

PERCEPTIONS OF THE CHILD AND THEIR IMPACT ON PRESCHOOL EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Abstract: In line with the sociological approach to childhood (James & Prout), this paper examines how preschool teachers in early childhood education institutions in the municipality of Čukarica (Belgrade) perceive children, their professional role, and educational practices. The research was conducted in 2006 using a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews with sixteen preschool teachers from two public and two private kindergartens. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal clear generational and institutional differences: younger preschool teachers tend to adopt contemporary, individualized approaches to children, whereas older teachers retain elements of a traditional, authoritarian model. Private kindergartens foster more modernized practices, while public institutions continue to reproduce traces of archaic patterns due to larger group sizes and an older professional structure. The study indicates that the modernization of educational practices unfolds gradually through generational and institutional shifts.

Keywords: Perception of the child, educational style, preschool institutions

1. Introduction

In contemporary sociology and anthropology, the concept of childhood is understood as a social construction whose forms, meanings, and expectations vary depending on cultural, economic, and historical contexts. In the case of Serbia, attitudes toward children have been shaped by the long-standing influence of a patriarchal model characterized by generational and gender hierarchies, clearly defined role divisions, and an authoritarian educational style. The processes of modernization, urbanization, and industrialization that marked the second half of the twentieth century contributed to the weakening of traditional models and the emergence of new forms of parenthood and professional childcare.

Previous studies on the transformation of approaches to children in Serbia, including the works of Erlich (1964), Tomanović (1997), and Bobić (2003), point to the simultaneous presence of traditional and modern patterns, particularly in urban areas that have undergone rapid social transition. Although preschool institutions are often perceived as agents of modernization, there is a lack of research that closely examines perceptions of the child from the perspective of preschool teachers themselves. In this context, the research problem addressed in this paper concerns understanding how preschool teachers in the municipality of Čukarica—an urban area with a pronounced working-class and migrant background—perceive children, their professional role, and contemporary educational models. This issue is particularly relevant because Čukarica represents a micro-context of urban transition, where modern and traditional models of childhood intersect, and where professional practices of preschool teachers may serve as indicators of broader social processes. In short, the aim of the study is to identify modern and archaic elements in educational approaches that correlate with broader cultural patterns (modern and traditional), as well as distinctions arising

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from generational and institutional differences. Such research contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of change within the early childhood education system in Serbia.

2. Method

From a theoretical perspective, the study is grounded in the framework of the new sociology of childhood, which conceptualizes childhood as a social construction, produced by and embedded within social, cultural, and historical processes (James & Prout, 1990). This theoretical framework enables an understanding of generational and institutional differences in approaches to children.

The research was conducted as a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive study. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of preschool teachers' subjective views, professional norms, and implicit pedagogical models. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and an interview guide was developed to address the following topics:

- preschool teachers' relationship to their profession
- organization of educational work
- attitudes toward the child's gender
- practices related to rewards and punishment
- attitudes toward professional development
- perceptions of media influence on children

The questions were open-ended and encouraged respondents to describe concrete situations and examples from their professional practice. The sample was purposive and consisted of sixteen preschool teachers from four preschool institutions in the municipality of Čukarica—two public and two private kindergartens.

All participants were female and held degrees from pedagogical academies. They differed, however, in terms of length of professional experience (ranging from several years to over thirty years), type of institution (public or private), and age structure, which enabled comparisons of generational and institutional patterns of educational practice. In other words, the inclusion of both younger and older preschool teachers was intentional, as one of the initial assumptions was that generational affiliation would be a significant factor influencing differences in educational approaches.

The interviews were conducted in 2006, on the premises of the kindergartens, at times that did not interfere with regular work activities. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Prior to participation, the purpose of the study was explained to all participants, anonymity was guaranteed, and they were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded in handwritten notes, and subsequently reconstructed in the form of detailed transcripts. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, whereby participants' statements were grouped into main thematic categories that emerged organically from the material (such as attitudes toward authority, individualization of approaches to children, disciplinary practices, and similar themes). Coding was conducted manually through repeated readings of the material and the identification of representative statements.

3. Results (Findings) — Thematic Categories

All respondents agreed that they take their work "very seriously" and that they possess a "high level of awareness of the responsibility this profession entails." Most of them made a clear distinction between the private and the professional sphere, emphasizing that their "private life must remain at home and must not influence their work in any way," and that this profession is "not a job that just anyone can do, but one that requires genuine love for children and dedication to the vocation of preschool teaching." However, while one respondent described her professional attitude as

“rational and committed,” noting that she often “takes work home and plans her workday in advance,” another stated that her relationship to the profession was “not particularly conscious, but rather affective, guided by the unlimited love she feels for children.”

Following these introductory remarks, the respondents were asked to describe how they organize activities and how they perceive their overall relationship with children. The aim was to explore whether they apply specific educational methods, whether the child’s gender plays any role in their work, and whether they use rewards and punishment as disciplinary techniques. At this point, the first significant divergences in their views emerged.

It should be noted that all interviewed preschool teachers strive—or at least claim—to adapt their pedagogical approach to the psychological profile of each child. However, the majority agreed that such individualization is feasible only in principle, not in practice. Given that groups often consist of twenty or more children, teachers face structural constraints that prevent them from addressing each child individually to the extent they consider necessary. This situation primarily applies to public kindergartens, whereas conditions in private institutions are somewhat more favorable, as smaller group sizes allow for a certain degree of individualized work.

Apart from personal preferences (some respondents expressed a greater affinity for boys, others for girls), all preschool teachers stated that they “do not differentiate their educational approach based on the child’s gender.” At the same time, several younger preschool teachers described their relationship with children as “friendly” or “partnership-based.” Nevertheless, all respondents agreed that “a certain degree of authority must exist,” or, as they put it, “it has to be clear who is who.” In this sense, the issue of the preschool teacher’s authority represents a key dividing line in the respondents’ answers.

While older preschool teachers emphasized authority as a central element of their professional role, younger teachers tended to mention it only when it became necessary to dispel any impression of disorganization in their work. One preschool teacher with nearly forty years of professional experience stated that she perceives herself as a “consistent educator for whom personal authority is paramount.” Another asserted that children “actually need strong authority” and that such a division of roles suits them best: “Children love me, but they are also afraid of me.” In contrast, younger preschool teachers generally seek to regulate their professional ego by building a friendly or partnership-based relationship with children. One of them explained that she always “strives to establish order in her group, but without strictness,” emphasizing that “respecting mutual agreements” is the most important aspect of her work. In this regard, younger preschool teachers can be said to cultivate a considerably more flexible approach than their older colleagues, as they explicitly state that they do not feel “called upon to instill fear in children,” but rather attempt to “lower themselves to the children’s level in order to present themselves as first among equals.”

Responses to the question of whether rewards and punishments are used in educational practice also reveal a clear generational divide. Most younger preschool teachers emphasized that they do not use punitive methods, and that the only form of sanction they apply is “temporary exclusion from play with other children.” Importantly, younger teachers consciously avoid using the word “punishment” in front of children, instead attempting to encourage the child to “recognize their mistake independently” through such exclusion. Although older preschool teachers do not apply particularly harsh measures either, they are more inclined to explicitly signal to the child that they are being punished and that punishment will follow whenever the teacher deems it necessary. Conversely, younger preschool teachers resort more frequently to rewarding children, considering it “the best method for stimulation.” Rewards are most often verbal, in the form of praise, while in private kindergartens children may also receive sweets if deemed deserving.

With regard to professional development, such as participation in various courses and seminars, respondents expressed a wide range of attitudes. Some preschool teachers regularly attend such activities, believing that “this kind of exchange of experience helps and facilitates their work” and that “a great deal can be learned from them.” Others stated that although they are “generally interested,” they most often “lack the energy and time” to participate. These courses were organized separately for public and private kindergartens, and preschool teachers employed in private institutions were required to attend, unlike those working in public kindergartens. In this respect, it can be said that in 2006 preschool teachers in public kindergartens in the municipality of Čukarica expressed interest in professional development, but that this enthusiasm generally declined with age. Older preschool teachers—defined here as those with thirty or more years of professional experience—although expressing an interest in new trends in child education, did not attend such programs at all. One of them stated quite openly: “I don’t go, and I’m not interested.”

The final question concerned the influence of the media on children, primarily television. Of the four kindergartens visited, two had a television set in each group room. Older preschool teachers working in these institutions reported that they “avoid turning it on for children, as it is unnecessary and has a negative impact.” In general, older teachers believe that “television has a strong influence on children, and that this influence is mostly negative.” Some even argued that television “encourages excessive aggressiveness in children, especially boys,” and that parents should “strictly regulate television viewing at home.” Their overall impression was that parents are “overworked, insufficiently involved in their children’s lives, and effectively allow television to raise their children for them.”

In contrast, younger preschool teachers who had access to television used it more frequently in their work, stating that it “serves as a useful tool for calming children when they are restless,” as well as for educational purposes, since “there is still some quality children’s programming available.” They generally perceive television as a “necessary evil,” arguing that it has become so commonplace that it is no longer particularly interesting to children: “Even if I turn on the television, after five or ten minutes most children have already found another activity.”

4. Analysis of Results

The analysis of the collected data reveals a complex and multilayered structure of preschool teachers’ professional practices, in which modern and archaic elements intertwine. Generational patterns, institutional frameworks, and individual professional experiences emerge as key factors shaping their understanding of the child, education, and their own role within the educational process.

In line with James and Prout’s (1990) thesis that there is no single childhood but multiple childhoods shaped by class, gender, locality, and historical period, the results clearly indicate that older and younger preschool teachers operate with different models of childhood. Older respondents, whose professional formation took place during a period marked by strong patriarchal norms and authoritarian educational styles, emphasize order, obedience, and professional distance. They tend to perceive education through stable and clearly defined roles of adults and children, corresponding to a classical model of socialization characteristic of traditional environments.

Younger preschool teachers, by contrast, construct their relationship with children through a partnership-based approach, emotional communication, and flexible professional positions. Their practices align with contemporary pedagogical theories and sociocultural perspectives, according to which adults function as mediators rather than strict authorities. These findings also confirm Jenks’s (1996) distinction between traditional and modern models of childhood, with the modern model grounded in the recognition of children’s subjectivity, individuality, and active participation.

Institutional factors likewise play a decisive role. Private kindergartens, characterized by smaller group sizes, more contemporary programs, and staff largely belonging to a younger professional generation, facilitate modernization and the implementation of individualized approaches. In contrast, public kindergartens continue to bear the burden of structural constraints—large group sizes, staff shortages, and professional routines rooted in older educational standards. This institutional divergence supports Prout's (2005) argument that different institutional settings produce different forms of childhood and organize differing expectations of children's conduct, as physical, organizational, and professional conditions directly shape how childhood is conceptualized and enacted in practice.

With regard to gender roles, preschool teachers predominantly emphasize that a child's gender does not play a significant role in educational practice, which represents an important indicator of the modernization of educational values. Nevertheless, among older respondents, traces of traditional gender expectations occasionally emerge, consistent with broader cultural patterns identified in the literature on family transition (Bobić, 2003; Tomanović, 1997).

Particularly pronounced generational differences are evident in interpretations of media influence. Older preschool teachers frequently perceive the media as a source of problems and a factor destabilizing adult authority. This perspective reflects broader patterns of concern typical of generations that did not grow up in a digital environment. Younger preschool teachers develop a more nuanced approach, combining protective and mediating strategies, in line with contemporary research on media mediation and children's digital socialization.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that preschool teachers' professional practices in Čukarica are simultaneously shaped by personal habitus, institutional constraints, and the broader social context. The transformation of educational models does not occur linearly but rather through gradual overlap and coexistence of traditional and modern patterns. This observation supports a core premise of the new sociology of childhood—that childhood is continuously constructed and reconstructed in response to social change. The responses of the preschool teachers confirm James and Prout's (1990) central claim that there is no single childhood but multiple childhoods shaped by class, gender, locality, and historical period, a dynamic clearly visible in the generational differences between older and younger educators. These two professional generations differ not only in work styles but also in the cultural models of childhood they hold, shaped by experiences of growing up in distinct social contexts.

Older preschool teachers often retain elements of an authoritarian approach to children, consistent with Erlich's (1964) findings on patriarchal family structures in which adult authority is grounded in clearly prescribed hierarchies and rules. Such professional practices reproduce traditional adult-child relations within institutional settings. By contrast, younger preschool teachers adopt more modern and reflexive approaches, closer to what Bobić describes as the transition of the family and a departure from rigid hierarchical models. Their work is characterized by emotional communication, flexibility, and a partnership-based relationship with children. This approach also corresponds to sociocultural models of education in which adults act as mediators rather than strict authorities.

Institutional differences further shape professional practices. Findings from private kindergartens reaffirm Prout's (2005) claim that different institutional settings produce different forms of childhood and organize differing expectations of children's conduct. Private institutions, with smaller groups and younger staff, promote modernized approaches, while public kindergartens, burdened by an older professional generation and larger group sizes, more readily reproduce archaic elements. Perceptions of the media likewise follow a generational line of division. Older preschool teachers interpret the media as a threat and a source of erosion of adult authority, reflecting broader concerns typical of generations formed prior to the digital age. Younger teachers,

in contrast, develop a more reflexive stance that combines child protection and mediation, consistent with contemporary research on media mediation, such as that of Livingstone and Helsper (2008).

5. Conclusion

The research conducted in preschool institutions in the municipality of Čukarica demonstrates that contemporary and traditional representations of the child do not appear as mutually exclusive models, but rather as simultaneous and overlapping patterns arising from generational differences, institutional conditions, and the broader cultural context. Younger preschool teachers consistently adopt modern pedagogical principles based on individualization, emotional communication, and partnership-based relationships with children. In contrast, older preschool teachers more frequently retain elements of an archaic model in which authority, hierarchy, and discipline occupy central educational roles.

These differences reflect broader processes of modernization in urban areas of Serbia, where traditional patterns are transformed gradually through generational turnover and changing professional standards. Private preschool institutions, with smaller groups and younger staff, function as sites of accelerated modernization, while public kindergartens maintain traditional elements due to structural constraints and an older professional workforce. At the same time, the findings indicate that gender neutrality as a normative value has become firmly established among preschool teachers, representing a significant shift away from traditional patriarchal patterns. Attitudes toward media further confirm generational polarization and divergent professional horizons among preschool teachers.

In this way, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of childhood transformation in Serbia, demonstrating that modernization is not linear but layered and conditioned by institutional, generational, and cultural factors. Future research could extend these insights through larger samples, longitudinal tracking of professional practices, or comparative analyses across different regions of Serbia and other post-socialist societies.

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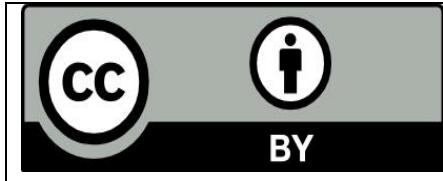
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