

Parents' perspective on a children's learning

Adrijana Višnjic-Jevtic¹

Abstract: Contemporary curricula of early childhood education were founded on perspective of *playing learning child*. Although that approach leads to children's well-being, research by Yahya (2006) has shown that parents do not want their children to learn through play, rather to focus on early and preschool education and teaching academic skills. If parents expect professionals to deliver the knowledge necessary for the development of academic skills to their children, research has been conducted on parental experience of a child's learning. The aim of the research was to find out how parents understand their children's learning and approach to the contemporary concepts of child learning as well as children's competence. The research was conducted in the period from November 2017 to May 2019. Parents involved in the study, documented how their children learn in a family environment, assessing their children's competencies. Results show that parents see learning through everyday situations whereas learning was related to the academic mode (direct teaching of letters), has only appeared in one example. At the end of the research, parents participated in a group interview, discussing their expectations of the institution towards educating children. The results showed that parents expect the institution to encourage the development of a child's social knowledge and skills, while academic knowledge and skills are ranked lower.

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Introduction

By adopting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), a child is recognized as a subject of rights and accepted as active, competent researcher of his or her own environment and creator of his or her own development (Bašić, 2011). The changed view of a child and childhood, understanding and appreciation of a child's perspective and perception of a child as an active participant in their own learning, have sparked discussions about a position of children in contemporary society (Bogatić, Visnjic Jevtic, Campbell-Barr, & Georgeson, 2019; Clouder, 2014; Sylva, 2010; Toros, Tiko & Saia, 2013). Although, childhood has been in scientists' focus of interest for a long time, these changes have led to a scientific rethinking of child's well-being and in this context, the importance of the environment for learning and developing young children (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Determining the environment for children's learning may differ. Rodger (2012) describes learning environment as environment that, based on children's interest and current stage of development, acts on children's development by setting challenging but attainable goals. Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide (2010) state that, in addition to the material and social environment of learning, special emphasis is placed on the importance of the key person with whom a child relates. McDowal Clark (2017) emphasizes the importance that the environment enables children to acquire different experiences, to ensure more successful learning. Considering the results of research, indicating the link between the enabling environment and child development (Bridges and Hoff, 2014; Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 2003; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Papatheodorou and Moyles, 2009), it is reasonable to conclude that both, the material and social environment are equally necessary for learning, and therefore the development of a child.

¹ University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education, Zagreb, Croatia, e-mail: adrijana.vjevtic@ufzg.hr, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3812-7472>

Responsibility for providing an enabling environment, for the development and learning, lies on the adults and communities in which children grow up. A responsibility is extremely high, because of intervening in the context of growing up and influencing the development of a child. Therefore, the most important task for adults is to understand a child as a learner, as well as a child's learning strategies.

The key people in supporting a child's development and learning are parents. Unlike professionals, parents usually do not have formal parental support. Support in the Republic of Croatia refers to material forms of support (for example, paid parental and maternity leave, child allowance). Due to the lack of support from immediate and extended families (Widmer, 2016), support for strengthening parental competencies occurs in various programs such as schools for parents. In Croatia, these programs are most often available to parents in larger places for a fee. Thus, residence, along with economic status, is a discriminatory factor for strengthening parental competencies.

Parents whose children attend early childhood education settings should receive support there. The research by Dobrotić, Matković, and Menger (2018) shows that more than half of parents (58%) of children attending early childhood education settings receives support in the settings. Documents governing early and preschool education (i.e. National curriculum for early childhood education (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i sporta 2015)) emphasize the importance of partnerships between families and institutions, including support for parents.

This paper discusses children's learning within the cultural-historical wholeness approach (Hedegaard, 2012), defines the parental perspective of children's learning and brings these concepts into relation with empirical research. Some research indicates that parents equate learning with the acquisition of academic skills (for example, Yahya, 2016). Given the lack of such research in the Republic of Croatia, it was justified to investigate whether parents see children's learning (exclusively) as the acquisition of academic skills.

Learning in the Early Childhood

Early childhood is the most sensitive period for learning. Some of the research (i.e. Shumow 2001) is talking about early childhood period as *preparation* period for future, (mostly) academic success. It may lead to perception of early childhood as *a waiting room* - for school, adulthood, life. This is contradictory to the image of childhood as a period with its own values, norms, and cultures (Babić, 2014). Visković and Višnjić Jevtić (2019) see early childhood as a period of intense (active and participatory) learning, development of personality, skills, and socialization, and emphasize a role of a child as a co-creator of his/her own development.

Cultural-Historical Wholeness Approach

Learning doesn't happen without children's agency. Rather, it is a construct of children's interactions with material and social environment. Constructivist conception of learning is rooted in the works of, amongst others, Bruner (1961) and Vygotsky (1962). Founded on socio-constructivist theory, Hedegaard (2012) discuss cultural-historical wholeness approach, highlighting the influence of life conditions on every person involved in the learning process. Hedegaard (2012) systematizes the contexts significant for a child's development by categorizing them in three planes:

- “a *formal societal* plane reflecting historically evolved traditions in a society that is formalized into laws and regulations as *conditions* for the existence of an institution (in the model depicted as cultural traditions in a society for different institutions, reflecting different value positions);
- a *general institutional* plane reflecting informal conventional traditions and demands (i.e., related to school and home), taking form as practices (in the model depicted as, respectively, home, school, and day care practice);

- a *specific* plane reflecting the shared activity settings of persons in a specific institution (i.e., a specific home or a specific school, depicted as activity settings in the model)." (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 129–130)

The presented planes are interconnected and influence learning and development. To analyse children's learning situation all above mentioned planes must be considered. Hedegaard (2012) pointed out that children's activities happen in various institutions (i.e. families, ECE settings) and meet different traditions and values, and result from different social situations. *Formal* societal plane usually focused on regulations establishing family as community (defining family, divorces, fostering the child,...) but rarely on upbringing practices in family (Hedegaard, 2012). Regarding the ECE institutions formal societal plane may be seen in various regulations. The general institutional plane and a specific plane occur in various activities within both, and families and institutions.

In Republic of Croatia formal societal plane might be seen in various acts and guidelines. Family law (Republic of Croatia, 2019) states that parental care presupposes the responsibility, duty, and rights of parents to promote the rights and welfare of the child. It states that the care and education of the child must be in accordance with the child's age and maturity, without any further guidelines. It may lead to different interpretations of the children wellbeing and/or appropriate care practices. ECE institution practices are regulated by National curriculum of early childhood and education (MZOS, 2015) and gives a framework for appropriate practices. Both abovementioned documents recognize the need for respecting different educational practices.

Respecting the differences arising from this approach, it is not possible to determine only one practice that would suit all parents and institutions in the Republic of Croatia. Every family and every institution are unique and should be approached as such.

Learning Trough Play

The process of learning in the early childhood education is closely connected to playing. Because of its importance in a child's development, play is an integral part of the early education curriculum worldwide i.e. *Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department for Education, 2017), *Te Whariki* (Ministry of Education, 2017), *Curriculum for the pre-school: Lpfö 98*. (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010), *Aistear* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009). Although, playing is not related exclusively to a period of early childhood, learning through play is usually associated with a period of early childhood. Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson (2008) throwing into question, how playing and learning are often generally separated in the context of early and preschool education. Thus, they state that playing is associated with free-time activities, and learning with the organized activities. The authors McInnes, Howard, Miles and Crowley (2011) have similar thinking, associating playing with child led activities, and learning with adult led activities. This way of thinking is contrary to the contemporary understanding of a child as a naturally curious and enterprising organizer of its own learning (Carter & Roe, 2013). The play gives children possibility to construct (new) knowledge based on their previous experiences and new understanding of previous ideas.

Pramling et al. (2019) emphasizes, how indisputable is learning through play, but the content of learning is questionable unless, there is an adult intervention. It is the role of adults to facilitate children's play by providing a supportive environment (Baumer, 2013; Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Such interventions represent an encroachment on the context of development, and therefore, the responsibility of providing time and space for playing. If adults organize play activities, it is possible to throw into question, whether it's a free or didactic play we're talking about. Some scientists (i.e. Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) emphasize, how learning happens during a free play, while the others (Pramling et al., 2019) emphasize, a didactic play is a prerequisite for learning. Both agree on the benefits that play has for the overall development of a child. Most research into children's learning starts from an adult perspective. Adults create expectations about desirable (required) content, and ways of learning it, and according to that, expected outcomes of learning. It is possible that the adult's perspective on a child's needs may differ

from a child's actual needs. It is also possible, for adults to misinterpret a child's capabilities, and to organize the learning environment in accordance with the desired, rather than actual developmental capabilities. This approach probably resulted in marginalizing the role of play in learning and focusing on academically measurable skills. Although, measurability can provide a clear definition of one's success according to certain criteria, the question is who determines the criteria.

van Oers (2003) concludes that complete development cannot be measured uniquely. The promotion of measurable results possibly influenced the reduction of playing time, regardless of the scientific knowledge of the values that playing brings. It is possible, that imperatives of successfulness, have led to perception of success as academically measurable achievement.

Parents' Perspective – A Child-Oriented or Outcome-Oriented Perspective

A child-centred approach starts from an environment that is organized for a child to develop according to his or her interests and abilities. Chung and Walsh (2000) define child-centred approach from a few standpoints, (a) a child in the centre of the world; (b) a child in the centre of learning and (c) a child as an active creator of his/her own learning. Speaking of the first two standpoints, (a child in the centre of the world, and a child in the centre of learning) they might be seen as perspectives of adults in relation to the position of a child. It is possible that the standpoint, of a child in the centre of the world, more often refers to parents than to educators. Partly because of the trend of parental overprotecting, that is, subordination of the world to a child. This trend has led to the appearance of new terms in parenting, such as, over parenting (Bernstein & Triger, 2011), helicopter parenting (Cline & Fay, 1990) or curling parents (Hougaard, 2004). All these terms refer to parents who uncritically place children at the centre of their worlds and try to shape it in a way that cannot harm a child, with its potentially risky environment. Approach to a child in the centre of learning, refers to learning aligned with a child's interests and needs. Considering that educators usually organize a learning environment, it is probably about being a child-centred, but from educators' perspective. Educators' professional competences presuppose an understanding of how children learn and understanding of different learning strategies (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Visković & Višnjić Jevtić, 2019). Therefore, an approach in which child is in the centre of learning might be part of an educator's professional habitus. Considering different responsibilities for children's development and learning, parents' and educators' approaches to children's learning are likely to be different from each other. Contemporary society emphasizes the need for mutual support, two-way communication, and the sharing of responsibilities between parents and educators (Višnjić Jevtić, 2021). De Vries (2013) emphasizes, while a clear division of the responsibilities is (still!) present in the context of primary education (the school is primarily responsible for education, and the family for upbringing), in early and preschool education institutions' attitudes and expectations are changing. It is assumed that educators can influence the development of pedagogical competence of parents, especially understanding how children learn. Despite the changes, some research concluded that parents do not want their children to learn through play, rather, they want early and preschool education institutions to focus on teaching academic skills (Yahya, 2006). Kehily (2013) quotes, that the upbringing of children today is a compound of romanticism, consumerism and the science promoted in the media. At the same time, the media provide guidance on how it's possible to increase the IQ of a child in prenatal period, implicating cognitive abilities as obligatory for child's development (Hardyment, 2007). Kluczniok, Anders, Sechtig and Rosebach (2016) start from determining the quality of institutions of early and preschool education, in terms of securing high development achievements, with an emphasis on early reading and numeracy. This reflection is on the trace of Shumow (2001) research, which showed that 61% of parents expect traditional transfer of knowledge in the fields of reading, writing and mathematics from educational institutions. O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012) emphasize, that although parents show an understanding of the value of play in their child's development, they still do not consider it sufficient to prepare a child for future education. However, construction of the (good) parenthood and appropriate parental behaviour is related to the society and the culture. Therefore, parental behaviours differ across the societies. It is possible that parental attitudes toward the ways in which children learn in early childhood can present a challenge for educators. The challenge for educators is even greater considering how contemporary understanding of the partnership

between parents and educators, assuming an active parental role in creating curriculum of early and preschool education.

Method

Considering the image of a child as an active and competent person who learn through play and in interaction with material and social environment, it is justified and necessary to explore parents' view on children's learning and competences in early years. The aim of the conducted research was to find out more information about parent's perspectives and understanding on children's learning (i.e. how they define learning in early years; what skills they see as necessary for the child's participation in society; how they perceive success in relation to their own child). Parent's perspective was explored in the field research, within the framework of the qualitative paradigm, by means of a photo diary and focus group. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Teacher Education in 2017. Participants were informed and agreed with the purpose and procedure of the research.

The research was conducted from November 2017 to May 2019, with parents whose children were attending the same kindergarten class. The research was conducted in two cycles. The first cycle lasted from November 2017 to May 2018, and fourteen parents participated in it (N=14). The second cycle lasted from September 2018 to May 2019 and twenty-two parents participated in it (N=22).

The research was based on the concept of photo diaries (Chaplin, 2011). Photo diary is recognized as auto ethnographic method that represent authors' own voice on research problem. Although the described research does not fully correspond to autoethnographic method, it is possible to connect it in a broader sense with research procedures that are close to this type of research. For example, parents themselves record their own perception of children's learning, in situations that they themselves consider significant. The research included an initial parent meeting with a lecture on children development. Afterwards, over two months the parents documented with photographs how their children were learning. They also described in their own words, what a child learns in the photographed situation. After completing the documentation cycle, photographs were analysed. To facilitate analysis of collected photographs, they were categorized according to two keys - the type of activity, which described learning (academic activities, life-practical activities, play, research, and creative activities) and social environment (whether a child is alone, or with family members in a learning situation). After this part of the research, a focus group was held with the parents, followed by a lecture and the results were presented. In the beginning of a new school year, a new cycle of monitoring and documenting children started, with an emphasis on children's competencies. The research ended with a presentation of the parents' opinions of their children.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the photographs showed that parents most often perceived life-practical and work activities (N=6) such as cooking, tidying up and participating in family rituals as learning situations. Parents related these activities to learning, as follows:

Photograph 1 Child bakes cookies.

She was taught organization, patience, creativity, and satisfaction which follows after completing a successful job (baked cookies).

Photograph 2 Child bakes and prepares tortillas with her mother.

Rearranges colourful vegetables in dough, decorates with ketchup, sour cream, and dips. This activity enhances emotional, cognitive, social activities... and as the child says "our bellies are very happy!"

Photograph 3 Child walking with a little brother.

Being outdoors, identifying with the role of big brother, protector, and mom's sidekick. A child develops self-esteem and confidence.

Photograph 4 Child tightens the screws.

Develops hand motions - turns screws, develops working skills.

The next activity, which was recognized as a stimulus for learning, was playing (N=5). Most parents, who decided for playing as a learning activity, documented a free play (N=4), while one parent documented a social play. One of the parents clarified the children's learning, describing the symbolic play of "a fruit shop":

The game started so that we played fruit shops, the child prepared the fruit, distributed the coins, but then realized that some fruits were bigger (heavier) and some smaller, "so that they did not have to be paid the same".

A parent explained how a child learned to cope with victory and defeat in the social play, which is important for functioning in society, and in addition learned colours and numbers. Three parents (N = 3) concluded that their children learned different creative activities. Only one parent emphasized reading and writing as activities he recognized, as a learning one. Analysing the social environment, it was possible to conclude that most parents (N = 10) estimated that their children were learning with another person. Although there were equal number of photographs showing only children (N = 7) and photographs showing children with families (N = 7), to provide a more detailed insight into the situation parents' written statements were also used to analyse this criterion. Based on the results of the first part of research it is visible, that the parents who participated in the research, do not associate learning exclusively with academic skills, unlike in some earlier research. (i.e. Kluczniok, Anders, Sechtig & Rosebach, 2016). At the same time, research has shown that parents understand the value of playing in their child's learning, which confirms the results of O'Gorman and Ailwood (2012).

A group interview was held for further clarification of parents' understanding of the importance to stimulate skills. An interview was attended by twenty parents (N=20). Through conversation, they identified a group of different skills, which should be stimulated. The skills were divided into five categories - social skills, emotional skills, self-care skills, motor skills, and academic skills. Parents ranked skills according to their assessment of importance. They rated social skills as the most important, following the self-care, emotional and motor skills. Academic skills were assessed as the least important. It is possible, that these assessments were influenced by lectures that emphasized a different approach to the previously known concept of school readiness. It is also possible, given the years of the previous research, that standing point towards upbringing and educating children is changing on behalf of socio-emotional skills.

Changes in understanding of contemporary parenting are precisely what induced the third part of the research. Assuming, that most contemporary parents are overly protective of their children, and even complete tasks instead of them, there was a need to research the parental opinion of children and their competences. To determine the parental opinion of their children, the parents photographed and documented the activity in which their child was successful, that is, an activity that demonstrates a child's competence. The photographs were divided into categories, according to common features. The categories were, social competence (N = 3), emotional competence (N = 1), cognitive ability (N = 3), motor skills (3), creative expression and creativity (N = 8), the play (n = 2), and work ability (N = 2). Analysing a child's competencies, one child's parents emphasized the interest in participating in jobs that he/she is interested in. They consider a child to be able to use the knife in situations that require it (documented with a photograph of a child cleaning a fish after fishing, independently). One of the parents stated that his/her child is competent *in all forms of play and playing*. A photograph that demonstrated these competencies showed a child doing handstand **activity**. It is very interesting how a lot of parents, especially parents of girls', described their children as successful / competent in various forms of creative expression. In this part of the research, only two collected photographs showed children in potentially risky activities (using a knife and a drill). Given that most of the photos showed children as the centre of family life (for example, four photographs showed children during a musical performance, while other members of a family applaud them), it is possible to take a stand that parents truly see their child as the centre of their world. A parent of the youngest child who was part of the research, was the only one who gave a photograph of his/her child participating independently in decision making:

As the youngest member of our family, K. loves being independent, and that reflects the most on her ability to choose and make decisions. These are small things that do not affect our family responsibilities or our schedule, but they mean a lot to her: for example, choosing a t-shirt, choosing apples or bananas for a snack, choosing a bath or shower,

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choosing a song before bedtime. She is proud when she makes her own decisions.

Previous research (Nikiforidou, 2017) states, that the parents see a child as precious and fragile, and in need of protection. This kind of parental thinking is on the trace of the contemporary concept of parenting. It is possible, that the results are consequences of systematic work with parents to strengthen their parenting competences. Parents allow children to use different tools and materials that were not intended solely for playing. It can be assumed, that this is one of the ways in which they show that they accept and promote the various interests of children. They also recognize competencies as a development category (*A child reads the draft independently and stacks the dice towards it. He used to do this with someone helping him!*) Parents also show how they are willing to provide children with different sorts of experiences. It is possible that previous thought may confirm parental understanding of how children experience a meaning based on their own experience activities (Bašić, 2011).

Although this research included a smaller group of participants, the results may provide a basis for future research on parental opinions about children. The limitation of this research is that the concept of the research did not predict individual interviews with parents, only their statements, which were in a form of brief written notes. This prevented a deeper understanding of their children's learning of concepts and children's competencies, and ultimately their opinion about them.

Conclusion

The conducted research showed how parents involved in the research understand how children learn. In doing so, they value social and emotional skills as a prerequisite for successful functioning in society and a precondition for the acquisition of other skills. Research participants (parents) see a child as competent, motivated, curious, successful, and willing to learn in different ways. It can be concluded that they are the ones who provide an enabling environment for the development of such children.

Even though the research focused on the assessment of children, it provided insight into the participants' parenting competences. Parental considerations can be used by educators, to better understand the family culture of children and to provide an environment for each child individually. The research was conducted with parents whose children are involved in ECE settings; therefore, it is likely that they had professional support in their parenting. By repeating the research in a different form, for example by collecting parental narratives, a more complete insight into parental understanding of children's learning would be obtained. The results of the research provide insight into the understanding of learning within a particular socio-cultural community. While it is certain that the results would be different within other growing communities, similar research could clarify the understanding of children's learning in families at risk of social exclusion. Given that ECE settings are obliged to support parents, such research can give them insight into parental understanding of child development. Consequently, professionals can provide parental support in accordance with modern scientific knowledge about the child's development.

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