

# THE ROLE OF THE PREPARATORY PRESCHOOL PROGRAM FOR THE SCHOOL START OF THE CHILDREN

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**Abstract.** The main objective of this paper is to determine the contribution of the Preparatory Preschool Program (PPP) coordination between Preschool and primary education process and analysis of all factors affecting the preliminary introduction of children for school through the implementation of the Preparatory Preschool Program.

The survey was conducted in 6 Preschool institutions and 12 primary schools in the following towns: Bujanovac, Vranje, Vladičin Han, Leskovac and Niš; the sample consisting of 173 Preschool child care workers, 180 teachers and 32 professional associates with total number of 385 respondents.

It is expected that the research results will initiate all people involved in children's education from Preschool to primary elementary school education to act and work together in order to achieve a strategic and important aim - to prepare children for school effectively, i.e. to realize successfully the basic and very important prerequisite for easy adaptation of the children in the school environment.

**Keywords:** *Preparatory preschool program, Maturity, Readiness, Readiness for school.*

## 1. PREPARATORY PRESCHOOL PROGRAM - A NEW CONCEPT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

The preparatory Preschool program is a part of the regular preschool institution program which is realized with the children during the year before the school year starts, the attendance of which became compulsory from 2006/2007. Obligatory preschool preparation program gives new dimension to Preschool education process, especially considering its place in the educational system becoming an integral part of the nine-year compulsory edu-

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cation in the Republic of Serbia. Although it is a part of the compulsory primary education, PPP is realized as a preparation program for the school start in the elementary education as a part of the Preschool education (defined as part of the PSC). So, a preschool concept education was intended to be applied in the implementation of the PPP (the aim is to foster the child development, not a formal learning process, the programs to be less controlled and less mandatory, teaching methods being based more on personal experience, curiosity in the game and so on).

## 2. MATURITY OR READINESS OF A CHILD FOR SCHOOL

Most of the schools in the world use the traditional age criterion for school start, which is separated and apart from the important issues for child development. It takes very little account /or not at all on the maturity and readiness of the child to start the school. The age to start the school learning is determined by law, which is administrative and generally the age between 5 to 8 years. However, the age of children, i.e. their chronological age may not be the only acceptable criterion of maturity readiness for school, yet it can only be a certain level of their physical and mental development. The maturity readiness of the child to start the school represents a new stage in the child development and his mental and physical maturation, which has a far greater significance than the legal prescription of time and age for a child to start the school. Concerning this we should have in mind different individual variations among children of the same and similar chronological age. The variability and the meaningfulness of this term was affected by the fact that it is not just a certain level of children's physical, intellectual, emotional and whatsoever development, but it is also the ability to meet the demands posed on children

by the school, depending on the school policy, its objectives and aims as well as its content and methodology work.

Although recently, scientists in many countries have dealt with the issue of children's readiness for school, they have not still found the reliable criteria for its definition. Each of them has defined it in his own way so it does not exist as a unique definition, having in mind not that big difference between them, as much as is the starting point about how to define the term. That is why it is difficult to determine the term *maturity* and *readiness* for school, as they occur most often paralelly (as distinct, still related concepts), substituting one another (as synonyms) or neutral terms are used as *school preparation / readiness for school*.

In recent literature there are different attitudes and definitions of these terms. According to Ivana Furlan (1984) "maturity" has a biological connotation and has the impression that a biological growth and development is a crucial priority in the development of specific skills which are needed for success in the school. For instance, from the past there is a view that children are matured enough to start the school when they have the second teeth, which is about the sixth-seventh year of age. On the other hand, Zlatko Pregrad (Pregrad 1971, after allegations Karic, 2011). believes that the age and the psychophysical development may be different a lot, so the term *maturity* for school he takes to be a state of "a young person that lets him participate successfully in an organized educational process in the school "on the basis of the level of their physical and mental abilities development (Pregrad 1971, after allegations Karic, 2011).

If the interpretation of the term "*maturity of the child* for the school" by authors Blagoje Neshikj and Vojka Radomirovikj is taken into consideration, the conclusion is that "the psychophysical maturity of the child is the optimal level of the development of various physical and mental functions of the child which will enable him to master the curriculum program successfully" (Nešic and Radomirović, 2000).

Banjac and Nikolic (2011) point out: "Maturity is an adaptation to the school team group - to accept the authority of the teacher, to meet the demands of school and adopt a different schedule of daily activities." It means that along with the cognitive and physical maturity for school, adequate school environment requires a certain level of social and emotional maturity.

Similar interpretation of the concept of

maturity is given by Čatić and Parić, 2009. According to them the maturity or readiness for school involves the child's development in all fields essential for the successful start in the primary school, i.e. for mastering the tasks and obligations he faces defined and posed by the specific educational institution (Čatić and Parić, 2009).

Given the fact that the maturity has a biological implication, more adequate term is readiness. Readiness for school is related to the possession of some necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes, motivation and other relevant characteristics that enable the child to adapt to new conditions of life and work actively, waiting for him in the school. For a child to get a positive experience at school and to perform the school requirements easily, he must be ready for it. It represents «a stage of development of the personality, which gives the child ability to participate in the systematic process of education and acquires its content knowledge successfully; it also represents the whole system of characteristics and quality features that preschool children should acquire during their physical, mental and aesthetic development» (Kamenov, 1997).

Authors Raymond Moore and Dorothy Moore (1989) in their book *Better Late Than Early* developed a holistic indicator for identifying readiness for school. Their "integrated indicator of maturity" takes into account: 1) the experience gained by age, 2) the ability of getting to know, understand, experience, 3) the knowledge and use of the language, 4) the physical development and anthropometric maturity, 5) perceptual ability to differentiate and 6) readiness to read, along with other factors related to it. Moore considered that the early formal compulsory education for children in schools is harmful from the academic, social, mental and even psychological point of view. They proved that, the increased number of enrolled children in special schools, problem behavior and disobedience is a result of the early child compulsory education in schools. They found out that the children of illiterate mothers from African tribes make progress more successfully either socially or emotionally rather than children of Western civilization, viewed from the point of western standards. Their key message is that the connection with the child and the child's emotional development at home, when interrupted by starting the school cannot be neither compensated nor repaired later in school. Moore considered that most children who are not still matured for the school it is much better for

them to stay at home with their parents, than to socialize with the most talented teachers in the school. This fact confirms “the importance of maturity” as a key indicator of school readiness. This stage generally is not reached to the eighth until the tenth year age for most of the children (Moore and Moore, 1989).

From all facts stated so far, it appears that the children’s maturity or readiness for school is a very complex phenomenon and it is really hard to define the valid criteria and indicators of children’s readiness for school. Summing up the attitudes of a number of authors on the child’s maturity for school, however the following components are taken into account: physical health and physical stability; emotional stability; social maturity; intellectual maturity; interest in learning, so we can talk about the general and special children’s preparation for school. *General preparation* comprises the whole physical and mental development of children, and *the special preparation* comprises individual features and activities of the general preparation. *Special children’s preparation for school* includes contents and activities, which contribute for easier achievement of the curriculum in the first grade of the primary school and adaptation to the news to be met by children in different conditions of life and work.

To determine the maturity of children for school has a great significance for their further development. The assessment of the child’s personality in the first grade is an important prerequisite for the development of a

healthy personality later on. Therefore it does matter the level of the professional psychological-pedagogical school service. Testing children for enrollment in the first grade is not only testing for school entry. It must be professional and team assessment of a child personality, a base for the further educational process. Children whose maturity does not meet the requirements of the school, experience great inconvenience, difficulties in work, which usually leads to a negative attitude towards school and learning, and often grow into negative forms of behaviors.

### 3. PREPARING THE CHILD FOR SCHOOL

Preparing the child for school is a process that lasts throughout the preschool years period as part of the fostering the child’s development as a whole. The direct objective of preparing children for school is to contribute to their maturity or readiness for life and work in the forms they exist and wait for them in school. In order to find out the views and the way the child care workers, teachers, professional associates of the school and the kindergartens assess the role of the preparatory Preschool program for school we made a survey of their attitudes on its role in preparing children for school. The survey showed the following results.

**Table 1.** The attitudes of pedagogues, teachers and expert associates of the school about the role of PPP for school

		0	1	2	3	4	Total
PPP increases the overall readiness for school.	Child care workers	F /	2	4	25	142	173
		% /	1.2	2.3	14.5	82.1	100
	Teachers	F 1	5	7	68	81	180
		% 0.6	2.8	3.9	37.8	55	100
	Professional associates of the school	F / /	2	7	16	19	
		% / /	10.5	36.8	52.6	100	
PPP contributes for the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to start school	Professional associates of the kindergartens	F / /	/	2	12	14	
		% / /	/	14.2	85.7	100	
	Child care workers	F / /	2	23	148	173	
		% / /	1.2	13.3	85.5	100	
	Teachers	F 1	3	15	71	90	180
		% 0.6	1.7	8.3	39.4	50	100
PPP helps to equalize the starting position of children in school	Professional associates of the school	F / /	/	9	10	19	
		% / /	/	47.4	52.6	100	
	Professional associates of the kindergartens	F / /	/	3	10	14	
		% / /	/	21.4	78.5	100	
	Child care workers	F /	1	5	37	130	173
		% /	0.6	2.9	21.4	75.1	100
PPP should have more socializing and emotional, rather than an educational effect on children	Teachers	F 2	5	21	81	71	180
		% 1.1	2.8	11.7	45	39	100
	Professional associates of the school	F /	1	1	9	8	19
		% /	5.3	5.3	47.4	42.1	100
	Professional associates of the kindergartens	F / /	2	4	8	14	
		% / /	14.2	28.6	57.1	100	
PPP should have more socializing and emotional, rather than an educational effect on children	Child care workers	F 2	1	21	68	81	173
		% 1.2	1.06	12.1	39.3	46.8	100
	Teachers	F / /	/	18	73	89	180
		% / /	/	10	40.6	49.4	100
	Professional associates of the school	F / /	/	1	8	10	19
		% / /	/	5.3	42.1	52.6	100
Professional associates of the kindergartens	F / /	2	3	9	14		
	% / /	14.2	21.4	64.3	100		

0 -do not agree; 1- Tend to disagree; 2- I partly agree; 3- Tend to agree; 4-I fully agree

Over 95% of child care workers surveyed agreed or totally agreed that PPP increases the overall readiness for school, to which over 90% of the teachers agreed as well. The high degree of consent with the first statement matches with the view of the 85% of the professional associates of the school, to which generally or entirely all professional associates of the kindergartens agreed. Practitioners have thus confirmed and justified the direct goal of PPP, which is the contribution to their overall maturity or readiness for life and work in the forms they exist and to be met later on in elementary school.

The fact that PPP contributes to the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for school start is undoubtedly confirmed by child care workers, teachers and all professional associates. These results are really satisfactory which indicates that respondents realize that transfer and the crossing point from one level of education to the next puts an enormous demands on the child, as for the adaptation to new conditions, situations and ways of work are not at all similar to those in the kindergarten. For the child it is a new life situation that involves a change in the physical environment, introducing adults and strangers, acknowledgment of the new teacher authority, introduction to a number of unfamiliar peers, adaptation to a new group of people, acceptance of new roles and responsibilities. Realizing the circumstances in which the child is to be put by the transition from preschool to school institution, practitioners as direct implementers of PPP activities contribute the children to acquire the necessary competencies, i.e. knowledge, skills and abilities needed to start school.

Over 95% of the child care workers agreed that PPP helps to equalize the starting point of children in school. Teachers agreed with this fact as well, although in slightly lower percentage (85%). The percentage results are very similar when it comes to the professional associates and assistants of the kindergarten and school, as well as with the fact that *PPP should have more socializing and emotional, rather than an educational effect on the children*. These results are satisfying because they suggest there is no schooling in areas where respondents act which on the other hand it is emphasized in some environments where children learn and master the part of the educational content of the first grade in the primary school, which can later have a negative effect on the learning process at school. Identical software facilities in kindergartens

and schools can make the children feel bored, reduce their interest in learning in general, and the ease with which they will perform school tasks the children have been already introduced within the kindergarten can reflect negatively on the very important process of acquiring working habits.

## 4. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the results on the role of the preparatory Preschool program for school start of the children we can be conclude that care child workers, teachers and professional associates valued the role and importance of the preparatory preschool program highly in the process of preparing children for school. In regard to this, further research on PPPs should focus on the analysis of its quality and efficiency use in the educational practice in line with international criteria in order to realize the effective implementation of the objectives and principles of preschool education and to approach gradually the system of preschool education of the European Community and of the modern world.

The objective to facilitate the adaptation of children and ease the successful start of their formal education requires evaluation instruments on the monitoring of the quality of the Preparatory preschool program which would provide dynamics and development of the educational process. In this context, following recommendations are given:

- Defining clear evaluation and self-evaluation criteria for existing practices that will contribute to an objective assessment of the quality of work in the preparatory groups and the first grades of elementary school. It is very important to choose and focus on a specific aspect of the problem carefully - and to plan self-evaluation in relation to it, which will lead to quality changes in the implementation of the Preparatory preschool program;

- Evaluation should be continuous on the basis of which action plans are to be designed in order to improve the program (its weak/strong points); in the evaluation process all actors should be involved - children, educators, professional services, parents, primary school teachers.

### Conflict of interests

Author declare no conflict of interest.

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