QUALITY INDICATORS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Tatjana Vonta, Slovenia

INTRODUCTION

In the last forty years of the 20th century a lot of early childhood specialists have put their attention on the influences of early childhood education outside of children’s home on children development. A lot of researches have found out that preschool education does not have negative influences on children from lower socio-cultural environment if they are involved in preschool education outside their home in nursery schools and kindergartens. Results also show that quality preschool programs have positive short and long term influences on children (Andersson 1989; 1992; Horvat 1983; Gray 1983; Rubenstein 1985; Hennesy and Melhuis 1991; Field et al. 1988; Field 1991; Schweinhart and Weikart 1985; 1993; Sylva 1992; Sylva and Wiltshire 1993; Doherty 1991; Phillips, McCartney, and Scarr 1987; Kontos, Fiene, and Myers 1988; Kontos and Fiene 1987; Vandell and Powers 1983; Howes 1983; 1988; 1990; Howes et al. 1988; Kontos and Feine 1987; Howes and Stewart 1987; McGurk et al. 1992; Goossens in Van Ljzendoorn 1990).

WHAT IS THE QUALITY IN PRESCHOOL?

The key to the results mentioned above lies in high quality of preschool programs. Unfortunately, we still do not have the definition of quality in early education, which is universal. Empirical data and developmental principles show only the general pictures of what is good for young children and what children need for optimal development. Probably we could agree that young children need physical health, healthy and safe environment, love and support form family members and other institutions which take care of their growth and development, continuity among them, and at last they need developmental and individual appropriate care and education. According to empirical research result we could also agree that children involved in preschools need high quality programs.

But as we distinguish among conditions and experiences, which children receive in their families, we could also distinguish among preschool programs according to their quality. The quality could vary between different preschools and different classrooms inside one preschool according to conceptual origin of the program, staff and their professional and individual characteristics, physical conditions and support from the community.
During the last decade professionals have asked themselves questions such as:

- How to identify and assess quality?
- Could we find out the relevant components of good quality?
- What are the relevant components and how do they influence child’s development? (McGruk et al. 1993; Phillips 1993).

There is more and more knowledge about how complex these questions are. Follow up studies about the outcomes and the influences on children involved in different programs, the usage of multiple research methods and consideration of context and interdependence of preschool environment, family environment and community environment have given us some new perspectives on quality in early childhood education.

If we take into consideration the Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1989) ecological theory then we can not think of quality in preschool as if it is a separate phenomenon. We should think of quality on the levels of mesosystem, exosystem, and makrosystem. That means that we will not make any significant changes in quality of early childhood education if we pay attention only to quality indicators in microsystem of preschools. There are a lot of factors in the sphere of mesosystem (laws, regulations, financing, donations, families, professional in-service training, aspiration for quality improvement), exosystem (system of education, economic climate, social environment, government) and makrosystem (cultural and sub cultural influences) on which preschools doesn’t have direct influence but they have a great impact on the level of quality in microsystem. The more attention is put on the quality of different factors in one sphere, the more changes in factors in other spheres are necessary. We have to put our attention on the quality of factors in different spheres at the same time if we want radical changes to happen. We will have to change not only what goes on in preschools, but also all other factors in other spheres to change the quality of early childhood education.

QUALITY DIMENSIONS IN MICROSYSTEM OF PRESCHOOL

What is the microsystem of the preschool institution? It is a classroom, from a child’s point of view. There are lots of microsystems in the same preschool institution. We will try to resume what kind of elements could influence the quality of early childhood education in one classroom?

The quality of life in each classroom is influenced by administrative and management quality dimensions and dimensions at classrooms’ levels.
Administrative and management dimensions which influence quality in each classroom could be:

- cadre policy (employment, arrangement, care for professional ability, efficiency, system and process of teachers’ and teacher assistants’ evaluation),
- matters connected with program (relations with parents and other institutions, program evaluation, assuring educational material and other conditions and possibilities for learning and playing etc),
- management (financing, marketing, laws, maintains . . .).

At classroom level we could distinguish between two types of quality dimensions: structural and process dimensions. The first are connected with organization and structure of the classroom and the second are connected with educational and childcare process in the classroom. It is much easier to control structural dimensions than process dimensions.

Among structural dimensions there are:

- Dimensions connected with people in microsystem (children-adult ratio, age, sex /male, female/, ethnic, training, support, consulting, opinions, believes, stability and continuity of staff).
- Space conditions (the size of outside and inside space, organization and arrangement of the classroom environment).
- Routine (duration of the day, daily schedule, group regulation, rules, parent involvement).
- Educational materials and toys.
- Maintenance in classroom, toilets.

Other types of quality dimensions are process dimensions. They are connected with the process and all kind of interactions in this process. We could find the foundation for those dimensions in constructivism. Constructivists believe that learning occurs as children strive to make a sense of the world around them. Children construct their own understanding of the world. They make sense of what is happening around them synthesizing new experiences with what they have previously come to understand. Learning become an interactive process involving the child, adults, other children and the environment. That can only happen if his physical and psychological needs are satisfied.

From this point of view we can predict that a child will learn and develop better if the quality of interaction between himself and another child,
small group, whole group, adults, physical environment, classroom arrangement and contents is better. But we also know that child’s interaction with his external surroundings is not the only process going on in the classroom.

Teacher and teacher assistants in the classroom interact with each and every child, with small groups, with the whole group, among themselves, with parents and other volunteers and specialists who come in the classroom, with physical environment of the classroom, goals and contents of the program. And the same is true for everyone else who comes to the classroom from outside.

Behind these types of interaction we can find a lot of pedagogical concepts, methods, approaches and techniques, such as individualization, child-centered approaches, meaningful learning, arranging learning environment, parent involvement, team working, partnership with families, teaching strategies, involving children in planning and organizing their life in the classroom, observing and assessing child’s development, planning, professional development etc.

A MODEL OF HOW TO MAINTAIN, SUPPORT AND DEVELOP THE QUALITY IN MYCROSYSYTEM OF PRESCHOOL?

Until today professionals have not succeeded in isolating only one dimension of good quality (Phillips 1993). It just does not help if we have very good children-staff ratio, but teachers do not know how to realize individualization. It also does not help if we have perfect conditions for children to make choices, but teachers do not know how to connect those choices with the goals in the curriculum, or if we have perfect partnership with families, but no place in the classroom to involve family members. We can talk about clusters of quality dimensions. The more elements there are on the high levels, the more quality there is in the classroom.

In almost all countries in transition on the one hand a lot of changes have been made in different spheres of the process of transformation. There are new laws, new regulations, changes in government, founding, economic climate, etc. All those changes is a good basis for changing the quality in preschools as we have already pointed out before. On the other hand there are projects in practice of our preschools that have tried to bring changes in classrooms and the whole community according to contemporary understanding of quality in preschool and school improvement.

One of the mentioned programs is Step by Step project initiated by The Open Society Institute New York to introduce and support child cen-
tered methods and to engender democratic ideals and principles within young children. Step by Step encourages children to think critically, to make choices and to understand the consequences of their choices. It promotes children’s creativity, individualized learning and resourcefulness and it brings changes to the role of parents in children’s education and to the role of teachers by different means; from providing information to facilitating learning (Coughlin 1997).

By analyzing the effects of the Step by Step at the level of microsystem we can realize that we have brought and made changes at the administrative and managerial level of each school involved in the project as well as at almost every dimension at classroom level we mentioned before. Step by Step initiatives have also brought changes at the level of mezosystem (families, inservice professional training, donations, aspiration for quality improvement etc.) and some elements in exosystem (some changes in higher education for example).

After working in practice for three years we have found out that we need some sort of indicators which will tell us at what level the implementation is according to program standards in every classroom. To measure the level of implementation we have developed two instruments in small group of experts from different countries and in cooperation with Children’s resources International from Washington D.C. These are, firstly the Step by Step Program Standards and secondly the Step by Step Teacher Standards.

Those instruments are intended to be the tools to help teachers, site managers, or principals to document standards that they have achieved and to record those they are seeking to meet. Every principal and every teacher could find strong and weak points in the process of implementation in his own classroom or school in this way. Self-evaluation is a good way for teachers and schools to put attention on main components and dimensions which bring changes to quality. The mentioned instruments are good tools to find out what kind of training they need, what kind of consultation and technical help they need, what needs to be changed and where they are at present. They are good orientation tools and they can serve as mirrors to look at themselves.

Those instruments could also be good tools for project managers to find out the level of quality educational experiences for children and to find out in which schools and which classrooms the principles and goals of the project are met and at what level they are. The high quality in the classrooms implementing Step by Step methodology is one of the main goal we follow.
‘It takes the whole village to grow a child’ is an old African proverb which is valid if we think about changing quality in preschools too. Great changes in quality will not occur if we only concentrate on involving changes at the level of classrooms. Teachers, parents and whole communities will have to put more attention and effort to change other quality factors in other systems to bring changes to laws, regulations, families, and other structures that influence the quality of children’s lives.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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