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CONTEXTUAL LEARNING IN THE MODERN PRESCHOOL CURRICULUM

Abstract: The modeling of a modern preschool curriculum is contextually conditioned and represents a complex process. Each kindergarten has its own *identity*, its *DNA*, just as children, preschool teachers and other participants in the educational process have their own *individual equations*. Contextual learning is at the heart of contemporary theoretical and value-based principles of education, encompassing dimensions of child well-being: cognitive, conative, and social. It focuses on creating an environment that ensures a sense of connection with other social subjects, a sense of competence, and a sense of autonomy in expression and action. Modern perspectives on education and upbringing, and consequently on pedagogical and didactic implications, are based on the theoretical foundations of postmodern discourse: contemporary understandings of the philosophy of education, sociocultural theory, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. The problem that initiated this research is marked by the question: *To what extent do preschools/kindergartens provide employed preschool teacher-students with opportunities for collaborative work, autonomy, (self-)reflection, critical thinking, emancipatory approaches in creating contextual practices, and decision-making (as actors of educational policy)?*

The paper presents the results of action (qualitative) research conducted with a sample of 40 preschool teachers employed in Vršac and Pančevo. The aim of the research is to determine, from the preschool teachers' perspective, the extent to which the kindergarten is a place of contextual and reflective practice and, based on these insights, to devise steps for its improvement. Through a semi-structured questionnaire, preschool teachers shared their insights regarding the context and specificities of the kindergarten and the educational group: group specificities; the greatest advantage and the greatest challenge in terms of contextual conditions; the extent to which different perspectives are respected in the institution; the extent to which preschool teachers accept perspectives differing from their own; and the extent to which preschool teachers act as decision-makers in building reflective practices. The research results highlight the importance of continuous reflection and adaptation of educational practices in preschools to better meet children's needs and support their overall development. While a desire for improvement and change is evident, challenges such as a lack of resources, organizational constraints, and the complexity of implementing new concepts and approaches remain significant. This study merely touches upon the significance of these questions and, we believe, opens new avenues for research to further improve educational practices.

Keywords: contextual kindergarten practice, preschool teachers' reflections, preschool teachers as decision-makers.

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1. Introduction

The contextual practice of preschools reflects a dedicated, committed, and highly professional approach by practitioners. They cannot work in isolation; as emphasized by modern theories of education and upbringing, participants in the educational process form a network characterized by horizontal exchange and learning. Preschool teachers, with the support of professional services (directors, professional associates) and other participants in the educational process, present an image of the preschool and its activities. In this sense, it is impossible to view the participation of one educational group in isolation from others. This is supported by the emphasis in regulatory acts and strategic documents, such as the current *Foundations of the Preschool Education and Care Program – "Years of Ascent" (Godine uzleta)*, which highlight that peer groups are not limited to children of the same age but encompass all children in the preschool—from infant groups to those in the year before school entry.

The context of kindergartens and their associated culture forms an integral part of daily functioning—from routines and rituals to play and learning situations (Krnjaja, Pavlovic Breneselovic, 2022; Slunjski, 2015; Pavlovic Breneselovic, Krnjaja, Jovanovic, & Sjenicic, 2022). Likewise, the context and structure significantly influence the work of preschool teachers, and consequently all key aspects of daily, weekly, and monthly schedules, as well as the approach cultivated, supported, and encouraged within the institution. Whether an exploratory, heuristic model or inertia and "business as usual" will prevail depends significantly on the operators, namely the preschool teachers. This is undoubtedly influenced by their job satisfaction, autonomy, and, *hand in hand* supportiveness, as well as their impact on processes and participation in the micro-politics of the institution (Veselinov, 2022).

The doyen of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire, in his work, the so-called testament of critical pedagogy "Pedagogija obespravljenih" / "Pedagogy of the Oppressed", clearly emphasizes the importance of participation by all actors in school (and kindergarten) operations. Institutionalization and the integration of preschools into the education system in Brazil began after the fall of the military junta in the mid-1960s. Freire and his followers (Giroux, McLaren, Shor, and others), building on the roots of reform pedagogy, promote a slogan for educators: *It concerns me, I question it, I contribute to it*. At the same time, they oppose the "banking model" of education, as Freire highlighted (Freire, 2020; Veselinov, 2021).

Critically and emancipatorily oriented pedagogues, like Paulo Freire, stress that education primarily involves assessing learning in relation to the values of the context in which it takes place. This understanding underpins education as a learning process in which those who learn are shaped in one of many possible ways. This shaping is inevitably influenced by the political values that dominate society during a particular period (Gojkov Rajic, Stojanovic, Safranji, & Gojkov, 2021).

For pedagogy, and consequently for didactics, this is not a new idea. It has always been understood that education and upbringing are inseparable from societal dynamics and that society has historically influenced the shaping of educational standards and ideals. However, what distinguishes critical-emancipatory pedagogy and didactics is the idea that education and upbringing should be viewed as a learning process that begins with various forms of awareness-raising among learners. This applies not only to children, students, preschool teachers, and teachers but also to parents and other relevant participants (agents) in the pedagogical process.

The critical-emancipatory movement primarily aims to uncover the political foundations underlying every pedagogy. This would provide those engaged in the learning process with the opportunity to transform the power relations that shape them, thus positioning the "pedagogy of hope" as an alternative to the "pedagogy of subjugation" (Gojkov Rajic et al., 2021; Gojkov & Stojanovic, 2024; Veselinov, 2021).

In this context, and guided by these principles, it is essential that educators—in this research, preschool teachers—are recognized as agents of change and key actors in shaping educational policy. Following these values, this paper presents the results of qualitative research conducted with preschool teachers, who are also master's students, focusing on their role in creating micro-politics and shaping the institutional climate.

1.2. Theoretical framework – contextual approach to practice from the perspective of contemporary theories of education and upbringing

Contemporary perspectives on education and upbringing, and consequently on pedagogical and didactic implications, are grounded in the theoretical foundations of postmodern discourse. The theoretical and value-based postulates of this discourse stem from modern understandings of the philosophy of education, sociocultural theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism, and the sociology of childhood. A common denominator among these viewpoints is the recognition of childhood as an inherently valuable and visible social category. This implies a shift in understanding children—from focusing on individual development to addressing the socio-cultural construction of childhood and the position of the child as a social actor within a given context. The child is seen as an active participant in their own learning and life, emphasizing collaboration in developing a community of practice between children and adults. Within this interaction, all participants (children, preschool teachers/practitioners, parents, and other stakeholders) are mutually transformed (Najdanovic Tomic, Vuletic, Kalezic Vignjevic, & Glamocak, 2022; Slunjski, 2020; Timmons, Pelletier, & Corter, 2016).

Sociocultural theory highlights the importance of the sociocultural context in children's learning. Through social interactions with peers and adults, children acquire cultural knowledge, learn to use cultural tools, and adopt behavioral patterns. Mastery and use of cultural tools (such as language, symbols, objects, customs, etc.) and various strategies are initially learned in the everyday family environment and the community in which they live (Pavlovic Breneselovic & Krnjaja, 2014). This underpins the rationale for preschool education programs to be oriented towards the life context and to support the experiences children build within their families and cultural communities (Pyle, Prioletta, & Poliszczuk, 2018; Walsh, McGuinness, & Sproule, 2017; Krnjaja, 2022).

Poststructuralism is an intellectual strategy for understanding how regimes of truth are formed and how knowledge and power are interrelated. Unlike other theoretical paradigms that attempt to theorize history in some way, poststructuralists seek to historicize theory. In other words, instead of offering another model for understanding the world, they provide historical explanations for the power dynamics underlying the mutual constitution of contemporary subjects and regimes of knowledge about the world (Ejdus, 2013). Reflections in the educational process pertain to the construction and deconstruction of practice, its continuous reevaluation through the critical friend model, horizontal exchange, and (self)reflective inventories.

From a postmodern perspective, educational processes take place within human interactions in complex organizations that reflect the pervasive political, social, cultural, and economic factors of a given time. This implies that preschools and schools must be analyzed as institutions situated within their socioeconomic environment and context. Politics cannot be separated from education, particularly because the agenda in schools is not determined within the classroom but by political and socioeconomic factors.

Given that education is interwoven with political, cultural, and socioeconomic factors, the imperative of educational research is to place education within its context. For example, the structure of the curriculum cannot be assessed without considering the power relations that influence it. Educational research is embedded in the frameworks of social theory, and consequently, in social interests and their legitimacy. Pedagogical theories act as social agents, but

their relevance depends on the prevailing paradigm of power that allows such an agent to evolve into social policy (Gojkov, 2013; Gojkov Rajic et al., 2021; Gojkov & Stojanovic, 2024). Diverse methodological approaches to research have opened pathways for didactics in the pursuit of new didactic models and theories that integrate creativity, speculative thinking, and the potential for empirical verification (Gojkov & Stojanovic, 2024).

In postmodern discourses, unlike the traditional concept, the emphasis is placed on learning rather than teaching. Guiding and teaching are important only to the extent that they facilitate autonomous learning, or "learning to learn". It is essential to note that ideas prioritizing learning over teaching are not new. They appear in reform pedagogy (within various concepts such as Georg Kerschensteiner's Work School, Adolphe Ferrière's Active School, John Dewey's Project Method, Helen Parkhurst's Dalton Plan, among others) but also much earlier. The methods of "learning to learn" were evident in Socratic maieutics and heuristic dialogues, Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Adolf Diesterweg's heuristic didactics, and others (Gojkov, 2024; Stojanovic & Gojkov, 2024).

However, the new culture of learning, interwoven with a contextual approach, does not diminish the importance of teaching. Instead, it emphasizes that in today's complex life, marked by rapid changes, uncertainty, and discontinuity, greater significance must be given to innovative and anticipatory learning based on restructuring, redefining, and transforming. Anticipatory learning, in particular, is highlighted, utilizing techniques such as forecasting, simulation models, scenarios, divergent productivity, and fact-based imagination (Gojkov, 2024). Such a discourse is inconceivable without critical thinking and seeks answers to questions about human freedom as the possibility of free thought and living within a civic society (Stojanovic & Gojkov, 2024).

2. Method

Sample

In accordance with contemporary principles of qualitative research (APA, 2020), this study emphasizes its key determinants. The research involved 40 preschool teachers who are simultaneously master-level vocational students at the Higher Vocational School for Educators and Medical Professionals in Vrsac. These participants are employed in kindergartens located in Pancevo and Vrsac and were engaged in an integrated approach across first- and second-year courses: Emancipatory pedagogy, Methodology of speech development, Giftedness in preschool children, and Research professional practice 1 and 2.

Procedure

As outlined in the curriculum for these courses, the participants (students/preschool teachers) were tasked with research-based assignments within preschool institutions. Their goal was to define and rank their role as agents of educational policy and change (as reflective practitioners, under the slogan: *I have a say, too*). The research aimed to address the question: *To what extent, from the perspective of preschool teachers, is the kindergarten a place of contextual and reflective practice, and what steps can be devised to improve it?*

Over two consecutive semesters, students engaged in synchronizing theoretical values with practical implications/applications. This process involved semi-structured open-ended questionnaires and applied research tasks presented as narrative records (Slunjski, 2020). During classes, students/preschool teachers received guidance and instructions to help craft their narratives. An authentic aspect of this study was the choice of preschool teachers to express their emotions, professional competencies, and insights, and to compare these with the existing realities in their workplaces. This comparison aimed to identify solutions for practice improvement. During

practical exercises and workshops, the WANDA method of collaborative reflection was employed, focusing on three research vectors: value, analysis, and action. Through research techniques such as the Challenge and Goal Tree, Sandwich Technique, and Three Lines Method, students constructed concepts documenting their insights about the strengths, weaknesses, and improvement opportunities in their kindergartens. These records included textual notes, illustrations, and symbols. Throughout the course, students continually revised and supplemented their observations, fostering an iterative process of reflection and improvement.

The problem raised by this research is marked by the question: To what extent does the preschool institution/kindergarten provide opportunities for collaborative work, autonomy, (self)reflection, critical thinking, and emancipatory approaches in creating contextual practice and making decisions (as actors in educational policy)?

Research questions: What insights do preschool teachers have about the opportunities for participation in creating contextual practices within kindergartens? To what extent is the physical space of the kindergarten important? What changes should be made to the kindergarten space? Are meetings organized with other actors in the educational process (representatives of the local community, relevant experts, practitioners from other preschool institutions)? How often are creative, non-stereotypical, heuristic methods used? To what extent is reflection and horizontal exchange between preschool teachers present?

Hypotheses:

1. Preschool teachers are not sufficiently involved in decision-making when it comes to creating the contextual practice of the kindergarten.
2. The kindergarten space is not sufficiently aligned with the contextual practice.
3. There is a need among preschool teachers for a more intensive use of heuristic methods, creative, and research techniques.
4. There is a need for more intense networking with other kindergartens and preschool institutions, as well as actors outside the kindergarten (local community, relevant experts, etc.).

Variables: *predictor* – strategies for encouraging emancipatory approaches and decision-making; *criterion* – level of satisfaction of the need to develop the contextual practice of the kindergarten and greater autonomy in decision-making.

Instrument: To capture insights, students wrote an essay on the topic "The kindergarten of my measure," using class materials and assigned literature. The categories were then extracted and systematized in the form of statements, with the most frequent ones being the most represented in the analyzed essays.

3. Research findings

In the research focused on the perspective of educators regarding their participation and decision-making in shaping the contextual practice of kindergartens, there is a limited number of studies. Most texts on similar topics address practical examples and descriptions of various play models, learning situations, and pedagogical documentation of implemented research projects/themes in kindergartens. We have highlighted two studies whose findings may be interesting for comparison with the findings of this study.

In the study *Where Quality Lives: Developing Kindergarten Practice / Gde stanuje kvaliteta: razvijanje prakse dečjeg vrtića* (2016), authored by Zivka Krnjaja, the results of the research on the roles and participation of practitioners as decision-makers in shaping the kindergarten practice are presented. Below, we summarize some of the results from the mentioned study:

The majority of preschool teachers (45.7%) identify the biggest difference in quality between the ideal and real preschool as a much smaller number of children in the group in the ideal preschool. A slightly smaller percentage of preschool teachers (44.8%) recognized the difference in professional autonomy, as the ability to make independent decisions about working with children at the preschool level (*Preschool teachers do not fear various inspections; preschool teachers can negotiate within the preschool about how to work with children, freed from various regulations, limitations, and waiting for decisions from above*). The next significant difference is the equipment of the space (42.9%), where preschool teachers highlighted the availability of equipment and materials for children. Other differences identified from the perspective of preschool teachers include, at the same percentage (30.5%), the burden of documentation and insufficient interaction between children, or between children and adults, due to the large number of children in the group in the real preschool compared to the ideal one (*Because of paperwork, there is less time for children; We neglect the children because we have to manage the daily log, children's portfolio, group portfolio, facility portfolio, institutional portfolio, and team portfolio*) (43–44).

The data also show that the majority of practitioners (85% preschool teachers, 83.3% specialist associates) believe the causes of the differences lie in the inability to involve practitioners in changes at the preschool level and in inadequate educational policy measures. Some of the comments include: "No one asks us, we are faced with ready-made solutions; Standards and regulations – misalignment with real needs; Insufficient involvement of practitioners in decision-making related to preschool education; Too much control and mistrust, and little quality professional support" (p. 45). One of the statements by a preschool teacher, as highlighted in the Preface of the study, was: "Practitioners are the first on the responsibility scale, but the last when decisions are made about preschool education" (p. 3).

In the book *Out of the Box – The Wisdom of Leadership: An Overview of Research and Tools for Developing Leadership Practice / Izvan okvira – Mudrost vođenja: prikaz istraživanja i alati razvoja prakse vođenja* (2019), authored by Edita Slunjski and colleagues, the research process is presented, with the central idea being the joint construction of understanding and collaborative development of new concepts of leadership in preschool practice. The research is action-based, with a holistic, interpretative, naturalistic, and phenomenological approach, relying on qualitative research methods. The focus of the research is on leadership in the context of preschool education institutions, based on insights and perspectives from all participants in the educational process (p. 5).

With the idea that quality can only be changed "from within," based on identifying problems and raising awareness of the need for change from within the institution itself, the goal of the research was not only to establish the existing quality of the leadership process but also to equip leaders to research and gradually improve leadership quality. All practitioners in the preschool setting participated in the research: directors, specialist associates (pedagogues), and preschool teachers. During the research, participants were encouraged to question, problematize, and modify their own leadership practices, build a deeper understanding of leadership, and take responsibility for actions aimed at developing the quality of leadership. Research techniques and instruments included open-ended inventories, interviews, video recordings, and more.

Some of the conclusions from the research are: the connection between leadership and the shaping and organization of the spatial-material context is easier to track and direct toward achieving qualitative changes compared to other organizational structures; flexibility in time organization in a preschool institution can only be achieved within the context of changing the entire system of the institution, and for this, contextual understanding of the institution is necessary among all

participants; steps need to be taken to build a culture of professional learning that will contribute to the development of leadership skills in everyday practice, have a continuous research character, and strengthen collective learning among all participants; the joint creation of a democratic, emotional context, and a climate of trust is essential (Slunjski, et al., 2019: 13, 14, 19, 25).

4. Interpretation of findings

The responses from students/preschool teachers were inductively coded and categorized. First, students/preschool teachers wrote an essay on the topic "The Kindergarten of My Dreams," where they were given autonomy in expressing their perspectives, conclusions, originality, and imagination. Based on the written essays, the task was then to compare the envisioned kindergarten with the actual state of the kindergarten where they were employed. The final task involved discussing the possibility of bringing the imagined kindergarten closer to the current reality. The results (see Table 1) and the discussion are presented below.

Table 1. Kindergarten according to my measure

Preschool teachers have stated...	N=40	Percentage
The space should take precedence.	38	95%
The space should be spacious, with bright rooms and utilized hallways and other areas in the kindergarten.	36	90%
The well-being of children through a propeller of relationships and actions.	38	95%
There should be more flowers/plants.	26	65%
There should be exhibition space for showcasing children's work products.	36	90%
More areas for spatial (project-specific) units.	34	85%
Increased availability of didactic materials and resources.	37	92,5%
More active involvement of the local community.	35	87,5%
Involvement in decision-making processes.	40	100%
Establishing connections with other kindergartens from different towns or cities.	35	87,5%
More opportunities for me to participate.	40	100%
<i>Pet-friendly</i> environments (aquariums, terrariums, pet dogs, cats, and other animals).	23	57,5%
Meetings with colleagues from kindergartens and colleagues from other institutions.	38	95%
Inclusion of experts from various fields in daily activities at the kindergarten.	33	82,5%
More creativity, less rigidity, more freedom: divergent production in terms of heuristic solutions, originality, fluency, fluidity...	40	100%

The research results indicate, as can be seen in Table 1, that respondents (hereinafter referred to as: preschool teachers) consider their involvement in decision-making and providing more opportunities for their input to be of paramount importance. The image of the kindergarten according to preschool teachers encompasses more creativity, less rigidity, and more freedom, which are also provided by the current *Osnove programa*. The majority of the preschool teachers believe that involving experts from various fields in the daily activities of the kindergarten, which also entails more active collaboration with the local community, is essential. Additionally, the well-being of children is a priority for most preschool teachers. Therefore, they believe that enriching the space with aquariums, terrariums, domestic animals (*Pet-friendly* concept), as well as plants, provides children with opportunities to learn – explore, nurture, make joint decisions, collaborate, develop critical and logical thinking, question themselves (see *Sociocultural theory; Post-culturalism*), while also feeling comfortable and spending time in a space that exudes a homely

atmosphere. Relationships and actions are the propellers of children's learning and development, as well as their well-being.

Preschool teachers are very well aware of the significance of the kindergarten space, which is by no means something given in itself, independent of the program, but rather the opposite: it should reflect theoretical-values premises and support program objectives - supporting child well-being - in the most direct and concrete way. It should be challenging and accessible to children – "space as the third preschool teacher". A well-organized kindergarten space implies such structure, materials, and resources that enable children to engage in meaningful and authentic choices, problem-solving, discovery, and questioning. The results of this research show that the majority of the preschool teachers believe that space should take precedence, be spacious, with bright rooms and utilized hallways and other areas in the kindergarten. In their essays, preschool teachers emphasized the importance of continuous learning through horizontal exchange, sharing experiences through meetings, collaborative work, and research with specialist associates and other preschool teachers from their kindergarten and preschool teachers from other institutions, towns, cities, etc. Their essays also suggest that the kindergarten according to their measure should be equipped with didactic tools and materials, which will enable children to explore through practical manipulation, movement in space, and bodily positioning. Didactic tools and challenging semi and unstructured materials greatly stimulate children's creativity through creating opportunities for diverse experiences, for rich and varied experiences from which new ideas can develop. Children can enjoy experimenting and exploring various materials (rich and varied textures, structures, shapes, sizes), they can explore and try out different artistic expressions and engage in joint original constructions (see Osnove programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2018).

The next vector of movement involved comparing these statements/descriptions with the existing/real situation in the kindergartens where preschool teachers are employed and ranking them on a five-point scale. Based on extracted, induced coded responses/categories, preschool teachers expressed the extent to which they agree that their viewpoints align with the real-life situation in kindergartens. The ranking ranged from 1 to 5 (1 being the least achievable, and 5 being fully achievable) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative analysis and ranking

Preschool teachers have stated...	Scale
The space should take precedence.	3
The space should be spacious, with bright rooms and utilized hallways and other areas in the kindergarten.	2
The well-being of children through a propeller of relationships and actions.	4
There should be more flowers/plants.	3
There should be exhibition space for showcasing children's work products.	3
More areas for spatial (project-specific) units.	4
Increased availability of didactic materials and resources.	3
More active involvement of the local community.	3
Involvement in decision-making processes.	2
Establishing connections with other kindergartens from different towns or cities.	3
More opportunities for me to participate.	2
<i>Pet-friendly</i> environments (aquariums, terrariums, pet dogs, cats, and other animals).	2
Meetings with colleagues from kindergartens and colleagues from other institutions.	3
Inclusion of experts from various fields in daily activities at the kindergarten.	3
More creativity, less rigidity, more freedom: divergent production in terms of heuristic solutions, originality, fluency, fluidity...	3

The results indicate that the imagined picture of the VPMM and the real picture of the kindergarten where preschool teachers are employed do not fully match, with the average, most frequently ranked score being 3. This indicator points to significantly greater involvement of the preschool

teachers in creating educational policies, their own policies, and personal equality, while respecting all predictors of the educational process. Particularly valuable were the responses of the preschool teachers regarding autonomy in work and cooperation with colleagues. Some of them were: *Nobody asks me anything; My word is not heard, parents have the final say; The director doesn't care how we feel; Everything is supposedly respected, but when needed, nobody is around; I don't have enough materials to work with, and I can't afford everything I would like to; The number of children in the group is catastrophically large; We need speech therapists urgently...*

The final part and the third vector of the research focused on the possibility of bridging the VPMM and the real state in preschool institutions. At this point, we found a special significance that would indicate so-called reconciliation, i.e., the strength of unity and the creation of an educational policy in which practitioners would have a leading role. Furthermore, these indicators can be valuable in listening to the voice of the other, who is actually the first, and that is the preschool teacher. Expressed as a percentage, preschool teachers said the following (see Table 3).

Table 3. Comparative analysis: VPMM and reality – the point of convergence

Preschool teachers have stated...	N=40	Percentage
The space should take precedence.	35	87,5%
The space should be spacious, with bright rooms and utilized hallways and other areas in the kindergarten.	22	55%
The well-being of children through a propeller of relationships and actions.	31	77,5%
There should be more flowers/plants.	24	60%
There should be exhibition space for showcasing children's work products.	29	72,5%
More areas for spatial (project-specific) units.	19	47,5%
Increased availability of didactic materials and resources.	32	80%
More active involvement of the local community.	28	70%
Involvement in decision-making processes.	18	45%
Establishing connections with other kindergartens from different towns or cities.	21	52,5%
More opportunities for me to participate.	18	45%
Pet-friendly environments (aquariums, terrariums, pet dogs, cats, and other animals).	16	40%
Meetings with colleagues from kindergartens and colleagues from other institutions.	34	85%
Inclusion of experts from various fields in daily activities at the kindergarten.	14	35%
More creativity, less rigidity, more freedom: divergent production in terms of heuristic solutions, originality, fluency, fluidity...	28	70%

Based on the obtained results, it can be concluded that most preschool teachers (87.5%) believe that the space could be prioritized in the kindergartens where they work, but that it is not possible for all spaces to be spacious with bright rooms, which could contribute, among other things, to a better feeling for children in the kindergarten. Given that equipping the space to encourage curiosity and aesthetic experience is of utmost importance, followed by spatial reorganization that promotes play, research-based learning, and interaction, less illuminated spaces can be excellently utilized, for example, for exploring light and shadow.

The majority of preschool teachers (77.5%) emphasize the importance of supporting children's well-being (through the "two arms of the propeller": *relationships and interaction*), which implies the need for various activities that support social and emotional development. Additionally, preschool teachers are in dire need of professional associates, such as special education teachers, pedagogical assistants, as there are increasing numbers of children with developmental dysphasia in the groups,

and the number of children per group (i.e., overcrowding) is exceptionally high. The majority of preschool teachers (80%) believe that more didactic materials can be provided, suggesting the need for additional resources that support children's learning and development.

The research shows that there is a desire for greater cooperation within the local community, as well as with other kindergartens and experts from various fields, but only two-thirds of preschool teachers believe this is achievable. The same number of teachers believes that more creativity and freedom in their work can be provided, indicating the importance of supporting divergent production and experimentation in the kindergarten environment. Involving experts from different fields in the daily activities in the kindergarten could be very useful and significant, especially for supporting the holistic development of children and for an interdisciplinary approach to working with children. However, only 35% of preschool teachers believe this is truly possible due to the more complex organization of the process itself, and we believe that the challenges or shortcomings in implementing this idea should be considered.

Less than half of the preschool teachers (40%) believe it is possible to provide a *pet-friendly* environment in the kindergarten where they work. This concept could be an important point for consideration in adapting to children's needs. We believe that preschool teachers are aware of the various health and other issues children face, such as allergies, developmental disorders, and fears, and therefore assume that this concept is not easy to introduce in the kindergartens where they are employed. We believe that analyzing these results can help in the development of strategies and micro-policies to improve educational practices and better meet the needs of children, supporting their developmental process.

The presented results and their interpretation confirm the research hypotheses:

1. Preschool teachers are not sufficiently involved in decision-making when it comes to creating the contextual practice of the kindergarten. Inference: It is essential to include practitioners – preschool teachers – in the educational policy of the institution to build and develop contextual and reflective practices.
2. The kindergarten's space is not sufficiently aligned with the contextual practice. Inference: Greater attention should be focused on the context and culture of the kindergarten, and based on this, the space should be constructed and deconstructed to support the image of the kindergarten as a place for communal living, a space for real educational work, reflective practices, and democratic and inclusive practices.
3. Preschool teachers have a need for more intensive use of heuristic methods, creative and research techniques. Inference (combined for hypotheses 3 and 4): Organizing seminars and professional development programs that provide support for creative techniques, divergent production, heuristic methods, as well as intensifying connections, interactions, and sharing experiences with practitioners from other kindergartens through professional meetings, horizontal exchange, and involving experts from relevant fields.
4. There is a need for more intense networking with other kindergartens and preschool institutions, as well as with external actors (local community, relevant experts, etc.).

5. Conclusion

Contextual learning and respecting the structure and culture of the kindergarten obliges us to also respect the voice of the educators. As the bearers of the educational process, educators play an indispensable role in diffraction, creativity, and the creation of diversified programs. However, is this really the case, or should it only be so? To this very delicate question, we have answered demurgically, in accordance with the fragments we obtained through the research. Certainly, one of the key elements of this research is the insights of the educators, whose maps can further guide the improvement of educational practice.

The research results indicate the importance of continuous reflection and adaptation of educational practices in preschool institutions in order to better respond to the needs of children and support their overall development. Although there is a recognized desire for improvement and change, challenges such as resource shortages, organizational limitations, and the complexity of implementing new concepts and approaches remain significant. Through this study, we have only touched upon the importance of these issues and, we believe, opened new research avenues for future improvements in educational practices. Conversely, the research has shown us that it is of utmost importance to involve educators in the educational policy of the preschool institution, from the position of decision-makers. Additionally, the study has provided insights and possibilities for further enriching and modernizing the master's program, which seems especially significant. Vice versa – without good educators, there are no good children. This could be a post-Freirian construct (in our reflections) for future generations. And indeed, if we do not have satisfied educators, fulfilled with opportunities and possibilities, we could ask ourselves: *quo vadis* (pedagogy – as the famous Nikola Potkonjak would say).

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