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## Influences of preschool on the development of self-control in preschool children in Montenegro

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The aim of the research presented in this paper is to examine the factors, including pedagogical ones, that influence the development of self-control in preschool children. Numerous studies emphasise the importance of discipline in the development of self-control. The methodological part of this paper represents a qualitative research study conducted within a single educational facility in Montenegro (Podgorica) which, apart from systematic observation, included interviews with teachers in a focus group (41 examinees). ATLAS.ti software was used to analyse and prepare the research data. The results of this study suggest not only the possible existence of an isolationist culture of preschools in Montenegro, but also insufficient awareness of teachers' practice. The nature of teacher-child interaction is considered in the context of an educational institution, characterised by predominantly linear communication, as well as the group tasks that dominate the working day. Studies of this type have not been conducted in Montenegro so far. The results provide significant material for further research and practice, such as the promotion of positive communication and successful teacher-child interaction in terms of the positive development of self-control in preschool institutions.

**Keywords:** education; environment; preschool; preschool teacher; self-control; self-regulation

### Introduction

#### Self-Control in the Preschool

Self-regulation can be defined as the ability to focus attention, manage emotions, control behaviour, and to successfully meet the demands of the environment (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Blair & Razza, 2007; Calkins & Williford, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson & Brock, 2009). It affects many segments of a child's life, ranging from cognitive development (Carlson, Mandell & Williams, 2004) to childhood personality formation (Stifter, Spinrad & Braungart-Rieker, 1999). If children cannot control their own behaviour (for example, avoid something or wait for something), they will not be able to cope with their environment (McClelland, Cameron, Connor, Farris, Jewkes & Morrison, 2007). This implies children's abilities to control their positive or negative emotions, to prevent or control behaviour, and to direct and share their attention (Fuhs, Farran & Nesbitt, 2013). Self-regulation is expressed by internal self-control, especially with children. At preschool age self-control development is one of the child's greatest achievements (Vasta, Haith & Miller, 1998). Research has shown that children with low levels of self-control achieve worse results in preschool institutions and schools than children with higher levels of self-control (Cooper & Farran, 1988; Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; McClelland, Morrison & Holmes, 2000). Focusing children's attention is an important segment of self-control as it helps children to perform their tasks, to act in accordance with the rules and, consequently, to successfully interact with others in a preschool group (Rothbart & Hwang, 2005; Zelazo & Müller, 2002).

At a global level, one cannot ignore the ecological approach or the importance of the context in the domain of developing self-control. These are aspects that reflect on the current relevance of our research in relation to the wider scientific community.

An illustrative example of the importance of such an approach is the research by Broekhuizen, Slot, Van Aken and Dubas (2017), who emphasise the importance of a stimulating environment for the development of children's social and emotional skills, with the primary interest being the impact of assistance from the teacher in the development of self-control through the use of games (Broekhuizen et al., 2017). Brajša-Žganec and Hanzec (2015) conducted research that provides significant insight into the subject. They produced reliable data on a direct correlation between self-control and emotions, as well as on aggressive behaviour in boys of preschool age.

According to Bandura (1997) and Bronson (2000), the development of self-control is based on self-assessment. Children learn the types of behaviour for which they will be rewarded or punished. They also learn to respect others and understand the consequences of their behaviour. In this way, they develop their future behaviour and establish patterns of behaviour. Zimmerman and Schunk (2008) point out that self-regulation in children originates from the social environment, on which the basis of self-control segments related to learning is developed. Vasta et al. (1998) state that autonomy is the basis for the development of self-control and for the formation of personality later in life.

It should be emphasized that importance of teaching competences is irreplaceable in relation to expression of the child's individuality, as well as self-control. Successful communication and a stimulating environment also motivate the child's individuality.

### The Role of Preschool Teachers in the Process of Developing Child's Self-Control

In the process of developing self-control, the most important role is definitely played by adults – preschool teachers and parents. They should be the experts in terms of observing and listening to children. However, it is not a matter of the spontaneous, intuitive recognition of children's needs and later again the spontaneous action of preschool teachers. On the contrary: initiative, autonomy, activity, and overall development in various domains require a very conscious, reflexive action on the part of preschool teachers. A reflexive practitioner has his or her own educational philosophy (Rossouw, 2009), which is continuously being challenged, testing their previous experiences in new situations and contexts. It is often the case that a preschool teacher acts directly in a given situation, i.e. applies his or her knowledge in action. All of that significantly forms the child's social environment in the preschool.

Blair (2002) points out that self-control skills have a significant impact on children's learning, as well as on the application of knowledge. Self-control has long been regarded as the basis for early childhood development and, although there is no general agreement on its definition, there is a consensus that self-control is developed through emotional control (child manages to control his emotions on his own) (Bodrova & Leong, 2008; Ford, McDougall & Evans, 2009; Liebermann, Giesbrecht & Müller, 2007; Sokol & Müller, 2007) or through cognitive processes (for example, executive function) (Bodrova & Leong, 2008; Bronson, 2000; Ford et al., 2009). Children begin to develop self-control skills as early as the first year of their lives and these improve over time. Early age is characterised by self-control in terms of physical activity, and children most often adopt this with the help of their parents. Children of this age are very dependent on those who take care of them. Preschool children begin to control their emotions and behaviour. They think about and focus on specific tasks (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Thus, "control" from an outside source transforms into an internally controlled process: self-control.

Children's behaviour can be regarded as mirroring their preschool teacher or, more precisely, mirroring what he or she does. In order to encourage discipline and self-control, preschool teachers must themselves be disciplined. First of all, they must know how to "pause" between an impulsive "feeling" and "taking action." The corresponding technique demonstrated to children is the so-called *time-out* (the time that allows one to "get away" from the problem and restore emotional stability (Nelsen, Duffy, Escobar, Ortolano & Owen-Sohocki, 1996)). The relationship that a preschool teacher has with his or her children, but also with all the other people in a preschool, affects the be-

haviour and development of each individual. Therefore, it is significant that the role of preschool teachers should be understood as the creation of a comprehensive, high-quality, socio-pedagogical context or, more precisely, as a network of reciprocal relationships and expectations that support and maintain diverse individual and group processes that encourage and direct children's upbringing and development (Petrović-Sočo, 2007). Curby, Brock and Hamre (2013) conducted research on a random sample (2,938 children); they found that consistent emotional support from preschool teachers results in better social skills and achievements in childhood. They also emphasise the dual role of consistency and easier problem solving: children may hesitate to engage in some activities in cases of inconsistent treatment and information processing on the part of the teacher. An inconsistent teacher will keep hold of the children's attention and thereby exclude them from numerous other experiences in the workroom (Curby et al., 2013). Russell, Lee, Spieker and Oxford (2016) came to a similar conclusion, pointing out that the benefits of a stimulating environment have a long-term impact on the development of children, and that the parental role and the development of self-regulation are predictors of the development of social skills.

Teachers often say that they place things out of children's reach, for the children's own protection. It imposes consideration of certain questions: In which way and manner does a child have the opportunity to explore and, consequently, learn, if a routine does not allow this? What will happen if we keep protecting children in such a way? How will they develop the abilities of self-protection and self-control? "They are forbidden to enter the kitchen, everything that might be dangerous in the preschool is unavailable to them, and, on the other hand, in order to make a child feel good, we want preschool to be as similar to home as possible and so, instead of protecting, we develop self-protection in children?" (Petrović-Sočo, 2009:37). A group of preschool teachers who participated in action research in Croatia described some of the situations that stimulated research and learning by children as being potentially dangerous for children, and the behaviour of children as euphoric and undisciplined (Petrović-Sočo, 2009).

Verbalising certain actions is necessary for teaching children about socially acceptable behaviour. Redirecting attention away from activities that are less desirable or replacing such activities can be a good way to gain children's attention. If one wants a child to understand what he or she should or should not do, one should set clear and specific rules. These rules should be meaningful and expressed in positive terms. It is easier for children to learn how to change their behaviour if their preschool teacher tells them: "Tell him it's your turn" instead of "Stop hitting him" (Hansen, Kaufmann

& Walsh, 2001:60). The condition for adopting a rule is that children should understand its meaning. That is why it is necessary to give an explanation or to state the reasons why something is acceptable, or not. If one notices that children are trying to obey a certain rule, even if they are not entirely successful in it, that children should be encouraged. This will certainly benefit the development of self-respect and confidence. When it comes to violating rules, the use of a system of logical consequences is far more effective than punishment.

Additionally, it should be noted that the entire social context in preschool depends on the preschool teachers. Apart from consistency in the relations with children, a teacher should apply the same principle (which is not the only one) in their relations with the other adults in the preschool. Children will be able to follow numerous actions in such an environment that will encourage or disable their self-control. Some researchers point out that social context depends on the preschool teacher – on his or her attitudes and expectations, his or her belief system, humour, control techniques, leadership style, and use of praise – as well as on the established rules of conduct in the preschool regarding different issues (Petrović-Sočo, 2007). If one regards a preschool as a teaching organisation, its traditional hierarchical organisation obviously needs to change. Instead of imposing control and supervision, it is necessary to enable joint decision-making and motivate all the members of staff.

#### The Influence of the Social Context in a Preschool on the Process of Developing Self-Control

The social environment, in the broadest sense of the word, affects the development of self-control. Therefore, it is necessary to mention the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1997), which emphasises, apart from environmental factors, the importance of an individual's active participation in the development of self-control. In relation to Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1997) the importance of the environment affecting an individual's behaviour is emphasised.

The environment should be flexible so that it can be modified in accordance with the child's needs. It is important to provide a sufficient quality of conditions for satisfying children's primary needs (for food, sleep, etc.). Satisfying these primary needs in early childhood generates a feeling of security. If such needs are not satisfied, it is difficult to influence development in any domain. It seems that it is important for the development of self-control to provide children with enough time, without compelling them all to work at the same pace, to have an individual schedule for sleeping, feeding, changing nappies, playing, and resting, and to have a flexible daily schedule, depending on the child's age, the number of children in a group, the level of development, and individual needs

(Abbott & Moylett, 1997; Stokes-Szanton, 2002 as cited in Petrović-Sočo, 2007; Von Hentig, 1997).

A well-planned and consistently applied routine is particularly beneficial for the development of internal control, but it has to be flexible enough to adapt to children's needs and capabilities (Kamenov, 2008). Therefore, the schedule of activities should be individualised as much as possible, especially in early childhood. Satisfying children's needs for sleep, food or for spending time outdoors at the wrong times often causes irritability and dissatisfaction. Steady but flexible implementation of the child's daily routine in the institution contributes to a feeling of trust in the environment, because, with the daily repetition of certain activities at approximately the same time and in a particular space, children experience pleasure and gradually realise what is happening to them, and can easily follow and anticipate further events (Petrović-Sočo, 2007). Unfortunately, the real situation is often different, so there is usually a teacher who is impatient, who wants to feed the child as soon as possible, and who communicates rudely (Manojlović & Mladenović, 2001). Instead of a prevalent daily routine, one should have a framework, and not rules that are implemented without exception.

Moreover, involving children in the decision-making process, setting limits and establishing behavioural rules will greatly enhance their self-confidence (Nelsen et al., 1996), which will later be reflected in the quality of their interactions in adulthood.

#### Methodological Approach of the Research

Considering the nature of the problem, influences of preschool on the development of self-control in preschool children in Montenegro, it was necessary to provide a holistic approach and to determine the nature of various interactions in the preschool context. Ethno-pedagogical research was conducted within the framework of broader research, the goal of which was to determine whether preschool children have the ability to manage positive or negative emotions, to prevent or control behaviour, and to direct and share their attention, i.e. to what degree self-control has been developed in children of preschool age and how self-control is being encouraged in preschool institutions. The aim of this study was to provide an insight into the factors that influence the development of self-control and to what extent the overall environment contributes to or restricts this development. Accordingly, a qualitative methodology was predominantly used, based on a synthesis of the gathered qualitative research findings, which are elaborated later.

#### Research

The first phase of the research consisted of observing the work of a unit in a preschool institution from the central region of Montenegro (Podgorica),

where the observed indicators were recorded according to the observation protocol, using a constructed and adapted research method in relation to the assessment instruments of the National Association for the Education of Young Children ([NAEYC], 1991; Petrović-Sočo, 2007). The timeframe over which the observation was carried out was one working week in March 2017. Two preschool teachers worked in the educational group, along with one trainee teacher and a teaching assistant (whose job was to assist with working with a child with special needs). Fifty-six children aged five to six attended preschool education classes in the group.

The second phase of the research was the implementation of two focus groups consisting of preschool teachers employed at the institution. For the purpose of the focus group discussion, a focus group guide was constructed, consisting of 16 open-type questions. Participants were invited to make comments on the previously observed units that had been identified as being important in the area of self-control development (for example, "Are you inclined to reduce assistance and control when you notice that a child can work independently?," "Do you act reflectively, and what kinds of reflections do you most often apply?," "What is important to consider when addressing requests to children?," and "How does discipline arise, and what is a prerequisite for discipline?"). A total of 41 teachers were interviewed (21 teachers in the first group and 20 teachers in the second group). All the teachers who were interviewed had worked in preschool educational groups during their years of service. The focus group interviews were conducted in April 2017. The focus groups were organised with the assistance of the management of the preschool institution within the premises of the institution, and the interviews lasted 80 minutes each. The focus group moderator is the first author of this paper. After obtaining oral consent from the research participants, she made audio recordings. In this respect, in order to understand and interpret the data, it was extremely important to engage with the respondents (teachers) who, through their personal experience (the implicit pedagogy), helped with the researchers' assessments and the participatory validation of their observation findings.

#### Data Analysis Procedure

The data was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to identify and study the topics (categories) contained in the data. When all the necessary findings were gathered, they were unified and encoded in the domain of items of developing self-control. The researchers tried to discover those factors that influenced the development of self-control, as well as how much the overall environment in the preschool institution contributed to or restricted its development. The

researchers used ATLAS.ti software to systematise and encode the data they had obtained. The monitoring protocols and the focus group transcripts were primarily stored as Word documents. Afterwards, the researchers imported the data into the ATLAS.ti software as separate documents within a hermeneutical unit (HU). During the data analysis, the researchers applied open coding, rapid coding and in vivo coding processes (Creswell, 2007; Friese, 2012) to observe and record every segment that seemed important and that should be considered in the analysis.

The researchers constantly evaluated previous code choices to determine whether the coding was being done consistently and systematically. The recorded items were divided into initial codes according to the observation protocol, and then the initial codes were grouped into smaller units.

The following themes discussed in the paper emerged after material analysis:

1. the environment in the playroom,
2. the daily routine,
3. time organisation,
4. the child's independence,
5. interactions at various levels (child-child, child-adult, etc.),
6. the discipline in the playroom.

In this study, the researchers tried to evaluate the phenomenon of self-control development in preschool institutions in relation to the confirmed presence or absence of the factors they had observed and studied. In this respect, the conclusions reached in this paper represent the results of an authentic analysis of the data collected considering the subject of the research.

#### Results

##### The Social Environment and the Daily Routine in the Playroom vs. Self-Control

The first impression gained by the researchers was that the preschool institution had a pleasant environment for learning and for spending time in. At the beginning of the working day the children played until breakfast time. During this period they were given time to choose what they wanted to do. Then the register was taken, followed by an introduction to the topics and activities planned for that day. After the introductory activities, the children were involved in some concrete structured activities, ending mostly with some musical or relaxation activities. Finally, they had lunch and then went to bed. The conclusions reached in this paper regarding the degree of schematisation, the flexibility of the daily routine, and its degree of stimulation for the development of self-control are based on the testimonies of the preschool teachers, as well as on the researchers' immediate observations.

The teachers claimed that they did not insist on a routine schedule, and that flexibility was possible as long as the mandatory code of conduct was obeyed. However, when the researchers asked

whether it was possible to individualise the daily programme (for example, did all the children have to go to bed at the same time?), they answered: *“We cannot do that; it is not feasible; it could be possible if we had a separate bedroom”*; *“The main problem is a lack of space”* and *“We are aware that it would be a good idea to have a special room for the children who do not sleep, as well as a room where the children would eat (so that we could satisfy their requirements), but the problem is purely technical.”* One teacher pointed out that a separate sleeping and eating arrangement already existed in some other preschools, and that changes in their preschool should go in the same direction.

#### The Organisation of the Time and the Child's Independence vs. Self-Control

The researchers got the impression that the organisation of time was also not flexible enough. Hand washing and food consumption were carried out at the so-called “frontal” level; the children waited in front of the toilet and it was usually crowded outside. The teachers justified this by saying that it was not possible to make exceptions, that there were rules and getting used to them was very important. The attitudes towards the children reflected the perception of the children being dependent, but at the same time being capable of adapting.

It also seemed contradictory that preschool teachers considered it essential to meet the primary needs of the children while, on the other hand, the researchers did not notice flexibility (individualisation) in the process of satisfying those needs. Satisfying the need for sleep has already been mentioned, which is similar to satisfying the need for food. All children had breakfast and lunch at the same time, where they would sit and wait for their helpings. Research opportunities were limited: the children were not allowed to pour tea or milk by themselves, their food was often pre-cut, and teachers often fed the slower children.

The environment of the playroom did not seem to be stimulating for exploration by the children. The materials and toys were available to the children, but the teachers generally had a planned activity stream. Instead of having a free choice of activities, the children were mostly assigned a task by the teacher, which was justified in the following way: *“The weaker children cannot, for example, glue balls of paper onto an outlined figure, but they can colour the figure in.”* The issue of freedom of choice also arose. However, when the researchers asked: *“How does discipline arise, what is the prerequisite for discipline?”*, the teachers answered: *“Through the attractiveness [of an activity], their interest, adjusting an activity to the children's age, focusing their attention, and then determining the requirement.”* The teachers directed the researchers' attention to their focus on work. A gap between the pre-planned set of activities and respon-

sibilities on the one hand, and the children's focused attention and interest on the other hand, was evident. A lack of space for free movement, as well as a lack or unavailability of natural materials for work, does not represent an encouraging environment for children.

The statements that the programme was flexible, marked by work organised around interest centres and thematic planning favoured flexible organisation, i.e. the individualisation of activities. *“We can finish a task that we start today on the following day or the next week.”* All this was aimed at focusing attention and fostering interest among the children. However, the researchers concluded that the topics and activities that arose from this had been prepared in advance (*“I prepare everything for the week ahead,”* one of the teachers stated). It is obvious that preparing for work requires effort, but the current interests of the children seemed to be ignored in the process. This approach also dominated in other teachers' cases. For example, they stressed the advantages of long-term engagement in a particular topic, but it seemed that they did not allow for needs and interests that might interrupt the flow of the activities that had already been planned. The unstructured time represented a deviation from this rule, such as the period before breakfast (for children who come to the kindergarten earlier) and after sleeping (for those who remained at the kindergarten after bedtime). Here the researchers observed the freedom of choice in respect of children's independent activities, such as drawing, playing, and watching cartoons. However, this time ended with breakfast being served or with the early arrival of parents. (One girl, Sara, wanted to paint some pre-prepared materials, but her mother came, so she had to postpone this until the following day or whenever the time came for her to be able to do this.)

#### Interactions at Various Levels and the Discipline in the Playroom vs. Self-Control

It was very encouraging that the teachers considered the setting of their own personal example to be particularly important for the development of self-discipline and self-control. *“We must set an example that children will follow”*; *“We teach everything by setting a good example (in terms of behaviour, establishing hygiene habits and directing),”* *“We do not miss the opportunity to learn from our mistakes, although this is quite difficult in large groups”* and *“We need to show how to maintain hygiene habits, how to sit at the table, and how to have nice manners (like saying ‘here you are,’ ‘thank you,’ ‘please,’ etc.)”*. It is also important for teachers to acknowledge and use the “time-out” technique. They pointed out the following: *“You have to control yourself”* and *“You can say whatever you want kindly, with a smile.”*

Discipline is primarily recognised as being aware of a set of rules and obeying those rules. “*Order, respect, mutual respect, rules of conduct; they know about all that from the day they start coming to the preschool*” and “*We insist on mutual respect, especially in the first month; we are constantly reminding children of the rules and order.*” The teachers emphasised the significant participation of children in this process, i.e. the necessity of respecting their needs and wishes and creating a stimulating social framework on this basis. The researchers’ curiosity was aroused by the following statement: “*They all know the rules. They know how to behave in the playroom and in the outdoor area, but there is also furniture which might be dangerous.*” What is “dangerous” furniture? Does this lead to encouraging self-protection or regarding a child as a dependent human being? At this moment, it is premature to consider the background to this statement, but this does not detract from the fact that it was stated.

Preschool teachers claim that delaying the impulse of satisfaction as a prerequisite for the development of self-control can be achieved by verbalisation or conversation. Often, during their stay at the preschool, the researchers witnessed the interpretation and explanation of various situations that were stimulating for self-regulation, such as: “*Was what Gojko did good?*”; “*You do not touch the tempera paints with your hands, because you will stain your hands*” and “*We cannot say who it is, it will ruin the game.*” Additionally, teachers emphasised the explicitness needed in imposing certain requirements on children. They emphasised the following: “*We need to be specific. If we do not act clearly and directly, we cannot expect children to respect our demands*” and “*Explicitness is necessary to get both a response and behavioural change.*” The researchers witnessed the giving of instructions such as: “*Listen carefully, take one strip of paper, do not rush, then apply the glue*”; “*Take one kernel of popcorn and stick it to the paper*”; “*Now sit at your desks*”; “*The teacher will call someone and then that person will call someone else*” and “*Put the crayons back, we take only one at a time.*” On the other hand, teachers rarely used positive terms in setting rules of behaviour. The researchers used the interview to explain why this was so. As they pointed out, children can easily understand statements such as: “*Is that a nice thing to do?*” and “*Do not hit him, but tell him it’s your turn.*” It is certain that the teachers are inclined to provide conclusions and explanations for certain situations and requirements. However, the formulation of positive terms is usually absent. They claim that their formulations are not negative, but they are not extremely positive either. They describe them as specified messages, with a necessary individual approach, and with an obligatory pleasant tone. “*We do not use negative connotations; our*

*goal is to get a child to understand a request by emphasising it in a pleasant way.*” Consequently, the teachers carefully explain why something is acceptable or unacceptable. In their own words, this is especially important because children often do not understand why something is problematic, or why they cannot have or do something. “*Even if we didn’t do this,*” the teachers said, “*the children themselves would demand explanations.*”

During the conversation the teachers confirmed the importance of setting positive examples for the children, but also of recognising positive examples set by the children themselves. According to them, children who set examples are praised or rewarded for something, and therefore they represent a stimulating model for other children. In further conversation, the researchers tried to identify what teachers did when a child tried to respect a rule.

In most cases, preschool teachers answered that such behaviour was rewarded. The researchers tried to determine what the prize typically was. The teachers most often considered praise as a reward. There were some different comments though, such as: “*They like it most when we give them something sweet.*” The teachers encouraged children (the researchers noted this during the observation). They used praise well, so as not to favour some of the children and negatively affect the self-confidence of others. The researchers heard some unexpected comments there too, such as that, during their training, the teachers were instructed to commend every activity or effort on the part of the child, which, in their opinion, was unjustified for the above-mentioned reasons. What the researchers perceived as being the most significant were the words of encouragement that they often heard: “*You’re doing great*”; “*Excellent, just keep doing what you’re doing*” and “*Don’t say you can’t, we all can.*” There were also comments with negative connotations, such as: “*Look at Gojko! He will never work with tempera again.*” However, such comments were rare exceptions.

In further conversations, the researchers brought up the issue of sanctioning unacceptable behaviour. The teachers explicitly stated that they did not apply punishments. However, the researchers observed that, while communicating with a child, the teachers used the phrase: “*You will be punished.*” The researchers realised that emphasising the system of logical consequences as a positive and ultimately purposeful solution was still not part of their everyday activities. The respondents pointed out that it was not “very effective” to ask a child to mop up milk that he or she had spilled, because the child would get dirty again. That happened periodically: “*Only when they throw pieces of bread at each other do they have to pick up the crumbs.*”

The researchers asked the teachers whether they tended to reduce their help and monitoring when they noticed that a child could work independently. The answers were rather confusing: “Yes, perseverance is important”; “I do not allow them to give up, even though they might be bad at something, you saw what it was like when they made balls”; “Depending on the situation and activity”, and “You must keep control and must not leave children on their own.”

### Discussion

The preschool teachers understood the necessity of discipline at the theoretical level, and in the same way, they understood the importance of thematic planning and working that corresponded with the children’s needs, capabilities, and interests. However, the spirit of collective discipline (equal rules of behaviour and a daily routine for every child), the absence of cooperation in the broadest sense of the word, and the planned activities contradicted the above-mentioned theoretical framework.

It was obvious that teachers felt a need to perform the planned activities regardless of possible variations in the children’s interests. The leading role of teachers in the realisation of the given activities largely contributed to this fact. Additionally, they would often reduce the opportunities for children’s exploration by doing some, in the researchers’ opinion, very stimulating activities themselves instead of allowing the children to do them (for example, applying glue or preparing paints). On top of that, the communication of directions, which primarily implied giving instructions and setting requirements that would be equal for all, contributed to creating an atmosphere that was more appropriate for teaching than for independent, spontaneous exploration by the children.

Based on their observations, the researchers gained the impression that, on several occasions a carefully planned work style did not enable true cooperation and learning. The researchers did not recognise this form of work as stimulating for learning either. As the group work was also individually oriented, children were not able to develop a feeling of closeness and social acceptance. Such “group” work does not offer the possibility for a true exchange of ideas, since the teacher does not stimulate spontaneous dialogue among the children, nor does the teacher devise activities that would be aimed at achieving a common goal, which is the essence of cooperation. Consider the statement of one of the teachers: “If one or two children understand it, they explain it to a third.” In this case, as in many others, the researchers recognised indicators that offered optimism.

Regardless of the previously described context of the preschool and the daily activities that were observed, the researchers considered certain indicators of discipline to be positive.

### Conclusion

The researchers studied the context of preschool as the fundamental part of the process of building self-control. In this sense, they especially emphasised its spatial-material and temporal dimensions.

- The spatial-material dimension is characterised, on one hand, by a rather dysfunctional space, but one which, on the other hand, with its open shelves, warm colours, cupboards and most of the working material being readily accessible to children, encourages optimism.
- The temporal dimension of “a fixed daily routine” was identified, within which, regardless of individual needs and tempo, children practice hygiene habits, have breakfast and lunch, and go to sleep. “*Staying in the preschool is a pattern: children come, have breakfast and sleep at a fixed time,*” the teachers said.
- The environment (i.e. the overall atmosphere in the preschool) was largely focused on teaching. Firstly, there was the prevailing, “frontal” starting up of activities at the beginning of the day, followed by activities planned according to interest centres, and finally, playing with insufficiently attractive or motivating material.

This conclusion agrees with the results of numerous research studies. For example, research by Ebrahim (2011) points out that preschool teachers should reconsider the possibility of creating a liberating practice. Teachers’ approval and a positive tone when addressing children greatly stimulate the development of cognitive self-regulation, which highlights the importance of the child’s environment in the broader sense (Fuhs et al., 2013). The processes taking place in preschool classrooms are the predictors of the development of cognitive self-regulation.

Taking such implicit pedagogies of teachers as a starting point, the researchers also considered the teachers’ discipline framework and, within it, the possibilities of developing self-control. This comprised the following:

- Respecting the code of conduct
- Explicit requirements
- Explanations
- Consistent determination of the limits of children’s behaviour.

The researchers believe that one should also add motivation by using praise and encouragement but avoid an insufficient application of logical consequences for the purpose of sanctioning unacceptable behaviour and encouraging desirable behaviour. Although the definitions mentioned here encourage self-regulation, the question arose as to what extent this was possible in the context described above, and how far these definitions reached. In view of the things observed in this study, it seemed that it was more about imposing discipline in the collective sense than about behaviour induced by self-control.

The researchers have particularly stressed the nature of the interaction between preschool teach-

ers and children in the context of the preschool that was observed. Usually, the teacher invites all the children to participate in activities, regardless of their individual interests. Thus, the same requirements are set before them, and they are offered general, valid instructions. The traditional educational teacher's role is certainly emphasised in this way, at the expense of the teacher's roles as observer, listener, or planner. This undermines the significance of the well-known teaching of Vygotsky on the zone of proximal development. It is not difficult to conclude that communication based on the described grounds is mostly linear. The researchers did not attempt to describe the interaction between children in detail. They mentioned it generally, since it is extremely important in the process of self-regulation. Undoubtedly, the previously indicated interaction and communication in the teacher-child relationship has been transferred to the area of children's relationships with each other. The teachers gave instructions to every child to listen to a story. The children mostly worked in groups on their assignments. They were not encouraged to exchange their places with someone within their own group, let alone with a member of another group, which resulted in mutual distrust, non-acceptance and even frequent conflicts. It is not difficult to conclude that, in such conditions, the opportunities for cooperative learning are limited.

Finally, the researchers realised how stimulating the described context was for teaching self-control. Perhaps in this respect, it is best to pay attention to the prefix "self." Is a child in the described conditions being treated as independent and autonomous, or as dependent and helpless? It is clear that one cannot make conclusions about self-control outside of a context. For this reason, teachers mostly pay attention to discipline, but the circumstances in which teachers work, as well as their implicit pedagogies, should be significantly modified in order to develop self-control in children.

### Authors' Contributions

MJ and SČN were responsible for data collection and the first draft manuscript; MJ and SČN contributed to the conceptualisation of the study, the analysis, and writing of the manuscript. Both authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### Notes

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