

Methodological Particularities in Research on Contemporary Childhood in Croatia: A Pedagogical-Psychological Perspective

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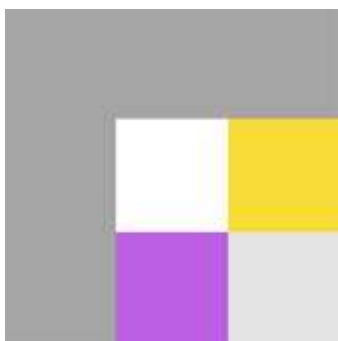
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METHODOLOGICAL PARTICULARITIES IN RESEARCH ON CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOOD IN CROATIA: A PEDAGOGICAL – PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract/Izveček The study aimed to determine the methodological particularities present in research on contemporary childhood. The study methodology involves an analysis of Croatian journals in which the subject of contemporary childhood has been published in the last two years. The inclusion criteria for article analysis were as follows: Social Science discipline, field of Pedagogy and Psychology, participants' age (from 6 to 14 years) and the visibility of the journal citation. The analysis of the contemporary approach included methodological particularities. The results show that these studies of contemporary childhood do not apply "contemporary" approaches to the examination of childhood.

Metodološke značilnosti raziskovanja sodobnega otroštva na Hrvaškem s pedagoško psihološke perspektive

Osnovni namen raziskave je bil prepoznati metodološke značilnosti raziskovanja sodobnega otroštva. Za ta namen so bili analizirani izbrani prispevki iz hrvaških znanstvenih revij, ki obravnavajo sodobno otroštvo, objavljeni v zadnjih dveh letih. Pri analizi gradiva smo uporabili naslednje kriterije, to so: družboslovna veda, področje pedagogike in psihologije, starost udeležencev v raziskavi (6- do 14-letniki) in citiranost revije. Upoštevali smo metodološke posebnosti sodobnih pristopov. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da se pri preučevanju sodobnega otroštva ne uporabljajo sodobni pristopi.

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Introduction

One of the most valuable determinants of every modern researcher is his willingness to use modern approaches while conducting research. The abundance of research techniques, qualitative and quantitative data analysis and the ready availability of global methodological research enable modern researchers to create a holistic approach to research that will not only identify challenges and potential problems but also successfully address the difficulties which caused them (Dubovicki, 2019b; Dubovicki and Topolovčan, 2020a).

While conducting research in the field of education involving participants aged 6 to 14, we often put an emphasis on respecting ethical principles, obtaining consent for research, ensuring anonymity and other technical details of the study, and we end by neglecting the research methodology (and everything it entails). We often use pre-tested (validated) instruments, or those that are available (to measure what we want to research), and all of that is simply easier when it comes to data analysis itself. Even students opt to use such ready-made instruments for their final or graduate papers. However, the question arises whether we can get the right answers to the complex problems of contemporary childhood based on this traditional approach? Is a modern approach required when it comes to researching modern childhood? Research on pedagogical phenomena, which partly includes insight into contemporary childhood, has recently been carried out by authors who have warned about research not using a contemporary, i.e., holistic approach, especially considering that pedagogical phenomena are dynamic, changeable and difficult to measure (Suzić, 2017). Above all, using a contemporary approach means looking into the future through the prism of contemporary methodology. The results of previous research show that, while preparing and implementing their research, scientists and practitioners mainly focus on researching the present and/or past, and rarely on predicting the future (Burdin, Nutter and Gips, 1984; Dubovicki, 2020). Recently, attention has increasingly been paid to the methodological immaturity of certain studies conducted with children, which unfortunately contributes to lower reliability of the results (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008). That leads us to the following question: In what ways can children participate in research? Some authors believe that observation is the most appropriate form of research on preschool children (Hajdin, 2009; Petrović-Sočo, 2009).

Participatory methods proved popular in the 1990s among researchers working with children (Dubovicki, 2019a; Mayall, 2002; Prout and James, 1990). It is certainly important that studies involving children achieve ethical and epistemological validity. By focusing on the new approaches in educational research that include participants aged 6 to 14, we sought to establish whether methodological approaches (and methodological particularities) are the topic of research in journals that publish scientific papers dealing with contemporary childhood, and we also wanted to establish whether research on contemporary childhood has been approached in a contemporary way. Keeping that question in mind, we ask ourselves what exactly is contemporary in the contemporary methodological approach. Above all, it should be reflected in a holistic approach, and not by approaching each profession within the specifics of their methodology, plurality of scientific paradigms, mixed methodology, and triangulation, with special emphasis on scientific contribution, especially in the case of topics that have been extensively researched (Bognar, 2012; Dubovicki, Mlinarević and Velki, 2018). While reviewing previous research dealing with this issue, we discovered that only a few papers include thematic/content analyses, which are vital for monitoring and predicting future trends (Dubovicki and Munjiza, 2021). That is why more recent pedagogical research has used a futures technique, Trend Analysis, which provides insight into past and present trends in a clear, systematic way, taking into account the methodological particularities of the historical approach and analysis of documentation, while also predicting potential future trends (Eğmir, Erdem and Koçyiğit, 2017; Dubovicki, Mlinarević and Velki, 2018; Dubovicki and Munjiza, 2019; Dubovicki and Topolovčan, 2020a; 2020b; Topolovčan and Dubovicki, 2019).

In addition to the contemporary methodological approach, one of the main goals of the paper is to open a methodological discussion on the pedagogical and psychological features, possibilities, advantages, and limitations of contemporary childhood research, but also to emphasize the importance of researching contemporary childhood with futurology research methods.

Materials and methods

The main aim of this study was to determine the methodological particularities represented in research on contemporary childhood, as well as the direction of future research in this field. To this end, we needed to take the following steps:

- analyse Croatian journals pertaining to a specific field of science (social sciences) and specific fields of science (pedagogy and psychology) which, in the last 2 years, have contained papers on contemporary childhood (based on predetermined criteria);
- determine the representation of a certain type of methodology (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methodology) in research on contemporary childhood;
- determine the representation of a certain scientific paradigm in the research on modern childhood;
- determine the number of research procedures used in the research on contemporary childhood;
- determine the research design and temporal dimension of research in contemporary childhood research;
- identify trends in contemporary childhood research based on thematic/content paper analysis;
- project potential future trends in contemporary childhood research, based on the established trends.

Given these research aims, we asked the following research question: Has contemporary childhood been researched following a contemporary research approach?.

Part One of the Research Methodology

The methodology in part one of the study involved analysis of Croatian journals that had published papers on contemporary childhood in the past two years (January 2018 – December 2019). The criteria used to select the journals related to a specific field of science (social sciences), specific fields of science (pedagogy and psychology), the age of the research participants (6 to 14 years) and the citation of the journal visible on Scimago Journal & Country Rank. The journals that met these criteria and were included in the analysis are as follows (in alphabetical order): Journal for General Social Issues, Croatian Journal of Education (hereafter, CJOE), Croatian Review of Rehabilitation Research, Jahr – European Journal of Bioethics,

Methodical Review: journal of philosophy of education, New Presence, Psychological Topics, Croatian Journal of Social Policy, Croatian Sociological Review, Management: Journal of Contemporary Management Issues, Organization, Technology & Management in Construction: An International Journal, Police and Security, Safety: Journal for the safety in the work organisation and living environment, Social Psychiatry, Tourism: An International Interdisciplinary Journal, and Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems: INDECS.

The criteria used to select articles for more detailed analysis are as follows: participants or age group mentioned in the article are elementary school children (6-14 years), and categorization of papers (original scientific article, review paper, professional paper or preliminary communication). From a total of 806 analysed papers, sixty-six met these criteria, which was only 8.19% (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of papers that met the criteria

| Year | Total number of published papers | Number of papers that met the criteria | % |
|-------|----------------------------------|--|------|
| 2018 | 376 | 37 | 9.84 |
| 2019 | 430 | 29 | 6.74 |
| TOTAL | 806 | 66 | 8.19 |

Part Two of the Research Methodology

To achieve comprehensive, precise analysis of the papers, in the second part of the study, we made a thematic/content analysis of those papers that were, according to the criteria, classified as dealing with research on contemporary childhood, and which were used as a basis for predicting possible future trends in researching the issue.

A detailed analysis was conducted with the help of a futures technique, Trend Analysis, which has rarely been used in previous research on this topic (Bigham and Riney, 2014; Dubovicki and Munjiza, 2021; Dubovicki and Topolovčan, 2020a; Topolovčan and Dubovicki, 2019).

Results

Part One of the Research

The analysis of the contemporary approach to research on contemporary childhood included some of the following methodological particularities: paper categorization, type of methodology, representation of the scientific paradigm, number of research procedures, temporal dimension of selected articles and research design.

Paper Categorization

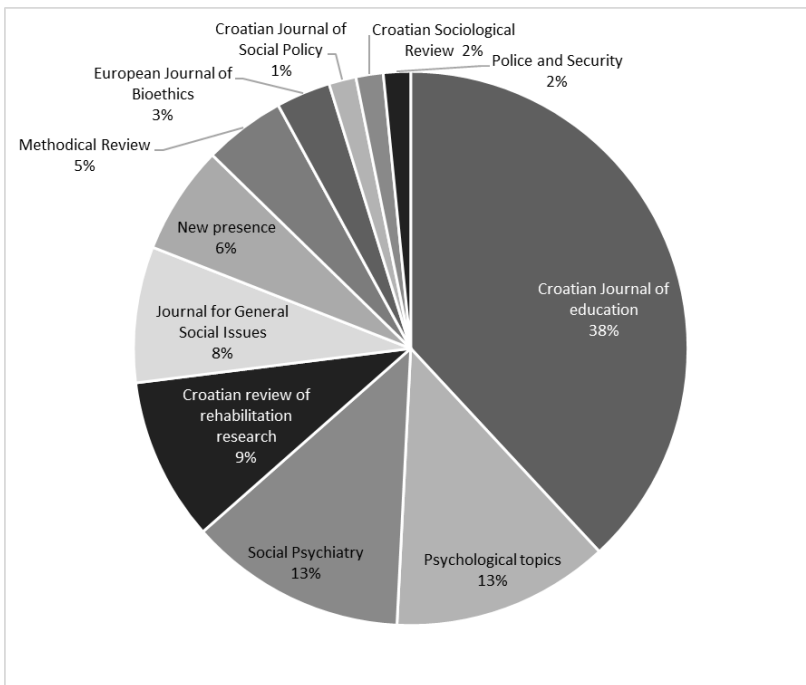


Figure 1: Representation of articles according to selected journals

Figure 1 shows the percentage of published papers by individual journals that met the criteria for the analysis. Most of the papers included in the analysis were from the CJOE, (38%), followed by Psychological Topics (13%), Social Psychiatry (13%), Croatian Review of Rehabilitation Research (9%) and from the Journal for General Social Issues (8%), which was to be expected, given that the titles of these journals indicate that they include papers on similar topics.

Further analysis on methodological particularities showed that, of the total number of papers that were included in the analysis (66), most were categorized as original scientific papers, which is partly because papers in these journals undergo strong preliminary methodological review and are only then sent to reviewers, who follow strict review criteria (established by the journal) in evaluation of submissions (Table 2).

Table 2: Categorization of articles included in the analysis

| Categorization | Number of articles according to criteria | % |
|---------------------------|--|-------|
| Original scientific paper | 46 | 69.70 |
| Review paper | 8 | 12.12 |
| Professional paper | 7 | 10.61 |
| Preliminary communication | 5 | 7.57 |
| Total | 66 | 100 |

In addition, such journals have a strict rule ensuring that every review is conducted by reviewers who are experts in the field for which they are reviewing, and that reviewers are at least at the same peer level as authors. Such journals do not have trouble recruiting reviewers, since these journals can afford to cover the costs of reviews.

Type of Methodology

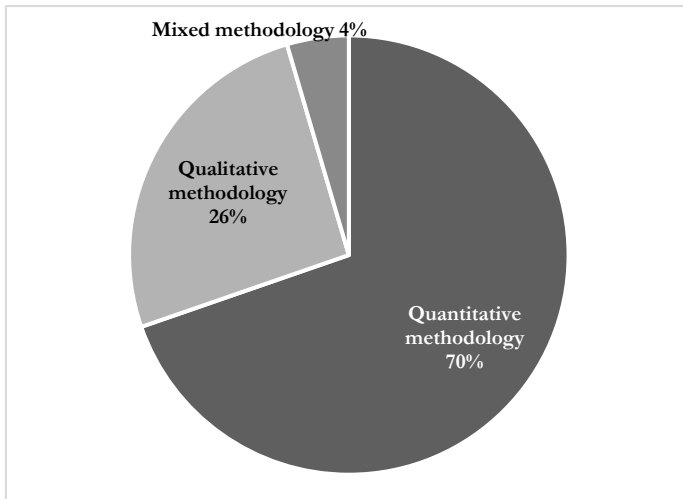


Figure 2: Representation of the type of methodology in the articles

The use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology (i.e., mixed methodology), which certainly provides a holistic approach, is one indicator of modernity in a methodological approach. Therefore, methodologists advocate the use of mixed methodology, which is insufficiently represented in pedagogical and psychological research. That is why an analysis was made according to the type of methodology to which the individual paper belonged, based on the research techniques employed in those papers (Figure 2).

Results show that the least represented type is mixed methodology. These results are consistent with previous research that included the dominant quantitative methodology.

Scientific Paradigm

The results prompted us to further verify the prevalence of scientific paradigms whose pluralism would characterize a modern methodological approach (Figure 3).

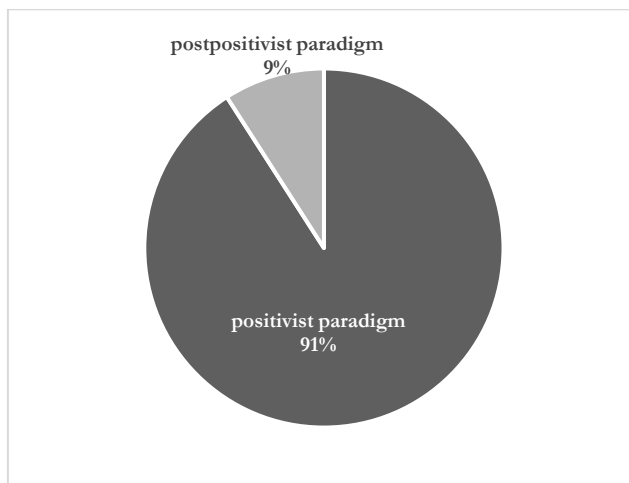


Figure 3: Representation of the scientific research paradigm in the articles

An absolute dominance of the positivist paradigm (91%) was noted in papers dealing with the problems of contemporary childhood. It is generally known that the positivist approach includes methods that allow precise measurement, quantification, manipulation and control of variables and hypothesis testing, while using experiments, quasi-experiments, correlation and survey (Dubovicki, 2017).

In addition to playing a significant role in curricular and educational re-forms, the Cold War also had an impact on the research approaches and methodological frameworks of pedagogical research. The present situation in research on pedagogical and didactic phenomena is mainly a result of the positivist approach, which asserts the possibility of correct understanding of natural and social phenomena, and that the basic task of science is to discover the real nature of reality and its true functioning. Such research aims to achieve an objective understanding of reality based on empirical data. The situation in research on pedagogical phenomena (especially in the Croatian context) has been mentioned by Jagić (2007), Dubovicki (2017), Dubovicki, Mlinarević and Velki (2018) and Topolovčan and Dubovicki (2019).

Number of Research Procedures

Table 3: Number of procedures included in the articles

| Procedures | Number of articles | % |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Questionnaires | 22 | 33.3% |
| Polls | 8 | 12.1% |
| Tests (skill or knowledge) | 13 | 19.7% |
| Literature review | 12 | 18.2% |
| Interviews | 2 | 3.0% |
| Other | 4 | 6.1% |
| Combinations of these procedures | 5 | 7.6% |

Table 3 shows the number of research procedures used in research on contemporary childhood. Most often questionnaires were the sole methodology applied (33.3%), meaning validated and sometimes standardized measurement instruments available for scientists to use for research purposes. Only in rare cases (7.6%), was a combination of procedures applied, indicating that the use modern procedures in contemporary childhood research is still insufficient. This is another indicator that goes in the direction of the mathematization and numbering of data on these phenomena in the field of pedagogy and psychology, methods which undoubtedly belong to the legacy of the Cold War (Topolovčan and Dubovicki, 2019).

Temporal Dimension of Selected Articles and Research Design

All articles included in the study were transversal in design (100%). Most focused on the present (n=55, 83.3%), some on the past (n=11, 16.7%) but none of them focused on the future.

The current situation with Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has demonstrated that it is vital to invest in education for the future, especially by planning scenarios for varied future educational outcomes. For the same reasons, it is especially important to explore the future by employing futuristic research methods, which increasingly occupy a justifiably equal place among other research techniques (Dubovicki, 2020).

Part Two of the Research

The second part of the research comprised the content analysis (trend analysis), conducted with the help of the futures technique Trend Analysis, which enables researchers to predict, based on previous trends (based on analysis of previous papers and a historical approach), potential trends in the field of contemporary childhood research.

Trends in Contemporary Childhood Research

It should be noted that the thematic/content analysis was a challenge, since some content overlapped between categories, while the content of some papers, despite their title, was more focused on instrument validation than on the research topic for which it was intended.

Research results (January 2018 - December 2019) show that studies of contemporary childhood in all these journals were dominated by research regarding these topics: physical condition ($f=6$), teaching (quality, media, games; $f=5$), learning ($f=5$), children with developmental disabilities (ADHD, visually impaired; $f=5$), prevention ($f=5$), different types of disorders ($f=4$), school success ($f=4$), therapy (art, therapy with dogs; $f=4$), children's rights ($f=4$), different types of violence ($f=4$) and methodology (most often instrument validation; $f=4$).

Predicting Future Trends in Contemporary Childhood Research

That leads us to conclude that most papers deal with teaching and teaching-related specifics that, in a way, affect the teaching process, but they also emphasise monitoring (on account of to various mental and health difficulties), and activities focused on mitigation of such conditions, as well as on the facilitation of monitoring of teaching (therapy, physical condition, etc.).

Therefore, we can predict future trends in research on this issue, which will certainly seek solutions for students with disabilities in some form of assistance with monitoring and participating at all stages of the teaching process. We can also predict that, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, further research will include papers on that exact issue.

Keeping in mind that this research deals with methodological particularities in contemporary childhood research, especially from a pedagogical and psychological perspective, the focus of interest included published papers on methodology, but only four. A more detailed analysis showed that research papers from the field of methodology in the context of contemporary childhood mainly focused on the validation of instruments dealing with the target population.

Discussion

Results from this study answer the set research question: Has the contemporary childhood been researched following a contemporary research approach? The modernity of research appears only in certain titles noted during the thematic/content analysis, but none at all from the methodological framework, which relies on previous, non-contemporary methodological approaches.

The non-modernity of methodological approaches can be seen in the prevalence of the positivist paradigm, the representation of quantitative methodology, the dominance of one research technique that is most often used to detect a state, but not to change it, which is something that we are expected to do, and which represents an important scientific contribution, especially in the area of education. In addition, all sixty-six papers belonged to the domain of transversal research, which leads us to question if observing only what happens now means that we only want to determine the present state? Do we not wonder about contemporary childhood research throughout history (because that might help us avoid repeating the same research of something we already know) or what could we expect (what trends) in the future research of the contemporary childhood?

Researching contemporary childhood does not mean studying current topics regarding contemporary childhood, it is necessary that research be conducted for the benefit of solving the problem which motivated us to conduct certain research, but also with children as active research participants (Cairns, 2001; Christensen & Prout, 2002; Mayall, 2002; Mužić, 2004; Punch, 2002; Rodrigues, 2018).

The mentioned analysis shed a light on another phenomenon that has significantly dispersed topics from the field of education. It is obvious that topics from education can also be found in journals in which one would not expect such topics to be covered, especially according to their title. It is possible that some journals will attribute the scope of topics to the so-called interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary. However, we believe that topics regarding education should be linked to journals that are "recognizable" precisely for publishing such papers, such as (the analysed) *CJOE*.

Conclusion

Based on the research results, we can conclude that the majority of researchers do not use a contemporary approach when it comes to researching issues in contemporary childhood. Future research focusing on contemporary childhood (children aged 6 to 14) should make more use of methods that include participatory methods, mixed methodology, historical research, and futurology research.

In conclusion, research practice cannot be reduced to ingenious techniques that are pre-planned and carefully applied, and which would guarantee success in the research. Although it is necessary, prior to conducting research, to plan in detail the use of methodology and what to expect from the results and their implementation, we must be aware that all research is partly unpredictable, especially when the participants are children, and we should keep in mind that sometimes even the best plans can take a direction different than desired. Sometimes the unforeseen and unwanted results become the best results because they give us a new perspective and deeper insight into the issues.

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