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Addressing Diversity and Equality in the Field of Early Childhood Education and Care in Serbia

By Ivana Bankovic,

English language teacher at Primary school “Branko Radičević”, Sedlare, Serbia

Abstract: This article explores diversity and equality issues in Early Childhood Education and Care field in Serbia. Three major themes that are particularly significant in the context of Serbia are identified and discussed: availability and accessibility of ECEC institutions, children with special needs and multiculturalism. The main considerations entail ensuring availability and accessibility of ECEC services, so that all children in the country would have equal opportunities with regard to benefiting from ECEC provision. Similarly, in order to foster and acknowledge child's own identity and a sense of belonging it is important to introduce him/her to cultures different from his/her own through positive atmosphere of play, curiosity, enjoyment and appreciation of differences. Therefore, the recommendations entail that addressing diversity and equality in ECEC settings in Serbia should be done on several very important levels: policy level, teacher training level, curriculum level and the level of everyday practice.

Key words: diversity, equality, Early Childhood Education and Care, Serbia

Apstrakt: U ovom radu su raspravljala o jednakosti i uvažavanju različitosti u sistemu predškolskog obrazovanja i vaspitanja u Srbiji. Na ovu temu se govori kroz prizmu tri pitanja: na koji način su dostupnost i pristupačnost predškolskih ustanova u vezi sa jednakim pravima za svu decu i uvažavanjem različitosti; kako se odnos prema ovim pojmovima ogleda u radu sa decom sa posebnim potrebama; i kakvo mesto multikulturalizam zauzima u predškolstvu. Zaključuje se da se pitanjima jednakosti i uvažavanja različitosti treba baviti na nekoliko nivoa: nivou obrazovnih politika, nivou obrazovanja vaspitača i nastavnika, nivou planova i programa i nivou svakodnevnog rada i razmatra se kako svaki od datih nivoa doprinosi unapređenju jednakosti i uvažavanja različitosti.

Ključne reči: različitost, jednakost, predškolsko obrazovanje i vaspitanje, Srbija

Introduction

Addressing diversity and equality in Early Childhood Education and Care field is a very important contemporary issue across the globe. As population becomes increasingly multi-faceted in terms of social class, people with disabilities, family status, ethnic minorities, religious minorities, the majority population, economic migrants, refugees and many others, the importance of recognising different individual needs and of ensuring equity in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children in the educational settings is highly emphasized. This issue is also very important for the field of ECEC in Serbia. In the next paragraphs, the diversity and equality issues, which are particularly significant in the context of Serbia, are explored by identifying three major themes and discussing them in some detail.

Definition of key terms

The concepts that are referred to throughout the paper are broad and subject to many different definitions and interpretations depending on the context, perceptions and theoretical perspectives. In this paper Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is considered as “a global term encompassing all arrangements providing care and education for children under compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours or programme content” (OECD, 2006, p. 229). An Early Childhood Education and Care setting refers to a centre-based ECEC which is “collective (more than 5 children) early education and care for young children from 6-12 months to 6 years, distinguished from services provided in households or family settings”. The centres may be public or private, and include “crèches, kindergartens, pre-school (normally 3-6 years) and publicly provided pre-primary classes, but not playgroups, or out-of-school care” (OECD, 2006, p. 227). An Early Childhood Teacher refers to a person “involved in teaching and learning with young children in early childhood settings” (MacNaughton, 2003, p. viii). Diversity refers to the diverse nature of a society for example in terms of social class, gender, returned emigrants, family status, minority groups and the majority group. Equality refers to the importance of

recognising different individual needs and of ensuring equity in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families; it is therefore not about treating people the 'same' (Ireland Office of the Minister & Ireland Dept. of Health 2006).

Present ECEC policies

In 2004 the government of the Republic of Serbia introduced the National Action Plan for Children (*Savez za prava deteta 2004*) which defines the general policy direction of the country towards children for the period until 2015. This document aims to fulfil some of the country's international obligations arising from its 1990 ratification of The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989), United Nations Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2000), A World Fit for Children (Unicef 2002) and Education For All (Unesco 1990), among others. Since 2003 the ECEC system in Serbia has been a part of the unified educational system (Gavrilović 2006). Currently, it is regulated under the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System (*Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja 2009*) and more specifically under the Law on Preschool Education and Upbringing (*Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju 2010*). These laws regulate the establishment and activities of ECEC institutions including their aims and principles, record keeping procedures, language use in minority communities, the organization of teachers' work, staff requirements and monitoring and financing. The laws state that preschool education and upbringing - which refers to services for children from six months to compulsory schooling age (seven years) - is of direct public interest and constitutes a public service.

Availability and accessibility

Serbia is still a highly centralized country, both in terms of government and economic development. The capital and nearby regions are the most economically developed with many successful national and international companies. Thus, the local budgets of these regions are significantly higher than in other parts of the country. However, ECEC services are one of the rare systems which are governed as well as financed at the local level. At this moment there are many investments in ECEC in the capital. On the other hand,

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smaller municipalities, due to underdeveloped industry and economy, do not have the funds to open new services and ensure that ECEC services are available and accessible to all members of the community. Thus, availability and accessibility of ECEC services greatly differs throughout the country. Consequently, it follows that all children in the country do not have equal opportunities with regard to benefiting from ECEC provision (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004, p. 142). Vulnerable or disadvantaged groups are especially affected. In the capital or more affluent municipalities these groups have more support in comparison to less affluent municipalities where the support is lacking, due to limited budgets and other resources. Since this is a very sensitive and complex issue, finding some kind of solution requires a lot of commitment. The first step should be raising awareness about the problem and getting political will to address it. This should be followed by the introduction of a new policy that would focus specifically on improving ECEC services in those regions in which local governments do not have sufficient funds. Similarly, special funds from the national budget need to be allocated (Baker et al., 2004, p. 81) in order to establish new services or support projects aimed at encouraging vulnerable groups to use ECEC services. By giving special attention to vulnerable groups at the policy level as well as by providing investments from the national budget, local governments would be motivated to pay special attention to those groups (esp. minorities). This would, consequently, lead to better accessibility of ECEC services to vulnerable groups as well as increasing diversity and equality within the services. Therefore, ECEC services can be made equally available and accessible to all inhabitants of the country, irrespective of whether they live in 'richer' or 'poorer' regions, whether they belong to vulnerable groups or minorities.

Children with special needs

Another issue that is very important for achieving equality and diversity is whether and how children with special needs use ECEC services. For a long time, these children have been sent to 'special' schools where only special needs children were admitted. However, currently there is an initiative which aims to integrate these children through inclusive education into the regular schooling.

This initiative instigated a debate on how this can be achieved in order to be successful and beneficial for all involved. Inclusive education is definitely the right step towards respecting diversity and equality principles for all children in the society (United Nations, 1989, sec. 23). However, if it is not implemented in the right way it can do more harm than good for all children. In order to ensure complete integration of children with special needs it is not sufficient to simply put them into a classroom with all other children. It is essential that good support mechanisms be provided by the system in order to achieve the goals of inclusion. The first necessary step is adapting space to suit children with special needs, mainly building ramps, suitable toilets and providing technical equipment. This would raise the quality of everyday life and schoolwork of these children. Next, since majority of teachers have not received adequate training on how to work with children with special needs during their formal education, they should be trained on how to deal with this situation through some form of professional development. Furthermore, new courses on special and inclusive education need to be introduced in bachelor programs for new generations of ECEC teachers. Another way of supporting teachers and children could be hiring assistants trained to work with special needs children in order to ensure constructive learning process for all children, those with special needs as well as others. Also, it is very important to re-examine the curriculum and adapt it to suit abilities of every child through designing individual educational programs. Moreover, since community awareness is another factor of great importance, ECEC services should try to raise it by organizing parental meetings, shows, recitals and similar activities emphasizing commonalities and similarities (Kernan & Singer, 2011, p. 108). Parents can, as a result of these activities, become aware that interaction and learning of all children can be successful even though it includes children with special needs. This could, consequently, lead to better integration of the children with special needs into peer groups because the level of isolation or bullying could diminish when children see that their parents have positive attitudes towards children with special needs.

Multiculturalism

It has been argued that parents usually choose early years services based on their home culture, language or religion (Willer et al., 1991). Thus, parents choose to send their child to an ECEC which is likely to enroll other children of similar/same background, language and culture. In Serbia, the right to education in minority languages is guaranteed by the law and ECEC services that use languages of the minority population exist. As a consequence many ECEC services are quite homogeneous either on ethnical, language, religious or socioeconomic level. Therefore, ECEC services face a difficult challenge since they are expected to provide experiences outside of their groups and offer opportunities to teach children how to be tolerant, respectful and accepting of differences. This can be quite difficult having in mind that they are quite homogeneous. One way of overcoming this difficulty could be visits to other ECEC services that are different in some way either by ethnicity, language, religion or other (Wardle, 2003). This would ensure exposing children to diversity and making them experience it in a positive, constructive way. A variety of activities that can be more or less formal could be organized, which would expose children to different culture through storytelling, plays, foreign language learning or free play time with toys that are particular to the particular culture. Consequently, this can lead to learning through experience about backgrounds of people different from them, discovering about different ways of doing the same thing or solving the same problem, challenge stereotypical thinking and decrease distinction between binary opposites US and THEM. It is not only important for the children from the minority groups in order to understand and learn how to function in a world around them, but also for the children from the majority group in order to sensitize them for the more and more diverse world they would not otherwise have an opportunity to experience.

Foreign language learning is particularly valuable as it opens the way for the children to get acquainted with the foreign language culture and different ways of cultural behaviors. It enables children to experience diversity in an interesting, cognitively stimulating way as well as to develop competences that are crucial for communicating inter-culturally. Early second/foreign language learning is also a

part of the EU policies such as A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (European Commission, 2005), Action plan on language learning and linguistic diversity (European Commission, 2003) and Council Resolution on the early teaching of European Union languages (The Council of the European Union, 1998). The objectives of these policies are to encourage early teaching of languages, the continuous provision of teaching in several languages, increasing awareness among all those involved of the benefits of teaching languages at an early age and encouraging measures to prepare teachers working in the field of early language learning to meet new needs. The rationale for introducing very young children to languages other than their mother tongue entails fostering multiculturalism that would enable greater understanding, respect and openness to Europe's cultural wealth, giving children a head start, providing them with a useful resource for further achievement as well as the views, which have been debated (Long, 2007), that a language is learnt more easily and quickly when children are young rather than as they grow older. Thus, the issue of second/foreign language acquisition is becoming progressively more relevant, particularly for the field of ECEC.

Conclusion

Having said all this, it follows that addressing diversity and equality in ECEC settings in Serbia should be done on several very important levels: policy level, teacher training level, curriculum level and the level of everyday practice. Having good policies pertaining to diversity and equality that are clearly stated in the law is extremely important. Although it does not guarantee practicing diversity and equality it gives them significance and helps raise social awareness. Furthermore, since teachers are crucial for practicing diversity and equality with children, parents and community, it is important to address diversity and equality on teacher education level as well, either by having a training that examines it or as a part of some other professional development activity. As teachers may sometimes be unaware of their stereotypes and bias it is necessary to question and examine their attitudes as well as to increase knowledge base regarding this issue. Moreover, curriculum presents the crucial document that empowers or depowers teachers to practice diversity and equality approaches in their

everyday practice. Thus, it is extremely important to reexamine the curriculum and implement diversity and equality principles as a base which teachers can later develop further with regard to a specific context they are in. Curriculum also obliges teachers, who otherwise would not do so, to deal with this issue (for e.g. using different stories or songs from the majority as well as minority or foreign culture, language and background) (Wardle, 2003). Finally, everyday practice is very important for implementing principles of diversity and equality into the life and upbringing of children as well as parents and consequently the whole local community. Therefore, teachers need to have sensitivity, continuous awareness of implementing these principles and should create environment that fosters equality and diversity (for e.g. pictures on the walls, toys, storybooks, different activities...) (Wardle, 1999). Teachers should also include parents and community into the planning of the activities, through parental visits to the kindergarten or visits to a community setting particular or different in some way. Introducing children to cultures different from their own is very important in order to foster and acknowledge, on one side, children's identity and a sense of belonging and, on the other, tolerance and appreciation of differences.

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Ivana Bankovic is an English language teacher and an Early Childhood professional. After earning her degree in the English language and literature from the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac in 2006, she worked as an English language teacher for four years. Following that, she enrolled the International Master in Early Childhood Education and Care organized jointly by Oslo and Akershus University College, Norway, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland and University of Malta and graduated in 2012. Her professional interests include EFL/ESL teaching, TEYL, early childhood studies and children's rights. She is committed to enhancing the quality of experience of educational settings for all children. Ivana is a country representative of the Erasmus Mundus Student and Alumni Association for Serbia.