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Educators and educational partnership

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Abstract

Raising a child is a task of the family, educational institutions and society as a whole. Considering them separately, raising a child is a private family matter in which parents have a dominant influence, an achievement that institution connects with its engagement or a requirement of the general society. This paper discusses the need for a consciously thought out, interconnected interaction of all educational factors directly and indirectly addressing the upbringing of a child, which represents a shift from the strategy of occasional and fragmented efforts to improve the living conditions of children related to only one of the aforementioned contexts. Furthermore, the paper considers the importance of institutional educators in the process of raising awareness about the importance of joint, partnership, supportive and developmental interrelationship of all educational factors and conditions for implementation of possibilities and seeking for concrete ways of joint action oriented to well-being of every child.

Keywords: institutional parenting; parental education; educational society; educational partnership;

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1. Introduction

Considering the position of educators of early and preschool children in the context of educational partnership stems from the very legal tasks related to their role and the definition of nature of education. Social documents define professional educators as implementers of immediate education tasks regarding children from the age of six months to starting primary school. They plan, program and evaluate educational work and support the development of each child according to his ability, by cooperating with their peers, parents and local communities (National Pedagogical Standard for Preschool Education, 2008). The nature of their role - education, can be understood as unified, because "education is formation of (...), creation of a man in the spirit of a certain culture", i.e. creation of man's abilities in the spirit of a particular culture is education, and simultaneous development of man's abilities is considered to be upbringing (Polic 1993, according to Skupnjak, 2013). Upbringing includes activities based on care, concern and respect for what is available to human, what is nurtured and to what human development strives for (Polic, 1993). Upbringing is directed to meeting needs of a child and the educator, according to his opportunities, must follow the development of a child's upbringing needs, because that is the only way he can meet them by creating the conditions for their satisfaction. So the educator's self-development is at the same time co-development with those who he educates, meaning that upbringing is in its essence at the same time self-upbringing (Polic, 1993). As mentioned above, the general society is involved in education of the individual through documents of government which direct educational efforts of educational institutions, thus giving a vision of its own development. So democratic governments with the main aim to adjust the object of manipulation show a tendency for upbringing designed to optimally meet the needs of those who are being raised (Polic, 1993). The role of democratically-characterized upbringing is development of capacity, so that the individual not only adapts to the community, but is also able to creatively improve it. Thus, upbringing is, *summa summarum*, in the interest of family as the basic educational community, professional education in social educational institutions and society in general, and in the context of this paper we do not consider them as individual education factors who operate parallel in the same field of interest, but, given that their focus is the same, we presume the need of their interdependent influence.

2. Educator in the context of partnership

The educator's task as the focus of this paper is establishing educational partnerships with other educational factors, especially the child's family and society as a whole. The term *educator* in this context means an implementer of the educational process in institutions of early and preschool education, although the same role is also assigned to professional participants in further course of education. The following are educational partnerships for assigning factors that are directly and indirectly related to the task of raising the growing population – families (personally and directly participating in education), institutional educators (professionally and directly aimed towards upbringing), society (indirectly involved and supporting its own development). Their preferable approach to the child is the one that is supportive in allowing the child to achieve the best outcomes, and that encourages a child to, according to his age, concrete capabilities and environmental context, maintain a good (desirable) course of development, the so called *adequate development*.

In this context, we further talk about *partnership*. Terminologically speaking, *cooperation* insufficiently describes the quality of the relationship necessary among educational factors. Here we interpret cooperation as mutual, potentially supporting *parallel* activities of various educational factors, and partnership as a mutually designed, thoughtfully decided, networked and at shared objectives aimed interrelationship. While we act directed to the same field of interest, we cooperate within the same frame. Family educators, institutional educators and the society are engaged, each in its own specific way, in the upbringing of the growing population. The quality of their cooperation, for the purpose of this work, is determined by the *intensity* of their parallel activities or committing. The quality of *partnership* however, we characterize as the intensity of the *impact*, which implies *mutual* enrichment of the capacities that allow the interacting individuals making a better contribution in working with a child. It is not just about their separate educational involvement, but about their mutually supportive involvement. Some authors emphasize that overcoming the notion of *partnership* when comparing it to *cooperation* is that partnerships underlines mutual responsibility of both factors

in upbringing a child and it is focused on an open, two-way communication between adults related to the welfare of the child (Petrovic-Soco, 1995). Mutual responsibility seems non-questionable because of the characteristics of both roles – family and institutional *education*. Furthermore, it is considered that characteristics of cooperation is occasional involvement of parents in the activities of the institution, their lack of awareness on their rights and obligations related to partnership with the institution, hierarchically organized relationships where parents are given a “lower” rank, or in other words, educational institutions and families are perceived as separate systems which function autonomously and occasionally, and only cooperate when necessary, while partnerships boils down to involvement of rights and obligations of well-informed parents in all activities of the institution, existence of trained educators in establishing desirable relationships with parents, equal status and bilateral initiative, consideration of families and institutions as systems in constant interaction (Ljubetic, 2014). Contemplating in the category of cooperation, the area of communication, initiative and relationships is attributed to the institution – the institution is the one that assigns the level of communication, level of initiative and determines the characteristics of the relationship. It seems that, in that way, the role of parents is passivated; their only choice is to accept the offered patterns. It is possible, however, to see parents as active generators of changes in the institutions that they share their children’s upbringing with. In particular, it is important to clearly define the *equality* in relationships. While interpreting it, some authors state that it implies direct participation of parents in upbringing practice of the institution, giving guidelines and choosing educational methods and content in actual practice (Miljak, 1995). Equality of relationships does not mean the *sameness* of educational factors – in their responsibility they are equal, but they are still undoubtedly of different knowledge and experiences related to their common upbringing mission. The very fact, for example, that someone is a biological (or other type) of a parent, is not a guarantee of fulfilling the expectations of the role and it is necessary, as it is pointed out, to strengthen parental competence in the area of care and upbringing a child and in encouraging early development (Ljubetic, 2007). Furthermore, parents are today faced with many questions and situations that did not exist in their childhood and in which experiences of the previous generations of parents do not give good solutions (Stricevic, 2011). The research about the importance of parental beliefs that shape and organize parental behavior shows that harmful beliefs are still significantly present in the population – although there is a consensus among the adults about the importance of working with a child and communicating with him is an important aspect of parenting. The respondents also show a high tolerance for physical punishment of children in certain situations, such as when he threatens his safety (Pecnik, Radocaj & Tokic, 2011). It is important, therefore, to allow the participants in upbringing the child to have different cognitive and experiential spheres and the educator’s professional obligation is to encourage parents to re-think their parenting methods and, if necessary, point them to the possibility of considering alternatives. An educator who encourages the child’s primary family to potentially modify educational methods that are inadequate and in a long term harmful for a child, has undoubtedly facilitated the child’s development on the, for a child, most important level. As authors emphasize, systematic *social* influence should allow parents to be informed, clever and educated, because without these conditions, the whole care for the child and its development is focused on the family level and “personal pedagogy” and programs that parents use have a characteristic of intervention and maintaining the necessary level of functioning of the child and his family (Milanovic, Stricevic, Males & Sekulic-Majurec, 2001). Sometimes the support offered to parents in exercising their family role is desirable, and sometimes it is necessary. Modern institutions of early and preschool relationships should be made available to parents in developing their parental knowledge and skills, which in no way implies giving the parents a *learning* role and the educator a *teaching* role- the educator does not *prescribe* the parents what to do, but, taking into account their family context and individuality of their child, indicates an opportunity to improve their relationships with the child by nurturing the way they raise them. On the other hand, understanding the family context is necessary for an educator to design the best approach to every child. The institution of early and preschool education primarily promotes combining family and institutional educators as individuals of different knowledge and experiences related to a certain child, and which they share in order to achieve the welfare of the child.

As institutional educators are professionally focused on the upbringing and have scientific knowledge and technical skills that are necessary for developmental continuity of the child, the

essence of this work gives them a role of initiative creators and responders to initiatives of other factors in establishing educational co-relationships.

3. Educational partnership of educators and parents

Family is a primary formative factor and a basis of the educational and social community that participates in forming complex emotional and social relationships important for the later development of the individual as a whole. Here is where the child gains his first skills, experiences, norms of behavior and models of identification (Previsic, 2003). In addition, family life is the introduction into social life. Here, a child adopts moral values and learns how to use his freedom (Grbac, 2003). The main objective of the educational process in institutions of early and preschool education is ensuring the well-being of a child, which includes the process of uniting a healthy and successful individual functioning of a child and establishing positive social relationships (National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, 2014). Such an institutional task cannot remain family decontextualized. Difficulties in the child's social functioning are, according to research, associated with the child's perception of parental educational practices. The research (Magoc-Simoni, 2012) on a sample of school children has shown that there is a statistically significant correlation between boys committing violence and the perception of being rejected from their mother. Rejection includes acts of punishment, misunderstanding, neglect, or failing to display interest, care or concern for the child. When it comes to girls, there is a positive correlation between violent behavior and perceived control by the mother, which implies a higher degree of monitoring child's emotions, thoughts and inner experiences. Parents prone to approving aggression and punishing children encourage their most aggressive behavior. Seeing parents fighting and being violent encourages the same patterns of behavior in children. In conclusion, with deterioration of the quality of parent-child relationships, tendency to violent behavior increases. A very important result of this research, in our opinion, is the determined level of violent behavior in children, depending on their age (the sample included children from fifth to eighth grade). It would be expected that older children due to developed social skills, cognitive functions and self-regulation show a lower level of violence compared to younger children, but the research has shown quite the opposite. If we think of programs of educational institutions self-sufficient for developing adequate behavior in children which they can encourage isolated, not taking into account broader context (especially family), it would be logical to expect that the length of the child's stay in educational institutions would productively impact the development of their social skills, but that is clearly not the case. Authors often point out that children who have poor peer relationships most often grow up in families where parents are bad role models who exercise inappropriate parenting styles, such as punishment and coercion, which children adopt and use in relationships with other children, which is why they usually reject them and show that they are not welcome to the community (Jurcevic-Lozancic, 2011). This shows how parenthood necessarily involves self-judgement of own behavior and actions and confirms the importance of the continuation of self-development of adults in order to have an improving impact on their children. Withholding, for example, of own emotionally unthoughtful reactions is a contribution to development of fruitful relationship between a parent and a child (Runkel, 2008). However, raising awareness on the need of developing parental capacities should not stay a question of every parent individually, but they should get support in early education institution, especially because the realization of the concept of *good* (Cudina-Obradovic, Obradovic, 2006), *competent* (Ljubetic, 2012) and *positive* (Stricevic, 2011) parenting requires social support. It is exactly why, as direct participants in child education, professional educators are encouraged to consider their contribution to the development of desirable parenting in order to improve the quality of a child's life.

The focus of institutional upbringing to establishing partnership with family educators is potentially crucial in achieving good development results of a child. As the family is a root formative factor and a permanent child's educator, to create pre-school programs who do not address the primary caregivers would mean denying a child at the origin of his life experiences. A child's opportunity to gain knowledge and experience, build social relationship in the institution of early and preschool institution is intertwined with the child's family experiences; programs intended for the child's upbringing do not exist in an isolated context. The educator's understanding of the child's family context is significant because of the ability to better understand child's behavior and needs, which allows the educator to adapt his own behavior towards him, a behavior which is confirming for his development. It is

important to emphasize the aforementioned because preschool programs are often designed with insufficient respect of family contribution. Projects that are examples of good practice associated with primary prevention, in some cases, somewhat neglect the parents' contribution. The project "*Alcohol is sadness*" (Mataga-Tintor, 2012) is related to prevention in the community that sensitizes common concern for children's well-being, and is comprehensive in various activities, but potentially the parents' perception of the project would have to be noted as an important factor because alcohol consumption of minors implies a possible parent-child issue, where the parent no longer manages to keep quality control over his child's behavior, does not know how the child spends his free time nor economic resources, or in other words – becomes or remains uninvolved.

The question of establishing partnership is a demanding educational task which requires development of educator's professional skills and the ability to make good relationships with adults. The problem of its establishment is that educators are often trained to work only with children, not adults, and it is implied that they know how adults learn and that they are capable of giving clear information with concrete examples (Stricevic, 2011). It is important to take into account educators' attitudes which contribute to discouragement of partnership with parents- they perceive them as uninterested, uncommunicative, unalterable, offensive, moody, superficial, and distanced. In problematic situations, educators avoid potential conflicts so they leave parents to solve educational problems on their own. The educators occasionally assume that parents will not take the problem seriously, that they will ignore or deny it, so the educator sometimes draws back to maintain peace. Educators believe that some parents do not have enough confidence in the institution or express a lack of support in achieving cooperation (Milanovic, 1997).

All of the above leads us to not only potentiate the importance of partnership but also concretize the *internal (related to educators specifically) and external (related to social factors)* conditions of its accomplishment. The basic *external* prerequisite is educator's education, which should be focused on the vision of establishing partnership between institutional and family educators. All in all, it is necessary that personal- professional development of educators is driven by clear rules of professional community which set responsibilities among all participants in the educational process.

Despite the complexity of this task, understanding a child and his parents as an indivisible whole suggests an inevitable necessity of that effort.

4. Educational partnership of educators and society

Participation of children and their families in the lives of kindergartens is confirmed by social documents as significant and important. The *National Strategy for Children's Rights in the Republic of Croatia from 2014 to 2020* clearly states that, since the main responsibility for protection, upbringing and development is carried by the family, it is necessary to improve and provide *systematic support* and help to parents, families and guardians in order for children to grow and develop in a safe and stable environment of understanding and respect. This means that the aforementioned support should be provided by institutions of early and preschool education, however the *Analysis on the Status of Women's and Children's Rights in the Republic of Croatia* (2011) states that exactly preschool education as a part of Croatian education system has not reached the level of development as in other countries of European Union and some transition countries. This is explained by discrimination of children while enrolling to an early education institution which establishes the criteria of entry points where working parents have a priority, and thus, a kindergarten is becoming a place of care for children of working parents and not an educational institution (Law on Preschool Education, 2013). At the same time, the risk factor for inadequate parenting practices is poverty (Raboteg-Saric, Pecnik, 2006), and unemployed parents, whose socio-economic status is lower, have limited access to educational institutions where they could get a desirable level of parenting support and where their child could enjoy equal rights of as children of working parents. It is further stated that the number of registered children who were not admitted to preschool shows the need to extend the network of preschool institutions and increase the number of children who can enroll in such programs (Milanovic et al., 2011). In addition, for all children in Croatia, it is only mandatory to spend one year before starting school in a preschool institution (National Curriculum for Early and Pre-school Education, 2014). This, in a way, disputes the importance of a common, family and institutional, systematic monitoring of a child development from an early age, and the institution for early and preschool

education is perceived important only in terms of *preparing* children for the start of formal education, which raises a question whether the society has realistically recognized educators as partners in developing the community.

The society is in its intention *educational*, among other, by laying down expectations from social, institutional, direct educators of children. However, out of the very domain of educational documents, the society also has an educational impact on an individual with its overall activities. The social contribution to upbringing of a child is visible through media access to child which shows how we perceive him in a society, what we think of him, and which content we offer him. It is however necessary to note that the *National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education* sets values which “result from the commitment of Croatian educational policy to complete personal development of the child, preservation and development of national, spiritual, material and natural heritage of the Republic of Croatia, European coexistence and creation of a society of knowledge and values which will allow progress and sustainable development”. The aforementioned values which are a landmark for educational objectives are knowledge, identity, humanism and tolerance, responsibility, autonomy, creativity. Humanism, which the document refers to, implies “acceptance and respect for every living being and their dignity and realization of justice as a life principle. It involves a high level of sensitivity for children and developing sensitivity of children for others: peers, family members, community and the overall living environment. Humanism and tolerance in education evolve from developing sensibility of children to needs of others, accepting others and understanding the importance of mutual interconnectedness with them (National Curriculum for Early and Preschool Education, 2014). Given that the document imposes social and educational orientation, we expect that as such it progresses in realization of those values and that the society is trying to implement those abstract commitments. It is expected that those are not only the values which children are taught in institutions, but that are actively lived in the society. As in the modern society media have also become important educators of children because parents, because of the hectic times we live in, spend less time with their children, teach them less and give them less moral lessons, and they leave this role to media (Ciboci, Kanizaj, Labas 2011), we would expect that media messages intended for children are organized in the atmosphere of the aforementioned educational orientation. However, research show that programs designed exclusively for children contain a lot of violent content (Ciboci, Kanizaj, Labas 2011). Furthermore, studies also show that violent content can leave consequences on the child’s psycho-social development and behavior (Zgrabljic, 2003). Violent behavior are not only practically over-presented, the question of protecting children from negative media influences is not given almost any attention not even on a declarative level - The Law on Croatian Radio Television (Official Gazette, 17/01), since it contains only general provisions that CRT is obliged to produce and / or broadcast programs intended for the education of children, whereby they are obliged to respect the honor, dignity, reputation and privacy of citizens, and especially the rights of children and young people and it seems that these few provisions are not quite enough to create a legislative framework which will systematically and clearly define the rights, obligations and responsibilities of the media towards children (Zgrabljic, 2003). In addition, it would be expected that the “Government recognizes the importance of media in the upbringing of children, in their proper psychological, physical and social development and that it is a useful partner and ally in raising them” (Zgrabljic, 2003). Except social authorities, since there are also public and commercial media, the important role is also played by the civil society.

In this context, the initiative of educators should not remain unremarkable, but precisely with their social engagement and involvement in social events they have an opportunity to strengthen the credibility of their educational efforts and advocate for best interests of children by encouraging the community that abstract formulations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) begin to live in a society through concrete actions. This kind of educational partnership with society is exactly what that society needs because it tends to its welfare- individually successful individuals, especially healthy, safe and active in the society lead to maintaining a successful community- economically productive, socially cohesive, democratic, environmentally sustainable, affirming human rights (Definition and Selection of Key Competences, 1987), and the contribution of institutional educators in this process is crucial.

5. Conclusion

Realization of educational partnership is a need resulting from defining upbringing as the primary task of the family, educational institutions and the community as a whole. With them focusing on the child's development, it is important to have a harmonized, joint contribution – educational care of the family is supported by responsibility of institutions with educational conscious commitment of the society. With justifying them theoretically, it is also necessary to articulate and concretize the preconditions which need to be provided at each level (personal, family, professional, institutional, social), in order to provide every child with the opportunity for his best development in a progressive community. If every educational factor is involved, but not cooperative in its educational efforts, the success will remain unrealized in its possible entirety. It is exactly why preschool institution educators are needed as the initiators of partnerships, which is how they advocate for best preconditions of a child's development in different contexts- institutional and external environment, family and general ambience in the child's life. The upbringing is realized in institutions that do not neglect the family, in families who respect institutions, in a society which, by taking care of them, opens up the possibility for its own development. The development of adult individuals and improving the lives of the whole community is an outcome of their creativity in raising every single child.

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