbeit des Südens

Band 7

**Family Structures in Change –
Challenges of Transitional Phenomena**

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Paulo Freire Verlag
Oldenburg 2019
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Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie.
Detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet unter <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-86585-915-0
ISSN 1864-5577

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THE EDITORS WOULD LIKE TO THANK THE ERFURT UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES
FOR THE PRINTING COSTS SUBSIDY

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The Issue of Parental Competences in the Context of Early Childhood Development in the Republic of Macedonia

Modern approaches in the treatment of parenthood in the context of the early childhood development

So much more has been learned and discussed about parenting in the past decade than in the entire history of mankind. Today's parents finally have an opportunity to find out what the preconditions are for a complementary psychological, emotional, social and intellectual development of the child. The latest scientific research in neuroscience and developmental psychology enable the perception of the importance of the early childhood experience for the child's functioning during their whole lifetime. Nevertheless, the styles of parenting set themselves up as compensation for these experiences. The author Tomislav Kulish, creator of the Parenthood 0-6 program and founder of the Natural Parenting Center¹, believes that parents don't have to be perfect in order to be good parents. The brain of the child and its philosophy require fulfillment of the basic necessities that are not tangible, visible, as it's all about the conditions and relationships, and any insufficiency or lack results in failure of the realization of child's potentials. Natural parenting is simply "normal" parenting so that all natural development processes in the child can take place especially in their early childhood development. Achieving positive parenting is not a matter of educational methods and techniques, as parents have been acting so far.

Science goes one step further and research shows that natural parenting encompasses creating preconditions for natural development of all the child's potentials. Natural parenting does not mean being lenient because that, precisely, means harming the child directly. Lack of parents' personal limits place the child in a place of disorientation, uncertainty and disconnection, with no feeling for their own boundaries and the boundaries of others, and with no proper social skills. Author Dr. Robert Shaw (child and family psychiatrist), who explores the topic of *The Epidemic: Raising Secure, Loving, Happy, and Responsible Children in an Era of Absentee and Permissive Parenting*², considers the root to be

¹ <http://prirodnoroditeljstvo.com/programi/>

² Shaw, R., & Wood, S. (2013). *The Epidemic: Raising Secure, Loving, Happy, and Responsible Children in an Era of Absentee and Permissive Parenting*. New York: Harper Collins Publisher.

the absence of parents from their children's life and the application of inadequate and compliant educational methods. Furthermore, simple parenting is explained in a study titled *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier and More Secure Kids*³, where contemporary Australian authors talk about the parental, child and life context. They talk about 4 categories of too many things (the so-called new standards in contemporary living), which we must deal with, those being: too many subjects, too much information, a lot of choices and a very fast tempo.

The authors think that when children are too satisfied, they have no time to think, explore and relax. They don't have time to systematize their thoughts and impressions, to fantasize, and all the aforementioned results in them feeling unhappy and, yet again, dissatisfied. The various styles of upbringing also have various educational effects on children. In that direction, it is necessary to place them in the spotlight, with the scientific public opening a comprehensive debate on pinpointing all the positive aspects that could be professionally displayed for the parents. Of course, these educational styles prove to be a firm ground for creating and developing parental programs as well, whose goal would be developing positive approaches in the variety of styles of child education.

When discussing positive parenthood, it in fact regards understanding or having a vision of parenthood that is based on the values of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as on the scientific findings in this field. Those are scientific findings about the characteristics of the parental context, which presupposes fulfillment of the basic psychological needs of the child regarding connection, competence and autonomy, yet they refer to the personal involvement of a parent, creating a structure, as well as supporting the child's autonomy. Those are findings on the quality of parental guidance, based on equal dignity between the parents and the children, as well as on the notion of empathetic interactions between them. The program for positive parenting, as an integral part of the positive parenting concept, offers the parents access, educational concepts and particular strategies that would help them in the development of their own skills and abilities for positive interaction with their children.

The latest EuroChild report discusses the principles which the parental support policies and services should be based on, and they are oriented towards:

³Payne, K. J., & Ross, L. M. (2009). *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids*. New York: Ballantine books.

- 1) Framing family policies within a children's rights approach as defined by the UNCRC;
- 2) Creating the right conditions for positive parenting to take place and avoiding the risk to the children's well-being becoming a reality;
- 3) Investing in early support and in services for families that prevent harm to the children's well-being;
- 4) Supporting the parents' empowerment, involvement and participation;
- 5) Recognizing and respecting diversity in relation to family patterns, family composition and size, cultural and gender differences, in keeping with the best interests of the child;
- 6) Ensuring adequate, secure and universal family benefits;
- 7) Respecting the children's right to be heard and ensuring that the voice, views and experiences of children are taken into account in the development of services and policies that affect them;
- 8) Enabling effectiveness and efficiency of outcomes in parenting and family services.

To respect these values and achieve the underlying objectives, stakeholders at all levels need to work together to put in place the necessary strategies, policy measures, quality standards and monitoring, and to advocate, communicate and promote a policy that is coherent and comprehensive.⁴

Educational institutions in the function of the development of parents' competences

A great amount of research related to early childhood development confirms that the experience that children are facing during early childhood is a critical moment for long-lasting success in life, generally. The responsibility for providing an overall ambient, which supports positive experiences during early childhood is shared by many stakeholders: starting from parents / guardians, educators, teachers and the wider community. They all have an equal role in instigating the growth and development of young children, as well as creating opportunities for skill-building that prepare the children to easily adapt to the challenges in the world that surrounds them. Hence the need for creating an ambient for early

⁴ See Eurochild policy position on family policies, November 2014. Available at: http://nmd.bg/wpcontent/uploads/2014/01/Eurochild-policy-position-on-family-policies-FINALadopted_on_3_November_01.pdf.

learning by all those who care about young children, and that is in accordance with the children's learning interests, built upon what the children already know. The stimulating environment for early learning makes space for the early childhood development to thrive and incites the skills for critical and creative thinking; thus children are becoming aware of multiculturalism and the existence of diversity, strengthening the overall process of their early learning.

The early childhood development in every developed domain (physical, socio-emotional, cognitive or linguistic) is supported, stimulated and strengthened primarily through activities that promote targeted games in the framework of the surroundings in which the child stays. However, the surrounding in which the child stays must abound with both structured and non-structured games (activities) for learning. Non-structured games occupy a significant part of the day, whereas the structured activities are included in the daily routines (during kindergarten reception, during the meals, during the preparation for rest, sleeping), as well as learning activities that are carried out within the planned program content. Nevertheless, the ambient for learning must be pleasant, safe, clean, warm and stimulating, for both structured and non-structured activities. While creating an environment which incites early childhood development and early learning in young children, three basic principles should be taken into consideration:

- 1) Development in children occurs according to previously set-up developmental achievements, which progressively become more complex and more organized. They are a reflection of the individual development of every child.
- 2) Play is the driving force that encourages the development in every child, including children with developmental disabilities.
- 3) An effective study atmosphere can be achieved when different study activities (ones initiated by children and ones led by adults) are combined. Neither adults nor children have an extremely passive or an extremely active role in that process. Effective programs inciting early learning in young children combine them and contain activities that are at the same time led by adults (educators, parents) and children themselves.

The essence of the science of pedagogy today is much deeper and broader than simply guiding a child, i.e. it is as broad and deep as the upbringing itself. The educator is no longer involved only in the theoretical part or only in the practical part of the upbringing. They are not a person who merely notes down the occurrences and processes of the upbringing anymore. They are rather an active participant in the way children develop and adapt. Pedagogy nowadays directs its interest towards describing what happened and what is currently happening in education, while simultaneously paying attention to what could and should happen in the future. Therefore, the requirement and the necessity to write down previous occurrences and to plan the ones that have been pointed out, lies at the core of pedagogy. These are the two general tasks of pedagogy: descriptive and normative. The normative task is broader and is founded on the descriptive one, but it is not reduced to it. This means that in order to implement the normative tasks, it is necessary to fully describe the development of the science of pedagogy. The development of education as an occupation lies in successfully implementing the normative task.

Today, parents in the Republic of Macedonia still believe that a child has to behave in the way they think is right. If the child doesn't, then he or she is considered to be rude. Those beliefs rightfully create so many misfortunes and defeats in the upbringing work we all do because that kind of upbringing and everybody who has been brought up in that way, an upbringing of violence, an upbringing of such raised children or children of comfort, is a great misfortune for any child or any community. Children raised according to this motto display revolt and masked behavior to their parents and teachers, which has to be taken into consideration only for as long as educators require and expect it from them. Parents have relatively high expectations from schools. A lot of parents think that when education starts, the whole upbringing of a child should be transferred to the teacher and the school. A great number of them think that everything can be overcome step by step when a child overcomes their difficulties and problems.

The parents are the first and the most responsible educators of their children, and as such, they are completely responsible for their children's healthy individual development. The school, as an educational institution, can easily help with that. Even though the upbringing at school is just a complement to what the parents have already put in for the upbringing of their children, it cannot compensate for the upbringing received at home. When a French journalist made a survey which targeted very successful students and asked them about what had an influence on

their achievements at school, 75 percent of the interviewees answered with the following: "first of all, the state of my family". The emotional relations between members of a family have an influence on the emotional state of the whole family, and although children's achievements do not depend on it, it largely influences their development early on and later in life. School educators advise parents to think about what their children are saying while there's time to react. When you hear the sentence: "I don't want to go to school", it's the first sign that you should react and talk to your child about their feelings. The contemporary society we live in and the modern educational context inevitably make us face the question about role reversal, competences, the professional development of one of the key factors of the educational process, which is the teacher (professor, educator). Teaching is a supporting profession in education. It's required of the teacher to be open to changes in the paradigms, goals, forms, the content and methods of teaching and education and scientific knowledge as well. Nowadays, the teacher/educator is faced with numerous tasks, tasks that demand more and more new roles. He/she is the leader of the educational process. He/she is the pedagogical guide, the person that disseminates pieces of information, the coordinator of pedagogical communication, a model for the intellectual demeanor of children/students, a source of motivation for doing work, a model for professional identification, an appraiser of knowledge acquired by students, their adeptness, habits, skills and their behavior. He/she is a partner of the parents, collaborators, children/students, the local community, an administrator, a content presenter, a helper in forming habits in children/students, an inexhaustible source of knowledge, a regulator of the social behavior of the child/student in kindergarten/at school, a diagnostician and a stimulator of the personal, social, cognitive, emotional abilities, the skills and the value of students, which enables a continuous progress in the studies. He/she creates the conditions for actualization or self-actualization of a person. He/she is a collaborator in organizing the activities that come from the student, a researcher in the field of upbringing and education, a member of various teams, an expert with a high degree of autonomy, etc. The abovementioned are just part of the roles an educator should exhibit in the preschool educational process, whose realization is conditioned by the possession of human qualities, such as: a high IQ or EQ (classical and emotional intelligence), social capabilities, empathy, control over him/herself, the power of judgment, verbal competences, an ability to have interpersonal influence over the demeanor, attitude, conduct of the children/students.

He/she should have these qualities: - pedagogical qualities: to be a pedagogical guide, to enable the process of studying, to make sure there are high quality studies and teaching available for the students, to be a counselor, an example, to be unbiased, righteous, consistent; - professional qualities: to be an expert in his/her field, to present challenges in teaching and studying, to have a high level of verbal, written and ICT literacy; to demonstrate the strategies, models of studying and teaching, to invest in his/her professional development, to structure seminars, carry out the ideas from a seminar into the activity room, to have the capability of optimally using the emotional and spiritual resources in the classroom; to be oriented towards permanently professional improvement; to create an air of great expectations in the classroom; to propagate teamwork; to be capable of cooperative-participative relations; to closely follow the dynamics of the process of studying in the classroom; as a high level of achieved professional ethics; etc. The previous statements have directed us towards asking a few crucial questions: What and which competences do educators possess and what/which competences should they possess? Can the initial education of an educator provide them with all the necessary competences to cope with obstacles and new challenges in modern society? What should the professional development of an educator be oriented towards, so that he/she can successfully answer the needs of the community, the needs of a learning and developing society? What and which competences do the educators possess and should possess?

In order for children to learn and develop, there should be solid collaboration between the educator and the children's families and the other members of the community. When the educator understands the importance of studying at home and the importance of family as the first and foremost educational and social factor for the child, he/she will be able to build bridges between the school and the family/the community and be able to realize bilateral communication. Different conditions in the family and the community the children come from must be taken into consideration, so that they can study and develop successfully. A prosperous collaboration between educators and families is realized if the teacher is aware of the numerous ways a family can contribute to better learning for children, so that the atmosphere in the classroom and the school can be improved. The educator respects the interests and the responsibilities of everybody who is involved in the education and formation of the children's future as long as he/she implements successful communication and interaction between families, the school and the community, which contributes to the shaping of a stronger society.

Methodology and Research

The subject of the research is focused towards researching the needs and possibilities of developing parental competences in the context of early childhood development. The tasks of this research refer to the self-evaluation of the competence of the parent in their parental role, and the evaluation of the educator about the competence of the parent in their parental role. The expected results are the following:

- 1) Parents perceive themselves as competent in their parental role, but feel the need to ask for professional help in the development of those competences;
- 2) Educators think that parental competences in their parental role should further be developed;
- 3) There's a difference in the perception of parental competences from the viewpoint of educators vs. the viewpoint of parents. The need arises for creating a professional program designed to develop parental competences in the context of early childhood development.

The methods and techniques applied for the requirements of the research were: the method of analysis, comparison and the descriptive method. A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the obtained results was also done.

Analysis and interpretation of the results received

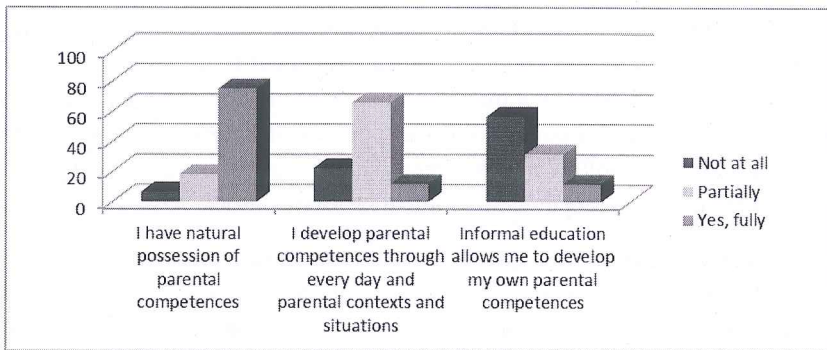
Self-perception of the parent for the parental competences

Table 1: Viewpoints and thoughts of the parents regarding possession and development of parental competences

Viewpoints and thoughts of the parents for development and possession of parental competences		Not at all	Partially	Yes, fully	Total
I have natural possession of parental competences	f	10	28	114	152
	%	6.6	18.4	75.0	100.0
I develop parental competences through	f	34	100	18	152

every day and parental contexts and situations	%	22.4	65.8	11.8	100.0
Informal education allows me to develop my own parental competences	f	86	48	18	152
	%	56.6	31.6	11.8	100.0

Graph 1: Graphical representation of the viewpoints and thoughts of the parents regarding possession and development of parental competences



Perception of the educator for the parental competences of the parents

Table 2: Viewpoints and thoughts of the educators regarding possession and development of parental competences of the parents

Viewpoints and thoughts of the educators regarding possession and development of parental competences of the parents		Not at all	Partially	Yes, fully	Total
The parents reflect a positive educational influence on their children	f	18	109	25	152
	%	11.8	71.7	16.5	100.0
The parents ask for professional help in the development of their parental competences	f	105	29	18	152
	%	69	19.1	11.9	100.0
The educators think that there is a need for additional development of the competences of the parents in their parental role	f	7	20	125	152
	%	4.6	13.2	82.2	100.0

From the data obtained in the conducted research, we can conclude, on the one hand, that parents perceive themselves as competent in their parental role, but feel the need to obtain professional help in the development of their competences. That being said, it is essential to raise the awareness of parents for regular self-evaluation of their own competences in relation to the upbringing of their children. Of course, it is required of them to collaborate closely and continuously with professional services and educators in kindergartens. On the other hand, though, educators point out to the fact there's a need for additionally developing parental competences in their parental role because they face different parental approaches every day, which are different in the way they lead to the development of the child. Nevertheless, the data obtained from the conducted research point out that there is a difference in the perception of parental competences from different viewpoints – the viewpoint of educators and the viewpoint of parents. The data follow a rather more subjective approach in the parents' self-perception, regarding how they act in their parental role.

In that regard, we believe that there's a need for creating a professional program for development of the parents' competencies in the context of the early childhood development. Many programs exist in Europe and in the world in general, which are specifically designed and implemented in order to develop positive aspects of the parental role. In the Republic of Macedonia, there hasn't been a firmly established and developed program intended for parents. This country is still in the process of realization of the importance of the development of parents' competencies; a phase in which conscious self-reflection is being updated for, more or less, a successful parental role or story. In that direction, the experts should be focused on updating this issue, and in the future, intense development and implementation is expected to take place, chiefly of the various parental programs that will lead to improvement of the parental competences.

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