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**PRESCHOOL TEACHERS’ BELIEFS ABOUT CHILD’S
PARTICIPATION AND ITS SUPPORT IN RUSSIAN
KINDERGARTENS**

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Abstract

The aim of our research is to study preschool teachers’ beliefs (n=40) about participation and to analyze interconnections of this data with teachers’ interaction with children and learning environment in their classrooms (n=27). Participation as a concept and the role of teachers in its implementation were conceptualized from the perspective of democratic education and cultural-historical theory. For teachers’ beliefs, the questionnaire was used. For assessment of provisions quality for participation, the tool was elaborated and validated according to the ERSI (Environment Rating Scales Institute) standards. The observed classrooms were divided into 2 clusters (“low quality” and “high quality”) according to the results of the assessment. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of teachers’ answers from each cluster was made. The main finding is that there is a gap between teacher’s beliefs about participation and the quality of provision for participation in their classrooms. All teachers understand the importance of child participation but some of them don’t support it in their classrooms. In-service training program for teachers and administration can help to shift this gap. It should include team discussions of the concept of participation with experts and reflection on the strengths and deficiencies of their practice.

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1. Introduction

The aim of ECEC is not only to provide basic provisions for children's emotional comfort and well-being but also to extend their learning possibilities, to support their creativity and initiative. Thereby, one of the key competences for preschool teachers is to support child's participation and keep balance between adult- and child-initiated activity, between child's interests and educational outcomes.

Education based on participatory approach supports development of democratic society (Day et al., 2015). It gives children the opportunity not only to express and implement their ideas but also to influence decisions about learning process and different aspects of their life (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Participative teaching supports development of collaboration, makes different points of view visible, helps to discuss and to take into account different and even opposite interests and needs, creates "the space of child's realization" (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Veraksa, 2018). Recent studies shows that children don't learn to make decisions in a moment, they need support to enhance these competences from early years, and preschool education can be the context where children's rights are recognized and respected (Kangas, 2016; Manassakis, 2020). And provisions for participation in preschool is one of the key aspects of high quality of education and at the same time one of the main challenges for preschool teachers (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2020; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

2. Problem Statement

We consider decision-making as a main criterion for participation (Correia et al., 2019; Lansdown, 2020). We argue that wider criteria – such as physical activity, involvement in activity, sense of belonging, free choice from alternatives – can't help researchers and teachers to focus on the specific provisions supporting child's participation that allow children not only to express their preferences, but also to influence on what concerns them.

We also consider participation as principle, not just as separate educational technology. By "principle" we mean that participatory practice should be regular, inclusive, consistent, universal to different educational programs, respectful and based on partnership, integrated in organizational culture (Day et al., 2015).

Researchers point out that there is a lack of real participatory practice for young children and very often participation is distorted and turns into "play in democracy", children don't have enough free time and freedom to choose materials, activity and partners, teachers are too directive (Day et al., 2015; Kangas et al., 2016; Shiyan et al., 2018). We often see in practice of Russian kindergarten kind of "sprouts of participation" (for example, children are offered to vote for something only occasionally and it's in a great contrast to daily life in the kindergarten) instead of regular real participatory practice. Though the Convention of Children's Rights emphasizes the importance of involvement of children to make decisions that concern them, a point of view that decision-making is not a "child's business" is still very popular, and participation is considered as a burden for small children (Hartoft, 2021; Hanson & Lundy, 2017; Lansdown, 2020; Lundy & O'Lynn, 2018).

Problems with the support of participation may be caused by different teacher's understandings of the concept. Recent studies show that the majority of teachers highly appreciate participation but the

concept of participation is interpreted differently. Participation is often considered as child's own activity, child's decisions in free play or independent choice supported by an adult (Broström et al., 2015). For example, from the Swedish teachers' point of view, to participate means to belong to the group (the most frequent interpretation), to listen to, to influence and to be involved (Johansson & Sandberg, 2010). There is also heterogeneity in Italian and Portugal preschool teachers' understandings of participation (Correia et al., 2020; Dusi et al., 2012). For instance, the majority of Portugal preschool teachers consider participation as the possibility to make a contribution by ideas and points of view or as the possibility to be heard and participate in community life, while only 14% of teachers consider participation as the possibility to influence decision-making (Correia et al., 2020). Analyses of studies about teacher's beliefs and understandings about participation also shows that teachers describe their practice and limits for participation differently depending on their understanding of participation; there are also conflicting data about interconnection between understanding of participation and work experience in different countries (Correia et al., 2020; Sandberg & Eriksson, 2010). We suppose that the system of pre-service and in-service teacher's training may support – or block – the implementation of participatory principle in preschool education. We see the problem in such a broad and blurred understanding of participation. As Vygotsky (1982) points out that “it's crucial how we name a fact. A mistake in the word is a mistake in understanding. The word is a theory of the denoted fact” (p. 365 in our translation). The specific understanding of psychological provisions and the model of professional competences are hidden behind each conceptualization of participation. In Russia, we meet the same problem: the word “participation” is extremely popular but the concept is not discussed broadly and can't be the tool for development of practice. There are no research papers on the Russian field about preschool teachers' understanding of participation and provisions for its development. That's why it's important to reveal different understanding and reflect on them to get shared meaning.

Recent studies also present the idea that even practitioners, who value participation, face different challenges in their practice, such as the lack of support from their centre's administration, the lack of specific competences which help to support participation, fear to overburden young children with responsibility for their decisions, the lack of knowledge about learning environment of a good quality, participatory practice and methods for involvement of early-year-old children (Dusi et al., 2012; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Analyses of the recent studies allows us to distinguish two groups of teacher's competences that support and extend child's participation in preschool. The first group includes competences for supporting “child's voice” such as observation and creating provisions for emotional comfort and well-being, free play and free choice, supporting self-expression, respectful interaction, dialogue and sense of belonging to community, interpretation of child's feelings, actions and sayings (Burger, 2017; Casey et al., 2019; Church & Bateman, 2019; Clark, 2020; Houen et al., 2016; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). The other group includes teacher's competences that can extend child's possibility to participate in decision- making such as democratic interaction, informing children about their life, teaching technics for feedback to children about their decisions and influence, for help children to experience responsibility for made decisions, extended learning and emergent curriculum (flexible planning), taking into account children's interests and ideas (Casey et al., 2019; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). There is a lack of research concerning child's ability to make decisions and

psychological provisions for child's participation in preschool age. According to Vygotsky's theory (1982), communication and social interaction are the source for development, and an adult plays a great role in a child's development by conducting and conveying cultural tools and creating provisions for development. As for participation in preschool education, Vygotsky's theory can help to reflect on the role of a preschool teacher in supporting child's decision-making and extending child's possibility to influence life in the kindergarten with their ideas and initiatives.

3. Research Questions

1. How do preschool teachers understand the concept of participation and its role in teaching and learning?
2. Do preschool teachers promote provisions for participation in their classrooms?
3. Is there any difference in teachers' beliefs about participation in classrooms with contrast quality levels of provisions for participation?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our research is to study Russian preschool teacher's beliefs about participation and to analyze the interconnections with their practice and learning environment in their kindergartens.

5. Research Methods

The research design included two methods: a structured observation of learning environment in preschool classrooms and a survey of preschool teachers' beliefs about child participation in kindergartens. The data were collected in February and the beginning of March 2020 (before pandemic and the Covid-19 lockdown).

On the 1st stage of the study structured observation was conducted in 27 classrooms (two of them are from profit sector and the rest are from non-profit, where parents can get partial or full subsidy – municipal n=23 and charity organization n=2). The program in one classroom (profit sector) is short-time (3 hours), all the rest are full-day (7-12 hours). From classrooms with full-day program, 24 of them have different programs for ordinary preschool education and 2 classrooms have unordinary program which helps children with special needs to integrate into ordinary preschool programs).

On the 2nd stage preschool teachers from these classrooms were offered to fill in the questionnaire online. There were 40 preschool teachers in the sample. All of them provided voluntary consent for participation and could withdraw from the study at any stage. Confidentiality of the participants was ensured.

All the respondents work in urban kindergartens: 38 of them – in the capital megapolis and 2 in a major city of one of the Russian Federation regions. There are three age groups of the participants: 8 teachers belong to the 20-35 age group, 27 to the 36-50 age group, and 5 to the 51-60 age group. As for their qualification, 37 teachers have teachers training diploma (4 or 5-year-long vocational education), and 3 teachers don't have. Working experience of the teachers differ from 1-3 years (6 participants, one from them is without vocational education), 4-15 years (22 participants, two of them are without teachers

training diploma), to 16-36 years (12 participants). Race or nationality dimension of teachers wasn't followed. Most of the respondents (n=25) work with children of 3– 5-year-old, 13 teachers work in classes for children of 6–7-year-old , 2 respondents – in classes for 0–3-year-old children. Almost all respondents except 6 are from municipal non-profit kindergartens, the rest are from profit sector (n=4) and non-profit charity organization (n=2).

In the study we used the following instruments:

- the environment rating scale to assess provisions for participation in preschool classrooms, which was elaborated and validated for this study (the “Provisions for child participation” scale, the PCP scale);
- the questionnaire to examine preschool teacher’s beliefs about children’s learning and participation, which was implemented earlier in some surveys (Broström et al., 2015).

For the 1st stage of the study, we elaborated PCP according Vygotsky’s theory: the environment is not the background but the source for development of a child. So, the assessment of environment, including adult-child interaction, is crucial for predicting child development. The concept of “zone of proximal development” is reflected in PCP through the gradual extension of children’s opportunities in decision-making.

The concept of participation is reflected through space, materials, adult-child interaction, the principal of curriculum construction. The scale helps to focus both – on basic provisions for emerging participation (such as “voice of child”, opportunity to choose, child authorship of pieces of work and ideas) and on provisions for child involvement into decision-making (cultural tools for its promotion).

The PCP scale promotes the ERSI (Environment Rating Scales Institute) standards. It has 14 indicators (observed situations and other distinct evidence), systemized on four levels of quality. Each indicator is scored “yes” / “no”. The item is then scored according to the level of indicators that have all or the most “yes” scores for positive levels and “no” scores for the “inadequate” level. The general quality score has the following levels: “inadequate” is equal to mean scores 1.00– 2.99; minimal, 3.00– 4.99; good, 5.00–6.99; and excellent, 7.00. The observation is conducted by one trained assessor per one group during 3 morning hours (the most active time for learning and other activities for child development).

The PCP scale was validated before the study with the methods of contrast groups and interrater reliability. The low and the high quality of learning environment clusters were divided according to the ECERS-3 scores of these classrooms (Harms et al., 2015): the benchmark for the higher quality level cluster was 3.55 for general ECERS score and 4.00 for interaction. In the field test, the PCP scale showed sufficient validity: differences in means are significant at 0.01, P- value=0.002168, interrater reliability 80%, Me=0.8, sd=1.375. Based on the confirmation of sufficient validity, these data were used for comparison with teachers’ answers on the questionnaire.

6. Findings

According to the results of observation, all the classrooms were divided into two clusters: the lower quality (the score is under 4.00) and the higher quality of provisions for child participation (the score is 4.00 and more, the maximum is 6.00). Differences between clusters in the quality of provisions

for participation are significant (P-value=1.84E-05). Average score for “low quality” cluster = 2.42 (sd=0.67, md=3, confidence interval 2.09-2.75, $\alpha=0.01$), for “high quality cluster” = 4.67 (sd=0.87, md=4, confidence interval 3.70-5.64). Qualitative analysis showed that there are such common aspects between clusters as a recognition of authorship, free choice during free play. But teachers from “low quality” in comparison with “high quality” cluster don’t provide children opportunity for free choice and expression of ideas during group activity don’t give children feedback about their influence on decision-making. Teachers from “high quality” cluster much more often give children different opportunities to express their opinion, emphasize the importance of child’s ideas and show respect to different points of view. But there are also common deficiencies for both clusters: extension of children’s possibilities to influence decision - making and spread participation beyond the borders of the classroom. There were only few classrooms with the score higher than 4, and no classrooms with the score higher than 5 (max. score=7) in the sample. The overall level of provision for participation remains rather low.

The analysis of the survey didn’t show any significant difference in preschool teacher’s beliefs about participation (Table 1). All the teachers ranked participation as a very important issue for child’s learning (rank 1 or 2 from 4).

Table 1. Preschool teacher’s beliefs about participation

Participation means... (the answers which were suggested to the respondents)	The lower quality cluster	The higher quality cluster	Significant difference (p-value)
To be a part of a group and enter into its activities together	1.548	1.333	0.360
Teachers listen to children and understand their way of thinking	1.387	1.333	0.817
To have influence on what happens	1.355	1.222	0.503
Children listen to the adults and peers	1.968	2.000	0.914
To be involved in current activities	1.710	1.556	0.648
Teachers encourage children to make their own decisions	1.323	1.222	0.619
Teachers provide the best conditions for children’s independent choices	1.484	1.222	0.467

Results of the study show that, on the one hand, Russian preschool teachers as well as their foreign colleagues value child participation but, on the other hand, in contrast to them Russian preschool teachers are more homogenous in their understanding of participation (Johansson & Sandberg, 2010). At the same time their strategies of supporting participation in classrooms are very different. We suppose that this similarity in understanding and variety in implementation of participatory principal can be explained through the fact that the concept of participation is not discussed in kindergartens’ teams. It can mean many different things for teachers. It makes the possibility for development of participatory practice restricted (Kangas et al., 2016). There is the gap between teacher’s beliefs about participation, its role in learning and the teachers’ practice in Russian kindergartens. It may be caused by the lack of reflection of this concept and impossibility to use it as a tool for development of practice.

In groups with relatively high level of provisions for participation children’s opinion and preferences are often valued, and teachers try to support children’s involvement into discussion of important issues that concern them and children’s participation in decision-making through environment

and interaction. While in groups with lower quality of provisions for participation children's opinion are asked formally and children aren't provided with the feedback about its influence; children can choose their activity only during free play time and they can make decisions only about their belongings. All these factors strictly limit child participation (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). When children everyday experience this gap between words and actions of their teacher it may lead to falsification of participation (Day et al., 2015) and negatively influence children's decision-making.

Results of our study reveal the tendency that in spite of the level of quality of environment in Russian kindergartens "the sprouts of participation" don't go beyond the classroom. We consider it as a barrier for true participation that involves the whole preschool community. According to Vygotsky's theory (1982), an adult is a mediator: a bearer of a culture of participation (ideal form of participation) who can convey (and wants to convey) it to children (Elkonin, 2016). That's why respectful interaction with the participatory adult who can make decisions, take responsibility and influence the issues concerning him/her life is a key condition for development of child participation. And thus, child participation can't be considered as isolated practice and it is grounded in wider context of participatory culture in kindergarten.

One of the strict limitations of this study is a small sample of preschool teachers and classrooms. We assessed only those classrooms whose preschool teachers gave us voluntary consent for participation in the study, it may cause the distortion of the whole picture of provisions for participation in Russian kindergartens, thus, more future research is needed. How to make organizational culture more democratic and participatory; how to develop preschool teacher's competences that support child decision-making and help children to influence their life in the kindergarten – these are also open questions and challenges for future research.

It's also a challenge for future research: team discussions of the concept of participation and reflection on strengths and deficits of practice with experts can help to shift this gap between teacher's beliefs and real practice.

7. Conclusion

The study reveals the gap between preschool teacher's beliefs about participation and its implementation in everyday practice. Participation must be considered in more complex context and social interaction within the preschool community must be taken into account. Study of organizational culture and provisions for teacher's participation in the whole preschool community, elaboration of methods to study participation and provisions for it in preschool are main challenges for future research. In-service trainings must be focused on the development of professional reflection and problematization of the concept "participation". Also, educational programs must help preschool teachers to improve their knowledge about effects of participation on child development, to get understanding of psychological provisions for development participation and develop participatory interaction with children.

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