

## UNDERSTANDING OF INTELLECTUAL AUTONOMY BY THE EDUCATOR - A FACTOR FOR FLEXIBLE PEDAGOGICAL LEAD IN THE PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

UDC 373.2(497.7); 005:373.211.24(497.7)

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**Abstract.** *Intellectual autonomy as a discourse of humanistic pedagogy enables the preschool teacher to critically examine the impact of his or her own work and provide a constant impetus for development and change. In this sense, the teacher successfully creates strategies with the help of which she leads the pedagogical activity in a reactive and contemporary way. This paper refers to the results of a research whose aim was to determine the relationship between the understanding of intellectual autonomy and flexibility in the pedagogical leadership of preschool teachers from the point of view of a possible discrepancy between the theoretical and applied curriculum. The research was conducted in seven kindergartens in the Skopje region, where 108 preschool teachers were surveyed with a questionnaire and 45 of them participated in a focus group interview. An analysis of the pedagogical documentation was also conducted to show the relevance of the answers from the other instruments. The different research instruments showed a discrepancy in the teachers' attitudes and opinions about the same segments of the educational process. They respect intellectual autonomy, but do not have a clear idea of it and are not aware of their own rights related to its realization. At the same time, they are not aware of the extent to which and the direction in which they can turn autonomy into development and change. Therefore, it is necessary to redefine and structure the competencies related to intellectual autonomy of preschool teachers throughout their initial and continuing education.*

**Key words:** *intellectual autonomy, pedagogical lead, early childhood development, preschool education*

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Received December 15, 2022/Accepted February 26, 2023

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The preschool teacher is a leader of the whole activity in the preschool educational process. He organizes the whole activity taking into account the individual and developmental characteristics of the children and takes care to achieve the educational goals set at the national level. He must not be rigidly pressured from outside and implement the curriculum in the form in which it was written/prescribed if it does not meet the individual needs of the children he perceives. The preschool teacher who is aware of the needs of practice knows how to adapt and modify the written curriculum in a democratic, scientific, and professional manner while creating a developmental model for educational practice and a developmental curriculum. Thus, intellectual autonomy as a discourse of humanistic pedagogy, then, enables the preschool teacher to critically examine the impact of his work and to effect continuous development and change. In this sense, the teacher successfully creates strategies with the help of which he manages the pedagogical activity in a creative and timely manner. For this purpose, he should have a high degree of intellectual autonomy.

Depending on how he understands and implements intellectual autonomy, the preschool teacher's way of pedagogical leadership can be evaluated, which is important for quality early childhood development.

### 1.1. Understanding of intellectual autonomy

Intellectual autonomy represents a critical review of the effects of the work and a constant striving for development and change. In that sense, the educator includes different models of evaluation and valorization, constantly re-evaluating himself and, accordingly, developing strategies with which to redevelop the program and the activity. In this way, he works on his intellectual and professional development, but also becomes aware of the need for continuous development of the children in the group he leads. The educator, aware of the needs of practice, knows how to adapt and modify the written curriculum in a democratic, scientific and professional manner, while creating a developmental model of educational practice and a developmentally oriented curriculum. Considering that the educator is the holder of the activity, how he understands the curriculum and how he will apply it in practice depends on him. "Autonomy presupposes an active and dynamic attitude of the educator towards his own and other people's practices, the educational process which is at the same time the result of individual and joint decisions and plans... The educator who needs emancipation in his competence framework is not satisfied only with the formal or operational change of the institution, but also with changes in learning strategies..." (Šagud & Jurčević-Lozančić A., 2012, p. 466)

Intellectual autonomy, then, is the educator's ability to think critically about practice and be aware of the needs of the moment, both in terms of personal development and the development of children's autonomy and self-awareness. In that sense, the preschool teacher evaluates his activity and, accordingly, develops strategies with which to redevelop the program and activities. In this way, he works on his intellectual and professional development, but he also becomes aware of the need to continuously promote the autonomy of the children in the group he leads. Intellectual autonomy allows the preschool teacher to find new truths and thus contribute to the development of pedagogical theory and practice.

Pedagogical leadership is the way the preschool teacher balances the written and applied curriculum. It is the way in which he or she implements the written curriculum in

a way that takes into account the needs of the environment, the children, and the practice. The educator (preschool teacher) is the leader of the educational activity, the creator, coordinator and evaluator of the educational processes, who puts a special stamp on all the areas and subjects that develop during the process of upbringing and education. The right choice of methods, forms and contents, as well as the way they are combined according to the findings and in awareness of changes and developments, make up the character of the pedagogical leading of the preschool teacher.

The applied curriculum is the fruit of emancipatory and implicit pedagogy as a discourse through which the educator is trained to question personal attitudes, reflect on his understanding of the processes and follow the needs of children and practice. In order for the written curriculum to be adaptable to the needs of the particular practice, it should be flexible and not provide ready-made solutions for educational situations. An educator who is emancipatory and has built autonomy can easily locate the elements of the curriculum that need developmental modification in a particular situation. The autonomous educator should do this through the processes of shared and used experiences of reflection and self-reflection. In this way, the educator gives a social dimension to his autonomy, with which he contributes to the autonomous development of the collaborators - including the child as a partner and subject in the educational process. All this leads to the conclusion that autonomy allows the educator to adapt the curriculum in preschool practice.

According to this discourse, this paper refers to the results of the research whose aim was to discover the relationship between preschool teachers' understanding of intellectual autonomy and the flexibility of their pedagogical leadership from the point of view of the possible discrepancy between the theoretical and the applied curriculum.

The basic paradigms and directions from which the researched problem started were:

- The way of pedagogical leadership by the preschool teacher is significant for the quality and flexibility in the implementation of the curriculum (for its applied form)
- On the other hand, pedagogical leadership is related to the educator's understanding of intellectual autonomy and the way he implements it in practice.
- This means that intellectual autonomy is the "driver" for change and development of the preschool curriculum and the entire preschool process

In view of the above, the subject of research was the relationship between the educator's intellectual autonomy and pedagogical leadership in preschool education from the point of view of the gap between the written/theoretical curriculum and the applied curriculum. The possibilities and congruent relationship between two important aspects of preschool education were considered, i.e.:

- From the aspect of awareness of the need and existence of intellectual autonomy among educators in the implementation of the educational activity and
- From the aspect of the gap between the written, i.e. theoretical and applied curriculum, on the one hand, and the success of the connection of needs and opportunities in practice, on the other hand

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The main goal of the research was to determine *whether there is a relationship between the autonomy of the educator and flexibility in pedagogical leadership in preschool education, without devaluing the scientifically established educational goals in the theoretical*

*curriculum*. In this sense, we wanted to examine whether there is a relationship between the intellectual autonomy of the educator and the flexibility in the pedagogical leading of preschool education, taking into account the needs of the child, the practice, but also the scientifically established educational objectives in the theoretical curriculum.

### **2.1. Data collection process**

The data processing has a quantitative and a qualitative character. It was developed for each instrument separately, divided into phases. The research was conducted in seven kindergartens in the Skopje region, where 108 preschool teachers were interviewed with a questionnaire and 45 of them participated in a focus group interview. The sample was determined randomly. In order to show the relevance of the answers from the other instruments, an analysis of the pedagogical documentation was also conducted to meet the requirements of the research. All results were subjected to analysis and interpretation, based on which specific conclusions were drawn.

### **2.2. Method and data collection tools**

The research and processing of the studied problem was a composition of quantitative and qualitative analyses. In the study of this problem, the descriptive method was used, with the help of which the knowledge of the theoretical and practical framework of the research was interpreted, and the phenomena studied by the research, their connection, dependence, independence, etc. were described. The data were collected in three ways, namely through a questionnaire consisting of open and closed questions, through a structured interview with focus groups whose discussions were recorded and entered into an interview protocol, as well as through the use of documentation analysis and a protocol to collect the most important data in the interest of the research. The documentation analysis included the educators' personal records, such as the operational plan, notes to evaluate the process, notes to monitor the children's individual achievements, etc.

## **3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The analysis of the research includes the observations obtained from the pedagogical documents and the interview, as well as the observations obtained from the questionnaires. In the development of the results, the data obtained with the different instruments are grouped according to their interrelation, in order to obtain a holistic picture of the specific aspect of the studied topic. In the following, only a part of the results of the research is presented.

In the first question, we are interested in the preschool teachers' opinion on the definition of the concept of intellectual autonomy. Respondents were free to choose several response alternatives at the same time to complete their views on this important aspect of preschool education. Accordingly, the largest percentage, 65.85% of the respondents, defined intellectual autonomy as a design of the educational activity according to the specifics of the children and the educational group, as well as according to the educator's perception of the efficiency of the process. Immediately after that, in 46.34% of cases, the respondents understand intellectual autonomy as the freedom of the educator in carrying out the activity, while 36.58% of them consider that autonomy is only an innovation in the educational process. The rest of the respondents (little of the cases) emphasized the freedom in planning

the activity as an explanation for the intellectual autonomy of the educator, but a part of them sees the autonomy in the creation of developmental changes, as well as in the continuous education and in their own development.

On the other hand, the answers to the second question show that the respondents (preschool teachers and other professionals) consider intellectual autonomy as a factor to increase the quality of educational activities. When asked about the role of intellectual autonomy in the implementation of the educational process, the largest number of respondents, 75.61%, agree that their role is to increase the quality of educational activities. Only 24.39% of the educators surveyed agree that intellectual autonomy should help to adapt the program to practice.

This attitude was confirmed by most of the respondents' answers during the conducted interview. Namely, the educators interviewed voted for the reliance on intellectual autonomy as a factor in the quality of the educational process. It is interesting that this attitude was not evident in the analysis of pedagogical documentation. These data encourage us to reflect on the reasons for the discrepancy between the responses and the actual behavior of practitioners in practice. It is probably due to several interrelated factors, such as fear of deviating from the program, not knowing their rights to use autonomy in implementation, etc.

The second group of questions related to the educators' views and opinions about the implementation of intellectual autonomy in practice. When asked how they (preschool teachers) feel about autonomy in planning educational activities, respondents answered affirmatively in 73.17% of cases, that is, they feel autonomous in their practice, while 12.16% of them did not share this feeling. The rest of the respondents indicated that they do not know if they feel autonomous in their work.

If we take into account the partial determination of the concept of intellectual autonomy, which is evident in the responses to the first part of the questionnaire, we could discuss here the authenticity and originality of the experience and application of autonomy in the design and implementation of the educational process. Moreover, as mentioned above, the pedagogical records did not record the educators' autonomy in planning and recording the activity.

The third part of the questionnaire was about how educators perceive the written curriculum versus the applied curriculum. When asked whether they deviate from the written curriculum in practice, the largest number of respondents, i.e. over 56.00% of them, answered positively, i.e. they confirmed that they deviate from the written/theoretical curriculum, while only a few of the respondents deviated from it partially in the practical implementation in the educational process. Only 9.76% of the respondents consistently apply the curriculum without deviating from its requirements. Regarding the right to deviate from the written curriculum, in a greater number of cases (more than half) educators believe that they do not have the right to make changes, in contrast to respondents who believe that they have the right to do so, and in contrast to 7.32% who believe that they partially have the right to deviate from the given curriculum. When asked about the problems in consistently applying the given/written curriculum, the largest number of them, 39.02%, answered that they have no problem and consistently apply the program as given, while 29.27% have no opinion on this question and 4.88% did not answer this question. The remaining 26.83% answered that they have problems with the consistent application of the program because it does not fulfill all aspects of planning the educational activity. The answers in this group of questions again contradict the respondents' determination to be positive about the deviations from the written curriculum that they realize in practice.

Interesting are the statements of educators on the question whether they feel that they play an important role in shaping and leading the educational process. Namely, 85.36% of them declared themselves positive to this question, while 12.19% chose the negative answer, i.e. they do not feel that they play a significant role in shaping and leading the educational process. The remaining 2.45% explained themselves by choosing the alternative "I do not know". The answers to this question justify the statement that educators (respondents) have the need to make changes, but according to the state of the previous group of questions, it is uncertain to what extent they put this need into practice and in what direction they do it.

The fourth group of questions relates to pedagogical leadership and its connection to intellectual autonomy. According to the opinion of the respondents to the question whether they implement the interactive pedagogical leadership in the preschool educational practice, the largest number of answers, 58.54%, gave a positive answer, 36.58% of them estimate that the interactive pedagogical leadership is partially implemented, while 2.44% chose a negative answer and also 2.44% have no opinion on this question. On the other hand, 63.41% of the educators surveyed indicated that there is a relationship between the pedagogical leadership of the educational process and the intellectual autonomy of the educators. 19.51% of the total number of respondents declared a partial relationship between the two variables, which together with the positive answer is still a high percentage. The rest of the respondents have no opinion on this question or did not choose any of the offered answers

#### 4. DISCUSSION

From the analysis, it appears that the different research instruments reveal a discrepancy in teachers' attitudes and opinions about the same segments of the educational process. We found that preschool teachers respect intellectual autonomy, but do not have a clear idea about it and are not aware of their own rights related to its realization. At the same time, they are not aware of the extent to which and the direction in which they can turn autonomy into development and change. We must emphasize this moment as an important problem in creating the quality of preschool educational process, which is confirmed in many other researches (Kanyiri, Alfred, & Alfred, 2017; Koteva-Mojsovska, 2015; Shratz, 2005)

Therefore, the competencies related to intellectual autonomy of preschool teachers need to be redefined and restructured in their initial training and continuous professional development. The preschool teachers (respondents) have a need to make changes, but they have no idea (or cannot explain) how much and how they put this need into practice, and they have no idea in which direction they do it. In the interview and questionnaires, teachers in most cases indicated that they initiate and make changes in the application of the curriculum on the one hand, but on the other hand, the analysis of pedagogical records showed the opposite. Further analysis showed that educators are not aware of their rights to what extent they can change and adapt the written curriculum, and therefore rigidly adhere to the form in which it was given.

The result shows that intellectual autonomy is respected, and therefore it is necessary to constantly support them in the function of pedagogical quality management of the educational process. (Yidong, 2014). It is interesting to note that in the records, which are officially kept by educators, there is no flexibility or deviation from the written program, so it is not possible to draw a specific conclusion that supports the desired response. By

analogy with modern pedagogical and humanistic discourses (see: Koteva-Mojsovska, 2018; Kanyiri et al., 2017), the conducted interview in our research confirmed the need to give educators flexibility and greater independence in terms of applied curriculum, but not at the cost of neglecting scientific orientation and national interests in terms of educational goals. In this direction, educators do not seem to feel that they are trusted in terms of their ability to design and develop the educational process.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Considering the result obtained, it can be stated that teachers are looking for solutions in initial and permanent education, as well as in training courses where they acquire knowledge on how to adjust the program. They also want an improvement in the working conditions established by the legal regulation, that is, a reduction in the number of children, more time for the exchange of experiences and for planning and evaluation, and more confidence in their ability to adapt the program to practice without disturbing the state educational policy.

If we go by the educators' testimonies and take into account their personal records, we can say that there is a connection between the educator's intellectual autonomy and flexibility in his pedagogical leadership in preschool education, taking into account the child's needs, practice, but also the scientifically established educational goals in the theoretical curriculum. However, if we take into account the observations from practice, we can conclude that there is no adaptation of the written curriculum. So, it is necessary to intervene as soon as possible. Intellectual autonomy requires a deep confidence in one's own competence and professionalism, but also a critical attitude towards all aspects of educational processes. A critical relationship develops a tendency toward personal growth that leads the educator to lifelong learning and continuous improvement. Therefore, the educator should be trained to become an emancipated and autonomous person during the initial education.

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## INTELEKTUALNA AUTONOMIJA VASPITAČA – FAKTOR FLEKSIBILNOG PEDAGOŠKOG VOĐENJA U PREDŠKOLSKOM VASPITNO-OBRAZOVNOM PROCESU

*Intelektualna autonomija kao diskurs humanističke pedagogije omogućava vaspitaču da kritički sagleda sopstveni rad i utiče na njegov permanentni podsticaj za razvoj i promene. Imajući to u vidu, vaspitač može uspešno da kreira strategije koje mu omogućavaju da pedagošku delatnost vodi na reaktivan i savremen način. U radu su prikazani rezultati istraživanja čiji je cilj bio da se utvrdi odnos između shvatanja intelektualne autonomije od strane vaspitača i fleksibilnosti u njegovom pedagoškom rukovođenju sa stanovišta mogućeg neslaganja između teorijskog i primenjenog kurikulumu. Istraživanje je sprovedeno u sedam vrtića na području Skoplja, u Severnoj Makedoniji. U istraživanju su korišćena dva instrumenta – anketni upitnik na uzorku od 108 vaspitača i intervju fokus grupa u kome je učestvovalo 45 vaspitača. U cilju relevantnosti dobijenih rezultata, urađena je analiza odgovora vaspitača iz različitih instrumenata koji se odnose na iste segmente obrazovnog procesa koja je pokazala neslaganje u njihovim pojedinim stavovima i mišljenjima. Dobijeni rezultati ukazuju na to da vaspitači poštuju intelektualnu autonomiju, ali nemaju jasnu predstavu o njoj i nisu upoznati sa sopstvenim pravima koja se odnose na njeno ostvarivanje. Takođe, nisu upoznati sa tim u kojoj meri i na koji način mogu da pretvore autonomiju u razvoj i promene. Zbog toga je u toku inicijalnog i kontinuiranog obrazovanja vaspitača neophodno redefinisati i strukturirati kompetencije koje se odnose na njihovu intelektualnu autonomiju.*

*Ključne reči: intelektualna autonomija, pedagoško liderstvo, rani razvoj deteta, predškolsko vaspitanje i obrazovanje*