

# Children's participation at daily routine in Slovene preschools

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**Abstract.** Since most of the children in Slovenia attend full-day programs, the daily routine represents a significant part of children's lives in preschool institution. We presents some of the findings of a research on children's participation in daily routine and play; in this paper, we focused on meals. In a study, which included 150 preschool teachers from Slovene preschools we researched their viewpoints with a questionnaire, made by ourselves. The results show that some problematic practices still exist, as insisting that children at least try the food they refused or that they must eat everything from their plate. Less than a quarter of teachers encourage children to express their desires and proposals about meals in preschool. The obstacles to changes in daily routines might be in the traditions and stereotypical beliefs of preschool teachers. We suggest that children should participate more in the organization of daily routine.

## 1 Introduction

In Slovenia there is a unitary system of early education for all preschool aged children from one year until they enter compulsory schooling at the age of 6 [1]. After Slovenia, one of the former Yugoslav republics, gained independence, a radical (paradigmatic) change of the education system was made, including the new legislation and curriculum [2]. Unlike in most other countries in Slovenia the vast majority (93%) of preschools are public, and a vast majority of children attend full-day programs [3]. The operating time is adjusted to parents' workdays, so children in preschools have four meals (breakfast, lunch and two snacks) and time for sleep or rest.

In the past, the Educational Programme for Preschool Children [4] precisely defined the objectives, contents and methods of educational work in preschools. Every attention was devoted to pre-planned and teacher-directed activities, but the daily routine, an important part of the lived curriculum, was not considered at all. The division into the planned process, led by the teacher, and care, for which the teacher's aide was responsible, characterized the preschool education in socialist period [5]. A rigid arrangement of daily activities did not allow for adapting daily routines to various needs and biorhythms of

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children [6]. In contrast, in the Curriculum for Preschools [7] a special section addresses sleep, eating and other daily activities, for which flexibility and the possibility of children's choice are recommended.

We present some findings of the research in which we studied the viewpoints and practices of preschool teachers regarding the participation of children at daily routine and play in preschools. In this article, we present selected result and interpretation connected with meals in preschool.

### **1.1 Participation of children in early childhood education**

According to the broad WHO definition, participation is »an individual involvement in a life situation« [8]. Kjörholt [9] sees the growing interest for participation in the context of international discourse about children as social actors. The concept of the necessity of children's participation materialized in opposition to the dominant practice of the past decades, when the concern for children and their optimal development was in the forefront [10].

Pascal and Bertram [11] stress the importance of participation in empowering children as learners and the benefits of children's participation in society as a whole, as well as for the development of citizenship. Moss, Clark and Kjörholt [12] agree that participation comprises of the children's rights to participate, to be listened to by adults and be taken into account. They say that participation and listening to children in preschool is a manifestation of a certain way of life that affects children's relationships as well as their individual activity. Turnšek [13] defines participation in preschool as children's involvement in creating their life in preschool. Participation also includes the decision-making that affects the ability to influence and work with adults in changing the world.

On the other hand, many researchers have concluded, that participation is not strongly practiced in preschools. The extensive international study from some more than a decade ago by Weikart, Olmsted and Montie [14] showed that in most preschool settings adult-centered education prevails, negative behaviour management approaches, and a lack of adult listening hinders child participation. Some empirical research from Nordic early childhood institutions show that the quality of participation varies among institutions and teachers [15] and that preschool teachers decide more or less on everything that takes place in preschool, ranging from the organization of work and routine to the choice of the activities [16].

In the Slovene Curriculum for Preschools [17] children's participation is not directly mentioned, even though some of curriculum principles clearly support it. In contrast with the Educational Program [18], the Curriculum for Preschools is based on the process approach, which underlines the importance of the quality of interactions and relationships among children and adults in preschools and the importance of evaluation of the educational process. One of the important principles is the allowance of individuality, choice and difference in preschool education in opposition to the group routine that was dominating the concept of preschool education in the time of socialism. We strongly advocate that the children should participate in the organization of their life in preschool and the daily routine, in particular.

### **1.2 Research about daily routine**

There is no uniform definition of a daily routine in preschool. According to High/Scope programme [19], every more or less permanent activity in the preschool is part of a daily routine. In the Slovene preschools, they are referred to as the daily schedule, of which the daily routine is considered as one of its parts. Here we chose the narrower definition of a

daily routine, in which Medved [20] includes the following components: the arrival and departure times of children, personal care, eating, rest and sleep.

As Wildenger, McIntyre, Fiese and Eckert [21] believe, routines are thought to be critical in establishing a feeling of predictability, thus enhancing the feelings of security, trust and independence in young children. However, it is appropriate to establish a balance between stability and predictability on the one hand, and to take into account the specific needs of each child and the daily changing situations in preschool, on the other hand. The structure of the day should be fixed, but flexible, and that the pace and timing of activities should possibly be adjusted to children and their individual needs [22].

There is only a limited body of research available on daily routine, and the existing ones deal mainly with the routines in the family and their association with the preschool. Millei and Gallagher [23] establish that the issue of toilet facilities and routines have very rarely been researched, and if so, it is both limited, and geared toward the medical and developmental perspective and less from educational, sociological or cultural studies' perspectives. On contrary in Slovenia, some respective research about daily routine was made.

At the end of the 1980s De Batistič [24] found out that, the daily routine was timely specified in advance, usually held for all children at the same time and in the same way. Preschool teachers paid little attention to individual differences and needs, biorhythm and desires of children. The findings of Bahovec and Kodelja [25] in 1990s were very similar: in a fifth to a quarter of preschools of that time undesirable forms of organizing everyday life were being practised, such as unreflected susceptibility to a group routine and excessive discipline.

The international research IEA Preprimary Project [26] showed that Slovenian preschools keep to relatively high routine levels and medicalised education in the form of personal care. Compared to the 14 countries, the Slovenian teachers occupy the first place in the percentage of time (32%) devoted to daily routines.

### **1.3 Research context and aims**

In the study, we researched the viewpoints of preschool teachers regarding the participation of children, and how much and in what way the children participate at daily routine and play in their preschool classes. We also wanted to find out whether the teachers' educational degree and years of service in preschool education influence their viewpoints and practice. In this article, we present selected result and interpretation connected with eating and rest or sleeping time.

## **2 Method**

### **2.1 Sample**

We included 150 educators from Slovene preschools, among them 79 (52.7%) preschool teachers and 71 (47.3 %) preschool teachers' assistants<sup>b</sup>. All of them worked in classes with children aged 3 to 6 years. A good half of respondents (57.3%) finished secondary school, a good third (35.3%) had a university degree, and only a small part finished college (4.7%) or had other degrees (2.7%).

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<sup>b</sup> From now on we will use the term »teacher« for both – preschool teacher and teacher's assistant.

## 2.2 Instruments and Techniques

We used the questionnaire made by ourselves in which we partly used questionnaires already used in previous researches. The questionnaire consisted of closed (optional) questions, and of Likert-type scales. It was pilot tested on 20 preschool teachers and corrected according to their suggestions.

Substantive validity was tested rationally and constructive validity with factor analyses. First factor explains 25.664 % of items and with five factors, 58.484% of variability can be explained.

## 2.3 Data collection and Analysis

We distributed 210 questionnaires, of which 150 (71%) were returned and completed. The data was quantitatively analysed at the level of descriptive and inferential statistics, whereby the frequency distribution (f, f %) of attributive variables was used. The factor analyses was used for testing validity and Cronbach's alpha coefficient for reliability. The data was processed using the SPSS 20.0 programme.

## 3 Results and Discussion

First, we were interested how teachers act at mealtime and if children participate or have an opportunity to choose. We also asked teachers for their viewpoints on eating in preschool. The results are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Teachers' acting at meals and participation of children

	Percentage (%)	
	YES	NO
The children can seat at the meal wherever they like.	88.7	11.3
Each child participates at the preparation for meals (e.g. takes the cutlery, napkin)	32.7	67.3
Selected children on duty are in charge for the preparation of meals.	88.7	11.3
Children can choose which food to have and which food not to have.	81.3	18.7
Children can choose how much they are going to eat.	90.0	10.0
Children can refuse a food, which they do not want to eat.	97.3	2.7
Educators insist that children should at least try the food that they refuse.	80.0	20.0
Educators insist that children should eat up all the food on their plate.	33.3	66.7
Children who have eaten all the meal are praised.	50.0	50.0
Children who have eaten fast are praised.	16.0	84.0
Children are allowed to talk during the meals.	69.3	30.7
Children can leave the table when they finish eating.	36.7	63.3
The child must ask for permission to leave the table.	68.7	31.3
Each child participates in cleaning after meal (e.g. takes away the plates and cutlery).	91.3	8.7
Selected children on duty are in charge for cleaning after the meals.	2.0	98.0
Children can drink whenever they like.	94.0	6.0
Children can take drink by themselves.	85.3	14.7
Educators change the rules and agreements about the meals according to situation.	58.0	42.0

Results in Table 1 show that preparation for meals is usually the task of selected children on duty (88.7%), but the cleaning after meals is mostly the duty of each child (91%). In a great majority of classes (90%) children can decide, how much they will eat and in the majority of classes (81.3%), what they will eat. Almost all teachers (97.3%) said that children could refuse a certain food. However, this result becomes questionable when

we consider that the majority (80 %) of teachers insist that children at least try the food they do not like to eat, and that the third of them (33.3%) want the children to eat everything they get on their plate. We can approve the viewpoint (in Table 2) of a majority of teacher (86%) who think that children need stimulation to try food at least to know how it tastes, but on our opinion the stimulation to taste certain food is not the same as insisting to eat every food on the plate. This results are similar to the findings of Batistič Zorec and Jug Došler [27], who said that the normative persistence to taste ‘at least one spoon’ of the refused food in every case, often heard and seen in preschool practice, surely is not aligned with the principle of choice in the Curriculum for preschools. We can conclude that at least quarter of teachers (24%) who think that children cannot yet decide what and how much they will eat (Table 2), do not see the children as competent persons to decide about the quality and quantity of their meals.

**Table 2.** The teacher's viewpoints on eating and drinking

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Cannot say	Agree	Completely agree
	%	%	%	%	%
Meals are social events, during which we talk one with another.	6.7	15.3	14.0	44.0	20.0
Children cannot yet decide what and how much they will eat.	25.3	40.7	10.0	19.3	4.7
Children need stimulation to try food at least to know how it tastes.	1.3	6.0	6.7	46.0	40.0
It is important that children drink so the beverage must be available all the time.	0.7	0.7	1.3	25.3	72.0

The fact that half of the teachers (50%) praise the children who eat everything, we can understand as disapproval of all the children who are picky eaters. Although fast eating is not healthy, a fifth (16%) of teachers still praise the children who first finish their meal.

We believe that meals in preschool are also social events, as they are at home, so quiet talking should be normal during the meal. As it is presented in Table 2, this is also the viewpoint of a two thirds of teachers (64%), which is similar to two-thirds (64.6%) of teachers who allow children to talk during the meals (in Table 1). The results are also similar to research made by Batistič and Jug Došler [27], who found out that a bit more teachers (77%) allow children to talk during meals. We can conclude that from quarter to third of Slovene preschool teachers do not see meals as social events.

In a great majority of classes (94%), children can drink whenever they want and in a majority (85.3 %), they can take a beverage by themselves. This result is in accordance to a great majority of teachers (97.3%) viewpoints (in Table 2) that it is important that children drink so the beverage must be available all the time. We suppose that the few, who think the children, should drink but do not practice it, have difficulties with kitchen staff who should prepare the beverage for children.

Finally, we asked teachers if they encourage children to express their desires and proposals about meals in preschool. Less than a quarter of them (23.3%) said that they do, so we must conclude that most teachers take the children’s wishes into account but the children are not really participating in the organization of meals. Turnšek [28] alerts our attention to the disparity between the freedom of choice, which means the choice between the alternatives presented by adults themselves, and participation, which means the child’s opportunity to make his/her own choices. She thinks that the first case prevails in Slovene preschools and our results are just a proof of her statement.

## 4 Conclusion

In a great majority of classes children can decide, how much they will eat and in the majority of classes, what they will eat. This coincidences with about a quarter of teachers who do not see the children as yet competent persons to decide what and how much they want to eat. As problematic, we see the result that the majority of teachers insist that children at least try the food they refuse, and that the third of them must eat everything from their plate. We think that the stimulation to taste the unknown food is not the same as insisting to try every food and that it is unacceptable that a fifth (16%) of teachers still praise the children who first finish their meal. From this and some other researches we suppose that from a quarter to third of Slovene preschool teachers do not see meals as social events. As less than a quarter of them (23.3%) encourage children to express their desires and proposals about meals in preschool, we conclude that children do not participate much in this part of daily routine.

Obstacles to changes in daily routines, which should be more thoughtful and adjusted to the individual child, can be seen in traditions and stereotypical beliefs of preschool teachers. Although students mostly do not support forcing children with eating, it seems that when they start working in preschool, many of them rather adopt the practices of their colleagues instead of taking their own decisions. The possible causes are the lack of experiences, connected with a fear to stand out among the colleagues in preschool. Our study confirmed that subjective theories of teachers are very stable and difficult to change.

We think that preschool teachers should flexibly plan the daily routines in preschool class, not only taking into account children's needs and wishes, but also encouraging children to participate in the creation of their daily events and routines. Reflection on the knowledge and preschool teacher's personal values are precondition to identifying possibilities of positive interference of even those less structured elements of child's time spent in preschool. The adults' concepts about children and educational practices in preschool class should be constantly rethought and discussed in the preschool team. We suggest that further research analyse subjective theories of professionals and search for the possibilities to change them and the practices when they are not suitable from the view of the children's rights. Through the action and evaluation research, we should also examine the children's views and suggestions about their life in preschool.

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