

PARENTS' ATTITUDES ABOUT MOTIVES FOR ENROLLING CHILDREN IN PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS AND EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

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Abstract: Based on the most important theoretical and empirical evidence on the importance and benefits of including children in preschool institutions, we conducted a survey on a sample of 334 parents in the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) whose children attended a preparatory program in the year before entering school in 2024, with the aim of determining their attitudes about motives for enrolling children in early learning programs. Factor analysis determined that one dominant factor explains 91.26% of the total variance of parental motives for enrolling children in preschool institutions. This research has important implications for educational policymakers and practitioners because the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is a country in transition in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Preschool children, Parents, Early Learning, Preschool Institutions

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Based on current scientific findings, preschool upbringing and education is the first step in the system of lifelong learning (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2010; Sheridan et al., 2011, Travar, 2019; Travar, 2021), and early learning is one of the most pressing challenges of modern education (Black et al., 2017; Спасојевић et al., 2013). The right to accessible and quality education, starting from early childhood, is one of the fundamental children's rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), which has been ratified by many countries around the world, including Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A synthesis of current knowledge about preschool upbringing and education highlights its impact on the overall development of a child's personality and general well-being, encouraging physical, intellectual, socio-emotional, and speech development; communication and creativity; experiential learning; and acquiring and expanding ideas about oneself and the world around one, which are necessary for all subsequent levels of education (Arteaga et al., 2014; Bautista et al., 2016; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Lopez-Agudo & Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 2024; Rastovac & Cvetković, 2018).

At the preschool age, which is a precious period in which the foundations of the future personality are laid, the support and participation of parents in the early learning process is of great importance. The authors conclude that the manner and type of their engagement in this process largely depend on the parents' attitudes towards early learning. Parents are expected to be the first to recognize the importance of a stimulating environment for the learning and development of preschool children, in the provision of which they very often need the help and support of preschool institutions (Марковић et al., 2019). For the well-being of a preschool child, it is best if his development and learning take place simultaneously in the family and preschool institutions; that is, if, in addition to education in a functional family, the child is also enrolled in some institutional early learning program.

Research shows that parental involvement in children's early learning is related to the child's later academic and socio-emotional skills, as well as long-term results and achievements. Therefore, it is of great importance to engage parents in the process of early learning and play, as well as to find ways in which the family can be involved in these processes (Mohammed, 2023). The conclusions of other research studies show that knowledge about early learning needs to be incorporated into the education system and the preparation of future parents for responsible parenthood (Travar & Spasojević, 2018) in order to develop positive attitudes towards the importance of early learning and its beneficial impact on child development. Positive attitudes of parents about the effects of early learning would influence not only the inclusion of their children in early learning programs but also their own engagement in this process

and the establishment of a functional partnership between the family and the preschool institution. Cooperation between the family and preschool institutions ensures the continuity of the educational impact on the child, just as quality time spent by parents and children in the family is crucial for developing a positive attitude towards learning (Bakhtiyorova, 2024).

METHOD

Problem statement

One of the important challenges in preschool upbringing and education in the Republic of Srpska is to approach European and global trends in education, meaning to increase the number of preschool children attending early learning programs. One of the ways to shed light on the situation in this area and to propose concrete measures and steps to improve the situation is through examining the attitudes of parents of preschool children, who are potential users of preschool services.

Examining the needs and perceptions of parents, as well as their motives for enrolling children in early learning programs, is an important research project that has its own scientific, social, and practical significance.

Research questions

The aim of the research is to identify the most common factors that indicate the motives why parents would enroll children in preschool institutions and early learning programs.

In the research, we started from the following assumption: the identified factors will indicate the most common motives why parents enroll children in preschool institutions and early learning programs.

Sampling

The sample consisted of 334 parents from the population whose children attended the free preparatory program in the year before entering school. The sample was selected by random selection on the territory of the Republic of Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina). That sample is representative in relation to the population, as it makes up approximately 22% of the total number of parents whose children were enrolled in the free preparatory program in the year before entering school. Parents from all regions participated in the research.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire for parents consists of two parts: the first part is intended to collect data on the socio-demographic characteristics. The second part was assessment scale of Parents' Motives for Enrolling a Child in a Preschool Institution, which was used to determine parents' attitudes about the most common reasons for enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs. This Likert-type scale, with 5 levels of agreement (from 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree), was partly taken from the author's research (Hadela et al., 2019) and partly was originally constructed for the purposes of the research. The reliability of the assessment scale was verified by calculation (Cronbach's Alpha), the value of which confirmed the very good internal consistency of the items in the scale ($\alpha=.993$).

Data Collection

The survey was conducted in the period from March to June 2024. Respondents had the option to choose between Google questionnaires and printed surveys. All respondents entered research voluntarily, and their identity was completely anonymous.

Data Analysis

Statistical data processing was performed using the SPSS version 22 statistical package and included the following procedures: calculation of basic descriptive indicators (frequencies, percentages, arithmetic mean, standard deviation, standard error), and factor analysis using the principal components method with the application of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) sphericity test.

RESULTS

Starting from the second research task and our expectation that parents would indicate in their attitudes the most common motives for enrolling their children in preschool institutions and early learning programs, we applied factor analysis through scores, using the principal components analysis method with the application of Kaiser's criterion for "extracting" factors, and calculated Bartlett's sphericity test.

Table 1. Parents' Attitudes About the Motives for Enrolling Their Child in a Preschool Institution – KMO Test and Bartlett's Sphericity Test

| | | |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|
| KMO sample adequacy measure | .969 | |
| Bartlett's sphericity test | χ^2 | 11328.100 |
| | df | 105 |
| | p | .000 |

Based on the presented Bartlett's Sphericity Test, which is statistically significant, we conclude that it is justified to apply the principal components method. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin is .969 and shows that the scale has high reliability. By the factor analysis procedure, namely the principal components analysis, one main factor was singled out that explains 91.265% of the total variance. The contribution of the factor in explaining the total variance for the scale, Parents' motives for enrolling their child in a preschool institution, is shown in Table 1.

Table 2. Parents' Motives for Enrolling Their Child in a Preschool Institution —Explanation of Total Variance

| Component | Initial Eigenvalues | | | Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings | | |
|-----------|---------------------|------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| | Total | % Variance | Cumulative% | Total | %Variance | Cumulative % |
| 1 | 13.690 | 91.265 | 91.265 | 13.690 | 91.265 | 91.265 |
| 2 | .323 | 2.152 | 93.417 | | | |
| 3 | .205 | 1.364 | 94.781 | | | |
| 4 | .145 | .964 | 95.745 | | | |
| 5 | .111 | .741 | 96.486 | | | |
| 6 | .098 | .653 | 97.139 | | | |
| 7 | .081 | .539 | 97.678 | | | |
| 8 | .073 | .488 | 98.166 | | | |
| 9 | .058 | .384 | 98.551 | | | |
| 10 | .048 | .321 | 98.872 | | | |
| 11 | .043 | .287 | 99.158 | | | |
| 12 | .039 | .263 | 99.421 | | | |
| 13 | .036 | .237 | 99.658 | | | |
| 14 | .034 | .228 | 99.886 | | | |
| 15 | .017 | .114 | 100.00 | | | |

Table 2 shows the factor loading matrix, which presents the correlation values between individual factor 1 and each variable with a separate factor; that is, with the lowest correlation obtained being .920 and the highest being .975. This confirms that the obtained data are reliable for further analysis for the purpose of scientific inference.

Table 3. *Parents' Motives for Enrolling Their Child in a Preschool Institution—Factor Saturation Matrix*

| Items | Factor 1 |
|---|----------|
| It is important for the child to gain self-confidence. | .975 |
| It is important for the child to develop work habits. | .972 |
| It is important for the child to gain new experiences. | .969 |
| It is important for the child to learn something new. | .967 |
| It is important for the child to develop hygiene habits. | .964 |
| It is important for the child to adopt the basics of cultural behavior. | .963 |
| It is important for the child to learn to respect authority. | .957 |
| It is important for the child to become independent. | .957 |
| It is important for the child to prepare for school. | .956 |
| It is important for the child to talk to peers. | .952 |
| It is important for the child to play with other children. | .951 |
| The child will learn to help other children in kindergarten. | .949 |
| It is important for the child to be in a team with other children. | .946 |
| The child will learn to share things with other children in kindergarten. | .931 |
| It is important for the child to meet other children. | .920 |

Table 3 shows items with factor weights ranging between .920 and .975. We have named the factor “Main motives for enrolling children in preschool institutions.” The content of the items that make up the factor shows that the main motives for enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs are gaining self-confidence and work habits. This is followed by the motives related to gaining new experiences in a different environment compared to the family one. After that, there are the motives related to acquiring hygienic and cultural habits in a preschool institution. Motives related to learning to respect authority and preparing the child for entering school were highlighted as completely equal. After them, we observe motives related to the importance of spending time with other children (It is important for the child to talk to peers; It is important for the child to play with other children; The child will learn to help other children in kindergarten; It is important for the child to be in a group with other children). Factor analysis showed that the items (The child will learn to share with other children in kindergarten; It is important for the child to meet other children) had the lowest factor weights.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis in the research was confirmed, as factor analysis identified a factor that integrates and unifies the motives that would lead parents to include their children in preschools and early learning programs. Namely, factor analysis determined that parents in the sample surveyed recognize the importance of enrolling their children in preschools and highly value all the offered motives. It is encouraging to note that although the largest percentage of respondents included in this study are parents whose children have never been enrolled in preschools or an early learning program before (76.9% of parents), they still successfully identify motives for enrolling their children in institutions. Moreover, they value the motives for enrolling those related to personality traits necessary for further education and life in the 21st century (self-confidence and work habits) the most. They also successfully recognize the importance of the child’s stay in preschool institutions when it comes to gaining new experiences in a different environment compared to the family environment, aware that the family cannot replace the effects of the child’s stay in a preschool group. The results show that parents also recognize the effects of the stay in preschool institutions as important, which relate to the development of hygiene and work habits, acceptance of the authority of an adult (teacher), and preparation for entering school. The effects of socialization, namely staying in a group of children and talking and socializing with them, are also valued by parents as motives for enrolling children in preschool institutions and early learning programs, but somewhat less so. The reason for this is the knowledge that preschool children are today included in various informal peer groups; therefore, their socialization is not a priority reason for enrollment in preschool institutions. The results of similar empirical studies show that the main motives of parents for enrolling two-year-old children in early learning programs were taking care of their children while their parents are at work, developing intellectual abilities and acquiring knowledge, getting used to the routine of the team, and staying outside the family home. The results of the study showed that parents assessed the following as the largest developmental effects of attending early learning programs for their children: progress in communication, development of social

skills, and general progress (Wiegerová & Gavora, 2018). Similar to our study, the research (Višnjić-Jevtić, 2021) found that parents of preschool children assess that children's social and emotional skills are important for successful functioning in society, but also as a basis for acquiring other skills. This author concludes that preschool teachers can use parents' assessments to gain better insight into the family context in which a child grows up, that is, to learn about the specifics of the socio-cultural community to which the child belongs.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the theoretical and empirical study of this topic, it is possible to draw several conclusions and implications that are significant for educational policymakers in the Republic of Srpska, as well as practitioners and founders of preschool institutions that implement early learning programs in the public, private, or non-governmental sector:

- due to its complex, multiple, and optimal impact on the holistic development of a child's personality in the period of his most intensive development, that is, in the first six years, preschool education needs to be further institutionally strengthened as the first stage of the education system in the Republic of Srpska as a constituent part of Bosnia and Herzegovina;

- through a careful analysis of the research results, we can conclude that parents successfully recognize the motives for enrolling children in preschool institutions, and primarily those related to the compensatory role of preschool institutions to compensate children for what they are deprived of by staying only in the family environment. However, the results obtained indicate the need for additional education of parents of lower educational status about the advantages and values of enrolling preschool children in early learning programs. The bearers of these activities could be faculties for the education of preschool teachers, as well as the students themselves in the role of volunteers.

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