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Pre-school and Media Pedagogy Department		

A B S T R A C T

of

D I S S E R T A T I O N

FOR ACQUISITION OF EDUCATIONAL AND SCIENTIFIC DEGREE "DOCTOR" IN PROFESSIONAL FIELD 1.2. PEDAGOGY (PRESCHOOL PEDAGOGY)

Development of 5-6-year-old children's social competence in Montessori and conventional/mass kindergartens in Bulgaria

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The dissertation work was discussed and directed for defence by the "Preschool and Media Pedagogy" Department at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski". The content of the dissertation includes an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, recommendations, contributions, a bibliography and appendices. The dissertation contains 243 pages. The text comprises 76 tables, figures, graphs, charts and six appendices. The bibliography includes 178 titles, of which 64 are in English and Spanish.

The abstract, a concise yet comprehensive summary, mirrors the meticulous structure of the dissertation, preserving the original numbering of the figures, graphs, tables, and diagrams. The bibliography in the abstract is a curated collection covering only the cited literature, providing a glimpse into the depth of the research.

The public defence of the dissertation work will take place at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts of SU "St. Kliment Ohridski".

Content

DV - State Gazette
DOS - State educational standard for preschool education
EC - European Commission
EU - European Union
ZPUO - Law on preschool and school education
Ministry of Health - Ministry of Health
MES - Ministry of Education
MTSP - Ministry of Labor and Social Policy
NGOs - non-governmental organizations
EARLY CHILDHOOD - Education and care in early childhood (from birth to entry into first grade)

ON - Educational hearing
OIA - Educational core
PUV - Preschool age
ECD - Early childhood development (the age from birth to entering first grade)
Framework or Model - A model framework for creating a supportive learning environment
Latin abbreviations used
CASEL - The Collaborative Organization for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CST 3-6 - Challenging situations task, Variant 2
SEL (social and emotional learning) - social and emotional learning
SPSS - IBM SPSS Statistics Software v.20

Introduction

The current dissertation research on the topic "Development of social competence in 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria" was provoked by my long-term work in this field with a team I have had the pleasure of leading for over fifteen years. To this, I would add my experience in academic education gained over the past ten years, a period during which since 2016, in the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts (at that time FNPP) for the first time in a Bulgarian university, a Postgraduate Program began to function teacher qualification (SDC) "Montessori pedagogy in modern society". Five years later, in 2021, the first master's program in the country (and one of the few in the world) for training Montessori specialists, "Montessori Pedagogy in the Digital Society", was created. This experience, including training over 300 teachers, led to the creation of Montessori kindergartens or classes to existing ones. Montessori classes in mass kindergartens, currently four in Sofia, distributed in two kindergartens - 48 "Bratya Grimm" (1 group) and 42 "Seagull" (3 groups) are of particular interest for the present work. Similar training and qualification opportunities allowed students from the faculty to create the first Montessori elementary (from 1st till 4th grade) in our country in a municipal school - 191 "Otets Paisiy" School, Zheleznitsa. The presence of these Montessori classes in kindergartens and schools requires research to be launched to analyze the effect of applying the innovation. The Montessori classes mentioned above also provide excellent research material and a prerequisite for possibly upgrading the preschool education of the children attending the so-called mass groups to kindergartens. However, having said all this, one of the main limitations of the present work, is that the practical research is limited to measuring only the social competence of children and not all other competencies that are the object of formation within the framework of preschool education.

The age from birth to school entry is defined by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as the most critical period of human development (Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development for 2024 (2024, April 4). The World Bank and UNESCO data and recommendations define *education* as a priority for all countries. Among the World Bank's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Goal 4 is: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affairs), with particular focus on education in the years before starting school (SDG4 Scorecard Progress Report on National Benchmarks: Focus on Early Childhood). Research also reveals a promising statistic: children are three times more likely to complete secondary education if they have access to early childhood education and care

(ECEC) (EU, 2021). We will add one more argument. Let us keep in mind that Bulgaria is the poorest country in the European Union (First Years First Priority, 2021), with the most children in poverty and at risk of social exclusion. According to data provided by the European Child Guarantee:

- ⅓ of children in Bulgaria are at risk of poverty and social exclusion (for the EU, this is below 20%),
- almost 10% of children in Bulgaria are of Roma origin (EU average is 3%),
- 25% of children in Bulgaria have at least one parent who works abroad,

(EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2021) Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee). The data listed so far underscore the importance of the supports, institutions, and organizations that work with children from birth to entering the first grade. These entities are not just agents helping to overcome social inequalities, but they also provide these children with a chance to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, research shows that promoting students' emotional health and well-being has the most significant impact of any intervention to improve overall academic achievement (UNICEF, 2018).

Crucially, social competence, together with civic competence, is the sixth key competence for lifelong learning. It is defined as "the ability to participate effectively and constructively in social and professional life, engaging in active and democratic participation, especially in societies of increasing diversity" (RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 18 December 2006 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, 2006). However, a pressing issue arises from the need for more tools to assess essential competencies in Bulgaria, as highlighted in a report by the European Commission. The existing approaches in the system aim to assess progress towards achievements rather than the competencies related to the subjects. Its scope and the difference between the critical competencies in preschool education must be clarified: "This gap is the main challenge, requiring immediate attention" (European Commission, 2021, 78).

Within such an analytical context, we should note that the socialization of children was accepted as one of the three main components of education, along with teaching and upbringing - art. 3. (1) from the LAW on preschool and school education Promulgated, SG No. 79 of 13.10.2015, is a process that "includes teaching, upbringing and socialization". The importance of mastering social competence has broader aspects than the social quality of purely interpersonal relationships. It is also essential for "successful integration into human communities and groups, for dealing with critical situations caused by natural disasters, disasters or social conflicts and conflicts reflecting on the social situation of both society and each of its members" (Nikolaeva, 2012, 36).

Significantly, research has unequivocally demonstrated that 'social information processing - SIP - social competence, adjustment in the classroom and academic readiness - "are potent predictors of academic success" (Denham et al., 2013, 668). This is because a socially competent child can pay more attention to academic tasks, plan better, and devote more

resources to learning than a less socially competent child" (Denham et al., 2013, 669), a finding that should not be overlooked in the context of preschool education.

Crucially, the impetus for the current study stems from the growing and explicit desire of parents - for their children to receive individual attention and comprehensive support, to develop holistically, and to be supported socially (Kotseva et al., 2018). As a significant socializing factor, the family plays a pivotal role 'because social learning takes place in the context of the specifics of family relationships, parental behaviour patterns and upbringing methods' (Penev, 2017, 21), underscoring the importance of parental involvement in preschool education.

We believe that the quest by parents for alternative and innovative methods is a testament to the potential of these models. This search is linked to the quality of care and education offered in traditional/mass pre-school institutions - nurseries and kindergartens - and the recommendations of international organizations to Bulgaria for enhancing the quality (European Commission, 2021).

During the last 15 years, many innovative approaches and practices have been developed in Bulgaria. Some of the world's most popular alternative educational models, such as Montessori pedagogy, Suggested pedagogy, Waldorf pedagogy, and Reggio Emilia educational method, are gaining popularity in Bulgaria. Montessori pedagogy is the most widespread alternative pedagogy in Bulgaria and the world (research shows that there exist over 22,000 Montessori learning centres worldwide). Our analysis shows that for the academic year 2022 - 2023, in our country, almost 2000 children are being taught in Montessori groups and classes in kindergartens and schools (distributed in 25 groups and four courses in municipal kindergartens and schools in Sofia, Plovdiv, Vratsa, Stara Zagora and other municipalities, as there are also over 40 private Montessori kindergartens and centres).

The regulatory framework encourages the implementation of innovations from one side. legal expectations for the teacher are to "create, establish and actively support a culture of generating innovative ideas and implementing innovative practices in the educational process" (ORDINANCE ON THE STATE REQUIREMENTS FOR ACQUIRING THE TEACHER PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION, 2016). On the other hand, due to regulatory restrictions, the application of the innovation - Montessori pedagogy - still needs to be implemented in a complete and authentic form in kindergartens. It is essential to provide an opportunity to create innovative groups at kindergartens according to a procedure similar to that by which innovative schools function (LAW on preschool and school education Promulgated, SG No. 79 of 13.10 .2015). On the other hand, research has shown that Montessori education significantly affects non-academic skills more than academic performance (Randolph et al., 2023; OECD, 2024). This gives an additional motive in the present dissertation research to establish the relationship between Montessori pedagogy and the development of social competence.

The context in which education functions today must be considered. Experts note that most learners of the XXI century are still taught by teachers who used pedagogical practices of the XX century in school organizations of the XIX century (Vitanova, 2023, 728). If we assume that we are on the threshold of Revolution 5.0, conditioned by Industry 5.0, education should

also move to its new version - Education 5.0. Its new specificity is determined by the fact that it must help to prepare "intellectually, socially and emotionally strong individuals" with "the appropriate strategic, methodological and pedagogical approaches", including "putting human qualities at the centre of education..., considering learners as agents of change..., providing flexibility and freedom in curriculum objectives and learning outcomes..., personalized learning", etc. (Vitanova, 2023, 734 - 735) in order to develop the unique talents of each child or student and to become a contributing member of society. The trends outlined here pose new questions to preschool education, which we discuss through this dissertation.

Therefore, in the present work, we have chosen to analyze and research the development of social competence in Montessori and a traditional preschool environment.

For these, as well as for some other reasons, social competence, particularly its development among 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mainstream kindergartens, was chosen as the subject of this dissertation.

The current dissertation research, with its unique and innovative interdisciplinary nature, is realized in the fields of preschool, media, Montessori, and social pedagogy.

Terms and concepts

For the needs of this dissertation, the understanding of nursery and preschool age and education will be expanded with the following terms and concepts, which will be analyzed in a context different from the generally accepted one in Bulgaria.

By early childhood development (ECD), we will understand the child's development from birth to the first grade (a similar understanding is laid down in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF, World Bank, World Health Organization, European Commission, etc.).

Similarly, we extend the term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECC), which, according to the definition of the European Commission, is "any regulatory mechanism that provides children with education and care from birth until reaching compulsory school age" (European Commission, 2021; Early Childhood Education, and Inclusion. World Bank., 2014; Early Childhood Development Alliance, 2018). The scope of ECEC also includes preschool education and nurseries (European Commission, 2021). Therefore, within the scope of the term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECC), we will consider all institutions and organizations for working with children from birth to entering the first grade - nurseries, kindergartens, centres for support of personal development, centres for support of the inclusive education, children's centres and cooperatives with an educational and educational purpose.

Through this dissertation, we aim to shift the focus from preschool education to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), recognizing the diverse forms of education and care in early childhood. It is the diversity and freedom in the provision of educational services and models that we believe can best meet the needs of educational communities, parents, and children. This is particularly crucial for vulnerable groups, as it can significantly contribute to their socialization and integration in society.

Although the concept of "mass" or "traditional" kindergartens has not been established in Bulgaria, this concept in the current dissertation study will be understood as the traditional institutions for preschool education in our country, which work according to a program system approved by the Ministry of Education and Science and organize their work with children according to the provisions of the Educational Law and Ordinance 5 on preschool education.

The concept of "Montessori kindergartens" in the present dissertation study will be understood as preschool education institutions that function as kindergartens but partially work according to the program system approved by the Ministry of Education. In return, they organize their work with children according to the international and established Montessori practice (the supportive Montessori environment and materials; specially designed didactic materials from all educational areas; work in different age groups; have a three-hour continuous work cycle in the supportive environment, etc.). It is important to note that these kindergartens at the time of the study only implemented some of the innovative practices described in the Supportive Educational Environment Model Framework (Chapter IV).

The present dissertation will examine the child's social competence from birth until the first grade of school. We can define *social competence* as meta-competence, including most competencies. Researchers point out the idea that "defining social competence requires defining life" and go on to call it by the Latin name "e pluribus unum" (one made of many) (Levterova, 2009, 40). In the current dissertation research, D. Lefterova's definition of social competence is chosen for a working definition: "processing and using the skills to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour to solve social tasks in the relevant context and culture" (Lefterova, 2009, 41). The importance of social competence for human development is enormous, and it is the basis on which successful socialization between children and individuals is realized. Therefore, we assume that the two concepts are directly related. Through socialization, we will understand the process of learning different types of social behaviour with the help of the closest social environment during the relevant sensitive periods.

"Normalization" - a term introduced by Dr. Maria Montessori (Montessori, 2007). It is a process internal to the child by which the child develops through the favorable environment, and, among many other effects, internal self-discipline, social competence, and socialization emerge. "Normalization" means becoming a "contributing member of society." Dr. Maria Montessori used the term to describe a process she observed while working with children at the first Casa dei Bambini ("House of the Children") in Rome at the beginning of the last century. Montessori defines the normalized child as one who has mastered the power of "spontaneous discipline, sustained and satisfying work, social feelings of helpfulness and sympathy for others" (Montessori, 2007, 188).

Our research focuses on the formation of social competence in 5-6-year-old children. This age group is significant as it marks the end of education at the preschool stage, providing a comprehensive view of the results of education in both Montessori and mass groups.

Based on the above, we set the following conceptual parameters of the dissertation work as the main parameters of the present development.

Conceptual parameters of the dissertation

CONCEPTUAL PARAMETERS OF THE DISSERTATION

Development of social competence in 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria

Objective	Subject	Object	Tasks	Contributions
This research aims to delve into a relatively unexplored area- the social competence of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori and mass kindergartens. It also seeks to propose a unique model framework for creating an educational environment that fosters the development of social competence.	The aspects of the Montessori educational environment that support the development of social competence in 5-6-year-old children.	The social competence of 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria.	To outline the specifics of education and care from birth to entry into first grade in Bulgaria through analysis of documents with recommendations and studies of international and national organizations; To outline the theoretical parameters of social competence, considered in the context of preschool practice in our country; To clarify the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy and to consider it in the context of its application as an innovative educational approach in preschool practice in Bulgaria, as well as the development of the social competence of 5-6-year-old children; To conduct a study on social competence among 5-6-year-old children in a Montessori environment and in mass kindergartens in our country to analyze the results and outline trends; To develop a model framework for stimulating the social competence of preschool children.	1.Анализирано е качеството на образованието и грижата от раждането до постъпването в първи клас чрез разглеждане на препоръки и изследвания на международни и национални организации. Изведени са спецификите и препоръките за качество, свързани с развитието на социалната компетентност; 2.Изяснени са характеристиките на Монтесори педагогиката като са разгледани в контекста на приложението й в предучилищната практика в България; 3.Очертани са теоретичните параметри на социалната компетентност като са разгледани в контекста на Монтесори педагогиката и предучилищната практика у нас; 4.Анализирани са научни изследвания относно развитието на социалната компетентност в Монтесори и в предучилищните детски заведения; 5.Проведено е са анализирани резултатите от изследване за социалната компетентност сред 5-6-годишни деца в Монтесори среда и в масовите детски градини у нас; 6.Изведени са изводи относно предпоставките и факторите, благоприятстващи развитието на социалната компетентност на 5-6-годишни деца; 7.Формулирани са препоръки и е предложен модел/ образователни технологии за подкрепяща образователна среда , с който би могло да се надгради качеството на предучилищната практика у нас, с цел стимулиране на на социалната компетентност. 8.Адаптирани са два изследователски инструмента - въпросник DESK 3-6 скали "Социална компетентност", "Социално взаимодействие" и "Внимание и концентрация") и тест за измерване на социалната компетентност на децата по модела на Слъли Деньов.

Scheme 1. Conceptual parameters of the dissertation work and research

Objective: This research aims to delve into a relatively unexplored area- the social competence of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori and mass kindergartens. It also seeks to propose a unique model framework for creating an educational environment that fosters the development of social competence.

The main **research tasks** of a dissertation are:
- To outline the specifics of education and care from birth to entry into first grade in Bulgaria through analysis of documents with recommendations and studies of international and national organizations;
- To outline the theoretical parameters of social competence, considered in the context of preschool practice in our country;
- To clarify the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy and to consider it in the context of its application as an innovative educational approach in preschool practice in Bulgaria, as well as the development of the social competence of 5-6-year-old children;
- To conduct a study on social competence among 5-6-year-old children in a Montessori environment and in mass kindergartens in our country to analyze the results and outline trends;
- To develop a model framework for stimulating the social competence of preschool

children.

Object: the social competence of 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria.

Subject: the aspects of the Montessori educational environment that support the development of social competence in 5-6-year-old children.

The realization of the set goals and tasks is described in this dissertation in four chapters. The first chapter outlines the current policies, priorities and approaches to increase education quality by supporting children's development from birth to entry into first grade. The second chapter details the specifics of the development of social competence in Montessori and mass kindergartens for children of preschool age. The third chapter details the five phases through which we pass to realize an empirical study of the social competence of 5-6-year-old children in mainstream and Montessori kindergartens in Sofia. In the fourth chapter, a framework of a model for creating a supportive educational environment for the development of social competence of preschool children is presented. In conclusion, the dissertation research results are summarized, with guidelines and recommendations for deepening scientific research in the field of early childhood education and innovation support. At the end of the work, the contributions of the dissertation research are outlined, along with the bibliography and appendices.

"The biggest stepforward in human evolution was made, when society began
to help the weak and the poor, instead of oppressing and despising them"
(Montessori, 2017, 274).

1. **Chapter One. Current policies, priorities and approaches to increase education quality by supporting children's development from birth to first grade.**

   1.1. **Global trends in education and care from birth to first grade**

   In pedagogical theory and practice in our country, the understanding of early childhood is "a stage of the child's development that covers the age from birth to three years" (Peneva, 2015, 16). Therefore, early childhood development researchers assume that the early age is the one in which the young children interacts with the environment and in this interaction, quantitative changes (growth) and qualitative changes (development) occur (Peneva, 2015; Daskalova, 1991).

   According to the understanding laid down in UN documents on the rights of the child, international organizations such as UNICEF, the World Bank, the European Commission, the World Health Organization and others, early childhood is the age from birth to entering the first grade (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2014; UNICEF et al., 2018; European Commission, 2021; Early Childhood Education and Care, and Inclusion: Situation Analysis and Policy Direction Recommendations. World Bank., 2020. This understanding of early child development coincides with the understanding of the leading researchers and theorists worldwide and in our country (MacLeod-Brudenell et al., 2008; Peneva, 2015).

   In the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Training and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 - 2030), for the first time in Bulgaria, early childhood development is officially recognized as a separate priority area (the Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, education and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030). This contribution results from the combined efforts of numerous NGOs and experts in our country.

   Despite the common understanding in our country (early child development covers the age between birth and three years old), it makes a strong impression that Art. 6. the Law on Preschool and School Education (ZPUO) regarding early childhood development mentions the following: "The system of preschool and school education provides conditions for 1. early childhood development and preparation of children for school" (LAW on Preschool and School Education Official Gazette, No. 79 of 13.10.2015). We can see a similar view in the projects published by the Ministry of Education - MES (Ministry of Education, 2020) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy - MTSP (Ministry of Labor and Social Policy - Website).

   The annual plan for the promotion of early childhood development is the last document adopted in February 2024 by the interdepartmental working group for early childhood development, determined by order N P-191 of 13.10.23 of the Prime Minister of Bulgaria (Annual plan for the promotion of early childhood development for 2024 (2024, April 4). It outlines early childhood education and care, understood from birth to first grade. In this sense,

early childhood education is defined as "process and result in mastering ideas, skills and relationships, which includes training and education with their cognitive and social-personal components, implies the assimilation of experience and its transformation into a personally significant meaning for the young child", and care as "actions of the adults, aimed at satisfying the daily current needs of the child, such as providing support and assistance in his activities, such as organizing a positive environment stimulating his development (2024 Annual Plan to Promote Early Childhood Development (2024, April 4).

Importance of early childhood education for the future of children and society

First and foremost, ECEC improves children's development and **benefits individuals' overall performance and future**. Providing quality ECEC is crucial in improving children's cognitive, social and emotional development from an early age. This leads to better educational attainment and employment prospects later in life, higher educational attainment, higher incomes, improved social integration and better health. There are also many benefits at a societal level, ranging from reduced welfare costs and lower crime rates to higher tax revenues and improved social cohesion (European Commission proposal Brussels, 7.9.2022 COM(2022) 442 Final 2022/0263 (NLE) on COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on revision, 3-5).

Importance of ECEC for reducing inequalities and social inclusion

In Bulgaria, with each passing year, the importance of ECEC for reducing inequalities and social inclusion is increasing, which is especially relevant given the data on the well-being of children in Bulgaria. As we indicated in the introduction, our country is the poorest in the entire European Union (First Years First Priority, 2021), with the most children in poverty and at risk of social exclusion (EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2021) Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee). Investments in ECEC reduce inequalities, help tackle social disadvantage, strengthen "social inclusion and equity and help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty, promote equal opportunities" (Council Recommendation 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Age and in the European Child Guarantee) (EUROPEAN COMMISSION Brussels, 7/9/2022 COM (2022) 442 Final 2022/0263 (NLE) Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION). The condition for all this is participation in high-quality ECEC.

In addition, in the present analysis, we focus on **the importance of ECEC for women's equal opportunities and the development of the economy**. Therefore, here, in the third place, we should consider how children's participation in ECEC promotes women's participation in the labour market and stimulates women's full-time employment "..a study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) shows that investing 1.1% of GDP in ECEC and 1.8% of GDP in long-term care each year would create an additional 26.7 million jobs in Europe by 2030" (EUROPEAN COMMISSION Brussels, 7.9 .2022 COM (2022) 442 Final 2022/0263 (NLE) Proposal for COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION).

Importance of ECEC for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals

As is evident from the analysis so far, the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is of great importance for individuals' future development, realization and socialization. Many organizations place ECD and ECD at the centre of their strategies and policies.

The recommendations in the field of early childhood development and ECEC support of the World Bank, UNICEF and the World Health Organization (UNICEF et al., 2018) bring out the components of supportive and attentive care (nurturing care) and place them at the centre of the global strategy to achieve The 17 goals for sustainable development of the United Nations (THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development). In this regard, five strategic steps for ECEC have been defined:

1. Manage and invest;
2. Focus on families and their communities; 3. Strengthen services;
4. Monitor progress; 5. Use data and innovate (UNICEF et al., 2018, 27). See Scheme

Diagram 4. Supportive and attentive care is at the centre of the global strategy and the goals for sustainable development (UNICEF et al., 2018, 27).

1.2. National trends in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) e

In this part of the dissertation, we outline some national trends in nurseries and kindergartens in our country. Preschool education is "level 0" in the National Qualification Framework (NATIONAL QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA COMPETENTLY, n.d.).

1.3. Challenges and prospects for the quality of ECEC

In the study Global Competitiveness Report 2017 - 2018 of the World Economic Forum - Bulgaria is ranked 83rd in the world (out of approximately 195 countries) and 26th in the EU in terms of the quality of the education system (World Economic Forum, 2019). In September 2020, the World Bank published the Human Capital Index 2020 (Human Capital Index HCI) - "the human capital index measures the amount of human capital that a child born today can expect to have by 18- years old. It conveys the productivity of the next generation of workers compared to a benchmark of full education and full health" (World Bank, 2022a, Bulgaria). The human capital index states that a "child born in Bulgaria just before the pandemic will be 61 per cent as productive when they grow up as they could be if they enjoyed full education and full health. Research shows that Bulgarian fourth graders perform above average in studies such as PIRLS

and TIMSS. However, the results of PISA remain worrying because "the lag compared to the EU is more than double in all areas of the study" (SFC2021 Program, supported by ERDF ("Investments for jobs" objective, 2022).

In the following, we will outline the **challenges and prospects for increasing the quality of early childhood education and care in Bulgaria.**

The first challenge and opportunity for change: a shared vision for the entire ECEC sector (from birth to primary school). Currently, ECEC services are divided into three sectors - education, health and social services. The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and the State Agency for Child Protection are responsible for safeguarding the well-being within the framework of the RDA and the entire life cycle of all children up to the age of 18. The MES is responsible for children from 2 or 3 years until school admission, and the Ministry of Health is for children under three. Building cross-sectoral capacity for ECEC is a "primary need for governance in Bulgaria" and synchronizing ECEC and ECEC policies (European Commission, 2021, 90).

The second challenge and opportunity for change in Bulgaria is access to early childhood education, including expanding the scope and providing equal opportunities for all children (Introduction of a National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care, 2020). Bulgaria is one of the countries in the EU with the lowest coverage of children in preschool. According to EUROSTAT data, in 2021 in Bulgaria, the percentage of children in pre-primary education from the age of 3 to primary age for compulsory education is 79.9% of the total number of children of the corresponding age, and the range of children in nurseries is 9.4% [educ_uoe_enra21]. According to the goals set by the EC, "by 2030: (a) at least 50% of children under the age of 3 participate in ECEC; and (b) at least 96% of children between the ages of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education participate in ECEC (EUROPEAN COMMISSION Brussels, 7.9.2022 COM(2022) 442 Final 2022/0263 (NLE) Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision, 21 - 22). Based on the data, intensive work should be done to expand the scope.

The other **challenge related to access to ECEC is ensuring equal opportunities for each child's development and support for early childhood social inclusion** (TSOIDUEM, n.d.; STRATEGY FOR REDUCING EARLY DROPOUTS, 2013). Therefore, the European Commission directs the attention of Bulgarian education to "social equality ... and social justice, as social exclusion becomes sustainable for the same categories of children and their families" (European Commission, 2021, 64). This part also comments on the probable reasons for this.

Moreover, we come to **the third challenge and the corresponding opportunity for change in ECEC in our country: the expansion of the ECEC sector should be combined with an increase in quality standards throughout the system and accordingly.** This was precisely what was laid down in the initial idea of adopting the National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education, through which work was to be done in the five directions for ensuring the quality of early childhood education - access, personnel, educational content, monitoring and evaluation. The current analysis showed that through the indicators set in the

national framework, the objectives of the European Quality Framework initiative (Introduction of a National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care, 2020) will probably not be realized or will be partially realized.

The fourth challenge and opportunity for change is a contractual curriculum framework for all children from birth to preschool/primary school (Introducing a National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (REFORM/SC2020, 67). Regarding the fourth challenge, we could share that the Annual Plan for the Promotion of Early Childhood Development for 2024 was adopted (2024, April 4), and we hope to see concrete steps taken in this direction.

In this part, we also outline the **principles we recommend for an ECD curriculum**. We propose that the first principle is to make ECEC the foundation of lifelong learning (Council Recommendations of May 22 2018, on critical competencies for lifelong learning, 2018). As a second principle, ECEC should assist in acquiring key competencies. According to the EC, in our country, the competencies "are still defined as expected results... in educational fields, which in practice cover the traditional educational subjects for the system (for example, Bulgarian language, mathematics, etc.)" (European Commission, 2021, 77).

1.4. Challenges and Prospects for Innovations in Preschool education about the Development of Social Competence

In this part, we explore the legal framework regulation in Bulgaria. While it poses some limitations, it also provides a solid foundation for applying educational innovations. This becomes a significant factor in the potential success of Montessori pedagogy, which is a focal point of the present dissertation.

The World Bank, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization (UNICEF et al., 2018) promote educational innovation in Sustainable Development Goals (THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development). One of the five strategic goals of ECEC is "Use data and innovate" (UNICEF et al., 2018, 27). The European Commission report also emphasizes the promotion of innovation in ECEC, which requires the "introduction of innovative forms of management, educational environment and learning, use of innovative teaching methods, development of innovative educational content, curricula and educational plans" (VET project, Priority 2 - Modernization and quality of education) (European Commission, 2021, 134).

In the system of preschool and school education - art. 3 (1). 8. From ZPUO - emphasis is placed on "innovativeness and efficiency in pedagogical practices and in the organization of the educational process based on scientific validity and forecasting of the results of innovations" (ZPUO). This is realized, according to Art. 69. (3) original and innovative program systems", BUT "by the state educational standard for preschool education" (ZPUO), which practically limits the application of Montessori pedagogy.

We believe that it is essential to promote innovation by fulfilling the pledge in the "Strategic Framework for the Development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria"

(2021 - 2030), in which it is written that it is necessary to have "5. Creation of legal conditions for the functioning of innovative kindergartens" (Strategic framework for the development of education, training and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 - 2030). This could be implemented similarly to how innovative schools in Bulgaria are organized (ZPUO, art. 38, paragraphs 6, 7, 8).

In the recommendations of the European Commission, two countries with a high quality of early childhood education (Sweden and Ireland) are cited as examples in which the application of Montessori pedagogy is relatively widespread (Introduction of a National Framework for the quality of education and care in early childhood (REFORM/ SC2020, 2020).

Montessori kindergartens (which unfortunately currently operate partly outside the legal regulation in Bulgaria) offer a stable basis for developing children's social competence in the most critical years of their lives. Therefore, through the legal framework, it is essential to encourage applying Montessori educational practices to build on the work with children in traditional/mass kindergartens.

In conclusion, we outline five areas where policy changes could be made: overall vision and state policies for education and care from birth to first grade (Change 1); Increasing the systemic quality of ECEC (see the analysis of data and documents in Chapter One World Bank, 2022a & World Bank, 2022b; World Economic Forum, 2019); EUROPEAN COMMISSION Brussels, 7/9/2022 COM (2022) 442 Final 2022/0263 (NLE) Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION; European Commission, 2021; Introducing a national framework for the quality of early childhood education and care, 2020; Alliance for Early Childhood Development, 2021; National Children's Network initiates lawsuit over lack of kindergarten places, 2023) (Change 2); It is necessary to change the legal framework, in order to create innovative groups for kindergartens and nurseries that apply innovative pedagogy/methods/approaches in their overall form (Change 3); Providing funding to support innovation, as well as to measure the effect of their application (Change 4); The effective spending of the funds allocated for ECEC (Change 5).

Currently, the legal framework and policies in practice need to support the application of innovative practices such as Montessori pedagogy. However, what is Montessori pedagogy and what is its relationship with developing social competence? We will focus on this in the second chapter.

2.   Chapter Two. Development of social competence in Montessori and mass kindergartens in preschool age

2.1.   Developing social competence and socialization in preschool age

The dissertation's second chapter presents the specifics of social development, socialization, and social competence in preschool age. It aims to connect theory and interweave it with some contemporary trends in practice. The first part examines the child's development and, accordingly, social development, the development of social competence and socialization, and the relationship between social and emotional development. The differences between the concepts - competence, competencies, skills, etc. are clarified. Then, we delve into more detail about the practical implications of supporting social development - in the family, educational institutions, children's groups, and the media. At the end of the chapter, we offer an analysis of the development of social competence according to the legal regulations in our country, further underlining the practical implications of the research.

The modern science of early childhood development defines *social development* as being on par with motor, language-speech, and cognitive development (MacLeod-Brudenell et al., 2008; Peneva, 2015). According to Lorenz, Hind, Montessori, and Vulkanova, socialization is learning different types of social behaviour with the help of the closest social environment during the relevant sensitive periods. If they are omitted, opportunities for socialization may disappear, as shown by an experiment with the child raised in the wild woods near Avignon, described by Itard (Itard, 1962). Other authors expand the meaning above and accept it as a "phenomenon characterizing man and his development as a part, the basis of social development and existence" (Nikolaeva, 2012, 32). Hristova singles out three components of the personality's social maturation process (Hristova, 2022, 33). Emotional development goes hand in hand with social development. Emotional intelligence is part of social intelligence. In this part, it is precisely these connections that are brought forward.

In this part of the dissertation, the basic definitions of social competence are summarized and presented, including Bulgarian authors' contribution to clarify the concept's essence.

author and year	definition of social competence

The Collaborative Organization for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning CASEL, (2015).	CASEL identifies five interrelated social competencies. These are self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2015). These elements are called the Big Five. These five characteristics are considered essential to being a good student, citizen, and worker and to reducing high-risk behaviours.
Radev, 2013, 350	A construct that refers to social and cognitive skills and behaviours that children need for successful adjustment. These skills and behaviours necessary for normal social development vary according to the child's age and the needs of the particular situation.
Levterova, 2009, 41	Processing and using the skills to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour to solve social tasks in the relevant context and culture.
Perren, Groeben, Stadelmann и von Klitzing, 2008, 89	The ability to achieve one's own goals in social relationships and to satisfy one's own needs while taking into account the goals and needs of others.
Arthur, Bochner & Butterfield, 1999	*Social competence* is a developmental phenomenon rather than a set of specific behaviours. It includes the developing understanding of self and others and the ability to form meaningful relationships with peers.
Ravan & Ziegler, 1997	We often define *social competence* as the ability to feel positive about ourselves and to fit into a network of positive relationships with family or peers.
Hubbard & Coie, 1994	They are well connected with peers or can influence and direct their activities effectively, regardless of whether you like them.
Rubin & Rose-Krasnor, 1992	The ability to achieve personal goals in social relationships while maintaining positive interactions over time and in different situations.
Guralnik, 1990	Young children's ability to successfully and appropriately choose and realize their interpersonal goals.
Döpfner, 1989 в Грьостер et al., 2019, 35	Available stock and skills for the appropriate use of communicative (verbal and non-verbal), cognitive and emotional behaviours for effective social interaction in a specific social context so that the behaviour in question has maximally positive and minimally negative consequences for the person and is evaluated by the environment as positive or at least as acceptable.
Foster & Ritchey, 1979	Those responses that, in a given situation, prove to be effective, or in other words, maximize the likelihood of creating, maintaining, or enhancing positive affect for the interactant.

Table 6. *Definitions of social competence.*

sources: Anne Lillvist, Anette Sandberg, Eva Björck-Äkesson, Mats Granlund, 2009, 45; CASEL (2015); Perren, Groeben, Stadelmann, and von Klitzing, 2008, 89; Döpfner, 1989 in Gröster et al., 2019, 35; Levterova, 2009, 41; Radev, 2013, 350.

In this part, four models for the development of social competence are described, which we present in more detail - contextual-ecological models, transactional models (Sameroff), social learning (Bandura); information processing models of human development (Crick and Dodge in Mejía R, Kliewer W., 2006).

Data from research on social competence conducted in Serbia, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Colombia and other countries are presented. The general conclusions from them can be highlighted in several directions: "The development of both academic and social-emotional competencies... is an indisputable fact; the important thing here is to develop strategies to achieve synergy between the two" (Bisquerra, 2003 in María Leonor Peña Julca, 2021); social competence can be a predictor of literacy skills at age 8 (B = 0.29) (Aleksic et al., 2019, 419); a solid and positive relationship between social competence and cognitive development (Karina Porciuncula de Almeida Rodrigues & al., 2021, 431); a close relationship between social competence in childhood and subsequent social performance (Ana Betina Lacunza, Norma Contini de González, 2009, 57), etc.

2.2. Social development, socialization and the development of social competence in preschool age

The support of social development, socialization and the development of social competence could be carried out in the relevant institutions/agents of socialization - the family, educational institutions and educational facilities, children's collectives - peers (Baeva, 1992), as well as through the mass media as mediators in the place of other agents of socialization (Valkanova, 2006). In all of them, the role of the adult is significant. In this part of the thesis, we outline ideas and concepts about how support is implemented. We emphasize the role of play as a socializing factor and emotional regulator. Play is a direct reflection of the socialization process. It is a kind of socializing activity in which the social relationships between people are recreated, and the human and social essence is separated from it (Elkonin in Angelova, 2010). In this part, we present the four models of game interaction (Gyurova, 2009). We focus on different types of children's games - with objects and educational toys, constructive games, creative games, games with rules, story role-playing games and others. The emphasis in this part is the support for the development of social competence in kindergartens through the primary (pedagogical situation) and additional forms of pedagogical interaction such as - forms providing motor activity such as morning gymnastics, mobile and sports games, sports entertainment and holidays; forms of entertainment - holidays; game forms such as creative, story-role and theatrical games; joint forms with parents; optional activities etc. (Hristova, 2022, 79).

In this part, we also present the potential risks of media consumption on children's social development. We comment on the socializing possibilities of the media and, more specifically,

whether children have a filter with which to distinguish reality from fantasy, such as Lipman believes adults have (Lipman in Angelov, 2016). After the analysis, we are more inclined to accept that children at preschool still need to develop well-developed skills to distinguish reality from fantasy (Montessori, 2017). We agree that the media creates a hyperreality - different from what it is (Finnegan in Danov, 2016), and we advocate the view that children do not have "the ability to critically rethink while watching" and especially "when the media is consumed for entertainment" (Peicheva, 2013, 198). This underscores the importance of media literacy in children's education.

Children's problems with screen media consumption are related, on the one hand, to the impact of the screens themselves and, on the other hand, to the media content. When children do not distinguish well between real life and fantasy experiences with screen media, as Angelov writes, they remember and carry cruelties into their real lives; aggressive behaviour of children prone to aggression increases; they want to be the "successful" characters and emulate them whether they are good or bad - the individual's identification or identification with significant others (Angelov, 2016). In the end, we tend to agree that "media constructs children's reality" (Aufderheide in Angelov, 2016), sometimes even more than adults.

Most mass communication and media researchers consider the family as a key factor in children's socialization (Jones and Gerrard). Some authors also consider the fact that media content is perceived through the value orientation of the environment - the primary group - family, relatives, etc. (Riley Model) and also that children's attitude towards mass media is related to that of parents (Schram, Lyle, Parker) (Angelov, 1994). Part of the problems mentioned above could be overcome through media pedagogy and media literacy, the role of which is explained in detail in this part of the dissertation. This highlights the crucial role of these educational approaches in addressing the challenges of media consumption.

2.3.   Social competence and national legal framework

The individual components of socialization and the development of social competence in the preschool stage, as outlined in the National Qualifications Framework and the Preschool and School Education Act, are of utmost importance in the early childhood education landscape.

In Art. 28. (2), ORDER No. 5 "competencies under para. 1, item 2 are defined as the expected results of the education, training and socialization of children for each age group by educational headers", which are seven. Two of them are related to socialization and the development of social competence - these are the educational header "Environment" and the educational header "Construction and Technologies". In the dissertation, we detail the expected results in these two educational areas related to the development of social competence and socialization. These are summarized in Figure 7.
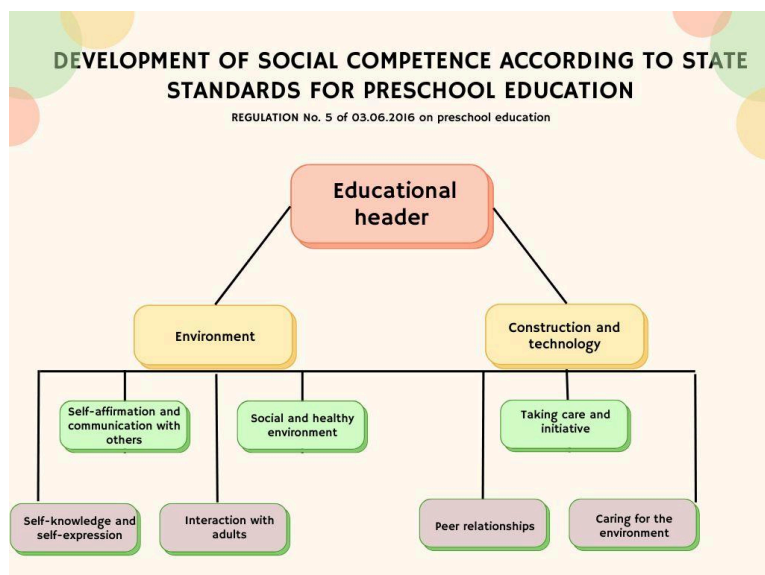
Figure 7. Development of social competence according to DOS for preschool education

The child's development and, in particular, his social development in kindergartens would be better supported to a greater extent by the principle of individualization of educational goals (Gyurov, 1999). We highlight the importance of setting "individualized goals of pedagogical interaction" because "different children learn differently" - and let's "see differences as resources, not as disadvantages or unfavourable deviations" (Baeva, 2009). In practice, however, research conducted by various authors shows "insufficient use of individualization and differentiation of pedagogical interaction" in our country (Engels-Kritidis, 2018).

In conclusion of this part, we must underscore the current lack of comprehensive and individualized programs for social-emotional learning in kindergartens, as in our country there are still 'no nationally or regionally recognized programs or interventions aimed at developing social-emotional skills, although there are many initiatives in the country' (Eyubova, 2022, 130).

2.4. Social development and social competence of 5-6-year-old children.

This part outlines the specifics of social development and social competence at the end of the preschool stage. We stress that at this moment in his/her life, the child overcomes his/her egocentrism and is therefore able to socialize. This is a significant achievement, as he learns to "coordinate his point of view with that of everyone else, and not see himself as the only possible one" (Freud in Gyurov, 1999). Equally important is his ability to use and respond to socially mediated signs and symbols (Angelov, 1994), a skill that is indicative of his cognitive development and readiness for the next stage of social learning.

2.5. Social competence and Montessori pedagogy in preschool age
2.5.1. History of Montessori pedagogy in Bulgaria

The history of Montessori pedagogy in Bulgaria is a story of collaboration and shared achievement. It can be conventionally divided into five phases. The first stage (the 20s to the 40s of the 20th century) is tentatively characterized by the interest of Bulgarian educators (Prof. Dr Dimitar Katsarov, Lidiya Stoyanova, etc.) to the views of the European reformers (Terziyska, 2017). In the second stage (the 40s to the 90s of the 20th century), Montessori pedagogy was

"the object of criticism and rejection rather than objective presentation" (Ivanova, 2022). However, the educators and students stood together, united in their belief in Montessori pedagogy. The third stage (which began after the 1990s until 2008) is Montessori pedagogy, mainly applied in the form of Montessori therapy and separate courses. During the fourth stage (2008 - 2016), the first Montessori kindergartens in Bulgaria were created, which also received the status of kindergartens from the Ministry of Education and Science. The fifth stage (2016 to date) marks a new stage in the spread and professionalization of Montessori pedagogy. Montessori became the subject of research and teaching in higher education as well. During the academic year 2016-2017, in the faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts - FNIO (previous FNPP) of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" the first Montessori postgraduate qualification at a university in our country was created "Montessori pedagogy in modern society". By 2024, over 400 people have been trained in it. In 2021, the country's first Montessori master's program, "Montessori pedagogy in the digital society", was created, and the fourth batch of students is currently being trained. In 2016, 2018, and 2019, FNOI organized three international forums for innovative and Montessori education with a total participation of over 600 teachers and educational specialists. The collaborative efforts of students and teachers from SU "St. Kliment Ohridski" led to the creation of the first Montessori group in a municipal kindergarten (42 DG "Chaika") in Sofia and the first Montessori class in a municipal school in Bulgaria - 191 OU "Otets Paisiy" in Zeleznica. Currently, Montessori pedagogy is the most widespread alternative pedagogy, not only in Bulgaria but also around the world.

2.5.2. Social competence, normalization and socialization according to Montessori pedagogy

The three key interrelated elements in Montessori pedagogy are the supportive environment - the supportive adult - and the child (see Figure 8). It is important to note that the three elements are interconnected and interact continuously.
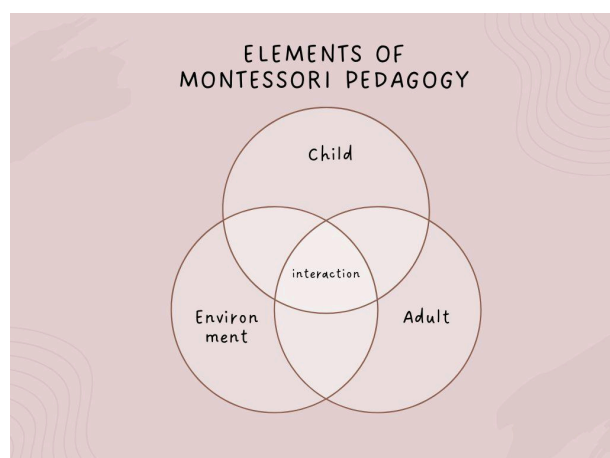

Figure 8. Elements of Montessori pedagogy: child, environment, adult

A **supportive environment** is paramount in Montessori pedagogy. It is perceived as the primary teacher, and the child develops himself through it. It provides children with development incentives through accessible and tailored materials tailored to their interests and needs, as well as didactic materials and activities distributed in areas of learning. For ages 3 to 6, the supportive environment consists of multisensory, didactic materials from the following areas: activities of everyday living, sensory development, geometry and algebra,

language and literacy, learning and understanding the world, creativity (role play, stage, art, applied arts and music).

A distinctive feature of a supportive environment is the freedom children are given within certain limits, called ground rules. Another essential feature is that the environment is built to encourage children's independence - both physical and psychological.

In Montessori pedagogy, the role of the **supportive adult** is different from that in the traditional classroom. One of his/her tasks is to create, maintain and renew a favourable environment to meet the needs and interests of the children in the group. Its second task is to connect the children with the environment by presenting the materials (presenting to the children how to work with the didactic materials). This is done in order for the children to exercise their will through concentrated work with their chosen materials, as well as to acquire knowledge and skills. We could outline the third task of the teacher in the Montessori classroom, which is to observe the children and their work. "From his scientific training, a teacher must acquire the ability and interest to observe natural phenomena. In our system, he must be passive rather than active, and his passivity must contain eager scientific curiosity and respect for the phenomenon he wishes to observe. The teacher must appreciate and understand his position as an observer" (Montessori, 2018, 71). The teacher's work is considered well done when he says, "The children are now working as if I did not exist" (Montessori, 2017, 259).

According to Montessori pedagogy, the child up to the age of 6 has an "**absorbing mind**", which is sensitive to absorbing and embodying everything from the environment in his very existence and personality. "Impressions not only penetrate the child's mind but also shape it. They are embodied in him. The child creates his own "mental muscles" by using what he finds in his environment. We have called this type of mind the absorbing mind" (Montessori, 2017, 34). To fulfill this task, the child is endowed with sensitive periods. They represent "an intense and special sensitivity in consequence of which the things around the child awaken a strong interest and such great enthusiasm that they become embodied in his very existence. The child absorbs all these impressions not with his mind but with his life" (Montessori, 2017, 32). According to Dr. Montessori, one of the most essential sensitive periods is the social aspects of life. This sensitive period is supported in the Montessori environment by having children in different age groups from 3 to 6 years. Another important aspect during the sensitive period for the social aspects of life is lessons in politeness and good manners, which are an integral part of any Montessori classroom. The fact that there is only one material of each type in the environment supports the development of social competence as children learn to wait, negotiate, share, etc. Last but not least, the specially developed materials are played within small groups.

The role of **sensitive periods**, particularly socialization and social aspects of life, is shared by the authors related to the biological theory of personality socialization - Lorenz and Hind (Valkanova, 2006). It is no coincidence that Dr. Montessori calls the child from 3 to 6 years a "**social embryo**" in contrast to the "spiritual embryo" (from 0 to 3) and the "physical embryo" (the prenatal period). Between 3 and 6 years, the child can adapt and become part of the culture to which he belongs, its language, traditions, customs, religion, attitudes, etc. This also explains

the perfect adaptability of children to any culture, place, region, climate and social relations and habits. According to Montessori pedagogy, the child up to the age of 6 has an "absorbing mind", which is sensitive to absorbing and embodying everything from the environment in his very existence and personality. "Impressions not only penetrate the child's mind but also shape it. They are embodied in him. The child creates his own "mental muscles" by using what he finds in his environment. We have called this type of mind the absorbing mind" (Montessori, 2017, 34). To fulfil this task, the child is endowed with sensitive periods. They represent "an intense and special sensitivity in consequence of which the things around the child awaken a strong interest and such great enthusiasm that they become embodied in his very existence. The child absorbs all these impressions not with his mind but with his life" (Montessori, 2017, 32). According to Dr. Montessori, one of the most essential sensitive periods is the social aspects of life. This sensitive period is supported in the Montessori environment by having children in different age groups from 3 to 6 years. Another important aspect during the sensitive period for the social aspects of life is lessons in politeness and good manners, which are an integral part of any Montessori classroom. The fact that there is only one material of each type in the environment supports the development of social competence as children learn to wait, negotiate, share, etc. Last but not least, the specially developed materials are played within small groups. The role of sensitive periods, particularly socialization, is shared by the authors related to the biological theory of personality socialization - Lorenz and Hind (Valkanova, 2006).

Dr. Montessori's term' social embryo' for children from 3 to 6 years is not just a metaphor, but a profound insight into the child's development. This is the period in which the child has the ability to adapt and become part of the culture to which he belongs, its language, traditions, customs, religion, attitudes, etc. This also explains the perfect adaptability of children to any culture, place, region, climate and social relations and habits. The term' social embryo' encapsulates the child's potential to fully integrate into their social environment during this crucial period.

According to Dr. Maria Montessori, the effect of children's work in a Montessori environment is seen in creating the perfect social symbiosis between children, which Dr. Montessori calls "cohesion in the social unit". This is "a unity born among children, caused by a spontaneous need, guided by an unconscious ability and animated by a social spirit, is a phenomenon that needs a name, and I call it cohesion in the social unit" (Montessori, 2017, 276 - 277).

In order to reach this phase, children in a Montessori environment develop the following five aspects, which here we could call self-development for the child - movement and work with the hands, concentration and building of the will, internal discipline, socialization and cohesion in the social unit.

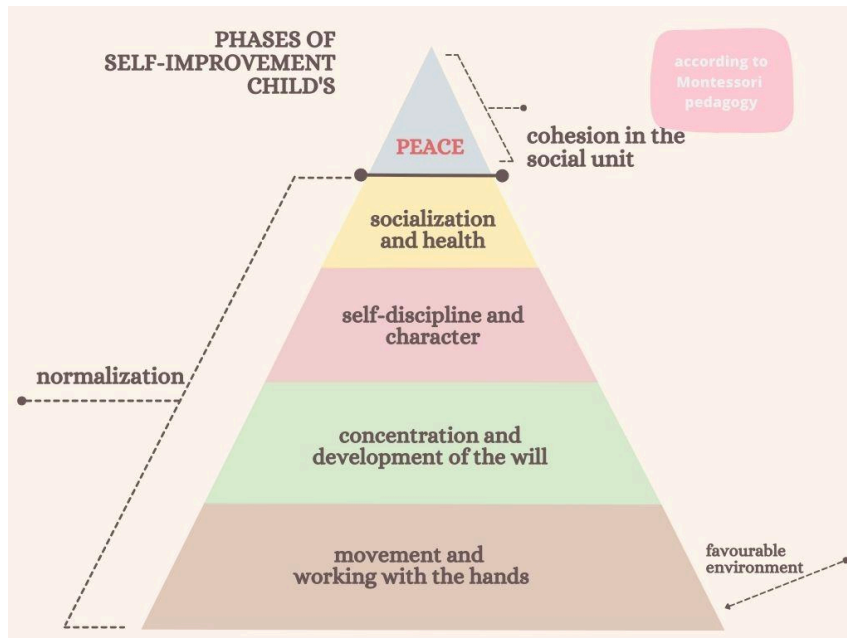**The process of normalization and relation to socialization**

Figure 9 phases of child development and social effects

The first cultivation aspect is related to movement and handwork. According to Dr Maria Montessori, who was a physician and profound researcher of the human brain and body, it is only through movement that a child unifies his thoughts and actions, harmonizes his mental and physical energies, and unites his mind and body, to create the unity of his personality "....the child moves to construct and unify his thoughts and his actions. This key opens the doors to personality development' (Montessori, 1935, 16). Therefore, in a Montessori environment, movement is an integral part of children's freedom - the freedom to move as much, where and as they see fit. This is the reason why all didactic materials are designed to include fine or gross motor movement, with a particular focus on the movements of the hand, which, according to Dr Montessori, is the organ of intelligence "a person builds himself up through work, work with the hand's si" (Montessori, 2017a, 216) and continues "we can say this: the child's intelligence can develop to a certain level without the help of the hand, but if it develops simultaneously with the hand, then the level of development that it will reach, is higher, and the child's character stronger" (Montessori, 2017, 181). Here, we would like to note the close connection that Dr Maria Montessori (Montessori, 2017), Pavlov, Sechenov, and Valon (Daskalova, 2019) make between control over movement and control over the mind and emotions, the connection between the motor analyst and all other analysts. The idea is that uncoordinated movements suggest the inability of the will to exert control over it, which, in turn, leads to the inability of the will to exert control over the mind and emotions. "Uncoordinated movements reach an internal connection that leads them to the desired actions controlled from the will" (Borisova & Arnaudova, 1999).

Coordination and refinement of movements when working with didactic materials are prerequisites for the concentration and the development of the will and the beginning of the normalization process. "Concentration is the reconstruction of the personality, bearing its ability to develop normally" (Montessori, 2019, 283) - the essential and most important goal of working with children in a Montessori environment. It is always accompanied by movement. Through concentration, the child's will is built. "The first essential quality for a child's development is concentration. It determines the foundation of his character and social behaviour" (Montessori, 2017, 263).

Concentration is the required step to building social skills, or "the result of concentration is the awakening of a social mind" (Montessori, 2017, 326). Together with the developing concentration, the teacher changes his role - the moment he notices the first signs of concentration, he begins to behave "as if he (the child) does not exist" (Montessori, 2017, 334).

Normalization, in turn, "…is the most important result of all our work" (Montessori, 2017, 242). Regarding its relationship with socialization, we can say that through this internal process called "normalization", the necessary social qualities are acquired, such as: "discipline, order, silence, obedience, moral sensitivity - everything that reveals a great ability to adapt … liveliness, self-confidence, courage, solidarity" (Montessori, 1935, 11).

The idea is that obedience, self-discipline, or internal discipline is built with willpower, which will be honed through concentration in working with didactic materials in a supportive environment. Self-discipline is a necessary condition for socialization to exist. "We say that a person is disciplined when he becomes master of himself and when, as a result, he can control himself when he has to follow some rule of life" (Montessori, 2018, 70).

Socialization is the final phase of a child's development. It can be successful only if the child has developed all the abilities described so far - to concentrate, normalize and build his will, and follow life's rules (self-discipline).

As a result, the so-called "cohesion in the social unit" is created. It represents a natural union, cooperation or so-called. "natural psychic osmosis" (Montessori, 2017, 268-269) - "this unity, born among children, caused by a spontaneous need, guided by an unconscious ability and animated by a social spirit, is a phenomenon that needs a name and I call cohesion in the social unit" (Montessori, 2017, 276). If we accept that this unity is the basis of a harmonious social society, then this would lead to the establishment of peace "if all are driven by the desire to bring honour to the group and not only to themselves, then humanity will be reborn" (Montessori, 2017, 278).

Montessori believed that this integration should be the basis for all education: "This integration of the individual with his group should be cultivated in the schools since this is the only thing we lack, and the failure and ruin of our civilization is due to this lack' (Montessori, 2017, 278).

2.5.3. **Screen media, normalization and socialization in a Montessori environment**

In this dissertation, we are examining the aspect of social competence through the lens of children's use of screen media. In this part, we go into more detail about the actual situation with children and the media in our country.

A study published by the Electronic Media Council in 2023 (Electronic Media Council, 2023) found that 59% of children who use a smartphone, tablet or computer own their electronic device (Electronic Media Council, 2023). The average time children from 0 to 2 years use a smartphone during the day is 2 hours and 36 minutes, children from 3 to 5 years - 3 hours, according to the research commissioned by CEM (ibid.). A non-random UNICEF study conducted in the period 2019 - 2020 shows that one in seven children in Bulgaria has been a victim of online bullying and harassment, especially on social networks (UNICEF, 2021). Parents need to be fully aware of the effects and defects of media content. According to some, it develops their child's social skills to the greatest extent (47% of parents). However, according to the survey, only 21% of parents think the opposite (Electronic Media Council, 2023). For these other reasons, which reflect the trend in Europe, media literacy is now the ninth essential skill that has found a place in the lifelong learning reference framework alongside language and mathematical competencies (Official Journal of the European Union, 2010/C 45 E/02, page 13).

Research on children underscores the negative effects of regular and long-term use of screen media. These effects, which can manifest in children as young as 0 to 2 years, include irritability, difficulty concentrating, delay in speech, cognitive problems, overexcited and hyperactive behaviour, aggression, escape from reality, reluctance to communicate, apathy to other activities, immobility, obesity and more health problems (Rydin, I. & Sjoberg, U., 2010, 88). This highlights the urgency of our research topic and the need for further investigation.

Thus, as Marshall McLuhan claims, sometimes we feel not only the consequences but more - the very penetration of the media into children and the fact that "all electronic devices reset the brain...Electronic media effectively changes our nervous system because both systems work similarly and are compatible; because of this, they are easily connected. Both involve the instantaneous transmission of electrical signals to create connections" (McLuhan in Doji, 2009, 327).

In this part of the dissertation, we examine normalization and socialization through Montessori pedagogy and the prism of screen media. After the analysis, we conclude that screen media mostly hinders normalization in a Montessori environment.

2.5.4. **Research on social competence and socialization in a Montessori environment**

At the end of this chapter II, the results of two scientific studies - a meta-analysis and a systematic review from 2023 are presented, which cover the leading experimental and quasi-experimental studies investigating the relationship between Montessori pedagogy and the development of social skills and social competence (see table 36a).

Year	Research	Results	Source
2023	A systematic review examines the effectiveness of Montessori education compared to traditional education in terms of academic and nonacademic outcomes. One hundred seventy-three articles were summarized for ten years back from 2012. One hundred forty-one of them were excluded, and 32 were included.	Montessori education has a significant and positive impact on both academic and nonacademic outcomes compared to traditional educational methods. The effect size for social skills was g=0.23	Randolph et al., (2023)
2023	Meta-analysis of 33 experimental and quasi-experimental studies from the USA, Asia, Europe (from 1991 to 2021)	Effect size on social skills (g=0.22)	Demangeon, A., Claudel-Valentin, S., Aubry, A., & Tazouti, Y. (2023)

Table 36a. Effect size for social skills in a Montessori environment in international research

The conclusions of the authors who publish the systematic review "The Impact of Montessori Education on Academic and Nonacademic Outcomes: A Systematic Review" (Montessori Education's Impact on Academic and Nonacademic Outcomes: A Systematic Review) are in several directions.

- Montessori education appears to impact social studies, science, creativity (g=0.26) and social skills (g=0.23), but these effects must be clarified, and further study is needed. The effect size for the pool of all nonacademic outcomes was g=0.33.
- Montessori education affects aspects of well-being such as the internal experience of school and liking school - the evidence is strong and seems reliable;
- Montessori education strongly and clearly affected mathematics, literacy, general academic ability, and executive skills (g = 0.36).

A sensitivity analysis showed robust findings favouring Montessori education (Randolph et al., 2023).

The conclusions of "A meta-analysis of the effects of Montessori education on five fields of development and learning in preschool and school-age children), published in the renowned journal Contemporary Educational Psychology, show that the effects of Montessori instruction on development and learning are positive and range from moderate to high, depending on the domain considered: academic achievement (g = 1, 10); creativity (g = 0.25); motor skills (g = 0.27); social skills (g = 0.22); cognitive abilities (g = 0.17) (Demangeon, A., Claudel-Valentin, S., Aubry, A., & Tazouti, Y., 2023).

The theoretical analysis and the data from the studies currently show us a few prerequisites to assume that there is very likely a connection between the work with 5-6-year-old children through the principles of Montessori pedagogy and the development of their social competence. If this is the case, it would give us ample grounds to propose a model for developing social competence that could, if desired, build on existing practices in the preschool stage. We chose to test this by conducting an empirical study, detailed in Chapter III.

"All higher levels of perfection
come through social life"
*(Montessori, 2017, 267).*

3. **Chapter three. Research on social competence of 5-6-year-old children in mainstream and Montessori kindergartens**
   3.1. **Relevance of the study**

In the beginning of this chapter, we present the need, relevance, concept, implementation and results of a study of social competence among 5-6-year-old children from mainstream/mass and Montessori kindergartens in Bulgaria.

3.2. **Main phases, tasks and expected results of the research**

The empirical research, a meticulous part of the overall dissertation research, was conducted within the framework of the following five main phases, each with distinct objectives and their corresponding expected results (see Figure 3). While comprehensive, we acknowledge that an empirical study could not encompass all aspects, levels, and dimensions analyzed at a theoretical or conceptual level. Hence, we have outlined its limitations in this part.

MAIN PHASES OF THE RESEARCH

on social competence of 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass kindergartens in Sofia, Bulgaria
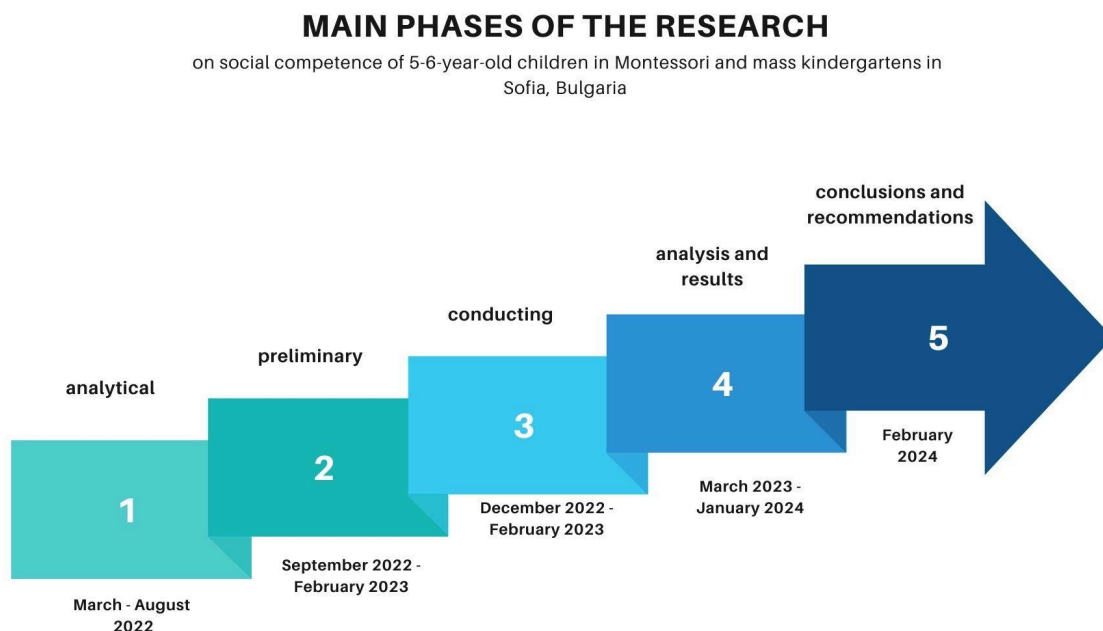
Scheme 3. Main phases of empirical research

3.3. Implementation of the main phases of the research
3.3.1. First phase - analytical

The research investigates the social competence of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori and mass kindergartens.

Tasks of the research:
- To study the social competence of children from mass kindergartens;
- To study the social competence of children from Montessori kindergartens;
- To analyze the data and derive guidelines for building a Framework of a model for the development of social competence in preschool age.

Hypothesis of the empirical study

We hypothesize that 5-6-year-old children educated in a Montessori environment through Montessori educational practices, in addition to the basic traditional ones used, have a higher degree of social competence than their peers in mass kindergartens.

The grounds for formulating and verifying such a hypothesis are as follows:

1. The supportive and inclusive Montessori educational environment, through the freedom of choice, movement, concentrated interaction, and play with the multisensory didactic materials, supports children to self-build, self-control, and "normalize" (Montessori, 2018), the natural result of which is their overall development, including their social competence.

2. Through the individual support of each child in Montessori educational practices, teachers follow the needs, interests and opportunities of children and thus assist in the implementation of their relationships with other children and adults, to support each other, to seek and find solutions together in conflict situations, contributes to the development "...of the skills to integrate thinking, feeling and behaviour to solve social tasks in the relevant context and culture" (Levterova, 2009, 41) - what is the essence of social competence.

3. The development of children's social competence in a Montessori environment is also supported by the opportunity for children to communicate and play in different age groups (from 3 to 6 years old), by the freedom to choose a partner in the activities/games and by the strategies that are provided for children to solve their conflicts or seek a friend for help.

4. By working with Montessori multisensory didactic materials in a Montessori educational environment, children learn to communicate, negotiate, share, interact, build meaningful relationships, following rules, principles and social norms. Through focused play with Montessori materials, the child's physical and mental strengths are harmonized, and this internal self-improvement process manifests itself in developing his social competence.

The present study belongs to applied research, which aims to solve real problems and questions from practice to offer immediate solutions (Johnson & Christensen, 2019, 11). In it, we base the understanding of "experience" (according to John Locke's interpretation of the source). Therefore, as the basis of our epistemological searches, we assume that our statements are based on empirical experience from observations, experiments or experiences. In other words, a research paradigm on which the current study steps is quantitative research (Guba, 1990;

Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998 in Johnson & Christensen, 2019, 30), which in our case will be based on hypothesis testing. We use the concept of determinism, which assumes that all events are conditioned/determined by one or more causes (Salmon, 2007 in Johnson & Christensen, 2019, 34).

3.3.2.   **Second phase - preliminary**

In the second phase of the research, the different tools for researching the social competence of 5-6-year-old children are studied, and to choose suitable and available research instruments. Given the formulated hypothesis, the need to choose research tools was outlined, and we decided on two instruments. The first tool is a social competence questionnaire for parents and teachers. The second is a picture test with the children with tasks for challenging situations - Challenging situations task (CST 3-6) (Denham et al., 1994).   The research instrument was provided by S. Denham to Lead Ass. Prof. Ch. Nadia Kolcheva, PhD (Department of Cognitive Science and Psychology, New Bulgarian University). She translated it into Bulgarian and adapted it for use in our country. She provided the Bulgarian language version for use for the purposes of this study.

The results of the presented empirical study have some limitations. They are also related to the fact that they refer to a sample whose characteristics may not be determinative of the characteristics of the population.

Limitation 1: The sample is not representative. However, we consider that the number of persons examined is relatively sufficient to outline initial trends (the total number of persons examined is 137 persons - 60 children, 60 teachers and 37 parents of these children). Since the persons studied must have a certain specific quality (be from a Montessori group) and be of a precisely defined age, the researchers covered almost all 5-6-year-old children who are taught in a Montessori group in this period and to which they were allowed access. In the future, we recommend conducting a representative study to verify the outlined trends and draw conclusions.

Limitation 2: Demographic information is incomplete.

Limitation 3: The choice to study in an alternative pedagogical environment and methodology (Montessori) is made by parents who, in all likelihood, have demographic, social and psychological characteristics different from parents in mainstream groups.

Limitation 4: There is no complete comparability of the results of the two sub-samples (children, Montessori teachers and parents and mass group) because due to the insufficient number of 5-6-year-old children in Montessori municipal kindergartens, it was necessary to study 5 one-third of Montessori children, teachers and parents who are from a private school;

Limitation 5: The instrument with which we examine teachers and parents of children from both groups is screening, i.e. its purpose is to identify potential risks in children's development. In the dissertation research, this was overcome, as the tool was not used as a diagnostic or evaluative tool but as a survey of adults (parents and teachers) to outline fundamental trends in the social

competence of the children they work with. The fact that the instrument has been revised and standardized for Bulgaria gives us a basis for trusting the studied items.

Limitation 6: Only two scales that measure social competence were used from the instrument with which we examined the teachers and parents of the children of both groups - therefore, there is a possibility of deviations from the standard values indicated during its standardization. For the dissertation research, a consistency check was made for the two scales with 16 items (Cronbach's alpha). Unlike the parent questionnaire, its reliability was found intact for both scales used with teachers.

Limitation 7: It is impossible to determine the exact criteria for evaluating socially acceptable behaviour. Therefore, in the study of social competence, certain limitations must be accepted on the possibility of objectivity in the observation of children's behaviour.

Limitation 8: The tool - test for social competence, conducted with children (Challenging situations task - CST 3-6) (Denham et al., 2013), has yet to be standardized for Bulgaria but has only been adapted for purposes of this dissertation work.

By conducting the present study, we aim only to outline trends, which, in the long term, we propose to be verified with a representative sample. By implementing a representative survey, many of the current study's limitations will be overcome.

This section also presents the theoretical model of the two instruments used.

The organization and conduct of the empirical part of the dissertation research went through participation in specialized training, communication and organization for the conduct of the research with the directors of kindergartens: 42 "Seagull", 48 "Brothers Grimm", "Sunny Angel", "Children's house", "Casa dei Bambini", sending and collecting informed consents from parents, etc. The researchers also went through specialized training in working with SPSS.

3.3.3. Third phase - conducting the research

In this section, we describe the organization of conducting the research in the mainstream and Montessori groups and the challenges we overcame. In the following lines, we have presented the structure of the sample.

Kinder garden	Number of children (% in the sample)	Number of children's teachers (% in the sample)	Number of parents of children (% in the sample)	Total number
42 "Seagull"/42 „Чайка"	23 (38%)	23 (38%)	14 (38%)	60 (38%)
48 The Brothers Grimm/48 „Братя Грим"	20 (33%)	20 (33%)	11 (30%)	51 (32%)

Casa dei Bambini Montessori School/ЧДГ „Монтесори къща на децата"	7 (12%)	7 (12%)	2 (5%)	16 (10%)
Children's house/ЧДГ „Детската"	6 (10%)	6 (10%)	6 (16%)	18 (11%)
"Sunny Angel"/ЧДГ „Слънчев ангел"	4 (7%)	4 (7%)	4 (11%)	12 (9%)
Total	60 (30 from Montessori and 30 from mass group)	60 (30 from Montessori and 30 from mass group)	37 (16 for Montessori children and 21 for mainstream children)	**157 (100%)**

Scheme 11. Structure of the sample

In this phase, we successfully examined - 50% of children, teachers and parents from Montessori groups and 50% of children, teachers and parents from mainstream groups, 50% girls and 50% boys, both in the general population and the two subgroups - Montessori and mainstream. The expectation that 100% of the children are from municipal kindergartens was partially fulfilled due to the need for additional 5-6-year-old children in the Montessori groups in the municipal kindergartens. Therefore, 28.3% or 17 cases of children, teachers and parents from the following Montessori private kindergartens were included in the Montessori House of Children, Sunny Angel, Children's Kindergarten sample. The total number of persons whose data were included in the study was 157, below the expected number of 180 persons. However, it was agreed in advance that the number of parents may be lower because not all of them wished to complete the questionnaire. 96.7% of examined children are aged six years and one month on average (m=73.6), the average arithmetic age of the children from the mass group is the same, and the children from the Montessori groups are on average one month younger (m =72.5) (there is one missing value).

### 3.3.4.   **Fourth phase - data analysis and results**

The researchers performed analysis and processed the data with statistical information processing software - SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics Software v.20). For the analysis, several statistical tests were performed: T-test for checking means (Ganeva, 2016, 349); Cramer's V (Ganeva, 2016, 453); Effect size (Ganeva, 2016, 412).

3.3.4.1. Results of the research with the children

According to the study data conducted with the children with a test for challenging situations - Challenging situations task (CST 3-6) Variant A (Denham et al., 1994), we obtained the following result. Chart 17 shows the total number of situations that Montessori and mainstream children indicated they would solve with one of four types of behaviour - prosocial, aggressive, crying or avoidant.

As a result of the four types of behaviour in the six situations according to the type of group - test with the children Challenging situations task (CST 3-6), Variant A we can notice that the Montessori children have a prosocial response between 4 and 5 (4.53) situations out of a total of 6 and an arithmetic mean of just over 1 (1.23) situation with an avoidant response, and aggressive and crying behaviour occupy a minimal arithmetic mean share among their responses - on average less than one situation (aggressive - 0.1; crying - 0.13).

Among the children from the mass groups, the prosocial and the avoidant responses are almost equally distributed on average between 2 and 3 situations (2.23), and again, the aggressive and crying options for solving the situation occupy a smaller share compared to the first two - on average below one situation (aggressive - 0.7; crying - 0.57), having slightly higher values of the last two reactions compared to children from the Montessori groups.
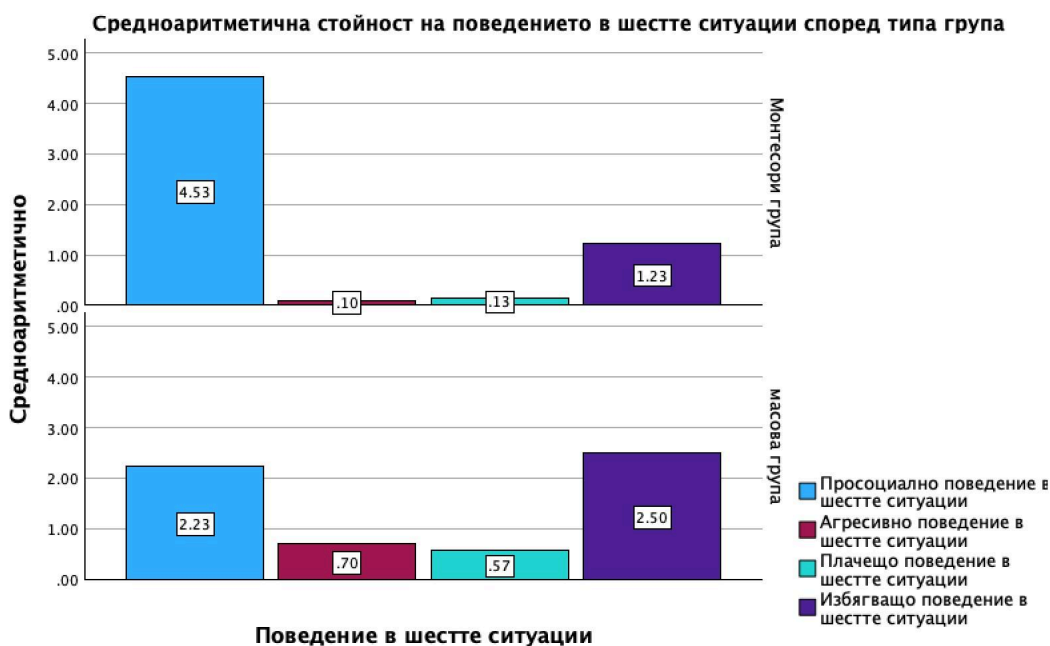
Graph 17. Average arithmetic result for the four types of behaviour in the six situations according to the type of group - test with the children Challenging situations task (CST 3-6), Option A

According to the study data conducted with the children, using a test for challenging situations - Challenging situations task (CST 3-6) (Denham et al., 1994), we obtained the following summary result.
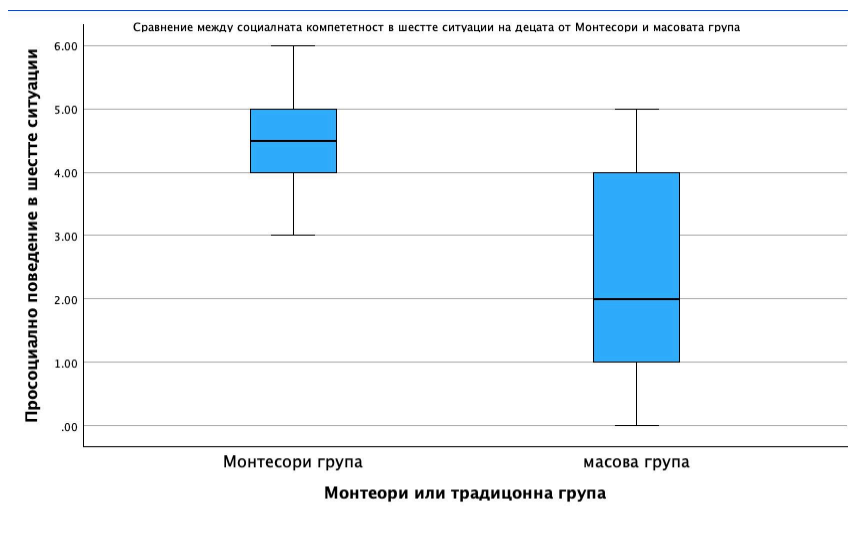
Graph 30. Box graph - test with children Challenging situations task (CST 3-6), Option A

Box plot 30 gives a relatively large amount of information about the variables (see plot 30). Each of the two distributions in Montessori and mass kindergartens for their social competence is represented "by a box and two protruding lines called whiskers. The length of the box covers 50 per cent of the observations for the variable (from 25 to 75), the bold line in the box is the median value, and the whiskers connect the box to the minimum and maximum value of the variable…any abnormal observation appears on the plot as a small circle with a corresponding identification number… An abnormal observation is any observation quite different from the others" (Ganeva, 2016, 178).

The median is 4.5 for Montessori children and 2 for mainstream children, i.e. half of the Montessori children have a total score of prosocial behaviour in the six situations that is 4.5 or more. In the mainstream children, half have a score of over and around two situations, and the other half correspondingly less. No abnormal observations are observed in the boxplot.

In the following paragraphs of the dissertation, we examine the type of behaviour/reaction (prosocial, crying, avoidant, aggressive) that the children from the two studied groups (Montessori and mainstream) chose in each of the six situations and draw conclusions about the results of the individual components of the research with the children.

3.3.4.2.   Results of the research with teachers and parents

In the analysis of the data from the parent's questionnaire and the children's teacher questionnaire, we use the median as a measure of the social competence of the children in both

groups because there are abnormal observations that would distort the arithmetic mean (mean) if we use it as a base for comparison. Median - when the observations are ordered from smallest values to most significant, "the median is the middle point in this data sequence so that half of the observations are below it and the other half are above it (Ganeva, 2016, 185).
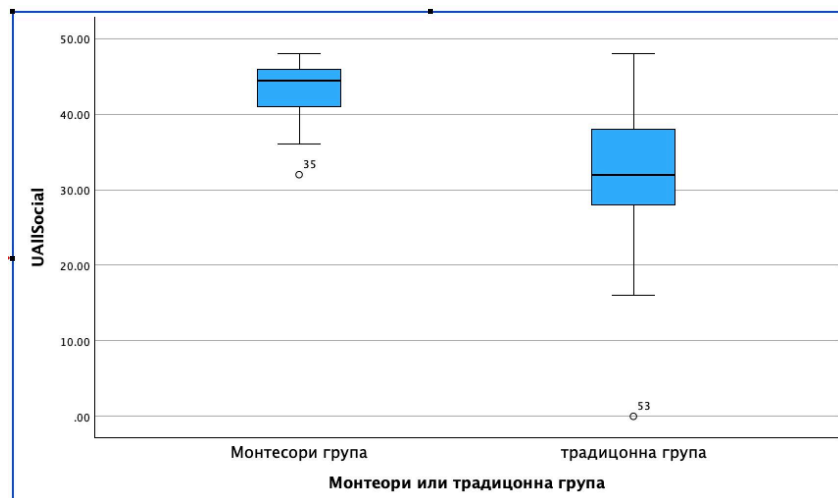

Chart 56. Boxplot on social competence - questionnaire to teachers of Montessori children and mass group

According to Montessori teachers, the level of social competence of 5-6-year-old children in Montessori and mass groups is more compact (the box is smaller) compared to the general social competence of children from mass groups (see graph 56). According to the teachers of the 5-6-year-old Montessori children, the median (the positional mean that halves the total in two) is 44.5, and according to the teachers of the children from the mainstream groups, it is 32. The medians for the two groups (Montessori and mainstream) differ by 12 points. In mass groups, the median score (32) is above the middle of the scale (24 points), i.e. It is in the third quartile, which indicates a general level of social competence above the relative. For Montessori children, the median score (44.5) is close to the maximum of 48 points/points, i.e., in the last-fourth quartile (shows the last ¼ of the scale).

The boxplot shows that, according to their teachers, the Montessori and mainstream children have the same maximum value of their social competence (48 for both groups) but a different minimum. The answers of the teachers of the 5-6-year-old Montessori children have a minimum value of 32 and for children from the mainstream groups, between 10 and 20 points. This shows a significant difference between the minimum results of the children from the two groups in favour of the children from the Montessori groups.

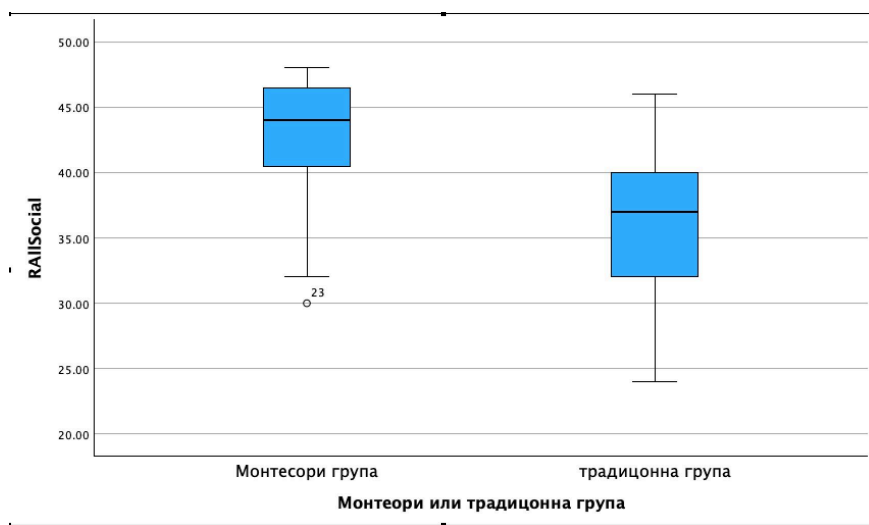Two anomalous observations are visible in this boxplot.

Chart 57. Boxplot for social competence - questionnaire to parents of Montessori children and mass group

According to the research conducted with parents on the social competence of 5-6-year-old children from both groups (mainstream and Montessori), we again observe more compact, in small boxes, than those on the graph from the test with the children (see graph 57). After analyzing the data obtained from the questionnaire of parents of 5-6-year-old children - it can be seen that the median according to parents of children who are trained in a Montessori group is close to the result of teachers - 44.25 from the questionnaire with parents and 44.44 from the questionnaire with the parents of the same children. After calculating the median of the answers of the parents of the 5-6-year-old children from the mainstream groups, it was established that it is 37, which is 5 points more than that of the teachers (the median of the answers of the teachers of the children from the mainstream groups is 32), i.e. for children from mainstream groups, the parents' assessment is 5 points higher than that of their teachers.

These results could lead us to the assumption that the parents and teachers of the children in the Montessori groups have approximately the same observations about the children's social competence. In contrast, parents of mainstream children were more optimistic about their social competence than their teachers.

When comparing the research conducted with children, teachers, and parents, it was established that the children from the Montessori groups had, on average, 7 points higher results than the children from the mainstream groups. The graph shows that, according to the parents of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori and mass groups, they have approximately the same maximum value, with a difference of 2 points (48 for Montessori children and 46 for children from mass groups) of their social competence and a more excellent value (6 points) in the difference between the minimum values of the two groups (30 for the Montessori children and 24 for the children from the mass groups). From the available data, we could conclude that the

median of the parents' answers for social competence of the 5-6-year-old children from the Montessori groups is 12 points higher than those in the mainstream groups. Only one abnormal observation is visible in this boxplot.

3.3.4.3.   Correlation coefficient and T-test

Cramer's correlation coefficient (SPSS) in the study with the teachers of the two scales is 0.826. Cramer's correlation coefficient (SPSS) in the study with parents for both scales was 0.766. Cramer's correlation coefficient (SPSS) in the study with children was 0.709. Therefore, from the three studies (with parents, teachers and children), it could be concluded that there is a very high (strength) between children's social competence and the fact that they are in a Montessori group.

The statistical test, a T-test (SPSS), performed on the data from the study with the teachers, provides a reliable measure of the difference between the means. The result, < 0.001, at the 95% confidence level, confirms the statistical significance of the difference between the two means of the Montessori and the mainstream groups, reinforcing the credibility of the research. Data from the study with the parents shows a borderline value, so no definite conclusion can be reached. The T-test (SPSS) of the research conducted with the children shows < 0.001, which, at a confidence level of 95%, shows that the difference between the two averages of the Montessori children and the mass groups' result is statistically significant.

The research findings have significant implications. Our analysis reveals a statistically significant difference in children's prosocial behaviour (t=3.758, p=0.000). This means that preschool children from Montessori kindergartens, with higher scores (M=7.667), exhibit more prosocial behaviour than children from mainstream schools (M=5.300). The two groups also differed in their scores on aggressive behavior (t=-2.374, p=0.021), with Montessori preschool children showing lower scores (M=1900) than mainstream kindergarten children (M=2967), indicating a potential benefit of Montessori education in reducing aggressive behavior.

3.3.5.   Fifth phase - conclusions and recommendations

The results obtained concerning the hypothesis allow us to confirm that 5-6-year-old children, educated in a Montessori environment through Montessori educational practices in addition to the basic traditional ones, have a higher degree of social competence than their peers in mass kindergartens.

Based on the trends identified in our empirical study, we propose that the characteristics of Montessori pedagogy could form the basis for a framework model to enhance the social competence of 5-6-year-old children. This not only provides a potential roadmap for future research but also offers practical implications for educators and policymakers in the field of early childhood education.

We use the general conclusions from the conducted empirical research to create a framework for a model to support the development of social competence of 5-6-year-old children in mass kindergartens.

We focused on Montessori pedagogy as a basis for developing a model framework for creating a supportive educational environment since the data from the conducted research show higher values of social competence of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori groups compared to children from the mainstream groups.

We use the research conclusions to develop a framework of the model for creating a supportive educational environment for preschool-age children (outlined in Chapter IV).

Trends emerged from the current research, which, in the long term, we suggest verifying by conducting a similar study with a representative sample. Therefore, many of the limitations of the present study could be overcome.

The analyses made so far and the trends initially outlined serve as a basis for creating a framework of a model of a supportive educational environment, which is described in detail in Chapter IV.

Education should be "...aid to life; education from birth
fosters a peaceful revolution and binds all in one common purpose,
drawing them to one centre.
Mothers, fathers, politicians: they all should unite in their
respect and assistance for this delicate work of building, which the
little child does in the depths of his psychological secrets, under the
tutelage of his inner powers" (Montessori, 2007, 15).

4.   Chapter IV. Model framework for creating a supportive educational environment for the development of social competence in preschool-age

Before presenting the present Model Framework for creating a supportive environment for the development of social competence, it should be noted that it has been developed but has not been implemented, nor has the effectiveness of its application been studied.

4.1.   Actuality

Bearing in mind what has been said so far about the topicality of the issue, we would like to add the parents' opinion about the development of social competence and the support of socialization in kindergartens. Parents, in turn, often have their requirements and recommendations for kindergartens, most of which are related to the need to provide more support for their children's emotional and social development. In a study conducted in 2017, every fourth parent made such suggestions: individual approaches, a committed attitude towards the child's personality (Kotseva T., Dimitrova E., Moraliyska-Nikolova S., Ilieva I., 2017). According to the data from the research with parents, the staff needs to be highly qualified and adequate, and it is also necessary to provide additional training - training for communication and conflict resolution between children, etc. (ibid). Parents expect teachers to be patient, attentive, and tolerant, to respect children,... to communicate more with children, to provide them with more activities... to limit verbal and physical aggression between children, to introduce new modern teaching methods into practice for the development of children's emotional and social intelligence and many others (ibid.). Parents desire more active participation and inclusion in the life of the kindergarten (ibid.). It is essential to consider parents' opinions when creating the Model Framework.

4.2.   Concept of the Model Framework

The present model framework outlines briefly the concept of preschool work that supports the development of social competence. The current Model Framework is primarily based on the theoretical and practical approach in the application of Montessori pedagogy. With

it, we are trying to upgrade it in the direction of modernization and bring it closer to the modern interests of children.

The Model Framework aims to build on traditional educational approaches with Montessori pedagogy. The Model borrows theoretical and practical statements and ideas from other approaches such as experience-based education, experiential learning, forest kindergartens, democratic education, etc. Subgoals, tasks, expected results, principles on which the Framework of a model is based, and target groups are formulated.

We believe that it would be appropriate in the future to test the Framework of a model in a natural environment in order to verify its effectiveness, to highlight directions for its improvement and ultimately - it could be multiplied in any kindergarten that would like it to support the development of children's social competence.

4.3. Content of the Model Framework for creating a supportive environment for the development of social competence in preschool-age
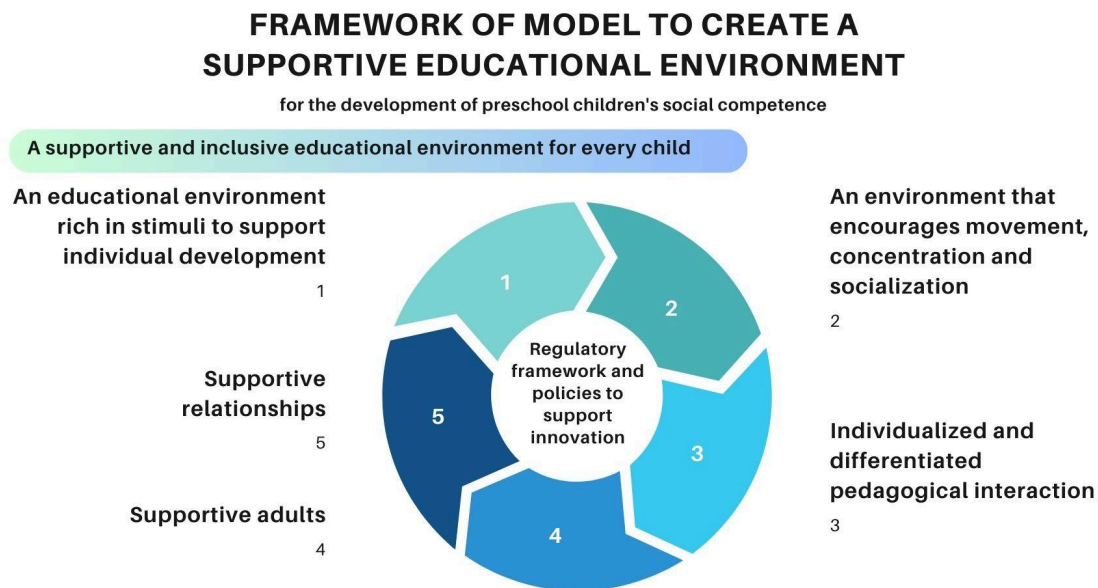
Scheme 68. A framework of a model for creating a supportive educational environment for the development of social competence of 3-6-year-old children

4.3.1. First part: An educational environment rich in stimuli and multi-sensory didactic materials that support overall development;

4.3.2. Part Two: An environment that encourages movement, concentration and socialization;

4.3.3. Third part: Individualized and differentiated pedagogical interaction;

4.3.4. Part Four: Supportive Adults;

4.3.5. Part Five: Supporting Relationships.

In this chapter, every five parts of the Model Framework are explained in detail.

In conclusion, we hope that the present Model Framework for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for every child in its five parts aims to build on traditional educational practices, and we hope that it could build on traditional educational practices in the preschool phase. Razka has the potential to contribute to increasing the quality of preschool education, as well as to the development of social competence of each child - firstly as an internal process passing through normalization, and secondly - as conditions for its development from the environment (different age groups, one material per type, opportunity at any moment for joint work/play between children, materials for play/work in pairs, etc.). As Dr Montessori states, "When he begins to respect the work of others, when he waits patiently for the object he wants instead of grabbing it from another child's hands, when he can walk around without bumping into his friends and without to advance them without turning the tables, then it organizes the forces of its will and balances its impulses and inhibitions. This behaviour prepares him for the habits of social life" (Montessori, 2020, 199). Therefore, we believe the current model framework is suitable for application in any kindergarten or centre for children from any community and social group. The framework of the model is built on the principles of Montessori pedagogy and includes the best practices applied in mass kindergartens. We would be happy to see it applied in different contexts because "the education of the little ones, especially those from three to six years of age, is important because it is the embryonic period for the formation of character and society" (Montessori, 2017, 289).

"If everyone had done the exercises of practical life,

there would have been social equality"

(Montessori, 2019, 214).

Conclusion, conclusions and recommendations for future research

In conclusion, we could summarize that through the present dissertation research, we tried to clarify the role of innovative practices (what Montessori pedagogy is) for the development of social competence of 5-6-year-old children, as well as we developed a Framework Model through which Montessori pedagogy could upgrade traditional educational practices with innovative models in the following directions:

- With a methodology that creates, maintains, updates and works in an educational environment with specially developed multisensory materials tailored to the individual interests, needs and capabilities of the children in the group, including the principles for creating materials that achieve the expected results in all educational headers. Moreover, a natural result of the children's work in a supportive environment is the development of their social competence.
- With support from teachers, they can work according to each child's pace, capabilities, and interests within the group (which is good to be significant in size).
- With support for how the adult can observe and follow the children so that he can assist each child individually in the development of his social competence.
- Support for parents on how to work with children at home to develop their social competence.

The current dissertation has a separate section with specific recommendations on how to support social competence. The first recommendation is related to an overall vision and state policies for education and care from birth to first grade. The second recommendation could be related to increasing the quality of ECEC in Bulgaria (see the analysis of data and documents in Chapter One World Bank, 2022a & World Bank, 2022b; World Economic Forum, 2019); EUROPEAN COMMISSION Brussels, 7/9/2022 COM (2022) 442 Final 2022/0263 (NLE) Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION; European Commission, 2021; Introducing a national framework for the quality of early childhood education and care, 2020; Alliance for Early Childhood Development, 2021; National Children's Network initiates lawsuit over lack of places in kindergartens, 2023). The third recommendation concerns proposals for changes in the legal framework to create innovative groups for kindergartens and nurseries that apply innovative pedagogy/methods/approaches in their entirety. Then, we come to the fourth recommendation, which is to provide funding to support innovation and measure the effect of its application. This relates to our fifth change proposal - the effective spending of the funds allocated for ECEC. Research shows that the social benefits are five and a half times greater than the costs: "A quality intervention targeting at-risk preschool children has significant and

long-lasting effects, improves social integration, reduces crime and extends learning (Esping-Andersen & Palier B., 2010, 81).

With even more hope, we wish that early childhood education and care (ECC) in Bulgaria will have an ever more outstanding and significant contribution to the "overall development" support of "intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, moral and physical development of each child and every student by his age, needs, abilities and interests", to assist in the formation of sustainable attitudes and motivation for lifelong learning (Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affair; art. 5. (1) from ZPAO); Art. 28. (1) item 1 of REGULATION No. 5 of November 30, 2015, on general education), but to ensure inclusive, fair and quality education (Goal 4 | Department of Economic and Social Affair), to assist in the fight against inequalities, as well as to support children at risk of social exclusion - to contribute to the good of society as a whole.

Practical-applied contributions of the dissertation research

1. We conducted one of the first empirical studies on social competence among 5-6-year-old children in a Montessori environment and mass kindergartens in Bulgaria (60 children, 60 teachers and 37 parents) was conducted innovatively.
2. We have analyzed the factors and possible prerequisites (through an analysis of empirical information) that lead to the development of a Model Framework for creating a supportive educational environment that develops the social competence of children between 3 and 6 years of age are outlined (see chapter four).
3. A model framework has been developed to create a supportive educational environment for the development of social competence of preschool children, enriching a traditional educational environment with Montessori practices.
4. Two research instruments were selected and adapted that could be successfully used to investigate children's social competence in both Montessori and mainstream kindergartens.
   - a questionnaire to the teachers and the parents of the children
   - test with children - challenging situations task (CST 3-6), Option A (Denham et al., 1994)
5. Recommendations for legal changes and deepening of empirical research, as long as others, in our country are outlined to improve the quality of education and support the development of social competence of children from birth to entry into primary school.

   All these contributions were realized thanks to being:
- A systematic analysis of the specifics of education and care from birth to entering first grade in our country was carried out based on a study of documents and studies of international and national organizations. The place of innovative educational practices in Bulgaria (such as Montessori pedagogy) was outlined, and the quality characteristics related to the development of social competence were identified.

- The characteristics of Montessori pedagogy have been clarified and examined in the context of its application in preschool practice in Bulgaria.
- The theoretical parameters of social competence are outlined and considered in the context of Montessori pedagogy and preschool education in our country.
- International empirical studies (meta-analyses, systematic reviews and others) on the development of social competence in Montessori and preschools were analyzed.

With this, we could conclude that the aim and objectives of the dissertation work and research have been achieved, i.e. that we were able to study the social competence of 5-6-year-old children from Montessori and mass kindergartens, as well as to propose a framework of a model for creating an educational environment for the development of social competence.

We will conclude this long-term work with the hope that Dr Maria Montessori's enormous contribution to humanity remains highly appreciated to this day: She was nominated three times for the Nobel Peace Prize, and her followers continue her work and the struggle for peace to this day in the world (The Nobel Prize Website). One of the largest Montessori schools on the planet, with 26,000 children - City Montessori School in Lucknow, India, received a UNESCO Prize for Peace Education in 2002 (UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, 2002). Graduates of Montessori kindergartens and schools are invariably supported in developing themselves as harmonious and peaceful citizens. In the name of the idea that beautiful messages of peace and harmony reach more people, the possibilities of the new media are also successfully used.

Even today, Dr. Montessori's message continues to sound relevant, stating that "the child is capable of development and gives us visible proof of the possibility of humanity becoming better. The child shows us the true process of building a human being. We have witnessed how children change profoundly by learning to love, developing their sense of order, discipline and self-control…" (Montessori, 1943). Maria Montessori leaves us the great hope that the child's self-creation will change the world and commands us to support him and follow him in the path he chooses, because "the child is both hope and promise for humanity" (Montessori, 1943), and Education 5.0 it must adapt to children to help them build themselves for "creating a more inclusive, cohesive and productive world" (Vitanova, 2023, 736).

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