

CONTINUITY OF EDUCATIONAL PROCESS THROUGH VIRTUAL KINDERGARTEN DURING COVID-19 OUTBREAK – CASE STUDY FROM CROATIA

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the educational potential of a virtual kindergarten group during a nationwide isolation due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Since the COVID-19 outbreak has started in Croatia, all parts of the educational system have transferred to on-line teaching. From primary to university education, the teachers and the students were meeting, studying and communicating through different virtual platforms. Also, the national TV station was set up to provide continuous lectures that follow the national curriculums of every subject. However, no platform was offered for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers and preschool children. From the educational policy point of view, it remained unclear what should be done concerning preschool children that, like other students, were in isolation. To the local municipality it was also unclear what should be done with their employees, the ECEC teachers, since there were no children in kindergartens to work with. Even though different stakeholders could not find the right model for ECEC teachers, children and their families, an individual initiative of a possible model came from several different ECEC teachers in Croatia. It showed that ECEC teachers were using virtual social platforms on a daily basis for years now and that they had a model that could work for a specific context of their individual kindergarten group.

This paper will give a follow-up of one kindergarten group that for years now has been offering, beside direct work in kindergarten, a virtual space as a testimony of children's learning process. The main aim of creating a virtual kindergarten group was to make the process of learning and meaning making of children visible to parents in order to encourage partnership. The content that was used on a platform were different forms of documentation of children's learning. Somolanji Tokić and Vukašinić [1] stated that photos and videos of children's activities made the learning process easier for parents to understand. It served as a tool for practicing listening to children's learning and meaning making process and a helping tool for the adults to understand how children think. The endeavor of ECEC teacher who was working closely with families by using the platform resulted in a partnership based on mutual respect for each other as valuable and equal participants in the educational process. However, how would this form of practice work if there are no children in kindergarten? Will the partnership that has been created earlier surpass these circumstances and continue to prosper ensuring the continuity of children's experiences? In these conditions the table has turned and the ECEC teacher is trying to understand children's learning process from the documentation collected and given by parents and children. In no means the platform is supposed to transmit any form of academic content or lecture, but rather by using children's experience and their individual needs and interests create a space for joint communication and partnership. The value of this pedagogical practice is seen through ecological and sociocultural theory. By connecting different contexts, the continuity of the educational process is being fostered. The case study will show the educational potential of using virtual social networks on a daily basis. They are a powerful tool for promoting connectivity and partnership making the process of learning visible and tangible, ensuring transparent education and promoting curriculum co-construction.

Keywords: Children's interest, continuity, partnership, preschool, virtual meeting place.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, virtual social networks grew to be a powerful platform for communicating different areas of a person's interest. Different sources have shown that they have a significant impact on a person's everyday life changing the way people communicate with each other and that they could be a platform for more than just leisure time [2]. The educational potential of virtual social networks is being increasingly expressed through many different fields of education and through different educational content. Today, the educational potential of virtual social networks such as Facebook, Viber, LinkedIn etc. is widely accepted [2], [3], [4], [5]. They are usually used as an additional communication channel

between teacher and students [2] and, since they usually require a certain age verification, it is commonly used in higher education. However, Somolanji Tokić and Vukašinović [1] explored virtual social networks in context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and detected that they have a great educational potential specifically in promoting partnership of ECEC educators and parents. Authors have shown that nurturing an on-line community together with the direct work in kindergarten creates a sense of belonging and mutual respect and provides an additional platform for fostering partnership between family home and kindergarten. With that in mind, it was interesting to observe how a virtual social network, specifically Facebook, will be serving its community during the COVID-19 outbreak.

1.1 Educational continuity in time of social distancing and isolation

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, in many countries throughout the world schools have been closed. In Croatia, the whole educational system has transferred to on-line teaching starting March 16th 2020. Teachers from compulsory school education level to high school and university level offered different on-line ways to connect and communicate specificities of their subjects to their students. That was possible partially because since 2015 those educational systems have already been involved in a nationwide project called 'e-School: complete computerization of the business process of schools and teaching processes to create digitally mature schools for the 21st century' that is being led by Croatian Academic and Research Network – CARNET. The project is still going strong and it is in line with The European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators: DigCompEdu [6]. Due to this, it was relatively easy to organize the transfer from direct teaching to on-line teaching. From primary to university education, the teachers and students were meeting, studying and communicating through different virtual platforms.

Even though DigCompEdu includes the ECEC system, in Croatia this has not yet come to fruition. The earlier mentioned e-School project does not cover the ECEC system and that is one of the reasons why no platform was offered for ECEC teachers and preschool children during COVID-19 outbreak. Kindergartens did not have and still do not have digital credentials to access many useful on-line contents provided by the Ministry of Science and Education and CARNET (educations courses, platforms, materials, etc.). From the educational policy point of view, since kindergarten in Croatia is not entirely compulsory (it is compulsory only in the year preceding the CSE enrolment), it remained unclear what should be done concerning preschool children that, like other students, were in isolation. To the local municipality it was also unclear what should be done with their employees, the ECEC teachers, since there were no children in kindergartens to work with. This uninformed approach to the ECEC system gave an impression that the ECEC system was left to tackle with this demanding challenge on its own and with no continuous support throughout the system. However, an individual initiative of a possible model came from several different ECEC teachers in Croatia. While the stakeholders responsible for ECEC system (ministry, educational agency, local municipalities) were still unaware of the children's need for social and emotional stability and educational continuity, the ECEC teachers recognized that children and their families had the need to connect and communicate with their familiar surroundings. As professional educators they knew how important it was to create, together with children and their families, a space where they could nurture and cherish a sense of mutual respect and belonging [7], [8]. As Woodhead and Brooker [7] have said, „(...) a sense of belonging is often threatened when children, and their families, inhabit a community or society where prejudice and discrimination deny them recognition. Services built on respect and recognition can work towards combating these destructive forces and help to restore confidence and competence to both children and parents.“ (p. 6). By utilizing already achieved communication and partnership via virtual social networks, the ECEC teachers continued to develop a model that is working for the specific context of their individual kindergarten group and new and rather distressing situation that families and children are in. ECEC teachers are designing, organizing and implementing different ways on how to reach children and their families and jointly they are co-constructing a space where they can communicate and restore confidence and competence for both the adults and children.

This approach draws its foundation from the ecological model theory [9] and Vygotsky cultural historical theory which is also one of the foundations of the Croatian National curriculum for early childhood and preschool education and care [10]. The National curriculum [10] positions all stakeholders of the educational process as equal participants with emphasis on children's well-being, their holistic development, upbringing and learning as well as the development of their competences. It starts by pointing out leading contemporary and scientifically grounded evidence on child and childhood and aims to promote principles of flexibility and continuity of the educational process, partnership with children and their families, openness to lifelong learning and willingness to improve the quality of educational

practice. It is based on the values of knowledge, identity, tolerance and humanism, responsibility, autonomy and creativity, and, building from that, it recognizes a child as a competent, active and intrinsically motivated learner. It respects and builds upon an investigative and integrated nature of a child's learning process. Unlike national curriculum for compulsory school education, it has no predetermined outcomes, but rather it is offering the diversity of key competencies that can be, but are not mandatory to achieve. Key competencies are seen as constantly evolving, thus impelling the ECEC teachers to observe them continuously, holistically and in the context of each child's individual developmental capabilities, and not his chronological age [10].

1.2 Partnership with parents and pedagogical documentation

The National curriculum [10] gives special attention to parents and family context promoting an active participation of parents in the immediate educational process encouraging them for curriculum co-construction. Family and kindergarten are seen as microsystems whose close cooperation directly affects the continuity and quality of the dialectical relationship with the child. Kindergarten-family partnership is being developed through educational transparency, shared responsibility and a shared image of a child. All of those elements can be achieved by using pedagogical documentation. The National curriculum states that "Documentation enables the mediation of the ECEC culture to all stakeholders. It also enables a better understanding of the complex processes occurring in it. This contributes to curriculum design and affirmation of kindergartens, as well as ECEC culture as a whole." (p. 46). By using pedagogical documentation, a dialog is being fostered, knowledge is being co-constructed and a sense of belonging of all participants is being developed. Pedagogical documentation is a "vital tool for the creation of a reflective and democratic pedagogical practice" [11] (p. 145) with pedagogy of listening [12] being an integral part of the documentation process. Unlike merely archiving children's experiences, documentation is about reflecting, understanding and developing the child's interest and knowledge further. Without collective analysis, dialogue and interpretation, documentation has no meaningful purpose. Vujičić [13] points out that "(...) documentation does not seek answers, but creates questions by itself, leading it to thinking and rethinking about what to do next, without giving a child a definitive answer." (p. 23). Additionally, Sharmahd and Peeters [14] highlight the image of a child emphasizing that pedagogical documentation is based on the idea of a rich, competent, autonomous and creative child full of potential. Even though there are known forms of documentation [15], [16], [17] of children's learning, Slunjski [15] asserts that it is not a recipe or a technical manual but rather a modality of active and reflective learning process of all stakeholders.

This paper will give a follow-up of one kindergarten group called *Dragons* (cro. *Zmajevi*) that for years now has been offering, beside direct work in kindergarten, a virtual space at Facebook as a testimony of children's learning process. During the COVID-19 outbreak and national isolation, this virtual social network and its virtual space is serving as a transitional link between ECEC teacher, children and their families.

2 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this article is to provide insights into how prior use of virtual social networks in promoting partnership with parents in kindergarten is facilitating education continuity and emotional support during a nationwide isolation due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Research question that needs to be answered are:

- 1 Why are established virtual social networks precursor to considered for facilitating educational continuity during the outbreak?
- 2 Why is the existing partnership a foundation for utilizing the virtual social network as a transitional link?
- 3 How is the created partnership helping to surpass the new circumstances of social distancing?

To answer this question, an ethnographic case study design was used. Fusch, Fusch and Ness [18] note that "the use of a mini-ethnographic case study design enables researchers to generate as well as study theory in real world applications." (p. 926). This paper will present only a fraction of the collected data (on-line interview with parents, on-line interview with children, content analysis of the ECEC teacher professional portfolio), namely a review of the virtual social network content. To best present the focal points of this paper the authors tried to summarize the content of the group activities by selecting several descriptions – description of the use of documentation as a transitional link, description of the situations in need of providing socio-emotional support, and description of content which is directed toward

ensuring educational continuity. It should be understood that due to the extensiveness, multilayeredness and depth of the virtual kindergarten groups content, the results presented here are only a fraction of it.

3 RESULTS

The virtual social kindergarten group called *Dragons* was set up in 2016 on a Facebook platform. Back then it was called *Little Tigers*. The group was set to be a closed and private where one can be granted access upon prior permission from the administrator which was the ECEC teacher. It is still functioning and it gathers a community of one ECEC teacher of that particular kindergarten group, parents of children attending that kindergarten group, as well as other stakeholders that are closely connected to the kindergarten community (city library, city museum, local municipality, primary school teachers and principal of the surrounding school, university teachers closely cooperating with the ECEC teacher). The aim of creating a Facebook group was to make the process of learning and meaning making of children visible to parents (and other stakeholders) in order to encourage cooperation and partnership which is fundamental in fostering educational continuity.

3.1 The ECEC teacher

The ECEC teacher of the kindergarten group *Dragons* has a BA in early childhood education and care and is currently in the process of acquiring an MA in early childhood education and care. She has worked as a kindergarten teacher for nearly 24 years. Besides being an ECEC teacher, she is also offering training for students future ECEC teachers at the Faculty of Education. During her years in practice she was displeased with excessively formal communication with parents where only a transfer of basic information was being exchanged. She became aware the need many working parents have had to connect with their children, and she noticed how important it was to create a community of mutual trust and a sense of belonging in order to better understand children. In 2016 she set up a Facebook group because she wanted to engage in a dialectic relationship with parents trying to understand children 'hundred languages' [12]. She started posting different educational content with emphasis on children's activities in kindergarten (photos and videos of children followed by her and/or the children's interpretations of the activities) as a form of digital documentation on virtual social network. Even though she was concerned that it would limit the communication with parents to an on-line channel, it was within a year after the group was set up that the communication with parents progressed to partnership [1].

3.2 The parents

Kindergarten in Croatia is typically considered as a place for children to spend time when parents are working [19]. This image of kindergarten often prevents any kind of deeper and educationally meaningful relationship with parents which consequently affects the educational continuity and the quality of experience for children. Parents of children in the kindergarten group *Dragons* are mostly working parents. Since the economic situation in Croatia is challenging for many citizens, some parents are working long hours or working abroad. Confronted with the issue of image of kindergarten as well as the resource of time, the ECEC teacher offered parents a 'window' to the kindergarten so they could see what their children were doing. Parents responded extremely positive to this kind of opportunity [1]. A Facebook group perhaps served as a window to observe children's learning, but in direct communication a whole new door was opening. The use of virtual social network for educational purposes was recognized among parents and rated as a positive way of communicating. Parents gradually came to understanding that they are also an integral and essential part of the child-centered educational process and that they are welcomed in children's space. A strong sense of thrust and belonging developed meaning that they took an interest, participated and contributed to the kindergarten groups curriculum [20]. They were connecting to their and their children's fundus of knowledge and starting to create a space of mutual understanding. After some time, the parental understanding of ECEC culture changed immensely. They saw ECEC system as a place where their children are safe, loved and understood. The ECEC teacher became a person of trust and a professional who, by acknowledging parents, children and family context, offers a valuable support to children's holistic development.

3.3 The children

There are 28 strong, creative, inquisitive, competent and active children 4 to 7 years of age in the kindergarten group *Dragons*. They have a great sense of autonomy in their thinking and meaning-making and they express themselves in their authentic ways. Even though they are young, they hold an excellent implicit understanding of the educational process. Thus, they engage in a reflective critical

thinking process (sometimes with their peers, sometimes with the ECEC teacher/parents), and give leads to their own learning processes. Social cohesion of the group is very strong and there is a great sense of belonging to the group. When the Facebook group was founded, they were the ones who were, in a family setting, guiding their parents through the educational processes. They described to their parents what they did, how they came up with possible solutions, what kind of relationship they had with their peers, and what would help them continue their activities. The group served them as digital documentation - for children to revise their thinking leading them to metacognition, and for parents to observe the path of their child's meaning-making and overall development. Children could see that they are a valued member in both settings, that they have the capacity to lead their learning process and that they are seen.

3.4 The community

Since the group was set up in 2016, there was a multitude of activities provided by different stakeholders. For example, the local museum curator was following the on-line group when a pedagogical project called *The stone* came to life. The ECEC teacher documented children's theories, retraced their steps with them, offered appropriate materials to children to help them express their thinking and their theories in the making, while regularly posting the process in their Facebook group. Building on children interest, the museum offered an exhibition on different stones and a workshop with children. It served the children as a further provocation for the project, an experience they revisited many times for the duration of the project (which lasted for 6 months). Connecting with the local community and understanding the child as an equal member of the local community opened a whole new dimension of the educational process. Children were made visible to the community and their input was made valid thus urging the community to involve children in an everyday life.

3.5 Content of the virtual kindergarten group *Dragons* during the COVID-19 national isolation – an on-line kindergarten

The interconnectedness of children, parents, educators and the local community has proven to be an excellent basis for overcoming the crisis during COVID-19 national isolation. When isolation started, the ECEC teacher posted general information on how to conduct during the isolation (increased hygiene, social distancing, kindergarten expenses etc.). As the week went by, the ECEC teacher saw that kindergarten children were left out of the educational process (unlike students in CSE, high school and at universities). Since the return to the kindergarten was nowhere in sight, the ECEC teacher suggested that parents continue the educational process on a virtual social network to help their children to deal with the abrupt leaving of their friends and surrounding, as well as with the uncertainty surrounding the whole situation. Since the ECEC teacher and parents were, due to a strong partnership, well attuned concerning the basic principles of ECEC pedagogy, they were open to turning the tables on their roles. The ECEC teacher suggested to parent to continue with the documentation of children everyday activities which would then be posted in a Facebook and Viber group where a joint interpretation could take place. The ECEC teacher would try to understand children's learning process from the documentation collected and given by parents and children. In no means the platform was supposed to transmit any form of academic content or lecture, but rather by using children's experience and their individual needs and interests *create a space* for joint communication and partnership. By connecting different contexts, the continuity of the educational process would be fostered.

First record of children's preoccupation came from parents who commented with the ECEC teacher via Viber group how children missed their kindergarten friends and how they were complaining that the time is passing by too slowly. They wanted to know what day will they return to the kindergarten, how many days was that, how long will that days take to pass. The ECEC teacher used children preoccupation with the concept of time and *offered a provocation* on a Facebook group. She posted pictures of different clock mechanisms following with questions for parents to ask children so they could support children's interest further (generative questions). The ECEC teacher was also explaining to parents the value of children's play and proposing ways to propel play further. Parents collected photo documentation, the children's statements and a brief description of what the children were occupied with. They sent documentation through the Viber group or posted it on the Facebook group mostly every day. The children seemed to be doing something that was meaningful for them and what interested them. It seemed that the educational process was continuing as children were adapting the question of time to their individual needs and interests ("Fig. 1"), and the ECEC teacher together with parents was responding to it.



Figure 1. Children engaging in exploration of time (first row) which continued for some children to exploration of electricity (second row)

Following their interests, the ECEC teacher supported their inquisitive nature and reflective thinking by posting different documentation (strongly connected to their present interest) she had collected before the outbreak. It served as a recapitalization of children’s prior experience and their working theories assisting them to explore their present interests further. It was also evidence of children’s emerging, growing and developing competencies. It can be clearly seen in “Fig. 2” how an interest in building bridges emerged for some children, how the documentation allowed children to call upon their prior experience and how they were reminded of the possibilities of exploring open-ended materials, books and other resources available to them.



Figure 2. The ECEC teacher calling on children’s prior experience through documentation of children exploring statics and rigidity of material in kindergarten (first row) and children constructing the bridge during lockdown (second row)

In “Fig.3” children’s prior experience and their implicit understanding of the educational process can also be seen. A boy wanted to go to the seaside and hunt for whales which inspired his friend to explore whales. He made a model of a whale’s heart followed by a detailed writing of different facts and functions of a whale’s body. The ECEC teacher knew how this boy usually expresses himself in many more different forms of expression and she realized how he was constrained by this form of documentation. In response, she offered to him provocations to scaffold his learning process, and started further on to address to all children on Facebook in the first person. Many of the children were fluent in reading and writing and have developed some aspects of digital competencies so they had the skills and the knowledge to engage in direct on-line communication. The ECEC teacher also motivated the parents to offer children a possibility to engage in forms of activities that they are used to in kindergarten to provoke their response and to hear their voices. This way children were able to retrace their earlier steps and still follow their interests.



Figure 3. Exploring the whale by calling to mind children's prior experience of critical thinking and problem solving

Children displayed a great sense of understanding of their surroundings and the seriousness of the situation that the whole community was in. It had a strong impact on the socio-emotional wellbeing of children and their parents which was addressed and the support is being provided continuously. One of the situations was prominent during Easter time when parents reported that children started to express their worries that the Easter bunny would get sick and would not come to their nest. The ECEC teacher felt the need to support parents and to value children's concerns, so a colleague dressed like an Easter bunny and posted several videos for the children fostering their interest with different provocations. That resulted in easing the children's concerns seeing the Easter bunny safe and sound, but also allowed the children to continue with their interests restoring their confidence and competence. Without parent-ECEC teacher communication and mutual trust, it wouldn't be possible to engage it this kind of support. This way, the content that was being posted drew directly from children's individual concerns and interests thus respecting and accepting them. In addressing the social aspect of children's needs, video calls were found to be very useful. At one point, some of the children that were starting school in September knew that they would probably not going to see each other again and they grew impatient wanting to see their friends. The parents suggested to the ECEC teacher a conference video call for children. The video call was an alternative way to allow children's interaction and to nurture their friendship and a sense of belonging. Afterward, the video call was also found useful when one boy posted on Facebook a video of him playing the keyboard. His friend contacted him via video call where they played the keyboards together guessing the tunes each one played. It showed how children interact with each other, how well they explore and learn together. This tune guessing aided the ECEC teacher in offering another provocation assuring continuity and deepening the learning process, but also it allowed for parents to be directly engaged in their children's meaning making ("Fig. 4").



Figure 4. Children talking to each other via video call and playing to each other during their tune guessing; the ECEC teacher calling on children's prior experience by using documentation collected prior to the lockdown; the children engaging in different activities that involve sound and music

Even though not every parent is posting children's activities or interests on a daily basis and even though the interests of children are diverse, the continuity is ongoing and parents are regularly and without reluctance checking in. The autonomy and confidence that parents have in posting their children activities (without being told what content to post) demonstrates a deep sense of mutual trust and belonging. It is important that the ECEC teacher has confidence in parents as primary caregivers and educators and is valuing their input and family context ("Fig. 5"). In response, the parents offer the same.



Figure 5. Children engaged in an everyday life in their family context

Throughout this process, parents engaged in collecting of records. It was done in line with their competencies and experience as parents of children of this particular kindergarten group. Even though all members of the group were supposed to be involved in its interpretation, over the course of several weeks the ECEC teacher noticed that children were starting to get left out of the process. The ECEC teacher was concerned that this approach would diminish the children's agency and that they would become an object of inquiry. This is a concern that has to be addressed over and over to make sure that children remain the agents of their own learning process. It also highlights the question of power over shared responsibility. Parents were the main facilitators of this virtual kindergarten process since they were the ones in power. They had the access to virtual social networks, to all the devices needed to document the process, to the knowledge on how to access the records, they had the power over a resource of time deciding on how and when will they engage in the process with their children and the ECEC teacher. However, the power that they had by being a parent and an adult was supposed to be carefully and jointly shared among the group.

Developing participatory pedagogy that implements the rights of the child [14] is only possible if there is a shared understanding of the idea of education and a shared image of a competent child rich in potential. So, it is obvious that this whole process can easily go astray if there are no professional guiding lines from the ECEC teacher. There are still concerns regarding children as agents of their development, but the ECEC teacher through continuous joint interpretation of documentation is able to constantly re-evaluate and re-position her professional input for parents and children and work toward creating a shared space for democratic participation.

The virtual kindergarten group *The Dragons* is still going strong and it is still finding out ways on how to address children's and their family's needs and interests. The quality of children's experience is the focal point of the ECEC teacher professional interest. The virtual kindergarten group will continue to function after the national isolation comes to an end providing children, the ECEC teacher and parents (and the local community) the resources of this particular experience.

4 CONCLUSIONS

To summaries the answers to the main research questions we can say that established virtual social networks are precursor for facilitating educational continuity during the outbreak. However, established virtual social networks are not the only thing that is necessary to obtain continuity. It is found that the existing partnership is a foundation for utilizing the virtual social network as a transitional link. Parents and children knew and understood that kindergarten was not an obligation, but rather a shared space for everyone to participate in. Dockett and Perry [21] point out that creating a meeting place occurs in an environment where there is an appreciation of the culture and context of others, which further strengthens interpersonal relationships and directs educational process towards the same goals. This virtual kindergarten group *Dragons* would not function the way it does if prior to COVID-19 outbreak there were no sharing of the same goals and mutual trust both in direct and in on-line communication. A sense of sheared responsibility (rather than accountability) was what drove educational continuity further and already existing partnership helped to surpass the new circumstances of social distancing.

It is of the outmost importance to underline that a way of fostering continuity and connectedness of the whole kindergarten group's context during the COVID-19 outbreak was not seen through mandatory daily attendance of children and parents at a certain hour in a virtual kindergarten group for 15, 30 or 45 minutes. Bounding children and parents to a computer or a smartphone for any period of time to connect with the ECEC teacher or other children is in direct collision with contemporary early childhood pedagogy. It bluntly denies the whole context children live in, the multitude of their everyday interests and needs and their experience as competent, autonomous and active learners. In creating a virtual space for children, families and kindergarten, it is important to follow children's lead and not just use the virtual platform as a repository of different activities with no connection to real children's interests. With no interaction among all participants, only the content will be communicated. This virtual kindergarten group *Dragons* is not about communicating the content, but rather acknowledging and fostering the quality of children's experience. Following and listening to children is *only* fruitful if there is a feedback from children and a strong and dialectic relationship between family and kindergarten context. The ECEC teacher provided emotional and social support for children and their families, but also assured the continuity and quality of children's experience by closely listening and communicating with them and their families. Pedagogical documentation was not used as an arbitrary tool, but "as a way of enabling constant re-thinking of the educational processes and consequently, creating the learning community" ([22], p.474). When this isolation is over, this virtual kindergarten group will continue to function and serve all participants as a resource and evidence of their lived experience which they can reflect on.

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