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Early education agendas and practice in the upbringing of young children in post-conflict regions in eastern Croatia

ABSTRACT: During the 1990s, Croatia experienced war on its own territory. There were significant numbers of casualties, among them civilians. Today Croatia is a member of the European Union and implements its recommendations in its own agendas. One of these fields of political activity is early education. To find out which values are formally supported in contemporary early education agendas in Croatia, content analysis of the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education was conducted. Also, assessment of preschool environment in post-conflict regions was conducted with the main purpose of gaining insight into the pedagogical reality in these areas. As the results showed, the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education underlines several values: responsibility and inclusion, competence (i.e. key competencies and citizenship) and participation along with freedom of choice. However, the *de facto* situation in the regions previously affected by war has revealed dual practices: some institutions nurture segregation and animosity, while others are oriented towards inclusive and multicultural values. The latter ones also have a higher level of overall quality. These findings indicate the following: (1) supporting values such as participation, citizenship and inclusion can facilitate overall quality of early education, (2) institutions are immersed into local community climate and thus mirror contemporary social relations, (3) values are a complex issue driven by social and individual factors, and (4) education is seen as a tool for administrating political interests which is the opposite of child's best interest. The implications of this survey are theoretical, and can be used to incorporate a philosophical approach in education research.

KEY WORDS: early education, post-conflict context, quality, values

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Introduction

During the 1990s, Croatia experienced war on its own territory. Hostilities were conducted in several regions, and eastern Croatia (an area that shares border with Serbia) was amongst them. Vukovar, located in eastern Croatia, was the scene of one of Europe's worst genocides after WW2. The causes of the conflicts in the 1990s were connected with inter-nationality animosities (Croats and Serbs), which were supported with political actions and a change of values at the global level (the fall of the Berlin wall, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, etc.). Today, Croatia is a member of the European Union and implements its agendas in its own political activity. One of these fields of political activity is early education. In Croatia, early education is seen as a pillar of adulthood, and early education is defined as one of the most important chapters of a person's life, due to its impact on developmental outcomes (NCVVO, 2012). Croatia is oriented towards the Western world as are its educational practices and way of life in general, so naturally stakeholders tend to design agendas similar to those applied in the European Union. Following the political activities of the European Union, Croatian political actors have been trying to advance as many agendas as possible (policies and recommendations) with diverse purposes, and early education is among them. As a result, the Croatian educational community has several important documents, the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (MZOS, 2014) being the most important in the area of early education. This document represents a frame for designing early education practice and it is obligatory at all levels of the Croatian society, from the micro-level (classroom), and mezo-level (local community such as municipalities) to macro-level (i.e. county and state). However, there is no mechanism of supporting or supervising educational practices in kindergartens. More importantly, there are no coherent social actions on issues concerning the quality of children's lives, despite the fact that early education institutions are intended for children and their families, as the ultimate beneficiaries. Although the true purpose of early education is rarely discussed in Croatian literature, Baran, Dobrotić & Matković (2011) concluded that these institutions are seen as a solution for working parents while the perspective of children on the purposes of early education is less important. It is an instrumental approach to early education which has emerged from the contemporary needs of Croatian

families, and should be acknowledged as one of its inevitable functions. This is, perhaps, an unspoken purpose of early education worldwide. However, educational aspects are dominant in agendas and policies on early childhood care. Socialization, learning and preparing for future roles are among the fundamental, socially proclaimed functions of early education. These pragmatic values are considered outdated and undesirable in public discourse. Subsequently, the research concerning early childhood is often conducted on unstable ground, which results only in shallow insight into the true problems of early education, while real problems remain hidden and are left outside the scope of research.

The core problems in this paper are the proclaimed values embedded in the policies on early education and the reality of early education practice in post-conflict regions in Croatia. Thus, a brief look into values is necessary. This term is impossible to define autonomously. There are several definitions, depending on the scientific approach. In education, values are mostly explained from the psychological point of view; in this context *Schwartz* (2006: 1) defines them as “desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance that serve as guiding principles in people’s lives”. Although researchers are trying to link a particular behavior with a single value, it is important to stress that values are a complex phenomenon closely connected with emotions (*ibid.*). In other words, generalizations as to the influence of value(s) on particular behavior(s) are impossible. Rather, the discussion should be driven in the direction of the reciprocity of a value system and one’s behavior, or in the direction of the influence of proclaiming social values and one’s quality of life. If we acknowledge education as one of the most important fields of social activity and an individual’s development, then questioning values in the context of education could reveal the society’s dominant orientation: whether the society is oriented towards its members’ well-being (where critical thinking and meta-level competence is a priority), or individuals are utilized for the well-being of a special interest group called politicians (which can be seen in the absence of teachers, children and parents from curricular reform across eastern Europe, despite the fact that the educational reform concerns them).

Today there are a vast number of agendas on educational values in the European Union. One of the latest agendas on values in education launched by the European Commission (2015: 2) is focused on “democratic values and fundamental rights, social-inclusion and non-discrimination, as well as active

citizenship”. These values are seen as crucial factors for an individual’s well-being. However, they do not specify indicators for these values, i.e. benchmarks which will imply that values are fully achieved. For instance, what are the indicators of social inclusion? The presence of agendas on the universal design and rights of people with disabilities or real participation of people with disabilities in the local community and public life? It is clear that values in education, as explained by the latest *European Commission* agenda (2015), are still a vague concept, subservient to political will on a national level. Further, when it comes to the relationships of social values and education in the context of conflict, the *European Commission* (2011) emphasizes partnership and a coherent policy on geographic and economic issues as conflict prevention tools. It is clear that these factors of stability are not under an individual’s (citizen’s) control. Rather, they represent political goals, and should be questioned in relation to societal power and not one’s own will. Also worth mentioning, conflict is a result of various factors and should be researched as a multi-dimensional phenomenon.

A review of the literature on values and conflict revealed the presence of three key hotspots on the peace – conflict continuum. On the one hand, there are *pre-conflict values*. Since the majority of eastern European countries have experienced political transition, it can be assumed that there was also some sort of value transition, but there is no clear evidence of that. During a discussion on this topic, Buckland (2005) states that the changing regimes construct educational reforms which will allow them to distance themselves from the previous policy, and subsequently they promote values which support new political discourse. Due to the changes in social circumstances, values changed globally during the 1990s, which resulted in the appearance of new social movements (Thomas & Tarr, 1999). The majority of these social movements focus on specific problems of a particular social group (LGTB communities, people with disabilities, women, etc.). Similarly, Corker and Shakespeare (2006) claim that globalization and advances in communication technologies are reflected at all levels of the economy, as well as social and political life, including interpersonal relations. In other words, changes in social life lead to changes in the standpoints of individuals. The premise that there exists a connection between values, policies and social circumstances is supported with the contemporary global financial crisis where values are scrutinized in the context of individual well-being and sustainability of the wider community (community well-being).

In other words, social changes result in a clash between social and individual values. Which of the two will prevail depends on many factors. Basically, it is a question of power, and this is why political actions have a crucial role during the process of transition. Changing regimes from one extreme to another in a short period of time and a fast change in proclaimed values can result in conflict, as was the case in Croatia. The second hotspot on the peace-conflict continuum is the conflict itself. Values observed during this period can be addressed as *peri-conflict values*. Since the processes in educational institutions support dominant social values, attitudes and relationships (Bruner, 2000; Ogawa et al., 2006), they play a major role in times of conflict. During conflict, values erode and are highly politicized, with strong emphasis placed on the culture of violence (World Bank, 2005). This means that conflict activities have a direct influence on values, as much as values have an impact on conflict activities. According to Kahle's typology of values (1983), there are two types of values, internal and external. While internal values are basically personal factors of life quality, such as self-respect and self-fulfillment, external values depend more on social processes and they are closely connected with feelings of security and belonging (ibid.). The latter is underlined in times of conflict because safety is a basic human need. From my personal experience of war, I can confirm that the sense of community and belonging to an ethnic group (Croats or Serbs) was a dominant value in Croatia during the 1990s, and it was a pillar of our everyday life. During these years, it was the foundation of an individual's actions. Today, I think this was a prerequisite of war: if people had been able to think of another aspect of their identities, rather than nationality and belonging to the collective, perhaps the war could have been avoided. When I look back in time, I can conclude that during a social crisis (and conflict is one of such circumstances) values can be manipulated. Their repercussion on one's life is so obscure that individuals are not able to recognize the potential dangers of a particular value they nurture under the influence of the dominant social paradigm. However, the scientific community in the field of social studies is not preoccupied with this mechanism. Some philosophers pointed at this problem several decades ago (Chomsky, 1999; Foucault, 2003), yet an average citizen burdened with everyday problems is not interested in this issue. The third hotspot on the peace – conflict continuum are the *post-conflict values*, which can be recognized in the form of biased educational contexts (World Bank, 2005), and the exclusion of

young people from public life since they are perceived as a threat to social stability (Buckland, 2005). It looks like the post-conflict state of politics maintains oppression as an efficient mechanism for the regulation of social relations, i.e. post-conflict values can be interpreted as a tool for regulating social relations and maintaining social order. Research in Croatia on youth problems supported these ideas. For instance, *Ilišin* (2011) found that youngsters in Croatia value material well-being and do not burden themselves with politics, which suggests that values are transmitted from one generation to another with a minimum risk for the society and government. The absence of understanding of conflict mechanisms, including the ontology of power and political violence, can have a globally devastating impact on our society. As *Kulić* (2002) states, knowledge, understanding and information emergent from research are left out of its purpose and left out of strategies for which they were intended in the first place. Rather, the public face policies based on a close interaction of religion and politics, whose relationships are highly pragmatic (*ibid.*), i.e. based on mutual, narrow interests. This approach in Croatia, 20 years after the war, results in the emergence of traditional values where the emphasis is on national identity and a normative approach to every aspect of life (marriage, work, family etc.), which also has an impact on the youngest members of the Croatian society. For this reason, *Ilišin* and *Spajić Vrkaš* (2015) claim that Croatian youngsters face the revitalization of traditional values with a parallel reinforcement of material values, which results in the slow pace of modernization of the Croatian society. In the media, these values are presented as progressive and modern, and used in political campaigns as pillars for social arrangements. In this way, traditional values are presented as contemporary and therefore progressive ones, which is a false presupposition.

Methods

The goal of this survey was to find out which values are presented in the Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (MZOS, 2014) and to confirm whether in reality they are actually addressed in kindergartens in regions previously affected by war activities. For this purpose, content analysis of the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (MZOS, 2014)

was conducted. The content analysis was based on a Meta-inventory of values (Cheng & Fleischmann, 2010). The “reality check” was supported by a quantitative method of assessment. For that purpose, a Scale for the assessment of surroundings and interaction (Romstein, 2014) was applied in kindergartens in eastern Croatia, i.e. Vukovar-Syrmia County, which had been previously occupied by the Serbian army.

Instruments

The identification of dominant values in the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education (MZOS, 2014) was done by a Meta-inventory of values, developed by Cheng & Fleischmann (2010). This inventory encompassed sixteen groups of value concepts, i.e.: (1) freedom, (2) helpfulness, (3) accomplishment, (4) honesty, (5) self-respect, (6) intelligence, (7) broad-mindedness, (8) creativity, (9) equality, (10) responsibility, (11) social order, (12) wealth, (13) competence, (14) justice, (15) security, and (16) spirituality. Content analysis was semantic in nature, and the quantity was validated with the help of the previously mentioned values.

Early education practice was assessed with a Scale for assessing surroundings and interaction (Romstein, 2014). This scale encompasses six fields of assessment: (1) interior and furniture, (2) exterior and equipment, (3) speech/talking and thinking, (4) activities, (5) interaction, and (6) program structure. The levels of assessment were as follows: 1 – minimum (insufficient), 2 – medium (partially sufficient), 3 – maximum (sufficient, excellent).

A total of eight kindergartens in eastern Croatia were assessed. These eight kindergartens are geographically located in areas previously affected by war in Croatia. It is important to indicate that four kindergartens still practice a separation of children by nationality, as their everyday pedagogical practice. Other four kindergartens enroll children from diverse backgrounds (Croatian, Serbs, Hungarian, Roma, etc.). Only one kindergarten is in a rural area, while the others are located in urban areas.

Neither of these instruments are standardized, but are still proven to be useful for addressing the issues of values and quality in early education (Koepfler, Shilton & Fleishmann, 2013; Romstein, 2015).

Results and interpretation

Values in the Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education

The analysis of values in the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education was conducted with the help of a Meta-inventory developed by Cheng & Fleischmann (2010). The assessment of values in the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education was based on content analysis, i.e. frequencies of particular values, as proposed by Cheng & Fleischman (2010) in their Meta-inventory of values. Primarily, this inventory was proposed by these authors for research in diverse fields, and thus considered as appropriate for this survey.

Table 1. Values in the Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education

	value	%
1	responsibility	32,70
2	competence	26,92
3	creativity	9,61
4	self-respect	9,61
5	freedom	5,76
6	justice	3,85
7	helpfulness	1,92
8	accomplishment	1,92
9	honesty	1,92
10	equity	1,92
11	social order	1,92
12	security	1,92
13	intelligence	–
14	broad-mindedness	–
15	wealth	–
16	spirituality	–
	Σ	99,97

As the results show, some of the values present in the Meta-inventory (Cheng & Fleischmann, 2010) are not mentioned in the curriculum: intelligence, broad-mindedness, wealth, and spirituality. The value which is mentioned most frequently is *responsibility*. Yet, this value in the curriculum itself is always associated with social responsibility (to be responsible to others and to self). The second place belongs to *competence*. It is important to stress that the competence approach in the educational policy in Croatia has marked its presence in the recent decade due to Croatia's orientation towards the European Union. Competence approach to early education is seen in the presence of key competences (ICT, language, math, etc.) as well as in the presence of the value of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is valued *per se*, is seen as a prerequisite of the modern world and, without question, should be included in the curriculum. However, it would be developmentally more appropriate to incorporate other values, such as peer interaction advocacy approach to early childhood education, rather than lifelong learning. *Creativity*, as mentioned in the Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, is highly utilized for learning and problem solving. It is not seen as a value of self-accomplishment or an intrinsic need, but an external demand for an efficient learning process. In the context of *self-respect*, self-confidence is mentioned, which is a very important issue in early childhood education since it has an impact on one's entire life. In the curriculum, self-confidence is utilized in the same way as creativity: it is a prerequisite for efficient learning and not an individual's need. The value of *freedom* in the curriculum is closely connected with freedom of choice. It is not a state of absence of conflict, but an opportunity to choose between several options. A paradox inherent in this value is its dual nature: what can children really choose, if adults are responsible for the choices of children (morally and ethically as well as legally)? Also, the question of resources is raised, since children can choose only what is offered to them, i.e. what adults arrange for them. As far as *justice* is concerned, it is not a value which is often mentioned in the curriculum. It refers to peacekeeping as the absence of conflict, rather than justice in relationships with others and a way of life. This is the only value that actually implies problems in early education connected with war activities 20 years ago. Other values mentioned are as follows: *helpfulness*, *accomplishment*, *honesty*, and *equity*. The last value is very surprising since Croatia has accepted inclusion as one of the standards in education. There is no inclusive education

without equity and/or equal opportunities. Yet, an absence of equity in the curriculum implies the society's normative orientation towards child development.

Early education practice in eastern Croatia

The practice of raising children in post-conflict regions in eastern Croatia was evaluated with a Scale for the assessment of surroundings and interaction (Romstein, 2014). The scale consists of six subscales: (1) interior and furniture, (2) exterior and equipment, (3) speech/talking and thinking, (4) activities, (5) interaction, and (6) program structure. The levels of assessment were as follows: 1 – minimum (insufficient), 2 – medium (partially sufficient), 3 – maximum (sufficient, excellent).

Table 2 Means by subscales

	A Interior and furniture	B Exterior and equipment	C Speech/ talking and thinking	D Activities	E Interaction	F Program structure	average
segregated settings	3	1	2	2	2	2	2
integrated settings	2	2	3	3	3	3	3

In this survey, four kindergartens were segregated, i.e. organized for a singular nationality (Croats or Serbs). Paradoxically, two of these settings share the same building: a kindergarten for Croatian children is located on one side of the building, with a kindergarten for Serbian children on the other side. The remaining four are addressed as integrated settings due to the enrollment of children from diverse national and cultural backgrounds. All eight kindergartens are situated in the same county, 7 in urban and 1 in a rural area.

The quality of pedagogical surroundings in both settings is satisfactory and in accordance with Croatian standards, yet the quality in integrated settings is higher than in segregated settings. In integrated settings the overall quality is at level 3 (excellent), while in segregated settings it is at level 2 (partially

sufficient, medium). For a deeper insight into the differences below, we will take a closer look at particular fields. *Interior and furniture (A)* are better in segregated than in integrated settings. This seems paradoxical, but apparently financial support is very important in this case. In segregated settings there is a regular flow of money, they have firmly established financial support on a monthly basis from diverse sources (sponsorships). Integrated settings suffer from more financial problems, which reflects on furniture and didactic materials. The main reason for this could be children's needs: in integrated settings there are children with disabilities and children from minorities (Roma, Hungarian, etc.) and quality work with them presupposes the presence of specific didactic materials, which were missing in these settings. On the other hand, in segregated settings there were no children with disabilities enrolled and by the very nature of segregation, no minorities were present within the environment, which contributed to a uniform arrangement of interior space. *Exterior and equipment (B)* refer to outside space adjacent to kindergartens (backyards, terraces, etc.). The most noticeable feature in segregated settings were fences: they are quite higher than in integrated settings. In segregated settings the fences are over 200 cm high, which implies other purposes than simply safeguarding children's places. Further, in segregated settings backyards are divided into two separate areas and also fenced (playgrounds for Croatian and Serbian children). This means that children's play suffers due to the practice of segregation: they can see each other, but if they want to play with peers of another nationality, they are not able to. Integrated kindergartens have fences approximately 100 cm high, which are used only as a safety barrier for young children, balls, etc. As far as *speech/talking and thinking (C)* are concerned, in segregated settings there were materials only in one language and alphabet, while in integrated settings all displayed materials have been written in both languages and alphabets (Croatian and Serbian language, Latin and Cyrillic alphabet). Interestingly, in one integrated kindergarten, beside the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet, there were pictures and photographs displayed as a means of communication for children with autism enrolled in regular classrooms. Other children have mastered the technique of non-verbal communication via pictures and successfully interact with their peers with disabilities. This certainly is a meta-level of communication and therefore integrated settings proved to be at a higher level in this field of assessment. Further, *activities*

(D) in integrated settings are mostly directed at learning and play, while in segregated settings emphasis is on routines and curriculum activities such as learning songs and rhymes. An interesting fact is that in segregated settings there is no space for solitude, while in integrated settings preschool teachers have organized a space for solitude, mostly in wardrobes and halls, in the forms of tents and houses. In these areas children can distance themselves from others, if they feel a need to do so. This kind of activity is important for preschoolers with disabilities, for instance autism, since an intensive stimulus can overwhelm a child (Bujas Petković, 1995). During activities, children in integrated settings are allowed to use all of the kindergarten space: they play in halls, visit each other in classrooms and they are allowed to move from one classroom to another. Children in segregated settings spend the majority of time in their classrooms and they do not go to other classrooms. Moreover, in segregated settings there is a culture of *closed doors* where each preschool teacher is focused on his or her own classroom without much interaction with other staff members and other children. As far as *interaction (E)* is concerned, children in segregated settings are mostly focused on preschool teachers and tend to interact with peers when they do not interact with adults (or/or situation). In integrated settings, children are supported to interact with each other, even if peers do not speak or understand their language (for instance, if children speak only Bayash, i.e. a dialectic form of Roma language, or do not speak at all, as in the case of autism). Adults in integrated settings are also involved in peer interaction, but nurture an unobtrusive approach: they are near children, they observe and follow communication. Also, in integrated settings there were mixed age groups, while in segregated settings no such organization is present, i.e. classrooms are homogeneous with regard to the children's age. Two of four integrated settings had mixed age groups, while all segregated kindergartens were homogeneous with regard to the children's age. *Program structure (F)* showed that preschool teachers in integrated settings more often plan and conduct various forms of cooperation with parents, other colleagues, and the local community. They have established forms of supervision, and continually work on their competencies. Also, they have individual education programs for children with disabilities and from minorities. In segregated settings, preschool teachers also plan and conduct cooperation with parents, but do not cooperate so much with other colleagues.

Since there are no children with disabilities or from minorities in segregated settings, there were no individual educational programs to assess.

Discussion

The values addressed in the National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education are a result of “Croatian orientation towards a holistic approach to a child’s development, its will to maintain and develop national, spiritual, material and natural legacy, and tendency to create a society of knowledge which will allow prosperity and sustainable living within European area” (MZOS, 2014: 19). Although the Croatian National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education is founded on values, there is no definition of “value” in this document. This approach may be one of the factors contributing to the unbalanced practice of early education in eastern Croatia. Another problem is separate practice on the national versus local level. On the national level, Croatia has guidelines and agendas. However, it is the local community that is responsible for their implementation. Also, financing early education is the responsibility of a local community, and the contemporary economic conditions in Croatia reveal that some regions are more developed and have higher incomes than others. This can have an impact on early education practice since some kindergartens receive higher funding than others.

As the survey showed, the proclaimed values and practice of raising children in eastern Croatia suffer from disparity. The proclaimed values such as inclusion, participation and citizenship were missing in segregated kindergartens. Although these kindergartens have educational conditions (i.e. structural quality) on a higher level, they miss an opportunity to improve the process dimension of quality. Wider, social implications of such educational arrangements should become a subject of scientific inquiry. Yet, it is encouraging that in eastern Croatia children have kindergartens oriented towards human values at their disposal. These kindergartens recognize children’s culture as the most important value for identity. Integrated settings offer children activities related to their interests. Also, process quality is on a higher level than structural quality. If researchers become more oriented towards a critical approach to social paradigm, including questioning the proclaimed values and reality in classrooms, science can play a crucial role in raising the quality of children’s lives.

Conclusion

Although Croatia has several documents concerning early education, the implementation of these agendas remains problematic. It is a rarely discussed issue and researched only at a declarative level. No longitudinal research has been conducted in Croatia on any issue concerning early education and its efficiency in later life. Furthermore, there is no research dealing with nationality and/or post-conflict state of early education. Rather, the majority of research is oriented towards the norms and standards applied in European settings, without any consideration of specific issues at a national level. Cultural, historical, geopolitical and economical particularity should be the starting points for each society and its agendas, especially when it comes to early education.

As this survey showed, preschool teachers in integrated settings are more oriented towards processes (interaction, activities and individual behavior) and subsequently these environments have a higher level of overall quality. On the other hand, segregated settings have better working conditions, yet have a lower overall quality, which suggests that preschool teachers in these kindergartens are oriented towards outside demands, i.e. social expectations. This can burden preschool teachers and contribute to inappropriate early education practice.

Finally, segregation and animosity were revealed in kindergartens intended for a particular population (e.g. Croats and Serbs). In other words, the children were enrolled in a particular classroom due to their nationality. Paradoxically, nationality is expressed by parents: it is an adults' construct and imposed on children. This kind of practice contributes to biased values in classrooms. Therefore, children's perspective on the processes in society should be researched. In this way, the true purpose of early education can be found and true values of childhood revealed.

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