

**Sonja Rutar and Tina Štemberger**

# How children are manipulated and how they participate: Preschool teachers' and preschool teacher assistants' perspectives

**Abstract:** Study of the frequency and forms of participatory and non-participatory practice (manipulation) in preschools is key to learning about and becoming aware of the existing educational process. Lack of awareness of manipulation of children prevents their emancipation in the process of education. This paper addresses the occurrence of different degrees and forms of participation and non-participation in children's education. The research study included preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants from Slovenian public preschools. The findings suggest that neither extreme non-participatory practice nor extreme participatory practice occurs frequently. Future research should focus more on participation by proxy, an intermediary stage between non-participatory practice and children's participation that is difficult to identify in practice.

**Keywords:** children's rights, emancipation, participation by proxy, degrees of children's participation

UDC: 373.2

Scientific article

*Sonja Rutar, PhD, assistant professor, University of Primorska, Faculty of Education; Cankarjeva ulica 5, SI-6000 Koper, Slovenia; e-mail: sonja.rutar@pef.upr.si*

*Tina Štemberger, PhD, assistant professor, University of Primorska, Faculty of Education; Cankarjeva ulica 5, SI-6000 Koper, Slovenia; e-mail: tina.stemberger@pef.upr.si*

## Introduction

Planned, organised preschool education differs substantially among various countries and socio-cultural environments (Pomembni podatki... 2014). Therefore, how the process is conducted and its purposes and goals differ. Since the first Slovenian preschools were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, organised preschool education has been intended to serve as care for children from underprivileged socio-economic environments (Pavlič 2006). However, in addition to children care, we have always had planned education, which according to the 1884 statement of the Austro-Hungarian Imperial-Royal Ministry of Farming, it “greatly benefited children’s future behaviour” (ibid., p. 382). One-year training for future preschool teachers was organised and provided at teacher training colleges starting in 1883 (ibid.). The tradition of responsibility for preschool childcare in Slovenia was not broken during the First World War or afterwards. After the Second World War, preschool education became ‘a recognizable part of social, health and educational childcare’ (Marjanovič Umek, Fekonja Peklaj, Hočevar, and Lepičnik Vodopivec 2011). The first national preschool programme, *The Educational Programme on the Education of Preschool Children* (1979), specified the tasks of “educational and caring activities” (ibid., p. 5) as well as the content to be planned by the preschool teacher for children. The second national programme for preschool education, the *Preschool Curriculum* (1999), deliberately avoided the formulation “for children”. Thus, children became the central subject of educational activity in the programme. Despite the fundamental shift in the teacher’s and children’s roles, which occurred gradually and originated in the notion that children are always actively learning and that this activity leads to new knowledge, which constructivists (like Piaget) and social constructivists (like Vygotsky) have advocated, the conceptions of children’s role in the educational process have not been sufficiently reflected upon. Children’s role in the pedagogical process does not originate merely in the goals and principles defined by preschool programmes, but primarily in our image of the child. According to Malaguzzi (1994), this directs us as we begin to relate to children and defines how we act in our relationships with children, including how we speak to, listen to and observe children. As Woods (1995, p. 1) stated: “Our

images of children-as-learners are reflected, inevitably, in our definition of what it means to teach.”

It is clear that education has never denied children an active role in learning, even though the teacher has been responsible for the organisation of the process and adults involved in the educational process always hold the power. They cannot renounce this power, because it relates inextricably to children’s biological powerlessness to independently regulate their lives, which simultaneously implies the teachers’ responsibility. It is the absence of reflection and denial of this fact that may disable the emancipatory role of the educational process. It is in this role that power should be redistributed, which is defined by Arnstein (1969) as a precondition for true social participation. In order to fulfil this condition, we should reconceptualise the concept of the child and childhood. Children are significant agents of the construction and determination of their own social lives (Prout and James 1990) and, consequently, active agents of their own learning in relationships with their peers and adults. Adults’ role in the educational process should not be to determine what is best for children, but, when encountering children, to move away from pre-existing expectations and enter a dialogue when agreeing on the emergent curriculum and, emergent meaning making, enabling, in the words of Deborah Osberg and Gert Biesta (2008, p. 326), “the opening and closing of subjectivity”. In the emergent curriculum, which encourages the emergence of different meanings and individual conceptions, including those that are unforeseen and unpredictable, the educator’s “educational responsibility must therefore be understood in a double sense”: the teacher’s presence indicates ‘closure’ in the pedagogical process of learning and meaning making—anything else would be a neglect of learners rather than education—as well as ‘opening’, which in the emergent curriculum no longer encourages any predetermined or planned enculturation but the development of an individual (*ibid.*). Although the authors question the predetermination of the curriculum, arguing that the educator’s main responsibility is not promotion of predetermined and specifically defined meanings, but promotion of the singularity and uniqueness of each individual student, they also believe that the educational process without ‘closure’ by teachers in the emergent curriculum forces learners to discover what has already been discovered; in other words, learners find themselves “having to ‘reinvent the wheel’” (*ibid.*, p. 316).

In this paper, we argue that a dialogic relationship—in which continual opportunities arise for mutual listening, power sharing, risk taking, standpoint adoption and committed contribution by individuals to their own development and that of the learning community during learning and shared everyday life—is a characteristic of children’s participation that exceeds the loose formulation of children’s active learning in the educational process. Therefore, our research study, which included preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants in Slovenian public preschools, problematised the frequency of various degrees and forms of children’s participation and non-participation (manipulation) in education. Study of the frequency and forms of children’s non-participation (manipulation) is key for learning about and becoming aware of the existing practices of the study participants and relevant experts. It is the lack of awareness about manipulation of

children that prevents their emancipation in the process of education. The study is meant to encourage reconsideration of the ways of planning and including children in activities and of the degree of the influence that children have on the activities in the educational process.

### **From children's rights to the implementation of children's participation in education**

In the past, the conceptions of childhood and children's role in society were related mainly to the expectation that in the process of cultural transmission, children would be successfully socialised and motivated to participate in adulthood – in the existing society and in existing relationships (Nigel 2010). Conceptions of childhood define not only the mission and goals of education but also the principles of the pedagogical process. Therefore, it is challenging to align the stipulations of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989)—especially Articles 12 and 13, which state that children have the right to freely express their views in all matters affecting them—with traditional views about the mission and goals of education, which originated in the socially and culturally constructed and contextualised image of the child. This created an opportunity to re-evaluate and reconceptualise the image of the child, children's role in education and, consequently, the mission and goals of preschool education.

The sensible assertion that it is important to define what children's participation means did not come from the world of education, but from the field of children's social participation, which revealed major differences among different forms of children's participation (Hart 1992). The main subject of problematisation was the activities that children participated in, but it would be hard to say that children's contribution to them led to individuals' or groups' emancipatory subjectification. In fact, the opposite occurred; children and adolescents were frequently manipulated in projects and activities to achieve goals and purposes with which they were not familiar. Those in power and possessing information predominantly benefited from the activities. In other words, an activity in which children are active and cooperative does not in itself indicate that children are participating in their education.

Practices that can be described as non-participatory and manipulative were first described by Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992). Arnstein (1969) suggests that these practices can be classified as (1) manipulation or (2) therapy. Neither aims to enable individuals to participate or have any actual influence on the programme; they enable those in power to 'educate' or 'cure' participants in order to change their perspective rather than changing the social conditions that lead to the pathology (Arnstein 1969). In other words, therapeutic attempts may be made to alter the behaviour of children whose behaviour may be the consequence of inadequate living conditions, poverty or unsuitable pedagogical practice and approaches in their preschool group.

When defining non-participatory practice, Hart (1992) refers to situations that occur frequently in broader society and the educational environment, including the

preschool period: (1) manipulation, (2) decoration and (3) tokenism. Manipulation in the preschool period occurs in activities in which children participate but have no understanding of their own actions. Decoration occurs when children participate in activities simply for the sake of variety, and tokenism occurs when children have no choice about the subject or style of participation (i.e. their voice is only superficial) (Hart 1992).

The least frequently examined and reflected form of practice is so-called *participation by proxy* (Rutar 2006, 2015), which is best defined as an intermediary stage between non-participatory and participatory practice. The activities that fit this definition typically profess to be part of a child-centred curriculum, which Katz (1992 in Bredekamp and Rosegrant 1993) defines as 'child sensitive'. Its goal is "to help children achieve optimum developmental potential so as to be fully prepared to participate as citizens of a democracy" (Bredekamp and Rosegrant 1993, p. 36). However, *participation by proxy* is not explicit about children's direct influence on decision-making; rather, it accentuates planning and organising activities 'with children in mind', employing adults' expertise and curricular decisions that may, indeed, be wholly developmentally justified and culturally appropriate. Participation by proxy can be problematic for the development of children's autonomy and responsibility because, although children are active in their education and the activities can be very interesting (and developmentally and culturally appropriate), decisions regarding the purpose, goals, content and process of education are made by power-holding adults. Children have no direct voice in planning, implementing and evaluating such activities, and thereby the opportunity for children's self-expression, reflection on the suitability of their ideas, decisions, actions and acceptance of responsibility is lost.

To define practices characterised by children's participation in the pedagogical process, we employ three different degrees of participation, as proposed by Lansdown (2005). She ranks them, from lowest to highest, as follows: (1) consultative processes, which take place when adults consult children after recognising that children have views and experiences related to the matters that affect them; (2) participatory processes, in which children are actively involved in the planning, implementation, assessment and evaluation of projects, programmes or research activities, and (3) self-initiated processes, in which children themselves identify issues of concern and take action and then adults help realise the actions (Lansdown 2005).

It is especially crucial in the educational process to ensure children's participation in educational programmes and curriculums and the organisation of shared life at the level of preschool groups and the broader community. Indeed, research shows that schools/preschools in which children participate in decision-making to improve educational opportunities and conditions feature better relationships between adults and children and more effective learning environments (Davies and Kirkpatrick 2000). Participation empowers children to learn, make choices, express ideas and views, develop a positive self-image (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2013), present their perspectives and make sense of the world. Kangas, Ojala, and Venninen (2015) assert that activities involving discussion, negotiation and suggestions in interaction with others are essential for children's self-regulatory learning.

## **The empirical research study of preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants**

### *The research problem*

We will present our study, which examined:

- how frequently preschool children participated in planning, implementation and evaluation of the pedagogical process, according to the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants;
- how frequently preschool children participated in structural organisation of education and cooperated with the environment, according to the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants;
- how frequently non-participatory practice occurred during planning, implementation and evaluation of the pedagogical process, according to the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants and
- whether there were any differences in preschool teachers' and preschool teacher assistants' assessments of the frequency of participation and non-participation.

### *Methodology*

In our study a descriptive and non-experimental method of pedagogical research was employed (Sagadin 1993).

### *The sample*

The study was based on a convenience sample of 199 respondents, including 151 (75.9%) preschool teachers and 48 (24.1%) preschool teacher assistants employed in Slovenian public preschools. For inferential statistics, the studied sample is a simple random sample from a hypothetical population (Čagran 2004; Sagadin 2009). On average, the respondents had worked in education for 14.05 years ( $M = 14.05$ ,  $SD = 12.73$ ).

### *Procedure*

We collected data using a questionnaire consisting of three sections. The first section consisted of two questions about demographics (workplace, length of service). The second section comprised seven statements about participatory and non-participatory practices related to planning, implementing and evaluating the pedagogical process of preschool education. The respondents used a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often) to assess the frequency of the practices. The last section included five statements related to participatory practices at the level of structural organisation and cooperation with the environment. Here, too, the respondents used a scale from 1 to 5 to assess the frequency of the practices. The validity of the questionnaire was tested with factor analysis, which demonstrated that the first of the three obtained factors explained 36.44% of the variance, which is above the

20.0% and thus indicates that the construct validity of the scale is appropriate. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested with the method of internal consistency. Cronbach's coefficient alpha ( $\alpha = 0.760$ ) revealed that the reliability was satisfactory. The objectivity of the instrument was ensured with the use of the five-point numerical evaluation scale. Further on, objectivity was assured during data collection by providing unified, unambiguous and clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire as well as by giving respondents the opportunity to complete the questionnaire individually.

### *Data analysis*

The data was processed with descriptive and inferential statistics. Basic descriptive statistics was used for each of the statements (f, f%), and we employed the non-parametric Mann–Whitney test to establish whether there were any significant differences in the preschool teachers' and preschool teacher assistants' assessments of the frequencies of individual (non)participatory practices.

### *Results and interpretation*

First, we would like to present the findings of the basic descriptive statistics relating to individual practices, including:

- children's participation in planning, implementation and evaluation of the process;
- children's participation in the structural organisation of the process and cooperation with the environment; and
- non-participatory practices in the educational process at the level of planning, implementing and evaluating processes.

Below are the findings that describe differences in the frequency assessments provided by the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants.

### *Assessments of the frequency of children's participation at the level of planning, implementing and evaluating processes*

The statements, together with descriptions of participatory practice, provided in the questionnaire ranged from the least to most structured expectations of processes for children's participation. The first statement offered the least structured process of involving children in planning, the second and third statements defined the process in which an agreed plan (second statement), evaluation and reflection (third statement) became evident, as recorded by the teacher with the children, thereby allowing children to return to the statement by themselves, together with other children and with teachers to speak again about the plans, initiatives and reflections. The fourth statement defined the highest possible form of participation.

This form assumes that educators will listen to children’s initiatives, which typically cannot be realised by children themselves for a number of different reasons (developmental limitations, knowledge, experience, etc.) but can be more easily realised in the pedagogical process together with adults. In such a situation, educators share power with children in the emergent curriculum. Through such actions, stimuli and learning experiences in *the zone of proximal development*, according to Vygotsky’s theory (1986), educators contribute to faster child development.

Statement	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Very often		Total	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
1. Children participate in planning events and activities.	4	2.0	14	7.1	45	22.7	81	40.9	54	27.3	198	100.0
2. Children participate in planning, and the plans are recorded together with children so they are visible afterwards (posters, etc.).	3	1.5	33	16.6	56	28.1	59	29.7	48	24.1	199	100.0
3. Children participate in evaluation and reflection, which are recorded together with children so they are visible afterwards (posters, books, etc.).	5	2.5	41	20.6	58	29.2	59	29.6	36	18.1	199	100.0
4. Children participate in planning and implementation of content suggested by children that they cannot realise on their own due to a lack of knowledge, power or information (projects, etc.).	5	2.5	34	17.1	79	39.7	59	29.6	22	11.1	199	100.0

Table 1: The frequency (f) and percentage (f%) of participatory practices at the level of planning, implementing and evaluating processes, as assessed by preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants

As Table 1 shows, the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants mostly stated that children often (40.9%) or very often (27.3%) participated in planning events and activities. Some (22.7%) said that children sometimes participated in planning activities, and a smaller share reported that children rarely (7.1%) or never (2.0%) participated in planning preschool activities. Compared to participation in planning, children less frequently participated in recording the plans to make them visible afterwards. In total, 29.7% of respondents reported that children were included recording and 28.1% reported that children were included sometimes. Smaller shares replied that records of planning were prepared very often (24.1%), rarely (16.6%) and never (1.5%).

Regarding participation in evaluation, reflection and recording, the same share of preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants said the practice sometimes (29.2%) or often (29.6%) took place. Some educators reported that children rarely (20.6%) participated in evaluation and reflection, and a similar share reported that children participated very often (18.1%). Only 2.5% of respondents said that children never participated in such activities.



Most respondents (39.7%) asserted that children sometimes participated in planning and implementing content suggested by children that they cannot realise on their own due to a lack of knowledge, power, information and so on. Some reported that this occurred often (29.6%), and some stated that children's ideas were rarely taken into account (17.1%). Significantly fewer respondents said this practice took place very often (11.1%) or not at all (2.5%).

We assume that children often participate in planning, but the assessed frequency of joint evaluation and reflection—a shared record to enable children and educators to gain metacognitive awareness, make planning changes and learn—is significantly lower. The respondents' assessments suggest that pedagogical practice is still dominated by the participatory processes of children's active involvement in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects, programmes or research activities, in line with Lansdown (2005). Self-initiated processes in which children themselves identify issues of concern, take action and call upon adults to help them realise these actions are less frequent.

#### *Assessments of the frequency of children's participation in the structural organisation of the process and cooperation with the environment*

Starting from the assumption that, in the educational process, it is important to ensure children's participation in the programme and curriculum as well as the organisation of shared life, we examined how frequently children were able to influence changes at the level of the preschool group, preschool and broader environment. The first three statements concerned the possibility of influencing changes at the level of the preschool group, the fourth concerned the possibility of influencing changes at the level of the preschool and the fifth concerned the possibility of influencing changes in the local environment.

Statement	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Very often		Total	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
Children can influence changes:												
1. in the preschool group, regarding routine	6	3.0	46	23.1	66	33.2	59	29.6	22	11.1	199	100.0
2. in the preschool group, regarding space organisation	5	2.6	28	14.1	83	41.9	48	24.2	34	17.2	198	100.0
3. in the preschool group, regarding cooperation with families and the local environment	11	5.6	59	30.1	79	40.3	34	17.4	13	6.6	196	100.0
4. at the preschool level, regarding playground arrangement and organisational changes	48	24.2	73	36.9	52	26.3	16	8.1	9	4.5	198	100.0
5. in the local environment	102	51.8	64	32.5	26	13.2	5	2.5	0	0	197	100.0

*Table 2: The frequency (f) and percentage (f%) of participatory practices at the level of the structural organisation of the process and cooperation with the environment, as assessed by the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants*

The results presented in Table 2 demonstrate the areas in which children were most likely to be able to influence changes. The preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants stated that children were most able to influence changes related to the organisation of space in the preschool group: 41.9% said that children sometimes had this possibility, 24.2% said it often happened and 17.2% stated that the practice occurred very often. Children were thought to be somewhat less likely to be able to influence changes to daily routine: 23.1% of the participants said it was a rare practice, 33.2% reported that it happened sometimes, 29.6% said it happened often and 11.1% said it occurred very often. Subsequently, we found that children have less ability to influence cooperation with families and the local environment; according to 30.1% of the respondents in our study, this only rarely occurred, 40.3% said it happened sometimes and 17.4% said that children often had such influence.

Children had even less chance to influence changes at the level of the preschool (playground, organisation) and the local environment. As many as 24.2% of respondents assessed that children never had the ability to influence changes at the level of the preschool, 36.9% reported that they rarely had this opportunity and 26.3% believed that it occurred only sometimes.

As expected, children had the least possibility of influencing changes in the local environment. More than half of the respondents (51.8%) reported that children did not have this possibility at all, 32.5% stated it happened rarely and 13.2% said it sometimes occurred. Interestingly, none of the respondents said the practice occurred very often.

The findings suggest that children in preschool institutions were preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants participated in our study, had the most chance of influencing changes to the structural organisation of the process in the areas and issues for which the preschool teachers and teacher assistants are responsible, that is, at the level of the preschool group. It seems that they also had a degree of influence on preschool-level changes, but they had almost no impact on changes in the broader environment. We assume that educators can guarantee children's participation at the structural, organisational level as part of their responsibilities for the preschool group. However, it remains unexplained why children have no influence on changes that go beyond the preschool group level, that is, the teacher's direct responsibilities.

#### *Assessments of the frequency of non-participatory practices in the educational process at the level of planning, implementing and evaluating processes*

The statements that defined non-participatory practices described children's participation in activities in which they served as *decoration*, in which they were present but did not know what the goals or purposes of their actions were (*manipulation*) and in which they participated by proxy. These three forms of children's participation are not often reflected upon, an assumption that was confirmed in informal contact with the respondents after the study. They said that the statements they read and thought about were an opportunity for them to learn and reflect on their own practice.

Statement	Never		Rarely		Sometimes		Often		Very often		Total	
	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	f	f%
1. Children serve the function of decoration.	57	28.6	64	32.2	57	28.6	19	9.5	2	1.0	199	100.0
2. Children are manipulated. They are present at events and asked about their opinion, but they do not know what the aim of the action is or why they are participating.	51	25.8	67	33.8	57	28.8	21	10.6	2	1.0	198	100.0
3. Plans are developed without asking children about their views or ideas. Plans are worked out 'with children in mind', taking into account children's development and interests.	9	4.5	38	19.2	73	36.9	54	27.3	24	12.1	198	100.0

Table 3: The frequency (f) and percentage (f%) of non-participatory practices at the level of planning, implementing and evaluating the process, as assessed by the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants

As shown in Table 3, similar shares of respondents believed children rarely (32.2%), sometimes (28.6%) and never (28.6%) served as decoration. Far fewer thought that children often (9.5%) or very often (1.0%) served as decoration.

Likewise, similar shares of preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants assessed that children were manipulated rarely (33.8%), sometimes (28.8%) and never (25.8%), while 10.6% of the respondents stated that children were often manipulated and 1.0% said it happened very often.

Most preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants reported that plans were worked out without asking about children's opinions but 'with children in mind' sometimes (36.9%), with fewer saying it occurred often (27.3%) or rarely (19.2%). Fewer said the practice happened very often (12.1%) or that it did not happen at all (4.5%).

Our research findings imply that the most extreme forms of non-participatory practice only rarely occur. However, the respondents assessed that non-participatory practices that may appear to be participatory, such as participation by proxy, often take place (i.e. 'Plans are developed without asking children about their views or ideas' and 'Plans are worked out "with children in mind", taking into account children's development and interests'). The latter form of non-participatory practice is hardly ever reflected upon as planned activities can usually be justified by developmental appropriateness and consideration of children's interests. The domineering educator's perspective regarding the suitability of a practice or activity for children can only be relativised through a complete shift in how the process is planned to actively include children in planning; listen to, take into account and integrate into decisions their suggestions, views and opinions; and relate this to curricular goals and content. Adequate reflection on this form of non-participatory

practice may be prevented by the fact that children, when taking part in activities planned in this way (i.e. with children in mind and consideration of their interests), are very active. The activities are likely to be interesting, but they are not the consequence of children’s direct engagement; the activities do not reflect their views or attempts at realising their own or others’ ideas, which may prevent them from developing and taking on responsibility. In activities planned ‘with children in mind’ (i.e. participation by proxy), children remain dependent on the conceptual and content leadership of adults, who appear to know what is meaningful and good for children and their learning and development.

*Differences between preschool teachers’ and preschool teacher assistants’ assessments of the frequency of participatory and non-participatory practices<sup>1</sup>*

Preschool teachers are directly responsible for the quality of processes in the preschool group, although preschool teacher assistants are present and participate in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the programme. We assumed the assessments provided by the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants regarding the frequency and degree of participative practices would differ. Therefore, we identified any possible differences.

Statement	Position	n		U	2P
Children participate in planning and implementation of content suggested by children that they cannot realise on their own due to a lack of knowledge, power or information (projects, etc.).	Preschool teacher	151	104.36	2721.00	0.013
	Preschool teacher assistant	48	81.89		
Children participate in planning events and activities.	Preschool teacher	150	104.84	2799.00	0.014
	Preschool teacher assistant	48	82.81		
Children in the preschool group can influence the organisation of space.	Preschool teacher	150	102.77	2866.00	0.048
	Preschool teacher assistant	48	84.98		

*Table 4: The results of the Mann–Whitney test of differences in assessments by the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants regarding the frequency of participatory practices*

The results of the Mann–Whitney tests reveal that there were statistically significant differences between the preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants in their assessments of the frequency of (1) including children in planning and implementation of the content suggested by children that they cannot realise on their own due to a lack of knowledge, power or information (U = 2721.00, 2P = 0.013); (2) including children in planning events and activities (U = 2799.000, 2P = 0.014) and (3) enabling children to influence the organisation of space in the

<sup>1</sup> Only results for which the Mann–Whitney test showed statistically significant differences between the assessments given by the preschool teachers and those by the preschool teacher assistants are shown here.

preschool group ( $U = 2866.000$ ,  $2P = 0.048$ ). For all three statements, the preschool teacher assistants—compared to the preschool teachers—provided statistically significantly lower assessments of the frequency of the listed participatory practices. They were most critical about the highest degree of participation, where children themselves identify issues of concern, take action and call upon adults to help them realise processes. As seen in Table 1, all the respondents stated that the highest degree of participation was rare. However, the preschool teacher assistants reported an even lower frequency of this practice than the preschool teachers. We conclude that preschool teacher assistants have more opportunities to stand back and be more critical of existing practices. Although preschool teachers are directly responsible for the quality of processes, their continual and direct participation in preschool group activities may prevent them from providing more critical reflection or assessment.

Statement	Position	n	U	2P
Children serve the function of decoration.	Preschool teacher	151	95.25	2907.00 0.031
	Preschool teacher assistant	48	114.94	

*Table 5: The results of the Mann–Whitney test of differences in the assessments of preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants regarding the frequency of non-participatory practices*

The results of the Mann–Whitney test ( $U = 2907.000$ ,  $2P = 0.031$ ) show that preschool teacher assistants' assessments of the frequency of the practices in which children served as decoration were statistically significantly higher ( $= 114.94$ ) than those of preschool teachers' ( $= 95.25$ ).

Again, it is worth pointing out that the preschool teacher assistants were more critical of existing practices than the teachers. This indicates that, when assessing the state of affairs, more perspectives and insights should be taken into account. In particular, the views and attitudes of representatives with different perspectives should be confronted and justified.

## Conclusions

The purpose of our research study was to examine and problematise the occurrence of different degrees of participatory and non-participatory (manipulative) practices and content in children's education. We investigated the practice of Slovenian preschools, studying assessments given by preschool teachers and preschool teacher assistants regarding the frequency of different degrees of participation and the possibility for children to influence structural organisational changes at the levels of the preschool group, preschool as a whole and environment. In addition, we studied the preschool teachers' and preschool teacher assistants' assessments of the frequency of non-participatory, manipulative practices.

The respondents stated that participatory practices are most frequent at the level of planning activities and events, which were the least-defined structured

processes in the provided statements. Plans, joint evaluations and reflections recorded together with children, which require more planned and structured participation, are less frequent. Making records with children, which may be returned to them later, enables children to discuss issues (plans, evaluations, reflections) with other children, adults and perhaps parents. Processes with the highest degree of participation, that is, those in which children themselves identify issues of concern, take action and call upon adults to help them realise processes, are rare.

The assessments demonstrate that, compared to planning activities and events, children have less influence on changes to routine and space organisation. In the latter two, their influence is greater at the level of the preschool group than at the level of the entire preschool or local environment.

It remains to be seen why children have such little influence on changes at the level of the preschool and local environment and whether educators are sensitive enough (Čotar Konrad and Kukanja Gabrijelčič 2014) to identify and encourage solutions that ensure children's influence at the level of the preschool group, preschool and local environment. However, this information is crucial if we are to ensure the ethos of inclusive practice (Skubic Ermenc 2015; Ridge 2008) in areas children cannot access alone or for which they do not have enough power, information, knowledge or experience to realise their initiatives. When looking for solutions, we should be aware that individuals may be able to make choices, "but from a repertoire which is more or less limited by our social positioning and experience" (Nigel 2010, p. 35).

We presume that extreme non-participatory practice in Slovenian preschools does not occur frequently. Participation by proxy is more frequent, but it is the most difficult to identify. It can only be uncovered by reflection on the process of planning, implementation and evaluation, and it requires identification of elements suggested by children and the impact of their suggestions, initiatives and views on the educational process.

Future reflections intended to facilitate the transformation of pedagogical practice will need to include all participants in the educational process at the level of the preschool group, preschool and parents since the assessments of preschool teacher assistants in our research study were more critical than those of the preschool teachers. Confronting various perspectives and jointly developing the meaning of participatory education is likely to increase the frequency of activities with the highest participation, in which children identify issues of concern, take action and call upon adults to help them realise processes controlled by children. This would establish the most authentic form of the socio-cultural paradigm of children's and educators' joint learning in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1986). However, we should be careful because, as Jordan (2006, p. 32) states, 'In most scaffolding research, the adult had a specific end in mind, towards which the child was supported by an adult or by a more experienced peer'. When striving for the highest degree of participation, we should aim to facilitate dialogue about the emergent curriculum, joint learning by children and adults (regarding curricular expectations and children's initiatives) and joint co-construction of meaning that

is not entirely predetermined and expected and arises in interaction with the environment and among all learners.

Children take on different roles and manners of being present in the educational process: passive presence, passive activity, decoration, manipulation, participation by proxy and meaningful participation. However, children's capability to participate in all of these forms may obscure the fact that, in some of the practices, 'governing the soul' is expected (Rose 1999). This means that individuals are expected to self-regulate their own actions and efforts to reproduce the content, norms and values of existing society. That is why any emancipatory and participatory educational process predominantly requires all educators to withdraw with dignity from rigid, predetermined notions of what constitutes adequate practice and content and to listen to children. This indicates the beginning of redistribution of power.

## References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *JAIP*, 35, issue 4, pp. 216–224.
- Bredenkamp, S., and Rosegrant, T. (1993). *Reaching Potentials: Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment for Young Children*. Volume 1. Washington D. C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Available at: [http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Zunanja\\_politika/CP/Zbornik/I\\_CRC\\_-\\_Konvencija\\_o\\_otrokovih\\_pravicah.pdf](http://www.mzz.gov.si/fileadmin/pageuploads/Zunanja_politika/CP/Zbornik/I_CRC_-_Konvencija_o_otrokovih_pravicah.pdf) (Accessed on 14. 3. 2015).
- Čagran, B. (2004). *Univariatna in multivariatna analiza podatkov: zbirka primerov uporabe statističnih metod s SPSS*. Maribor: Pedagoška fakulteta.
- Čotar Konrad, S., and Kukanja Gabrijelčič, M. (2014). Pomen čustvene inteligentnosti v profesionalnem razvoju pedagoškega delavca. *Pedagoška obzorja: časopis za didaktiko in metodiko*, 29, issue 2, pp. 3–17.
- Davies, L., and Kilpatrick, G. (2000). *The Euridem Project: A Review of Pupil Democracy in Europe*. London: Children's Rights Alliance for England.
- Skubic Ermenc, K. S. (2015). Educating teachers for intercultural education. In: N. Popov, C. C. Wolhuter, and K. Skubic Ermenc (eds.). *Quality, social justice and accountability in education worldwide: BCES conference books* (BCES conference books, Vol. 13, no. 1). Sofia: Bulgarian comparative education society, pp. 108–114.
- Hart, A. R. (1992). *Children's participation: from tokenism to citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre, Spedale degli Innocenti.
- Jordan, B. (2006). Scaffolding learning and co-constructing understandings. In: A. Anning, J. Cullen, and M. Fleer (eds.). *Early childhood Education Society and Culture*. London, Thousand Paks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, pp. 31–42.
- Kangas, J., Ojala, M., and Venninen, T. (2015). Children's self-regulation in the context of participatory pedagogy in early childhood education. *Early Education and Development*, 26, issue 5/6, pp. 847–870.
- Lansdown, G. (2005). *Can you hear me? The right of young children to participate in decision affecting them*. Working paper 36. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.
- Levičnik, I. (ed.). (1979). *Vzgojni program za vzgojo in varstvo predšolskih otrok*. Ljubljana: Zavod SR Slovenije za šolstvo.

- Malaguzzi, L. (1994). Your image of the child: Where teaching begins. *Child Care Information Exchange*, issue 3, pp. 52–56.
- Marjanovič Umek, L., Fekonja Peklaj, U., Hočevar, A., and Lepičnik Vodopivec, J. (2011). Vrtni. In: J. Krek and M. Metljak (eds.). *Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji*. Ljubljana: Zavod za šolstvo.
- Nigel, T. (2010). Sociology of Childhood. In: T. Maynard and T. Nigel (eds.). *An introduction to Early Childhood Studies*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington D. C.: Sage, pp. 34–46.
- Osberg, D., and Biesta, G. (2008). The emergent curriculum: Navigating a complex course between unguided learning and planned enculturation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 40, issue 3, pp. 313–328.
- Pomembni podatki o vzgoji in varstvu predšolskih otrok v Evropi – 2014*. (2014). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key\\_data\\_series/166SL.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/166SL.pdf) (Accessed on 15. 5. 2017).
- Pavlič, S. (2006). *Zgodovina idrijskega šolstva do leta 1945*. Idrija: Založba Bogataj.
- Preschool Curriculum* (1999). Ljubljana: Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport and Zavod RS za šolstvo.
- Prout, A., and James, A. (1990). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In: A. James and A. Prout (eds.). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Falmer Press, pp. 7–33.
- Ridge, T. (2008). Childhood poverty: a barrier to social participation and inclusion. In: E. Tisdall, M. Kay, J. M. Davis, M. Hill, Malcolm, and A. Prout (eds.). *Children, Young People and Social Inclusion. Participation for what?* Bristol: The Policy Press, pp. 23–38.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Governing the Soul, The Shaping of the Private Self*. London, New York: Free Association Books.
- Rutar, S. (2006). Izzivi in možnosti participacije otrok v procesu vzgoje in izobraževanja. In: V. Medved Udovič and M. Cotič (eds.). *Zgodnje učenje in poučevanje otrok 1*. Koper: Univerza na Primorskem, Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče Koper, pp. 112–120.
- Rutar, S. (2015). Pomembne razlike med aktivnostjo otrok, participacijo s posrednikom in participacijo brez posrednika v vzgoji. Vzgoja in izobraževanje: revija za teoretična in praktična vprašanja vzgojno-izobraževalnega dela, 46, issue 4/5, pp. 13–19.
- Sagadin, J. (1993). *Poglavja iz metodologij pedagoškega raziskovanja*. Ljubljana: Zavod Republike Slovenije za šolstvo in šport.
- Sagadin, J. (2009). Veljavnost kvantitativnih empiričnih raziskav na vzgojno-izobraževalnem področju. *Sodobna pedagogika*, 60, issue 3, pp. 140–157.
- Sommer, D., Pramling Samuelsson, I., and Hundeide, K. (2013). Early childhood care and education: a child perspective paradigm. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21, issue 4, pp. 459–475.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Wood, D. (1995). *How children think and learn: The social context of cognitive development*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.