



Fears in Early Childhood in the Views of Children and Preschool Teachers in Preschool Institutions

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Abstract

Children's fears can be identified in the context of expected developmental and behavioural patterns, and they may be age-typical and functionally significant for the child's growth as they contribute to his or her independence and individualisation. However, in cases where they are long-term and destructive, children's fears can cause some complex behavioural difficulties. In order to define the types and incidence of children's fears, we conducted some qualitative micro-research in preschool institutions in Podgorica, which involved both children and preschool teachers. In order to gain a more comprehensive insight into this problem, we tried to obtain as objective and authentic answers as possible on the topic "What I am afraid of" from children in several kindergartens in Podgorica (60 children, aged 3–7). We interviewed 40 teachers (two groups of teachers from each of the two preschool institutions) and then analysed and classified the answers obtained by their similarity, into particular and unique categories. By analysing the children's drawings, we found the presence of common, age-appropriate fears. When it comes to younger children, it is evident that the number of fears in our sample is significantly higher in girls than in boys, while in older preschool children, the number of expressed fears is fairly homogeneous. So-called "learned" fears were dominant. Preschool teachers noticed and recorded some new, contextually conditioned fears, so-called "digital" fears. They pointed out that they lack the specialist skills and expert support for purposeful deconditioning of children's fears and anxiety.

Keywords

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Introduction

Early childhood is a source of potential for development and learning, but also of certain challenges that may lead to unexpected, unusual events, and deviations in behavioural maturation. Recognisable patterns of action applied in different situational contexts in adulthood usually have their origins in the early experiences and relationships that were gradually introduced into the world of individual childhood experience and perception of self and others (Cengiz & Duran, 2017). Melanie Klein points out that adult life can be viewed through the lens of early childhood, which means that both infantile fantasies and most complex behavioural manifestations have their roots in early experiences (Klein, 2001).

Child maturation is described by developmental and psychological laws and physiological indicators in the expected provisional outcomes within the particular, typical growth stages. Within these expected behavioural patterns, described, and anticipated by developmental principles, we recognise children's fears, which can be typical and natural, transient, and "bounded" by the limits of the developmental stages, but which also may become more complex and cause difficulties in life. A study that has focused on fears at an early school age reported that more than 60% of children claimed that their fears significantly affect the efficiency of their everyday activities (Vulić-Prtorić, 2002). Other studies have shown that the symptoms of fear and anxiety have produced various emotional, social, and behavioural problems in children (Kushnir, Gothelf, & Sadeh, 2015). In his/her effort to reveal secrets, things, and beings through symbolic cognitive processes, a child asks questions and anticipates the reactions of adults, who will help him/her perceive relationships, eliminate unrest, or otherwise, more complex fears could appear (Zlotovic, 1974).

Fear can be linked to a current challenge, but it is more often focused on some future, supposed situation, and has a connotation of dread and anxiety, which can be very layered, with a dose of caution, nervousness, and distress (Milivojević, 2015). Real fear can be described as a reaction to a perceived external danger, which can be expected or predicted, related to the escape reflex, and is a manifestation of the self-preservation instinct (Nikolić, 1982).

Real fear has two important elements: preparation for dangerous, hazardous situations and an irrational aspect of this effect, which can induce uncontrolled reactions, such as aggressive behaviour, panic reactions, running away, and even long-term disintegrating manifestations, which do not lead to functional self-protection. While fear in children is described as a natural developmental phenomenon, which has a functional role in the process of building up defence capabilities and gradual individuation, and then as the reaction to a visible, concrete source of danger, anxiety is presented as a diffuse reaction to non-specific stimuli. Fear that occurs in the absence of a threatening object comes from intrapsychic conflict and has the character of anxiety (Nikolić & Marangunić, 2004). Children who are inhibited in early childhood, as research shows, often manifest anxiety disorders in the more mature stages of development (Hirschfeld et al., 1992, as cited in Schmidt & Fox, 1997). For this reason, it is of particular importance to carry out interaction based on love, interest, and intuition, providing children with stimulating opportunities from their birth (Ulutaş & Belgin Aksoy, 2016).

If a child has an excessive fear which affects the functionality and efficiency of their behaviour and action, it is necessary to intervene. It is possible to do so in several ways, for example, by using cognitive-behavioural methods of therapy through games, and by conducting interviews about the content and source of fear (Mikas, Pavlović, & Rizvan, 2015). One of the commonly applied procedures for "the opening of fear" is the expression of the child's inner experience of tension and anxiety through drawings. In this way, the child is able to name his/her fear, to reify it, to confront it, and eventually decondition it.

Children at an early age live in a family and/or other organised groups, such as preschool institutions, and, through a variety of opportunities and available didactic interactions, express not only developmentally expected, but also some acquired, more or less complex and not always typical manifestations of fears. Therefore, our paper aims to examine the representation of fears among children

in preschool institutions in Montenegro based on their drawings and verbal descriptions. On the other hand, it is of particular importance that preschool teachers, during their continuous work in educational groups, look at this problem and reflect on how they can help children overcome fears more effectively for more functional development and a healthier childhood. In addition to this, the purpose of our research is to determine the extent to which fears can be identified in preschool children in Montenegrin kindergartens, whether there are some special signals and fears that are conditioned by the changed and specific, traditionally "coloured" family and social circumstances, and whether there are differences between boys and girls, younger and older, and whether something should be changed in the future.

The importance of this paper is reflected in the fact that the issue of a child's fears is particularly important in the light of new knowledge, global and local social challenges, family specificities, and even some traditionally inherited folk motifs in the domain of cultural heritage of silent exemplar and messages (Bruner, 1996). This study can be considered important because it sheds light on the problems of childhood fears in Montenegrin preschool practice, through mosaic-type networking and the comparison of children's expressions, through drawings and authentic narratives, as well as the perspective of preschool teachers concerning the given problem, since no one has dealt with this issue so far. This is also an opportunity to identify common fears among children in this context, given the fact that the contemporary context of a changed organisation of family life and a different distribution of time and responsibilities leads to more pronounced segregation between younger and older family members, and new childhood fears. Along with all the external challenges that modern times bring, such as digital media and the aggressive content in them, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for children to share their anxieties with their parents. Revealing the most common fears in children and the ways these are manifested (from the perspectives of both children and preschool teachers), the current procedures involving teachers' interventions concerning the identified children's problems make it possible to consider the more effective ways of timely and comprehensive action in preschool practice regarding the given problem (child's fears).

Finally, in the context of the proclaimed appreciation of the child's perspective, we often make conclusions related to children's needs and wellbeing only from the perspective of adults, so this research is an attempt to better "listen" to the child's voice and get a more comprehensive picture of the given problem, and the possibility of more efficient resolution of the child's fears in question.

Conditioning of Developmental Fears

Developmental fears have their functional dimension and supporting quality because they contribute to the child's independence, emotional, social, and cognitive pragmatism, provided they are age-timed, and of the expected duration and manifestation. It is estimated that over 90% of children aged 2 to 14 years have at least one specific fear, while most of them have more than one (Vulić-Prtorić, 2002). Other studies have shown that symptoms of fear and anxiety in children produce various emotional, social, and behavioural problems (Kushnir et al., 2015).

In psycho-pedagogical theories, we find various classifications of fears, based on different criteria. Moreover, certain developmental stages contain characteristic and recognisable fears inherent in children at that age, with their typical, associated events. Therefore, we know that, roughly, between the sixth and the eighth month the child recognises his/her mother's face, while unfamiliar individuals disturb and arouse fear in them, so they react by manifesting discomfort or trying to pull away violently. The natural response of a child to sudden changes in the immediate environment (losing ground beneath their feet, making loud sounds) is known in developmental psychology as the Moro reflex. In the period between the sixth and eighth months, the child is already responding with a feeling of discomfort and fear when separated from the mother, and when meeting with strangers, foreign persons (Sheridan, 1998). At the same time, the child gradually separates from a secure affective stronghold, where he/she has spent his/her early developmental stage with his/her mother and begins to feel uneasy due to "exposure to the view" of others in the immediate environment. The challenges of separation from the mother, for the child, during the second half of the first year of life represent a test of maturity during the stage of winning individuation and initial independence (Mikas et al., 2015).

During the period of separation anxiety, the role of the “life-saving bridge”, i.e. the functional link for a child, is played by a transitional object, i.e. an object/toy that is related to the safe environment, since it “opens up” a safer way to a new, uncertain, less familiar context (Ehrenreich, Santucci, & Weinrer, 2008). Transitional objects are imaginary, symbolic, extremely important “bridges” over which the child safely passes through those “dangerous, difficult places,” which, in the course of developing, are separated into two stages (Trebješanin, 2000). After the child “stands on their feet” (walking-age phase), there follows new research into the environment, movement, and coping with the restrictions imposed by adults, especially mothers, which produces various new experiences in the child and their relationships with others. If they establish a relationship of trust with the mother as “the cornerstone of a healthy personality”, they will more easily tolerate her absence and deal with the challenges of separation in general (Erikson, 2008, p. 13). Therefore, the notion of separation contains elements of intent – notions of poor parents (Mikas et al., 2015) may influence the fear of abandonment.

All the fears above are innate and are mainly related to the first two years of life (Tatalović Vorkapić, & Knapić, 2015). Usually, at an age between 2 and 12 years, learned fears (fear of imaginary beings, dangerous persons, etc.) become amplified and multiplied.

Poulton et al. (1990, as cited in Vulić-Prtorić, 2002), considering the content of fear, differentiate:

- **Social fears**, such as fear of unfamiliar people, new environment, educational groups, etc.
- **Agoraphobic fears**: fear of exposure to spaces and situations, such as bridges, tunnels, airplanes, elevators, buses, crowded places, loneliness, and the like.
- **Specific fears**, such as fear of water, animals, darkness, thunder, and storms;
- **Complex fears**, which are a combination of some of these fears.

The natural and initial physical reaction to a threatening source of fear, as shown by studies on animals, but also with people, is hiding, or, conversely, escaping. These are the evolutionary most frequent adaptive responses to stressful stimuli and situations that cause fear (Ekman, 2011). The basis of these opposing reactions lies in the method of activating the autonomic nervous system, so the sympathetic part prepares the body for escape and action, improving the tone of the muscles, while the parasympathetic dimension of the system acts reversibly – it paralyses. Which of the two parts of the system will be activated depends on the method of primary cognitive processing of information (Milivojević, 2008).

Children’s fears, as already underlined, represent a natural, expected and even desirable part of the development process and require the strengthening of defence capabilities, coping, overcoming and natural maturation of new insights and knowledge, and fuller adaptation to the system in which a child is growing up. Adaptation as a complex process of involving individuals in the context of living has a two-dimensional sense, i.e. shifting from an individual to external circumstances and, vice versa, from the “framework” of stimuli to individual needs. Animistic thinking induces confusion in a child’s understanding and an inability to distinguish between real and unrealistic sources of danger. Words and thoughts are not yet adequately demarcated, which contributes to the child’s “magical power” and the creation of a “different” reality (“imagined-done”) (Volman, 1978, p. 11). Children’s fears, in terms of the natural inner balance, slowly weaken and disappear with cognitive maturation. The reason for the gradual exit from certain “anxious phases” is based on the cognitive and overall progress of the child, which is their more mature perception of “old sources” of fears. One of the most reliable ways to determine the nature, size, and timeliness of children’s fear is continuous monitoring and observation of the child’s behaviour in different situational contexts and circumstances. But, if fears do not go away spontaneously, or become more complex by getting new “energy”, or if they start “colouring” the child’s overall behaviour with a certain tension, we may wonder if these are diffuse, ambiguous, complex neurotic patterns, which require careful, continuous attention, as well as attentive observation, monitoring, and an informed systematic approach in dealing with the problem. In order to make a clearer distinction between *desirable fears*, as evidenced by the development progress of the child and to

encourage their functional defensive force and those which are destructive, long-standing, and inappropriate to their age, we marked several indicators, which “stand on the border”: situational appropriateness, intensity, and duration of symptoms, the level of impact on the daily total behaviour, feasibility and conditionality of restless behaviour, and developmental time-appropriateness of fear (Vulić-Prtorić, 2002).

Interestingly, there is a difference in terms of the level of frequency and type of representation of certain fears, on the bases of both age and gender, and numerous studies have shown that younger children and girls experience a greater number of fears compared to older children and boys. Poulton et al. (1990, as cited in Vulić-Prtorić, 2002) found that the number of fears doubles in girls in early puberty, unlike boys who do not show this change.

Methods of identifying and monitoring children's fears

The method of systematic observation in pedagogical and psychological practice and studying behavioural manifestations is recognised as one of the most frequently applied procedures for the monitoring and generation of appropriate support measures for children. Descriptions of systematically observed children between the two World Wars can be found in Spitz, Bolby, and Winnicott, as well as in the representatives of American ego psychology, Margaret Mahler and Edith Jacobson (Vukašinić-Pecotić, 1991). By recording a child's behaviour precisely, in concrete, clear, and carefully operationalised terms, it is possible to establish the regularity and frequency of the occurrence of indicative manifestations and symptoms of fear. Psychoanalysts exploring the origin of fears and phobias in children find their causes in early learning and primary “holding,” i.e. the quality of symbiosis with the mother. If the child had no experience of safe symbiosis with its mother, Winnicott believes that the behaviour reflects the feeling of being “cast out into infinite space”, in which the child feels disintegrated (Winnicott, Kereković, & Kulenović, 1980). The Foundation for Child Development (2010, as cited in Leppma & Szente, 2013) has pointed out that the children of immigrants face many challenges that often inhibit their potential and performance due to many fears that were developed in traumatic situations.

At preschool age, parents, teachers, and other adults observe fears in children predominantly based on their behavioural reactions in certain situations, relationships, and contexts, since their age sets limits on a child's ability to verbalise. Psychological research shows a mismatch in responses between children and their parents and points to the need to obtain information about specific fears and symptoms of anxiety problems from the children themselves, directly and indirectly, with all the constraints resulting from the lack of developmentally appropriate cognitive and verbal capacity (Lahikainen, Kirmanen, Kraav, & Taimalu, 2016). A child's perspective, expressed through various “languages” (Malaguzzi, 1998, as cited in Pavlović Breneselović, 2015) such as narratives, drawings, role plays, relational performances, etc., represents an extremely important and unique view of the culture and quality of life in the family and the wider environment, providing adults with richer, more meaningful insights into the inner world of the child. Therefore, a discreet, cautious exploration of children's repressed fears, through a multi-aspectual assessment of their needs, their behaviour in different situations, and the ways they deal with unclear messages and unexpected events, is a necessary precondition for a timely, adequate and long-term solving of the problem. Fear, as the tendency to experience negative effects, and inhibitions in new and challenging situations, frustration in response to a failure in achieving goals in life situations is usually associated with anxiety and aggressive behaviour, withdrawal and failure (Rothbart & Jones, 1998, as cited in Macuka & Burić, 2015). The consequences of unresolved fears can lead to a variety of socio-emotional difficulties in life, a lack of self-esteem, inferiority, and a negative self-image, anxiety, and compulsive actions (Vulić-Prtorić, 2002). Research on testing the degree of correlation between the level of fear in infancy and success in sport during a child's youth, shows a significant correlation between these variables, which demonstrates the conditionality of success in any sphere of self-esteem and positive self-image that establishes itself in the first years of development (Poulton & Milne, 2002).

Therefore, the intent of this research, in addition to the already mentioned external focus, is to look at the type and “significant risks” stemming from unresolved childhood fears, since they can be the basis for more complex difficulties in further development. In this way, briefly, more efficient mechanisms and educational measures will be sought for more purposeful, systemic action in the field of child’s fears and the provision of support to the child on the path of a healthier upbringing.

Method

In order to evaluate the content, type, and frequency of children’s fears in the context of preschools in Podgorica (PPI “Đina Vrbica” and PPI “Ljubica Popović”), we conducted qualitative micro-research, in which we used methods derived from hermeneutical phenomenological and interpretative paradigms, such as narrative and thematic analysis of the content obtained through the application of appropriate techniques and instruments for the examination of the investigated phenomenon. Also, our goal was to determine the level of presence of developmental and/or acquired fears in preschool children in selected institutions in the Montenegrin context. We were interested in what children and preschool teachers had to say about it, whether their views are consistent, and how to overcome the fears in the current circumstances, from the educator’s perspective. We also probed whether the preschool teachers had had the opportunity to face new, contemporary, atypical, and especially “significant” children’s fears in practice. Qualitative research as a methodological approach contributes to a better understanding of reality and the meaning is derived from social situations, and “it is being dealt with in the interpretive process” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 137). This type of research is not understood as the registration of objective features of a focused subject, but as an interactive process in which the subject, researcher, and research conditions are changing (Halmi & Crnoja, 2003). To focus on the aforementioned problems, we used a specific task with children from the given preschools (60 boys and girls between the ages of 3–6 and 7 years old) to receive more objective, authentic answers on the topic of “my fear”, which was presented through drawings. The story used for this purpose was “The Girl and the Darkness,” which preschool teachers in preschool institutions use in their work with children. A multiple-child perspective gives a more layered view of the investigated phenomenon (Pavlović Breneselović, 2015). The theme, spontaneously derived from the experience of the story and the talk of its content, served as an idea for the further development of children’s reflections on the focused problem. For this reason, children continued to think about the phenomenon of fear through drawings, verbalising their ideas, through their narratives on a given topic, and interpreting artifacts during conversations with adults, i.e. the researchers and preschool teachers working in these educational groups.

The children were asked to further describe their drawings, to “explain” the content and motifs in them, i.e. to interpret their fears in their own way, intensity, and duration, the accompanying changes in behaviour and emotions, resulting from the unpleasant situations. Since children love to draw and to work spontaneously, without pressure, and since their verbal expression and verbal fluency is not yet sufficiently developed, then the complementary and mutually pervasive relationship between the drawn and the verbalised allows for “reading” of interesting and “eloquent” answers to the questions about the nature and origin of their fears. The research part, which was predominantly focused on children and the search for their authentic view on the focused-on issues, was based on a mosaic-like approach, which networked the topic (‘what I am afraid of’), drawings, and conversations with adults (Clark, 2005). On the other hand, we (the authors of the present research) used focus groups (four focus groups, 10 respondents each) to discuss the issue with preschool teachers in preschools, trying to get a more complete, more comprehensive, and meaningful impression of the given phenomenon. Through interaction and interpersonal discourse in focus-group interviews, preschool teachers complemented and analysed experiences related to the focused-on issues. This kind of interview “seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in clear language and does not aspire to quantification, seeking the open, nuanced descriptions of various aspects of the subjective world of the participants” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 272). Interviews with preschool teachers took place on the principle of setting non-directive questions accompanied by instructions to support the claims with examples, to identify the problem, and to

analyse it in detail. The interview with both focus groups was recorded and then transcribed to avoid any errors in writing down from memory. The survey was conducted in April, May, and June 2016. The meetings and discussions were organised in preschool institutions twice a month and lasted 2 hours each.

The discussions were led by the authors of this research. During data processing, a qualitative thematic analysis of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was carried out. It had several phases: audio recordings of conversations with preschool teachers; detailed review of the transcribed material and collected content; extracting the key meanings and messages from the text-coding (for example, children are afraid of other people and strangers); grouping separate content/codes into categories (e.g. social fears); and grouping general categories into topics (common fears of children of early preschool age). The researchers made their suggestions as per the definition of key content/codes and then the categories themselves, and then harmonised their views to obtain the final composition of the categories (Cohen et al., 2007). Some of the topics would not allow these categorisations ("new" fears and gender differences) because the responses were coherent, and there were no significant distributions into specific categories.

To achieve greater levels of validity and reliability, i.e. to reduce bias, transfer, and counter-transfer between the interviewers and respondents, we tried to consistently ask the questions from the guide, using the same, clear, consistent instructions and words (Cohen et al., 2007). However, at the same time, we tried to allow the respondents to express their unique ways of looking at the focused problem or "the definition of the situation", to feel comfortable and natural, which contributes to the validity and reliability of the interview (ibid). In naturalistic types of research, in an interview the validity is based on the sincerity, the deeper responses, and the involvement of the interviewee (Oppenheim, 1992).

Participants in the Research

The sample consisted of 60 children, 38 boys and 22 girls aged 3 to 7 years, from two preschool institutions in Podgorica. This is a non-random, small-scale sample without the intention and ability to generalise the results outside the context of the selected preschools (Cohen et al., 2007). The teachers in question gave the task to children and observed their work, asking appropriate questions about the content of the drawings. The researchers assumed the role of non-directive participants/observers and interacted with the team of preschool teachers to help them organise activities with children. They monitored the group interaction to better understand the "quality and texture" of experiences regarding the focused phenomenon of fear (Villig, 2016, p. 50). After reading and processing the story "The Girl and the Darkness", which is humorous and represents an appropriate context for the demystification of fear (children can laugh while listening to how it is possible to "kill" darkness with a flashlight), preschool teachers engaged the children in rich conversation about the content of the story, and then suggested they draw their "fears" in the creative, final stage of the reception of the story: "We talked about the fear of the girl from the story, and about some of our fears in general – we could now draw them, if you agree...", suggested a teacher cautiously. The entire preparation for the work and the development of discussion with children on a given topic is based on the adequate motivation of children for spontaneous reflection on the mentioned problem, while respecting ethical principles regarding the children's wellbeing and the right to emotional integrity (Dulčić, 2003).

We tried to engage children of both sexes from different age groups to see the differences between them in terms of the type of fear and the manner they experience that fear, starting from the criterion variables of sex and age. There were no children with special needs in the mentioned sample. When it comes to the adult respondents/professionals from two preschool institutions, a non-random non-probabilistic convenient sample was selected consisting of 40 preschool teachers from younger (3–4 years), intermediate (4–5 years), and older (5–6 years) age groups. All preschool teachers who participated in our research are female, with 10–25 years of working experience. Their interpretive

analysis of the phenomenon is based on an idiographic approach, individual insights, and descriptive comments based on their subjective experience and experiential quality of the described phenomenon (Villig, 2016).

Of course, we did not ignore the limiting factors of this examination of the phenomenon in question, i.e. a small sample, which is why the parameters for generalisation are negligible. In this type of research, the goal is to provide a wealth of details and the uniqueness of individual cases (Cohen et al., 2007).

Results and Discussion

The results of the research were examined within two related entities: analysis of the children's drawings and their narratives, and examination and processing of the content of empirical evidence obtained after the discussions in focus groups made up of preschool teachers and condensed into appropriate categories by the similarity of the ideas. We then compared the answers from two perspectives – the children's and teachers' and commented on them. The author and co-researcher, who is a psychologist, worked in cooperation with preschool teachers to guide the process of the developing and condensing of the ideas and narratives of children, aimed at describing the motifs in the drawings.

Analysis of Children's Drawings

Children's drawings contain elements of a symbolic game and a mental experience – in making a spontaneous "movement" on the paper, children "write down" their meanings (Lazarević, 2015). On the one hand, a drawing provides functional satisfaction like a symbolic game, and through a mental picture the child invests effort to mimic real events (Pijaže & Inhelder, 1990). Luquet points out that drawings by preschool-age children contain a transparent display of forms that cover something important, a selected point of view which is the most appropriate to the given child, an emphasis of the subjective dimension of the important elements, condensing or superimposing parts, and the transposition of certain details into new "images" (Luquet, 1927, as cited in Lazarević, 2015, p. 83). Luquet (1927, as cited in Quaglia, Longobardi, Iotti, & Prino, 2015) believed that graphical activity gradually evolved from a mere exercise to a form of structured game. A drawing can be considered an indicator of children's self-reflection, emotions, and thoughts about events, their inner world, and mental development (Sapsağlam, 2017).

In the intermediate (4–5 years) and older (5–6 years) age groups, as well as in the preparatory school groups (6–7 years), where the preschool teachers from the sample also work, the children drew on the already mentioned theme "What I am afraid of". "Children usually explore the world around them through intellectual, physical, and emotional methods for young children; pencil, brush, and paper are the best means of conveying their fondest hopes and most profound fears" (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011, p. 2221).

When collecting the children's works, the preschool teachers recorded the names and ages of the artists and the subject. From conversations with each child, they learned and recorded some more details about the content of their fear and the accompanying, indicative manifestations and emotions: how they react when frightened, how they describe their fears, what physical reactions follow this emotion, and how they "locate" their fear, in terms of internal physical distress. Regardless of the developmental achievements in the cognitive and verbal sense, children's descriptions of their inner states represent a rich and unique source of knowledge about the nature, intensity, and distinctiveness of their fear (Lahikainen et al., 2016). One psychotherapist commented recently, "Like dreams, they [children's drawings] are an expression of their unconscious mind, something which is not normally accessible" (Catté & Cox, 1999, p. 1). The drawings were reviewed by employing thematic content analysis. We analysed the results of the analysis of the data on the content obtained based on the child's interpretation of the drawings in three categories: the type of fear (source), the type of reaction in a disturbing situation, and the "location of fear"/manner of experiencing fear. We also took into account the age and gender differences between the children.

Table 1. Types of children's fears

Age	Number of drawings	Type of fear (source) I am afraid of:		Type of reaction When I get scared, I ...	"Location" of fear: Whenever I am afraid, I feel the fear in my... What happens to you?
		Girls (38)	Boys (22)		
4 and 5 years of age	15	Jungle Ghosts Monster Darkness (4) Snakes (2) Dinosaurs (3) Lion	Closed doors Monsters Ghosts (2) Darkness	"I bury my face in my mother's lap."	"My hands shake" (6) In my brain (1) In my head (2) I feel fear in my legs Fear in my chest (2) "My fear is my eyes."
5 and 6 years of age	15	Zombie Snakes (4) Darkness (3) Wolf I'm afraid of people who scare me "A bear, it can swallow a car." Ghosts, scarecrows, spiders (2) Witches (2) Terrible dreams (nightmares)	Thunder Darkness Zombie (2) Werewolf Dentist	I scream I run away	Fear in the hands Fear in the head (3) My heart is pounding "When fear enters me, my hands tremble." "When I get scared, I go to sleep." Fear in the chest
6 and 7 years of age	30	Bugs Being alone in the dark (1) I'm scared that someone might come into the room while I am asleep Thunder (4) Snakes (7) "I am afraid of the dark because then various creatures appear when it is dark." "I am afraid of the cane/stick my dad has in his room." Sharks "... of my mum when she wants to give me the syrup." Aliens (1) Ghosts (2) Wolf	Thunder (1) Crocodile Being alone in the dark (1) "I am afraid that someone might enter the room at night." Wolf Spiderman Nightmares Vampires, bats, werewolves, snakes, Outside toilets Wolf	"I shake" (3) "My heart beats strongly." I tremble (6) "I am calling my dad for help." "It gives me the creeps, and I tremble because of its slippery body" "I cry; I am afraid I cannot be helped." "I am mad, and I run..."	Fear in my stomach (4) Fear in my heart (2) Fear in my head (3) Hands (3), the legs (3) and stomach (6) In the eyes (2) The entire body (2) Chills in the heart

"I am afraid of the bug that can go into my ear."	Bat	"I ask mum to close the door."
"Cats, because they can scratch me."	"Sometimes my friends scare me."	"I scream."
"Toxic bugs which bite, because it really, really hurts."	Lion	"My heart is beating."
Wolves and bears	Ghost	"My eyes widen, and my stomach disappears."
Outside WC	Alien	"I shake, and I run to the bathroom."
Terrible dreams	Bug	"I run to my mother."
"I am afraid of needles."	Fear of other children	"I tend to run to my mother."
Fear of crossing the street	"The fear of the balcony, of falling..."	"I fall off the bed."
"Fear of my mother, when I break something ..."	Fear of kindergarten	"A strange sound appears in my ears."
"I am afraid of the shadows the closet makes."	"I used to be afraid of a beggar, who rode a motorcycle, he could take me away if I failed to be good."	"I cry."
"I am scared to sing in front of everyone!"	Arsonists and Zombies	"I run away, and I cannot escape."
"I fear that other children may laugh at me!"	(2)	"I shudder."
"I am scared when we come back from kindergarten and mother says that we will talk when we get home!"	"War Live" (game) (1)	
"I am afraid my mother will not come if I am not good"		
...		
"Evil Doctor" (game)		

The above list of collected children's descriptions, original narratives, allows us to perceive a set of known, typical manifestations of fears appropriate for children of preschool age. Besides this, we note that the girls at a young age (4–6 years) "expressed" slightly more anxiety than boys and that in their drawings, children (65.7% girls and 40.9% boys) depicted a variety of animals as the most common motifs/drivers of their fears: snakes, wolves, bears, bats, sharks, bugs, cats... (learned/acquired fears). Therefore, Zlotovic (1974) rightly speaks of the so-called "zoology" of fear at an early age. Fear of "gluttonous" animals, which pose a serious threat to the child's security and integrity is symbolically presented through drawings of wolves, bears... with "dangerous jaws". Very common motifs in the drawings tend to be various reptiles, especially snakes (23.6% of girls and 4.5% of boys), whose touch and looks make children afraid and express their discomfort, "gives me the creeps ... I am disgusted with its slippery body", as they say themselves. Fear of snakes occurs around the age of four as well as the natural reaction to the usual way these creatures move compared to familiar experiences.



Figure 1. Fear of wolves, girl, 6 years old



Figure 2. Fear of snakes, girl, 5 years old

However, the corpus of presented children's fears is rather "rich" and varied and it is apparent that there are some prominent differences among our young artists who are of different age. While young girls list significantly higher number of fears compared to boys of the same age, in the older age groups (6-7 years of age), where we analyzed 30 drawings, the frequency and occurrence of fears, that is certain "terrifying" motifs on the drawings of boys and girls, is approximately the same. Also, these children's drawings very frequently show monsters, vampires, ghosts and other imaginary beings, which is very common in their age (drawings 1, 2). Besides, these children's drawings very frequently show monsters, vampires, ghosts, and other imaginary beings, which is very common at their age (drawings 3, 4, and 5). (23.6% of girls and 31.8% of boys)



Figure 3. "I dream about a monster," boy, 6 years old



Figure 4. "Fear of ghosts," girl, 4 years 6 months



Figure 5. "I keep dreaming about zombies and witches", a girl, 5 years 8 months

Fear of the dark (18.33% of drawings include this motif) is often shown in the drawings of children in all preschool-age phases. Developmental psychologists point out that this kind of fear occurs early in children (at about two years of age), and remains present throughout the whole of their childhood, usually accompanied by a variety of behavioural manifestations. It is difficult to determine the nature of this fear, that is whether it is inherent in its nature or the result of various experiences, but it is obvious that it leads to discomfort and threatening thoughts associated with notions of separation and destruction (Zlotovic, 1974), so the children from our sample verbalise it "When it is dark, a thief or a monster may appear", "I'm afraid I will not be able to find my mother", etc.

Given the fact that these are children of intermediate and older preschool age who attend kindergarten/school, the various manifestations of socially conditioned fears in them are expected. These are usually characterised by discomfort caused by new unknown circumstances and encounters with strangers, at school, or in another "out-of-family" situation. Also, the drawings appear to show various cartoons and video game characters. According to Reiss' theory of phobias, all these children's fears belong to fundamental fears, experienced by the majority of children during their developmental maturation (Reiss, 1991). In addition to the fundamental ones, he says, there are also specific fears, which we also encountered in our "children's group": fear of parents who threaten ("I'm afraid of the cane my dad has in his room"), hostile friends ("Balša and Nenad sometimes deliberately scare me").

At the older preschool age, children express concern about their reputation and the perception of others about themselves, when they are in certain public situations: "I am scared of singing in front of everyone!"; "I fear that other children may laugh at me". Sensitivity to the judgment of others leads to discomfort and fear from their inferiorisation, and consequently a poor self-image. Children/peers are significant support in unpleasant situations, and if this relationship is burdened with misunderstandings, this lack of acceptance remains the source of tension and frustration. Through various play activities, children have the opportunity to actively negotiate with their peers, to express their emotions naturally and at the same time to spontaneously "de-fear" themselves (Pavlović Breneselović, 2015).

When asked how children react to situations when they are frightened, the answers are expected; older preschoolers tend to be more specific about their survival methods in *I shake, I tremble, I run, cry, run to my mother...* When asked to "locate" their fear, children responded describing somatic

reactions in the chests, stomachs, arms, and legs. An interesting account of her own experience of fear came from a 6-year-old girl: "My eyes widen, and my stomach disappears."

The motifs depicted in the drawings and described in the clarification of certain segments represent mostly expected, developmentally typical manifestations of childhood fears. Fear in children, caused by possible threats and physical punishment in the family, can be significant for the educator and subject to more serious observation, monitoring and possibly consulting experts (fear of the father's "cane", the mother who "will not come to pick me up if I'm not good" ...). When it comes to the acquired fears, some of the new threats arise from encounters with "digital sources/challenges," such as aggressive games, "zombies", "arsonists", "dangerous warriors", and the like.

Analysis of the answers of the interviewed preschool teachers

Guidelines for the focus group discussion for preschool teachers were given in the form of semi-structured problem-oriented interviews. The problem questions were defined following the set problem and were related to: 1) The most common fears at an early age; 2) Ways to overcome problems in a child's behaviour caused by fears; 3) Differences in the type and intensity of fears between girls and boys; and 4) "New" fears, their intensity, and the reasons for them.

Within the four focus groups, we interviewed 40 preschool teachers (two groups from each of the two preschool institutions) and the obtained answers were analysed and divided thematically, as previously pointed out, into particular categories and themes, where this was possible and appropriate. Interesting comments from individual participants were separated and quoted in the analysis of the content, "the focus of the discussion."

1. The most frequent fears in children at an early pre-school age

This question/topic generated a variety of answers, so we gathered the statements from our respondents – preschool teachers – and classified them into four categories according to Poulton et al. (1997):

(1) Social fears

This type of fear was noticed and underlined by all the interviewed preschool teachers. "We always have a group of children who are afraid of strangers, (parents and/or professional associates and/or other less familiar persons), especially of uniformed persons: cleaning ladies wearing white coats, doctors, repairmen, officers... However, today, somewhat fewer children react with fear to new and unknown persons in the classroom, because kindergartens tend to be more open, so they are accustomed to new people," claims one respondent. Other respondents agree that the problem of acceptance of new people in the kindergarten is less present because the "open-door" practice has proved to be good and has resulted in children having a stable and mature attitude towards strangers.

(2) Agoraphobic fears (fear of crowds, heights)

Fears of crowds, heights, and enclosed spaces occur in children, but not so often (in all four focus groups, nine teachers (or 22.5%) stated that they faced these kinds of fears in children), although they believe that the parents could speak of the incidence of these fears with more certainty. The preschool teachers in one of the focus groups mentioned a fear of heights in the children with whom they work. In two cases, preschool teachers mentioned claustrophobic behaviour incidents in children, and one of the interviewed respondents told us about the reactions of a girl who is afraid of noises. "When we go out, she always stays close to me, and whenever she hears the loud sound of cars or a motorcycle, she frantically grasps me, buries her head trying to avoid listening to the noise, while her whole body trembles!"

(3) Specific fears

The interviewed preschool teachers stated that the various types of specific fears in children are very present: fear of the dark, insects, reptiles (snakes in particular) and/or certain animals, and then there is the fear of a variety of imaginary beings from the perspective of children. All the interviewed preschool teachers agreed on this.

Interestingly, preschool teachers list certain motifs/characters from fairy tales that make children afraid. This happens when parents threaten their children using characters and events from fairy tales. Bettelheim stresses that a fairy tale can offer the child an incarnation of their fears and comfort that their anxiety will be overcome because “threatening enemies are defeated” (e.g. “the witch is defeated”). Fairy tales have a personal meaning for a child, as they encourage changes in identification, in the process of fighting fears. If adults, as mediators in the reception of fairy tales, encourage the permeation of the real and fictional in the child’s image of the world, that can be a reason for anxiety and fear in children (Betelhajm, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to carefully consider the impressions that the child has, carefully select them, respecting their age, cognitive capacities, and individual differences.

(4) Complex fears or existential fears

This kind of fear also finds its place in children’s behaviour, and it is usually based on complex negative experiences in the family and/or the environment that our respondents highlight.

They recognise both vulnerability and fears in the children’s behaviour conditioned by parental restrictions, conditions, high demands in terms of respect for order, respecting imposed unclear rules (“They cannot play outside in the sand, because their clothes would get dirty. Sometimes a child cries in panic if they notice a stain on the clothes fearing parental criticism, and even physical punishment.”). Also, threats such as “I will not come to pick you up if you fail to behave” is a way some parents use to “discipline” their children, our informants claim.

The children mentioned in our sample, through the drawings and narratives presented (the father’s “cane”, for example), expressed the above fears.

2. “New” fears

Since the contemporary context is made up of timeless, mutually pervasive environmental components that contain new challenges caused by global and local shifts and changes, it is possible to observe certain “new” fears in children, resulting from encounters with modern “amenities in a digital reality”. All of our respondents share this opinion.

Therefore, one of the respondent’s underlines: “Digital media, video games are the new drivers of children’s fears! A boy from the group told me that he was afraid of a bloody scarecrow from a cartoon! Others, however, mention zombies! Such aggressive content provokes fear, apprehension, and anxiety in children, and parents are not controlling this.” They point out that exposure to such content, computers, and smartphones without supervision affects the quality of social contact between children. A child can access a range of programmes even before they learn how to read and write (Rečicki & Girtner, 2002). This fiction experience can be powerful. Cognitive criticism theorists point to the necessary connection between cognitive and emotional functions, stating that mirror neurons prove we react to the imaginary as if it was real (Milivojević, 2015).

Stressing the emergence of new fears arising from contemporary “digital reality” that children are, often without censorship and control, exposed to (“parents do not do this because they are too busy, and it is easier that way!”), the preschool teachers with whom we talked express their concern and emphasise the need for professional training and expert support in their professional work. According to their experiences, this kind of support is most often missing, as well as the need to educate parents about these problems. “We need help from professional associates; we need new seminars and workshops with specific instructions and tips on working with children regarding their fears, and even aggressive behaviour, caused by watching inappropriate content and playing video games. We have had enough of theory...!” claims one of our preschool teachers. Preschool teachers here emphasise the increasing disconnection of children from parents and less time being spent together as reasons for children’s new issues, anxieties, and fears.

The respondents interviewed in the focus groups agree that there is an apparent increasing trend of new aggressive content in video games, to which children are exposed, and which can have serious consequences on the children's behaviour. One of the most comprehensive studies in this field, authored by researcher Craig Anderson, points to a high level of correlation between exposure to aggressive video content, and the short-term and long-term consequences in children's behaviour. In this sense, the results indicate the presence of aggressive thoughts, physiological tension and violent emotions, and an indifference to the suffering and problems of others; and as for the long-term implications, we can talk about the changed quality of social relationships and interpersonal problems (Žiropađa & Miočinović, 2007). In this way, children are increasingly exposed to social segregation, in which they can develop various anxieties and fears, and can project misconceptions onto the peer community, some of our respondents think.

All the interviewed preschool teachers mentioned the problem of overcrowded educational groups in kindergartens, which causes additional difficulties in the adaptation of children, complications in noticing the potential worries and fears in children, since they are harder to monitor and to provide with the necessary systemic support.

3. The differences in terms of the type and intensity of fear between girls and boys

Before pointing out the possible differences between girls and boys, in terms of the type, intensity, and manner of showing fears, it is interesting to point out that the ECE staff in the Montenegrin educational system are overwhelmingly female, and preschool institutions can be referred to as a "gender ghetto" (Rolfe, 2006, as cited in Pavlović Breneselović, 2015). As it has already been pointed out, in such conditions this dimension of diversity remains on the margin, since in practice there is no gender-mixed professional structure of preschool teachers which would enable children to build an experientially visible model of gender equality and diversity (Moss, 2000). In addition to this, in this "female kindergarten culture", girls are perceived as more constructive, more cooperative, and more sensitive than boys. Studies show that girls, in their early developmental period, have more frequent and more intense fears than do boys, which can be concluded from the drawings and narratives, so we discussed this issue with our respondents, the preschool teachers. Most of our respondents estimate that one can talk about individual differences in the type of fears preschool-age children have and the intensity and ways they express these. Children differ in their proneness to and intensity of frustration, fear, and positive excitement, as well as in their skills of self-regulation of attention and behaviour (Macuka & Burić, 2015). Far fewer respondents (30%) point out that differences between girls and boys still exist, although the reasons can be attributed to a more evident need in girls to talk about this openly. One respondent explained: "The girls have more fears and they express them in a more tumultuous fashion. However, girls talk more openly about their fears compared to boys..." Other respondents from the focus group agreed with her, noting that girls are louder, more open, and more expressive in terms of expressing their own emotions. They add that learned patterns of behaviour survive in our culture, such as the expected "fearlessness" of the boys, so they are sent "educational" messages, such as: "You are a boy, a man – how can you be afraid?" An educator says: "It is often a way to encourage, but at the same time this binds boys to courage, and therefore it is possible that it is more difficult for them to communicate their fears. Culturally implicit "folk psychology" contributes to gender segregation and the dissociation of expectations of girls and boys as far as games, toys, and fears are concerned. These gender stereotypes can "mask" a child's fears, the interviewed preschool teachers point out, because labels such as "coward" are implicitly culturally easier to attach to boys in the Montenegrin context and result in their fictional "boldness" and resorting to different defence mechanisms in their behaviour.

4. *Overcoming fears – experiences and suggestions of the preschool teachers*

When it comes to the ways and methods of overcoming fears, the preschool teachers in focus groups discussed the most effective solutions through intense thematic discourse, sharing their experiential perspectives and complementing each other. We classified their answers by their similarity:

(1) *Direct conversation with children about the reasons for their fear*

Some of the interviewed respondents (27.5%) seek to establish the reasons for a child's fear through conversation with them, trying to de-condition it gradually: "I talk to the child, and I try to find out the reason for his or her fear." Other focus group participants agreed with her, assessing that direct, open conversation with the children is the most effective means for them to cope with their fears, and then permanently overcome the problem. A focus group educator lists an example of a girl who was afraid of being left out if she briefly left the room. Through conversation and agreeing, the girl was convinced that this could not happen, and the preschool educator, in her testimony, managed to build a relationship of trust with her and eliminated the mentioned fear.

(2) *Redirection of the child's attention to other content*

Some of the interviewed respondents consider that a more comprehensive solution to the situation, when recognising manifestations of fear in child behaviour, is to ignore the problem by redirecting the child's attention and actions: "I ignore the children's reactions, I pretend not to notice anything, and I try to redirect their attention onto other activities!" Some preschool teachers from the focus group did not agree with the effectiveness of this solution, believing that the seeming "removal" and delaying of the problem does not have long-term positive effects on the behaviour and the whole process of children's further individuation.

(3) *Participation of children*

The interviewed preschool teachers (74%) think that they are helping children in the process of overcoming and removing fears in children by making them active participants in various play situations so that they can feel "important" and "powerful", especially when they help adults. Although the child's wellbeing is the foremost issue in the family and society, the provision of quality support for children, according to the protective childhood model, implies protection tailor-made by adults, that is deprived of intentionality, context, more active participation by children, and their greater contribution to solving the problem (Tadić, 2015). Control in the system of relations and upbringing, in which the submissiveness of children is developed and encouraged, is based on the assumption of their incompetence (Vranješević, 2016). Our respondents believe that parents, by overprotecting their children, are unconsciously contributing to their impotence, a weaker self-image, developing and "condensing" fears. On the other hand, our respondents point out that if we respect a child, given his/her power and unique abilities, by providing opportunities for learning, research, full participation, and solving problems, we also strengthen his/her capacity to overcome fears (Vudhed, 2012). Children speak different verbal and non-verbal languages, so numerous media for expression (drawing, modelling, different play situations, dramatisation, verbalising experiences, etc.) can help them to cope with their anxieties and to gradually remove their fears (Malaguzzi's "hundred languages") (1993, as cited in Miljak, 2009). Through participation in play activities, children empower their metacognitive capacities, learn how to express themselves, solve problems, and better understand others (Pavlović Breneselović, 2015). The intensive partnership and co-participation between children and preschool teachers contribute to their emotional well-being and spontaneous effective dealing with stress, in line with his or her cognitive and social development level. Through play, as a co-authoring space, preschool teachers better understand how children learn, think, feel, and question things from different perspectives (Slunjski, 2015). Besides this, the reciprocity and trust they build with adults help children's self-learning, help them to overcome fears, gain security, and to develop certain styles and strategies to deal with the problem (Vulić-Prtorić, 2002).

Moreover, preschool teachers believe that the solution lies in organising thematic activities: "We worked on a thematic project called *Dangers*. Children need to be free of fear, but they also need to be familiar with some potential dangers. Children have had the opportunity to talk about their fears, through the game, to master situations that seem dangerous to them, to watch others behave in dangerous situations, to face the fear, which is important for its overcoming. We read the story 'The Girl and the Darkness', so we talked about it and made drawings on this topic."

(4) Participation of parents

In the process of adaptation to the preschool environment, children go through different stages of anxiety and concern about their parents and, according to our respondents, constantly check with their teachers when and whether their mother or father will come to pick them up. One of the preschool teachers lists the most common questions: "When will my mother arrive?" "How long does it take my mum and dad to come?" "Is my mum coming after nap time?" They are afraid that their parents will "leave them" at the kindergarten, and that may cause anxiety, addiction, and fear of abandonment (Zlotovic, 1974). Children, as some of the interviewed preschool teachers say, often have a problem because of the lack of more intensive communication between preschool teachers and parents. The breakdown between the two contexts of life, family and institutional ones, induces anxiety and insecurity in children, and adults are often perceived as "external controllers" who require, condition, and impose vague limits. Therefore, most interviewed preschool teachers suggest (87.5% of respondents) more intensive involvement of parents in preschool kindergartens.

Preschool teachers and parents can monitor, observe, and assess a child's behaviour and recognise certain deviations and both latent and manifested problems. Also, constant and intensive communication between parents and their children inevitably leads to learning and adjustment processes and improvement of their language skills (Aydin, 2016). In an open-kindergarten approach, children can fully participate in all activities. The right to participate can be a criterion for assessing the individuality of exercising children's rights (Koran & Avci, 2017). Besides this, it can also be a universal expression that reflects the freedom of expression of children and their right to be heard and their contribution being taken seriously. The more they do this as a team and with the continuous and sincere exchanging of information, the more the image of the child will be objective and comprehensive, while observations of certain disorders in children's behaviour, conditioned by certain fears, will certainly be justified in more realistic and "stronger argumentation", our respondents claim.

If a child experiences their family and the kindergarten as connected, complementary, interchangeable, and continuous systems, separation problems will be more effectively overcome. However, according to the interviewed teachers, parents are not always open and ready to cooperate. An honest and open relationship between teachers and parents, as well as the establishment of quality, regular, and persistent interaction between the kindergarten and the family, is one of the necessary assumptions of the child's trust in adults and their safer positioning in this unique living environment.

Conclusion

The research was aimed at understanding the types and frequency of fears in children during their preschool years in educational institutions in Podgorica, Montenegro. To obtain authentic and honest answers to questions about the type, content, accompanying somatic reactions, and manifestations of fears, we analysed drawings created by children from preschools in Podgorica. Through a form of "reflexive iteration" and consideration of the focused phenomenon within the thematic discourse at meetings with preschool teachers, and combining our views with the "children's perspective", we have made our final findings, marking out at the same time the limiting circumstances and making recommendations for possible next research projects and changes in practice.

By analysing the children's drawings, i.e. the themes presented by 60 children, we found overall the presence of dominant, normal, age-typical fears. As expected, acquired/learned fears, especially those that are specific and social, dominate in children. Children explained the accompanying somatic reactions and manifestations of their fears, commenting on the details and their relation to their

drawings. Preschool teachers added, in addition to the expected incidence of social and specific fears in children, some new, contextually conditioned “anxieties”. These are fears that have arisen because of children’s excessive exposure to the aggressive content of video games and various internet animations.

In the context of new circumstances, changed family and social circumstances, positions, roles, and relationships of children among themselves and with adults, they experience changes and require different systemic attention and support. The children’s insights and knowledge are becoming more complicated, but we are witnessing new anxieties and fears, conditioned by various “ecosystem challenges” and agents (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Excessive separation of children from their parents, due to the increase of adults’ professional commitments and the inability to establish a continuous exchange between them, induces new unrest and fears, as well as behavioural problems in children. The social isolation of children, their separation into special groups, separated from adults, a new life culture, and “fascination” with media challenges are all reasons for new “encounters”, fears, and unrest.

Cultural stereotypes about gender roles, inherent to the Montenegrin context, impose specific expectations on boys and girls. In the “male” patricentric culture, it is harder to “forgive” boys for timid behavioural manifestations. Also, a cultural myth of the undeniable importance of external social judgment creates in children a feeling of anxiety regarding their reputation.

Our interlocutors from Montenegrin preschool institutions listed several strategies or situations involving coping with children’s fears: direct conversation with children about the reasons for their fears; redirection of children’s attention to other content and a search for alternative options; participation by the children for the purpose of more active cognitive and emotional coping with stress and for better adaptation; involving parents in the joint development of strategies for dealing with and solving problems.

Our interlocutors/preschool teachers from Montenegrin preschool institutions have pointed out that they lack the help and professional support to improve their professional competence and capacity for purposeful action in the field of the adequate identification and deconditioning of children’s fears and anxiety. Also, they expect more honest and more committed action on the part of the parents, as well as joint activities and educational support, for the sake of comprehensive intervention when it comes to the sources and consequences of children’s fears. Finally, preschool teachers expect serious, quality systemic support in the field of protection and respect of children’s rights in the proper conditions, in optimally organised educational groups, respecting pedagogical norms in order to tackle the problem of children’s fears in a more systemic and functional manner, with more sensitivity and prospects of success.

In the context of new circumstances and changed family and social circumstances, the positions, roles, and relationships of children among themselves and with adults change and require different systemic attention and support. Children’s insights and knowledge are becoming more complicated, but we are witnessing new anxieties and fears, conditioned by various challenges and agents.

Finally, through the research, we focused on some “verbal” indicators of children’s fears, from the perspective of already prominent criteria, such as the most common fears, the differences between girls and boys in the context of cultural and family conditions, “new fears”, and the manner of professional “dealing with the problem”. However, given the limiting circumstances, i.e. the small number of children and interviewed preschool teachers, and respondents coming from only one community in Montenegro, it is clear that applying generalisations to a wider population of preschool children in Montenegrin kindergartens may be questionable and lacking in strong grounds. Namely, the non-probabilistic convenient samples were most often built from available units, making their representativity questionable since there is no possibility of calculating the sampling error. However, such convenient samples have their place and importance in exploratory studies which are not conducted for the purpose of statistical evaluation (Ristić, 2006). It would be desirable to expand the sample population of children and preschool teachers to other cities (from northern and southern regions) and to conduct more extensive research involving parents and their assessment of their

children's behaviour, problems, fears, reasons, and suggestions for affirmation of children's prosocial behaviour. Also, extending and combining research instruments and comparative-correlative assessment of the results from multiple perspectives would contribute to a better refinement of this phenomenon. Comparison with current research indicators from other settings could also be useful for deeper consideration of different dimensions and the general structure of the phenomenon of children's fears (Villig, 2016).

In a society that implicitly fosters "internalised oppression" (Pascal & Bertram, 2009) and an overprotective attitude towards "incompetent" children, we recognise the inequitable distribution of power and the social segregation of children and the world of adults. The adopted "helplessness" of children makes them more vulnerable and "more prone" in the face of new external and internal challenges. Therefore, it is necessary to work on the education of preschool teachers and parents, in order for a more functional connection of the links in the system, better and more complete understanding of the child, restructuring of an environment in which everyone actively participates, building a unique community of learning and living. A proposal, which stems from the research insights, could also be the introduction of a new professional development programme (catalogue of professional development programmes) for preschool teachers and professional associates, focusing on issues such as the causes and manifestations of children's fears, as well as teamwork with parents for more comprehensive recognition and more effective prevention of behavioural problems arising from unresolved childhood fears. Also, the idea of the need for a systematic improvement of the preschool education position in the Montenegrin context remains, given that it is still marked by the implicitly predominating concept of "deficient childhood" in which "a little child means little concern". This is evidenced by the lack of spatial and personnel infrastructure, the overly crowded educational groups, which can also lead to the development of new fears among children since the child's socio-emotional development is conditioned by the quality and degree of responsiveness of contextual opportunities. Empowering emotional security in an adequate and supportive environment will contribute to the more efficient individualisation and quality personal integration of the child.

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