

# From the Traditional to the Modern: The Culture of Kindergartens Communities That Learn (The Croatian Experience)

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## Abstract

Even though the tradition of kindergartens in Croatia is a long one, it is only since the last decade that kindergartens in the Republic of Croatia have been regarded as communities that learn. For many years, the function of traditional kindergartens was determined by the philosophy and the beliefs of a totalitarian socialistic social order which, with the transition to democracy, accepted new paradigms about a child's development, learning, institutional upbringing and the education of pre-school aged children etc. New democratic values have become an integral part of early childhood and pre-school education institutions and have also initiated changes in educational programmes for kindergarten-school teachers. An important segment in this "new vision" of institutions for early childhood and pre-school education is the culture of the institution. All participants in the upbringing- educational process play an active role in the development of this culture. The quality of the community's culture determines the quality of life and learning of both adults and children in that community. Therefore, it is necessary to dedicate greater attention to raising awareness of and improving culture.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Modernity, Culture institution, Holistic child development

## 1. Introduction

Even though at first glance it seems that everything has been said and written about the culture of a community (Verin, 2004., Cagliari, &, Giudici, 2002., Kletzien, 2004), we believe, it is obvious that, given the numerous examples in pedagogical practice that prove the contrary, this area is incomplete.

What makes the culture of a community that learns? What kind and how much of a role does leadership play in an institution? Is it possible to change the culture of an institution by working externally or....? Do effective ways of evaluating the culture of a community exist and what are the possible ways to improve it? These are just some of the questions which are raised when we think about kindergartens as institutions that learn. Finally, the fundamental question is- have we and how far away have we moved from the perception of kindergartens as traditionally organised institutions and how close have we come towards real, and not just formal, kindergartens as communities that learn?

We believe that these questions deserve an answer not just at the theoretical level but at a practical level, that is, in the interaction between theory and practice. This would result in the gained answers being applied in that very practice with the aim of improving it. Even though we are aware of the culture (or atmosphere) of a community immediately "at first sight" upon entry to an institution, it is almost impossible to determine it unequivocally.

In modern scientific literature we come across various terms (culture, climate, atmosphere, spirit, ethos etc) which are related to the conditions which determine the quality of life and learning of all factors (children and adults) of the upbringing- educational process in an institution. Thacker (Slunjski, 2006, p. 73) almost equalises and unites all those concepts within the concept of "culture", which he determines as "the system of basic presumptions which a certain group creates when developing the external activity of an organisation, and learning, working together on attaining its goals". Donnelly (1999, p. 2), emphasises that the culture of an organisation is "the spirit and belief of an organisation,

recognisable in its norms and values, and is related to how individuals should behave towards one another". Dancy (1979) talks of the culture of an institution using the terms: "values, goals, viewpoints and actions", and emphasises: "Values determine goals, and goals inspire viewpoints. Viewpoints come from actions and are interpreted by them", concludes Dancy (1979, p. 32).

The culture of an institution is determined by a string of factors and it is not possible to perceive it isolated from other aspects of that community of which it is an integral part. However, in order for us to perceive the whole, it is imperative to be familiar with its parts (subsystems, interpersonal relationships, communication, leadership, processes and so forth.).

Culture makes up the essence of every community and gives it 'soul'. It makes the community unique, recognisable and unrepeatable. It makes it pleasant or unpleasant, healthy or unhealthy, desirable or undesirable. If the atmosphere itself is the essence of a community that learns, then one should dedicate greater attention to it -both to its creation and to its evaluation and improvement. If we agree on the fact that atmosphere or organisational culture is one of the factors and an important criterion for evaluating the functioning of a community, then we probably also agree on the fact that it considerably determines the quality of life and learning of both adults and children in that community. Therefore, it should be approached with particular sensitivity.

## 2. "Four Walls" Culture as Opposed to "Open Door Culture" (or "Freeing Culture")

We will try to generally determine the culture of an institution as a phenomenon which is approached differently in modern literature. Donnelly (1999, p. 2) points out that "the importance conceptualising and understanding the *ethos* of a culture lies in the possibility of explaining social processes, activities and structure". He adds that this concept determines both the opposing positivistic and anti-positivistic approaches. The Positivists see "*ethos* as social reality, that is, as a phenomenon which exists independently of individuals and social events in an organisation. The anti-thesis to this approach is contained in anti-positivistic theories according to which *ethos* results from social interaction and processes" within a community. It is precisely this anti-positivistic approach to understanding the culture of a community that learns which is much closer to our current understanding of kindergarten culture. Here we emphasise "the active component of all factors of an organisation and their equal contribution to the creation of an institution's culture" (Vujičić, 2007). However, by looking at the practice of kindergartens it is obvious that, at a declarative level, this kind of conceptualisation of kindergarten culture is acceptable. However, in everyday application of the basic principles (involvement and activity of all elements, their individual contribution and so on) "things" function with much more difficulty. That is, individuals in kindergartens accept and welcome, even declaratively support greater involvement, participation and engagement e.g. from parents, students and theorists of early and pre-school education and the like in kindergartens. However, in practice they more often resort to isolation, close themselves up within the framework of their work space, prefer homogeneous groups of children and so on. What is the reason for this? Most probably, in the application of some perceptions gained by constant expert professional development, they have established that introducing changes in the kindergarten context, according to principles of modern upbringing - educational concepts entails firstly:

- changing one's own self- one's beliefs, philosophies and values,
- greater personal engagement,
- experiencing each child as an individual who needs both an individual approach and understanding.

Such a realisation is not pleasant because it requires greater effort and involvement. Of all changes, here the most difficult is the one the individual has to change within him/herself. It is much easier to convince others that they have to change themselves.

The traditional approach to the activity of kindergartens, which has been cultivated for many years since the Second World War to independence in the nineties, provided kindergarten teachers peace and security throughout their working life in the familiarity and imperviousness of "their own four walls". This meant children of the same age being placed together who had to be taken care of while their parents were at work and who had to be educated and prepared for starting school. We emphasise this very fact of "preparing children for school", because it largely determined the entire work of the kindergarten teacher, approach to the child and learning, and choice of content and methodology which the kindergarten teacher for the most part determined in order to achieve certain goals. These were to teach the child certain content (or information) which the child would be required to reproduce e.g. upon entering elementary school.

The basic belief of kindergarten teachers was that they were “omniscient adults” who were competent and qualified to teach children. Communication with the parents of children of early and preschool age was most commonly limited to formal parent meetings via which the kindergarten teacher informed the parents of the activities and achievements of the children and /or informed them of the already decided upon, most often formally written, yearly work plan for the children. No one in particular was concerned that these plans were miles away from reality and the real needs and interests of the children. In such practice, there was little or no space left for detailed involvement of parents in the life and work of the kindergarten. Also, the interpersonal interactions of the kindergarten teacher (in a professional sense) during working hours were not especially well received, in particular from the kindergarten’s superiors. The explanation was that this equalled “not working”, “the creation of chaos”, “children without supervision”, “they are mingling”, (why should they not mingle?) etc. In that kind of social context and with those kinds of beliefs held by those in charge, (the institution’s executive, educational advisors), kindergarten teachers most often resorted to “the isolation within their four walls”. They created an in advance set yearly plan in surroundings which were only partly adapted to the real needs of the children. The existing time structure was rigid, therefore it is always better to satisfy the adults’ rather than the children’s needs in the kindergarten. The kindergarten environment more resembled a “little more colourful and playful school” rather than a kindergarten. In such kindergartens “hospital” beds were dominant even though they were for groups of kindergarten aged children. Tables, chairs and high out-of reach closed cupboards existed even though they were for children from the age of 3 to preschool (those who had turned six). It is important to emphasise that the inaccessible to children, closed cupboards “hid” didactic materials which were only occasionally, under the supervision of the kindergarten teachers, given to the children to use. Furthermore, traditional kindergartens abounded in the kindergarten teachers’ works of art, placed high up out of reach of the children so that the children “would not ruin them”. Looking back on traditional kindergartens reminds us of sterile, well furnished and uniform institutions where everything (or almost every) was subservient to form and external aesthetic impression (by today’s rules extremely questionable), and everything matched the criteria which satisfied adults (principal, child carer, parent). Very little was functional to children, their development and learning. So, harsh time constraints and organisational structure, a centralised and hierarchical system of administration in the kindergarten (always from top to bottom) directed the achievement of the set task (regardless of whether it was suitable to the child’s current needs or not). The parents were not included in the life of the kindergarten. Learning was understood as a process of teaching and transfer of knowledge and so on. All of this for a long time formed the framework within which kindergartens operated. Here one could not even mention culture. More precisely, one could mention the culture of one kindergarten which resembled every other, regardless of which kindergarten in the country one entered.

Fortunately, the more modern way of initial and continual education of the kindergarten teachers, the entry of the theorists into practice, team work between scientists and practitioners, new knowledges and paradigms in the raising and education of children and so on have led to a range of changes in the pre-school upbringing- education system. Kindergartens today more and more, albeit not all, function as a community in which children and not adults the main characters. That is, children and adults exist, learn and develop in the community simultaneously learning from each other. One could say that in modern kindergartens the “culture of freeing” is happening and moving away from a set scheme, dogmas, beliefs, prejudices. However, it is important to bear in mind that these are processes that last for a long time and occur relatively slowly (Miljak, 2009; Slunjski, 2008). Unfortunately, this is much more slowly than we would like. However, we are witnessing a new culture of children’s kindergartens which can no longer be classified uniformly and there are variations from kindergarten to kindergarten. The new kindergarten culture is the culture of a community that is “door-less”, in which constant and uninterrupted interactions of adults, children amongst themselves and between adults and children are usual and desirable. Conditions and presumptions are created so that these interactions can flow uninterruptedly. Artificially created architectonic, time, organisational and other barriers are rejected. Negotiability at all levels is allowed, differences are encouraged, multiculturalism is accepted, historical and cultural heritage is valued, and freedoms and rights of both children and adults are respected. Furthermore, and certainly most important, taking the initiative and responsibility is supported and encouraged at all levels (children and adults). Doors of rooms where time is spent are no longer closed. Varied, well equipped and encouraging centres of activities fill all corners of the kindergarten and simply “beckon” children to spend time, research, and learn in them. We dare say that the “open door policy” in kindergartens has done more for the development of early childhood and pre-school children than all the reforms “from up top” to now have done. What is really happening? At first glance, nothing special, but upon second glance quite a lot. A driving force has started. By ‘opening the doors’, children are given the freedom of choice be it the centre of activity, choice of materials, co-players, time for doing activities, kindergarten teachers and so on. Naturally, curious and playful children are conquering space, discovering and creating. They socialise, communicate, and learn from each other not caring about age, gender or other differences between them. So, natural communication destroys set schemata and the beliefs that children have to be grouped according to chronological age

and/or that they have to be led by adults in activities and that they are incapable of organising themselves. By conquering space children are “forcing” kindergarten teachers to ‘come out of their rooms’, to intercommunicate, come to agreements, plan, create new centres, new incentives, to actively observe and listen to children, recognise and in time address children's needs, to explain children's behaviour etc. Actually the real question is who “forced” whom to leave the room? Was it the kindergarten teachers who created the conditions for the children to ‘leave the room’ or was it the children who wanted to leave the limiting space of their rooms so the kindergarten teachers had to create the appropriate conditions? The answer to these questions is less important at this moment. The end result seems to be more important and that is a completely new set of dynamics in kindergartens which means new relations and new forms of behaviour and new competencies and new results of learning. However, the most important one is change, that is, a range of changes which had to occur in the very teachers themselves and in the very institution as a pre-condition to “opening the door”. Those changes have brought about a completely new, better quality of culture in the kindergarten community – the “we culture”.

### 3. “Letting go of the reins”– Sharing Power

To analyse and explain the culture of an institution given the complex and intertwined, often invisible and very personal factors and the influence of all those who live and work in an organisation, one must always bear in mind that the culture of an institution “is not a static process and that it works at various levels. Every level and/or dimension is not necessary in interpersonal agreement which leads to contradictions and inconsistencies”, claims Donnelly (1999, p. 13). Accepting these facts, the communities which learn try to bridge many limitations, directing their efforts to the creation of such cultures of institutions (here kindergartens) which are “democratic, respectable and appropriate” and in which children and adults “learn in an atmosphere which recognises and accepts differences, respects and understands origin and interests, religious viewpoints, social and cultural roots, gender, physical and mental advantages and limitations”, points out Rowe (2000, p. 3). Traditionally organised kindergartens dedicated relatively little attention to the relationship of all factors of the upbringing- educational process. A possible reason for this is the isolation of the teacher and their focus on “one's own room”, “one's own children”, “one's own work plan”. Strict hierarchy in an institution, the absence of a common vision and the absence of appropriate criteria for evaluation and self-evaluation of an institution's quality (Ljubetić, 2009) have even more so contributed to the individual feeling like an isolated island, exclusively responsible only for his/her segment of work. In such circumstances, the teacher has not even secured the minimum conditions for, for example, parents being more actively involved in the work and life of the kindergarten. Moreover, it was neither considered necessary nor appropriate that parents kept children in kindergarten for longer periods of time, that they participated in creating an upbringing-educational task, that they commented upon the process, sought explanations and so on. Teachers, on the other hand, who made this possible for parents were most often criticized by their own colleagues because the presence of parents “spoiled the daily rhythm” and “made children restless and cranky”. Simply, parents were seen as intruders who ‘checked up’, (the teacher, process, institution). If there had been, which most often was not the case, quality, expert dialogue, if reflection and self-reflection (Šagud, 2006) had been the norm and not the exception, and if agreement, discussion and negotiation at all levels had been imperative while working, much misunderstanding and conflict most often at a personal level would have been prevented. The culture of dialogue in the institution is a process which is created over a long period of time, and it is created by all who come, exist and work there, therefore both adults and children. How to successfully teach children the culture of dialogue, augmented discussion on certain issues and negotiation when adults fail in this task? Is it enough to present children with some literary text on the topic of good relations and quality communication and then expect that children will behave like that when, in their direct surroundings, they see something completely different? Of course it is not. Children best learn from what they see and experience.

It has already been emphasised that there is a need to build quality relations in an institution as a precondition for quality communication and the overall culture of the institution. However, where does one start from? Is it possible to expect quality relations if one operates like a superior towards one's group, instead of leading that institution? Furthermore, what is the likelihood that children of early and pre-school age in communication amongst themselves will behave in a leadership manner if in their immediate environment they are subjected to the influence of bossy management? One will always find some children who will copy the formula of acting like the boss from adults, adopt it and simply apply it to other children in the group.

Referring to Hofstede, Gladwell (2009, p. 160; 161), mentions the “index of the power distance” and emphasises that countries with a “low index of power distance” comprehend power as “something to be ashamed of and the importance of power should be diminished”. Therefore, individuals trying to display power “try to not appear powerful. Leaders can reinforce an informal image relinquishing official symbols”, emphasises Gladwell. Again we face the question: what have we as a society completely inherited in relation to the distance of power? Is a period of not even 20

years passing from totalitarian to democratic social order enough in order for us to learn about the distribution of power? In his papers Glasser (1997a; 1997b; 2001a; 2001b) also emphasises the need to give up power for a sense of belonging because he sees it as a condition for building, maintaining and improving good relations in every community. Fortunately, albeit slowly, the democratic system of values is entering all aspects of society and the same is happening in kindergartens. However, it seems that certain individuals in leading positions reluctantly let go of “the reins from their hands”. There is still more lip service being paid to the need to democratise relations in institutions than there is work being done on this. Letting go of “the reins” sometimes might appear to be risky from the point of view of those in power. However, only an individual who shares power can hold onto power. Sharing power is possible when relations of respect and trust are built into an organisation and when every individual is aware of his/ her part of the responsibility for a common result (institutional success). In relinquishing power in the sense of controlling others and constantly working on mutual belongingness, relations are strengthened which becomes a strong cohesive power which keeps together all individuals in the institution. This unity becomes a power which is the trigger for democratic changes and so too for changes in the kindergarten system and practice which leads to its improvement.

Those communities which have succeeded in driving away the recidivists from the past with commanding being replaced by leading, raising the awareness of the importance of quality relations, and most importantly, raising awareness of and teaching taking responsibility for one’s behaviour (at all levels) are slowly but surely turning into communities that learn.

Explaining the culture of an institution and referring to Goleman’s concept of emotional intelligence, Benson (2006) relates closely the culture of an institution to the emotional intelligence of the institution’s members. This includes both interpersonal (the capacity to understand others) intelligence and intrapersonal (the capacity to understand one’s self) emotional intelligence. Goleman (1999, p. 317) determines emotional intelligence (EQ) as “the capacity to recognise one’s own and others’ emotions, so that we can motivate ourselves and effectively manage the emotions in us and our relationships”. He adds that “EQ is much more important than IQ in the working of an organisation”. “The crux of this determination is managing emotions and we understand emotions as just one aspect of the whole behaviour of the individual”, believes Glasser (1997a). A satisfied individual most often passes his/her happiness and enthusiasm onto others (within their surroundings), is tolerant, contemplates his /her behaviours, builds relations, and all these are aspects of a desirable culture of an institution. Therefore, in order for us to build a desired institutional culture, it is necessary to firstly build quality relationships.

Benson (2006, p. 288), states four domains of emotional intelligence with six desired competences and they are:

- self-awareness - (emotional self awareness, correct self-evaluation, self confidence),
- initiative (self-leadership) – self-control,
- awareness of others (social awareness ) – empathy and
- actions of others (managing relations ) – influence.

“Developing these competencies“ will enable creation” while supporting the institutional culture in which there is a demand for changes and even greater achievements in balance with human fragility... In such organisations we do not always have to show the image of a competent and self confident person. We can share our insecurity and frustration and the feeling of burden with others“, states Benson (2006, p. 287). Therefore, “managing emotions increases EQ organisation”, adds Benson.

As children and their parents are equal partners in an institution for early upbringing and education it is logical to pose this question. How can children, as early as possible, and how can parents, who mostly do not possess formally acquired pedagogical knowledge, learn self awareness and managing emotions with the aim of increasing the EQ of the institution? Naturally, this is providing that kindergarten teachers and other experts in the institution have mastered this knowledge and these skills. More simply, the question could be formulated like this: What to do and what kind of conditions to secure in an institution so that all factors of the upbringing-educational process in the institution feel fine, satisfied and accepted?

By posing one’s self and other factors in the upbringing-educational process a range of self-evaluative questions, in expert discussion we can gain valued answers to the questions related to the appropriateness of our activities (individual, at the level of the institution, in the family), and to which competencies we wish to develop in children as Benson (ibid, p. 288) suggests.

- a) self-awareness - (emotional self-awareness, correct self-evaluation, self-confidence)
- What are my personal beliefs related to the capabilities of early childhood and pre-school children? Do I believe that a child of that age is capable of self-evaluation? How do I encourage him/her to self evaluate?
  - How important is developing self awareness in children to me? How would I rank the importance of that area in relation to the child's development?
  - Does my pedagogical activity (in the institution, in the family) allow the development of the child's self-awareness? What do I do, what behaviours do I adopt to make this better and more possible for the child?
  - When, with which questions, in which situations do I encourage the child to self evaluate his /her own behaviour? How do I do this? (Do I criticise the child often? Do I reach conclusions instead of them? Do I assess these achievements, explanations and so on? Do I label them? Do I often play the role of judge in my reactions with children?)
  - To what extent is it personally important to me to develop the child's self-confidence? (How highly is it ranked on the list of my values?)
  - How much does my behaviour (verbal and nonverbal communication, relationship to the child, encouragements, surroundings that I create etc) help and encourage the child's self-confidence?
  - What will I do differently, better, more often in order to enable the development of the child's self-confidence?
  - What will I get out of this? What will the child? What will the parents? What will the community?
- b) Taking charge (self leadership) – self control
- Do I believe that a child of early or pre-school age is capable of self-leadership, self-organisation or self-control?
  - What kind of surroundings and atmosphere (in the institution, in the family) do I create and how much does this contribute to the child taking charge of a situation?
  - Am I a parent or teacher who determines when, how, how long, with whom the child is with or should be interacting or doing ?
  - Am I a person who in every situation and all the time has to have control over the situation, time, activities and so on?
  - Does/do the child/children at every moment have to keep me informed of what they are doing, about a change in activity, their wishes and so on?
  - Am I a teacher or parent who allows the child to make mistakes, see their mistakes and try to correct them? How often and in what way do I interfere in the child's search for the solution?
- c) Awareness of others (social awareness) – empathy
- How empathetic am I as a person? How do I show this? How important if this trait to me? Am I a socially aware person?
  - How much and how do I develop and encourage that personal characteristic in my contact with children? How do I communicate with them? What values do I support?
  - What behaviour do I show as a role model for children?
  - What do I (still) want to do differently, better, more effectively?
- d) Actions of others (managing the relationship) – influence
- What are my beliefs when it comes to interpersonal relations?
  - Which relations are important to me?
  - How, by which behaviour do I build, maintain and improve interpersonal relations?
  - Do I take on one hundred percent responsibility for the quality of relationships?
  - Am I the person who gives up quickly on relations if I do not get the expected answer from the other person (in the relationship)?
  - What is my priority – keep my relation or my power?

- How much of myself do I invest in the development and maintenance of relations with children? How important are quality relations with children to me?
- Can I bring up children if I do not have a quality relationship with them?
- How often and in which situations do I criticise, force, threaten, and complain about the child / children? What do I gain from this? How does my behaviour affect our relationship?
- Which of these behaviours do I want to change in order to be closer to the children?

These and similarly formulated questions which enable self- evaluation do not threaten the power of the individual (parent, kindergarten teacher, others in the institution). Rather, they reduce fear from condemnation or mockery (from others), they encourage honest self contemplation of one's points of view, beliefs, and philosophies, enable the necessary time to go from self- knowledge to change in behaviour and their applications and tests in practice. Thereby, individuals in the institution are brought together encouraging each one to change / adapt a part of themselves for the common good. Simultaneously, these and similar questions can serve as a quality base for discussion among adult factors of the upbringing educational process with the aim of improving their behaviour, their upbringing-educational activities and improving practice as a whole. Such and similar discussions in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect create a new quality community culture (of the institution) which is desirable for the wholesome and healthy development of the child.

#### **4. Instead of a Conclusion – Understanding the Culture of a Community (that learns)**

All of the above convinces us that the culture of an institution is not easy to determine. This is precisely because of its complexity and its dependence on a range of factors. It is also not possible to perceive culture isolated from other aspects of the upbringing – educational institution because it is simultaneously also a constitutive part and product of that institution. Many authors emphasise the multidimensionality of the nature of the institution's culture and support a holistic approach to the research and evaluation of culture. The quality of interpersonal relations within the institution, and also reaction to the factors outside of the upbringing-educational institution, communication, interactions, psychological characteristics of the institution's members, the upbringing styles of the workers in that institution, their beliefs, viewpoints and values and the philosophy of that institution – all together and interpersonally create the culture of that institution. However, at the same time, culture influences all of these elements. Therefore, in order for us to comprehend the whole (upbringing- educational institution), it is necessary to become familiar with its parts (subsystems, interpersonal relations, communication an so on). "Given that all things simultaneously are causes and results of something and that they are interrelated by a natural and unperceivable link which links the most distant and most different of things, I believe that is impossible to perceive the parts and not comprehend the whole just as it is impossible to perceive the parts and not to comprehend the whole", states Pascal (Morin, 2001, p. 43). His principle seems to be applicable precisely where the culture of an institution such as a kindergarten is concerned. By raising awareness of the philosophy, viewpoints, values, communication, interactions, advantages and limitations of an institution, it is possible to perceive the whole – the culture of an institution. This culture may be an incentive but also a hindrance to the improvement of the institution for both individuals and groups who exist and work there. It can create a pleasant or unpleasant feeling in that institution. More attention must be paid to the quality of an institution's culture to emphasise its multidimensionality and the need for a holistic approach to its development and research. The basic aim here is to reiterate the interdependence of changing culture and the structure of the upbringing –educational institution. Contemporary programmes of educating the kindergarten teacher and those initial educational programmes and even those programmes of constant professional development have recognised the importance of the institution's culture and its influence on the overall functioning of the institution. Therefore, these programmes are placing more emphasis on this aspect. Educating the individual for actively participating in the growth of a culture of community (family, kindergarten) means firstly teaching him/her how to raise awareness and to accept personal responsibility and to take the initiative in building, maintaining and improving the quality of relations at all levels.

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