

Management of Children's Participation in Preschool Education

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Abstract: Educational institutions are institutional frameworks, in which the child learns values and norms of the society, learns to socialize. The phenomenon of the concept of children's participation is its genesis in the political framework set by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, relatively less – by scientific sources, thus making the substance of the concept legally regulated from the very beginning. The topicality of the issue is determined by the need in the management guidelines based on theoretical findings, setting out how to ensure the implementation of children's participation in practice in preschool education and thus contribute to closing the gap between political decisions and educational practices. The aim of the article is to determine the directions for the management of children's participation in early childhood education, based on scientific theoretical knowledge of comprehension of the concept of children's participation and management theories in the context of early childhood education, to conduct an empirical study of the situation and to give suggestions for the management of children's participation in early childhood education.

1 INTRODUCTION


Inclusion of ever younger children in social life activities outside the family has become a trend of the modern society. A high proportion of children in Latvia from their earliest years become participants of the education system – learners. Consequently, the role and responsibility of the institutions, in the context of the study – preschool educational institutions, in the upbringing of children from early childhood increases, undertaking a large part of functions that were previously traditionally attributed to the family. At the same time educational institutions are institutional frameworks, in which the child learns values and norms of the society, learns to socialize.


Latvia is also among the countries of the European Union, where the child has a statutory right to preschool education at an early age (OECD, 2016), namely, from eighteen months of age (Saeima, 1999). These factors particularly highlight the issues of children's participation in the formal institutional context.

Participation means active, conscious and voluntary involvement of persons in decision-making and in the daily life of their community, which is one

of the basic preconditions of a democratic society (Hart, 1992). The phenomenon of the concept of children's participation is its genesis in the political framework set by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, relatively less – by scientific sources, thus making the substance of the concept legally regulated from the very beginning. Children's participation in the field of children's rights is inextricably linked to Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has become as some sort of symbol of children's participation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) highlights several aspects of children's participation: (1) the right of every child to freely express his or her views, (2) the adult's obligation to pay due attention to the child's views, (3) increasing influence of the child's views with age and maturity, (4) the right of the child to express his or her views freely, to receive and to share information.

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2 METHODOLOGIES

The aim of the study: based on the examination of the concept of children's participation, to determine the directions for the management of children's participation in preschool education, to carry out empirical study of the situation and to provide recommendations for the management of children's participation in preschool education.

2.1 Methods

Study methods: theoretical: (1) analysis of scientific theoretical literature; (2) analysis of documents. Empirical: data acquisition method – survey. Data processing and analysis methods: (1) descriptive statistics, (2) correlation analysis (Pearson correlation coefficient).

Empirical study objectives:

- to develop a measurement instrument for the study of children's participation in preschool education;
- based on the preschool education teachers' self-assessment data, to study the situation regarding the implementation of children's participation in preschool education in Latvia;
- to study the correlation of children's participation criteria and indicators with the pedagogical work experience of preschool teachers, the level of education and the number of children in preschool education groups.

2.2 Instruments

A questionnaire for preschool education teachers was developed based on the criteria and indicators set out for children's participation. The measurement instrument includes nine statements that the respondents evaluate according to the scale, as well as demographic information about the respondents – gender, age, level of education, pedagogical work experience in preschool education, as well as information on the language of instruction of the educational institution and the implemented educational programme, the age range of the learners, the number of children in preschool education groups.

The order of the statements in the questionnaire is not grouped according to criteria, but they are arranged randomly, in order not to make the hierarchical nature of the indicators within each criterion obvious and thus not to influence the responses of the teachers. The Likert scale used in the questionnaire is based on the evaluation of the frequency of each statement and allows the

respondent to choose one of the levels: (1) almost never, (2) rarely, (3) sometimes, (4) often, (5) almost always.

2.3 Participants

The study included 129 teachers working in preschool educational institutions in Riga (Latvia).

The method of descriptive statistics was applied in the analysis of the survey sample. The age analysis of the respondents was performed according to the allocated conditional age groups. All age groups are represented in the survey sample, the most significant part of the respondents (33.3%) are teachers aged 35 to 44. The study involved teachers ranging in age from 18 to 66 years. The majority of the respondents are currently acquiring or have acquired higher pedagogical education (93.8% in total), the proportion of teachers with a master's degree is small – 8 respondents (6.2%), there are no teachers with a doctor's degree among the survey respondents.

The pedagogical work experience of the respondents in preschool education ranges from 0 (the teacher works less than one year) to 46 years. The largest number of the respondents is in the groups with less than one year of pedagogical work experience in preschool education (32.6%) and 1-5 years of work experience (25.6%), while the smallest number of respondents (5.4%) is in the group with 6 to 10 years of pedagogical work experience. The large number of young teachers among the respondents is not considered to be a characteristic trend in preschool education in Riga, but rather follows from the fact that a part of the questionnaires was obtained not from the teachers in preschool education institutions, but from the teachers in higher education institution within preschool pedagogy study programmes.

Teachers also indicated the number of children in their preschool education groups. As the regulatory enactments in Latvia do not set a strict number of children in a group, it can vary greatly. The majority of the respondents (57.4%) work in groups with 17 – 20 children.

3 RESULTS

Definition of Criteria and their Indicators for Children's Participation in Preschool Education.

The scientific theoretical findings accumulated in the world in the period from 1990s, view children's participation as a multilevel and multidimensional concept. In the scientific context, these models can

rather be considered as schematic representations of the content of the children's participation concept, as they do not describe the scientifically justified interrelationships of components in structural or procedural aspects, but rather show attempts to schematize the diversity of expressions in a simplified way. One of the reasons for the above is the function of developing the created models – practical applicability and comprehensibility for practitioners of different levels, whose activities are related to ensuring the rights of the child.

One of the first attempts to describe and structure the content of the children's participation concept is the ladder of participation (Fig.1) by Roger Hart (1992).

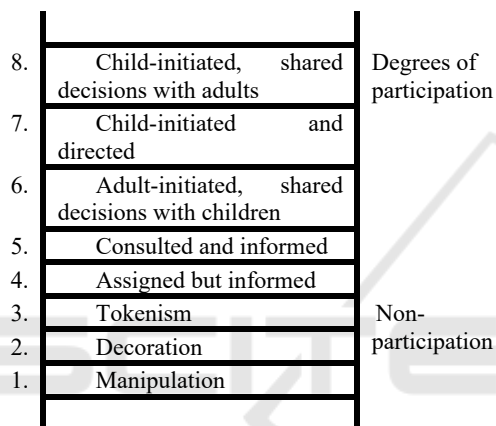


Figure 1: Ladder of participation (Hart, 1992).

Describing the ways in which children interact with adults, R. Hart (1992) views children's participation as a multilevel formation, where decision-making is the central element. From a scientific point of view, the efforts of the critics to exclude levels that do not correspond to the essence of participation seem logical, however, given the initial applicability of the concept mostly in the social and political field only, the wish of R. Hart to outline a broader context that would allow to distinguish the real participation of children from the formal one in the discussion of artificially-created children's participation and decision-making is understandable.

Fill Treseder (1997) offers a representation of the participation levels, which clearly follows from the idea of the ladder of participation of R. Hart. F. Treseder has not included R. Hart's levels of non-participation in his development, and has refused to use the hierarchical arrangement of levels, thus showing that children's participation does not have to be developed level by level in a certain order and not always it must be sought to achieve the highest degree of participation. Rather the level of participation that

best suits the needs of the situation must be chosen in each situation.

Harry Shier's (2001) development – Pathways to Participation – includes five levels: (1) Children are listened to; (2) Children are supported in expressing their views; (3) Children's views are taken into account; (4) Children are involved in decision-making processes; (5) Children share power and responsibility for decision-making. H. Shier offers not only a theoretical concept, but also a practical assessment of each level of participation, adding questions that allow to identify three "O's" – Openings, Opportunities, and Obligations. For example, at Level 1 "Children are listened to" the following questions are asked:

- Openings – Are you ready to listen to children?
- Opportunities – Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?
- Obligations – Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

Another theoretical development that should be highlighted in the preschool context is the model of participation developed by Laura Lundy (2007) (Fig.2).

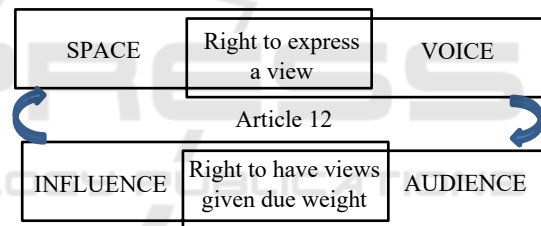


Figure 2: Model of participation (adapted from Lundy, 2007).

According to L. Lundy (2007), "voice is not enough" in children's participation, thus in addition to "Voice" there are three other categories – "Space", "Audience" and "Influence": the child can express his or her opinion (voice), a favourable environment (space) is created for the child's participation, adults listen to the child's views (audience), the child's views are taken into account (influence).

The first step in the conscious implementation of children's participation is to study the situation in the external and internal environment of the educational institution. A useful instrument in the assessment of the external environment of the educational institution is the Child Participation Assessment Tool provided by the Council of Europe (2016), the applicability of which is most important at the municipal level. While the assessment of the situation in the internal environment of the educational

institution shall be carried out in accordance with certain criteria and indicators.

Based on the analysis of the content of the Preschool Education Guidelines (Regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 716, 2018), three areas are the most important in preschool education: (1) children's participation in the creation of educational content, (2) children's participation in the creation of learning and play environment, (3) communication encouraging children's participation. The identified areas were set as the criteria for the assessment of children's participation. While the development of eligible children's participation indicators was based on the previously analysed schematic developments of children's participation (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001; Treseder, 1997).

Firstly, the characteristics of participation levels from different schemes were synthesized into a single five-step structure, creating a new hierarchy of children's participation levels in the context of preschool education (Table 1), then three of the participation levels were transformed into indicators in each criterion.

Table 1: Children's participation levels in preschool education and their genesis.

No.	Children's participation levels	Models of children's participation			
		Hart, 1992	Treseder, 1997	Shier, 2001	Lundy, 2007
1.	Children are heard and supported in expressing their views			✓	✓
2.	Children are involved in the discussion	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	Children's views are taken into account in the decision-making process	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Children initiate and manage their activities	✓	✓		
5.	Children make their own decisions and are responsible for them			✓	

The last two levels of participation were interpreted as less relevant in the formal context of

preschool education and, thus, were not included in the development of the indicators.

It is essential that the hierarchy of levels, similarly as emphasized by F. Treseder (1997), does not have to be understood as the need to consecutively implement all five levels. The hierarchy in the structure is expressed only in the gradually increasing influence of children's views on the decision-making process.

At the same time, it should be noted that in the informal context, children undeniably initiate "projects" themselves and make independent decisions from an early age, first of all – in their play, as pointed out also by R. Hart (2008).

Therefore, for the implementation of children's participation in preschool education, three criteria and three indicators for each of the criteria were set out formulating the characteristics of participation, according to the content of the certain criterion (Table 2).

Table 2: Children's participation criteria and their indicators.

Criteria	Indicators
Children's participation in curriculum development	The opinions of children are taken into account in the development of the curriculum, children together with adults are involved in making decisions about the curriculum
	Children are involved in discussing the planned curriculum
	Children are heard and supported in expressing their views on the content of learning
Children's participation in creating a learning and play environment	Children's opinions are taken into account in creating a learning and play environment, children are involved in making decisions about the learning and play environment together with adults
	Children are involved in discussing the improvement of the learning and play environment
	Children are heard and supported in expressing their views on the learning and play environment
Communication that encourages children's participation	Children's opinions are taken into account when planning daily activities, children are involved in daily decision-making together with adults
	Children are involved in discussing their own and other children's work
	Children are heard and supported in expressing their opinions on a daily basis

The developed criteria and their indicators were applied in the course of further study as a theoretical basis for the development of the teachers' questionnaire. The theoretical and practical development of the study can also serve as a useful support for the development of teachers' self-assessment questionnaires in preschool educational institutions.

Already at the stage of identifying the situation, it is important to assess the awareness of the educational institution employees of the issue of children's rights in general. Although, in accordance with the requirements of the regulatory enactments, every teacher and employee of an educational institution acquires a certain amount of professional development programme in the protection of children's rights, it is important to assess the situation in reality, not relying solely on the fulfilment of formal requirements.

As education practice of several countries shows, successful implementation of legislative provisions crucially depends on its inclusion in the regulatory enactments of a particular level of education (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2005, 2006; Compulsory School, 2018) that provides an opportunity to express and adapt the legislative provisions to the special characteristics of the specific level of education, the age of children, as well as to raise the issue in a certain target group of teachers.

3.1 Analysis of Frequency of Survey Responses

The absolute (N) and relative frequency (%) of the responses provided within the questionnaire were analysed. It was identified, which responses show the highest frequency indicators, and the high response indicators were identified in the category "Sometimes".

A conditional limit of frequency of responses – 25%, was chosen for the frequency analysis, and the results above 25% were considered high. The analysis shows that more than 25% of the respondents rate all the statements with the answer "Often", while four statements have a high number of answers "Almost always". The highest result in terms of frequency of responses (50.4%) is for the statement "I encourage children to express their opinions and accept different opinions", moreover, in the highest range – "Almost always". Also, summing up the answers in the ranges "Often" and "Almost always", the highest result (88.4%) is observed regarding this same statement.

It can be concluded that participatory work forms and methods dominate in teachers' pedagogical work, they are often used in the creation of educational

content and preschool group environment, as well as in the daily communication of children and teachers.

A large group of the respondents, who have provided a relatively neutral response "Sometimes" to a question, can be considered as a potential group to increase participation rates. A neutral, yet affirmative response may indicate a sufficiently positive attitude (i.e., activities of the said type exist in the teacher's work) and also some reasons, why these activities do not occur more often (i.e., occur only sometimes). The aim to obtain qualitative data for further study of the causes was not set out in the study, however, a high number of respondents in the range "Sometimes" in one of the statements may be the basis for identifying the direction of participation management with a potentially high efficiency. The frequency analysis showed that the frequency of the response "Sometimes" exceeds 25% in five statements, three of which meet the criterion of "Children's participation in the creation of learning and play environment", other two criteria have one statement each. Thus, the frequency analysis shows that the promotion of children's participation in the creation of the learning and play environment is the direction of participation management with the highest potential efficiency.

Grouping the responses based on the criteria (1) Children's participation in the creation of educational content, (2) Children's participation in the creation of learning and play environment, (3) Communication encouraging children's participation, assessing the distribution of responses, the response "Often" dominates in each of the criteria.

3.2 Analysis of Statistical Indicators of the Central Tendency

In the course of further study, the indicator of the central tendency – the arithmetic mean – was studied. The answers were coded: almost never – 1, rarely – 2, sometimes – 3, often – 4, almost always – 5. As a result, the central tendency indicators of the responses provided in each question were obtained (Tab. 3), which showed the highest frequency tendency in three statements, each related to its own criterion. Similar to the response frequency analysis, the highest arithmetic mean (4.36) is in the statement "I encourage children to express their opinions and accept different opinions". It is possible that the high results are determined by the applicability of the statement to all areas of preschool activities, describing a very general communication principle.

Table 3: Statistical indicators of the central tendency of the provided responses (arithmetic mean).

Statement	Indicator of the central trend
▪ I take children's suggestions into account when creating the curriculum.	4.18
▪ I encourage children to express their thoughts on what they are learning and listen to them.	3.78
▪ I encourage children to evaluate what they and other children have done.	3.60
▪ I invite children to express their views on the environment and listen to them.	3.24
▪ When creating an environment, I take into account children's suggestions, for example, about decorating rooms, choosing toys and games.	3.64
▪ I encourage children to make suggestions on how to improve the environment in the room.	4.32
▪ When planning the daily life, I take children's suggestions into account.	3.87
▪ I encourage children to discuss the content of the planned learning.	3.89
▪ I encourage children to express their views and accept different views.	4.36

3.3 Analysis of Variable Correlations

In the course of the study, a correlation study of three variables (Pearson correlation coefficient) was performed with each of the criteria. Selected variables – teachers' pedagogical work experience (length of service), level of education and number of children in the group. Although high statistical indicators were predicted, weak statistically significant results were obtained only in the correlation of teachers' pedagogical work experience with two of the criteria, i.e., "Children's participation in the creation of educational content" and "Communication encouraging children's participation" (Tab. 4).

It can be considered that the obtained results of the analysis of variable correlations are not relevant in the context of participation management, but require further studying in order to draw general conclusions.

Table 4: Correlation of teachers' pedagogical work experience with children's participation criteria.

		Children's participation in curriculum development	Children's participation in creating a learning and play environment	Communication that encourages children's participation
Teachers' experience in pedagogical work	r	190*	.014	.264**
	p	.031	.878	.002

** Significant correlation (bilateral) at the significance level $p = 0.01$

* Significant correlation (bilateral) at the significance level $p = 0.05$

Summarizing the results of the empirical study, it can be concluded that:

according to the self-assessment of preschool teachers, children's participation is characterized by high implementation rates in the field of educational content, environment and communication;

- the results obtained allow to identify the promotion of children's participation in the creation of learning and play environment as a direction of participation management with potentially the highest efficiency, but the reliability of the results is not high, considering the result of low internal coherence of the scale of the criterion "Children's participation in creation of learning and play environment" ($\alpha = 0.543$);
- the results obtained in the study are not sufficient for conclusions on the correlation of the implementation of children's participation with the number of children in the group, the teachers' pedagogical work experience and the level of education.

4 DISCUSSIONS

Comparing the studies on the opinions of preschool teachers carried out in Greece, Slovenia, Finland, Turkey and Latvia (Akyol & Erdem, 2021; Avgitidou et al., 2006; Zorec, 2015; Kangas et al., 2016; Turnšek, 2009; Turnšek & Pekkarinen, 2009), it is possible to draw general conclusions, as each study uses a different measurement instrument. However, taken as a whole, a similar tendency is observed, which confirms a positive attitude of teachers regarding the awareness and implementation of children's participation, as the finding that decision-

making has a positive effect on children's social and emotional development is dominant.

The authors of the article do not have information on the research on children's participation in the context of preschool management, but some studies (Akyol & Erdem, 2021) also confirm the need to continue the research, engaging the administrations of the institutions to develop mentoring programmes that would support participation-related teachers' practice in classroom. In surveys, the teachers assess the need of the children's participation mostly positive, but in practice it is not always given the attention it requires.

The interrelationship of children's participation with other important areas in preschool education practice are identified in the theoretical findings as interrelationships and adult roles (Bae, 2009). The potential risks, when implementing children's participation in the preschool context are also identified, mainly noting excessive attention on formal expressions of democracy such as meetings, voting (Bae, 2009), schoolification of preschool education, approximation to methods of democracy and organizational forms characteristic of school (Clausen, 2015). It is stressed that the child in preschool should experience "moments of participation" rather than a constant involvement in participatory activities (Bae, 2009).

In the context of the children's participation, the skill to separate the adult's view, driven by the desire to act in the best interests of the child, and the child's own views becomes relevant in the teacher's work (Sommer et al., 2013). Adults, considering themselves to be more competent, often take on the role of interpreting the children's needs without consulting the children themselves, and, guided by positive intentions, are acting seemingly in the best interests of the children. These views are deeply rooted in normative pedagogy, and even in today's postmodern world, the attitude towards the child as a subject of education and cooperation partner is not exactly clear neither in scientific theoretical findings, nor in educational practice. Therefore, there is a serious risk that only seeming participation is implemented in preschool education, namely, "child's participation on the conditions of the adults" (Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010).

Considering the relevance of the studied issue in preschool educational institutions in Latvia, in 2021, the Ministry of Education and Science carried out monitoring "Children's Participation in Preschool Education", identifying the teachers' self-assessment of competences (Bērnu līdzdalība pirmsskolas izglītībā, 2021). 2419 respondents participated in the

survey, representing 741 educational institutions or 82.89% of educational institutions that implement preschool education programmes for 5-6 years old children (in Latvia – a total of 894 educational institutions). The author of the article, A. Ozola, also participated in the development of the questionnaire, supplementing the criteria with more detailed indicators, which, to a certain extent, provide instructions for teacher's activities in communication with children, in organization of the psychological and physical environment. The results of the monitoring show that children's participation in preschool education in Latvia is generally implemented consistently. Greater attention must be paid to addressing children's suggestions and complaints and empathy regarding the child's views expressed non-verbally, including in creative work. In general, it must be acknowledged that the teacher has the key role in the implementation of children's participation.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarizing the findings obtained as a result of scientific theoretical and empirical study on children's participation and its management in preschool education, conclusions have been obtained on what can serve as practical recommendations for the implementation of children's participation and its management in preschool education.

- Children's participation shall cover all the activities and processes in daily life of a child in a preschool educational institution, but the most important tasks of children's participation management at the preschool level are to promote children's participation in creation of educational content, in creation of learning and play environment and to ensure communication encouraging children's participation in an educational institution.
- Successful implementation of children's participation in preschool education is ensured by the management, based on the rights of the children:
 - purposefully promoting awareness of children's participation in society among children, teachers, parents, as well as all the parties interested at the level of the state, local governments and educational institutions;

- raising the issue of children's participation in the state-level regulatory enactments in the field of preschool education and in strategic education policy documents, as well as in internal regulatory enactments of preschool education institutions;
- creating preconditions for children's participation in creation of educational content, creation of preschool learning and play environment;
- promoting an in-depth understanding of the principles of participatory communication between teachers and children by the management team and teachers of the educational institutions and the engagement of children in the decision-making process.

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