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Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care

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POVZETEK – Participacija otrok je temeljno načelo sodobne vzgoje in izobraževanja. Za zagotovitev participacije otrok je bil razvit Model spodbujanja participacije otrok v predšolski vzgoji, ki vzgojiteljem omogoča samorefleksijo njihove prakse, analizo participacije otrok, poslušanje glasov otrok in staršev ter povezovanje participacije otrok s kakovostjo predšolske vzgoje. Namen prispevka je predstaviti rezultate raziskave – spoznanja o pomenu modela pri zagotavljanju priložnosti za participacijo otrok in o stanju participacije otrok v vrtcu. Izvedli smo kvalitativno študijo, ki je temeljila na večperspektivnem participatornem pristopu spodbujanja participacije otrok. Ugotovitve raziskave kažejo, da ima model velik potencial za raziskovanje in spodbujanje participacije otrok v vzgojno-izobraževalnih ustanovah v smislu omogočanja izražanja otrok in profesionalne refleksije strokovnih delavcev.

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ABSTRACT – Children's participation is a fundamental principle of contemporary education. To ensure children's participation, a Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care has been developed that enables educators to self-reflect on their practice, analyse children's participation, listen to children's and parents' voices, and link children's participation to the quality of early childhood education and care. The aim of the paper is to present findings regarding the importance of the model for promoting children's participation in early childhood education and care and the current state of children's participation. The qualitative study is based on the multi-perspective participatory approach to promoting children's participation in action. The findings suggest that the model has great potential for researching and promoting children's participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, especially children's expression and teachers' professional reflection.

1 Introduction

One of the greatest pedagogical challenges since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is the question of how to ensure and promote children's expression and participation in education from preschool onwards. In particular, this requires promoting teachers' reflection on practices while also providing adequate expertise and support for all kindergarten practitioners. In the discourse on children's needs, where adults have control and power over relations in education, children cannot become the agents or subjects of their own lives. Rather, adults are often seen as experts and masters of children's lives. This is especially true in traditional teaching practice in kindergartens and schools, where teachers start the lesson with the motivation prepared for children, continue to teach new things, and end by checking how much the children have understood and retained from the activity. This didactic structure has a history of achiev-

ing results: knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquisition, which is planned and expected as a result of the teaching/learning process. So, why should this be changed?

The need for change is grounded in the assertion that children have the right to participate in education and other areas of private or public life as the subjects and agents of their own lives. Children should be the subject of the educational process as well as the subject of their everyday and public lives (health care, media, social care, etc.). Becoming subjects or agents (Oswell, 2013) in everyday life and learning situations, where the difference between teachers and children is not just declarative or symbolic but obvious because of children's biological need to be cared for, is complicated. Further, children yearn for positive recognition, but also for comfort, warmth and close relationships (Smith et al., 2017). They want to be visible, listened to, heard, and to relate to others (Allen et al., 2022).

It is commonly acknowledged that children's participation starts with the teachers' reflection on their role in the classroom (Kangas et al., 2016), especially regarding their values, professional identity, the goal of education (Korthagen, 2017) and what they believe is important in children's lives.

Theoretically, children's participation depends on the aim and purpose of education; on the image of the child (Malaguzzi, 1994); on the way we (teachers, researchers and society) understand the learning process; on the way we (teachers, researchers and society) understand the nature and development of children; on the role of children in society; and on the way we understand and interpret children's ability to feel things and to understand relationships and situations that happen to them or to others around them (empathy).

Even if there is agreement on the importance of children's participation and what is important for its realisation (the aim of education, the image of a child, children's role in society, etc.), it is also important to determine how to improve children's participation, especially in education. Indeed, we cannot expect significant changes in teachers' actions if, as stated by Syslová (2019), the professional reflections are limited to teachers' mere self-awareness, are not supported by a deeper analysis, and are based solely on subjective theories.

The multi-perspective approach to promoting children's participation in early childhood education and care – *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care*, presented in this article, is based on action research, which we propose as a way to research and promote children's participation in early childhood education and care in the future. The main objective of the model is to involve children, educators, parents and counsellors in early childhood education and care settings in way that promotes children's participation through their own reflections.

The paper presents findings regarding the importance of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care* for promoting children's participation, particularly opportunities for children to express themselves.

Interdependence of Quality in ECEC and Child Participation

The revolutionary book *Valuing Quality in Early Childhood Services* (Moss & Pence, 1994) elicited an important discussion about quality and the importance of quality in ear-

ly childhood education and care (ECEC). An industrial discourse about quality that only involves measurement and evaluation by someone in charge of evaluation is not appropriate in ECEC. Quality itself is rather subjective in ECEC and depends on how children, teachers, pedagogical professionals, parents, head teachers, the local community and the administrations involved in the organisation of ECEC understand the concept. Quality is therefore context dependent and can only be developed within the context and meaning of all who participate in ECEC. We know from previous theorising and early research on quality (Katz, 1999; Sheridan, 2001) that a single perspective is not sufficient when defining and discussing quality-related issues in early childhood education.

Since the 1990s, the whole world has recognised that it is no longer possible to measure quality in early childhood care without reflecting on the values that are part of and define the concept of quality (Moss & Pence, 1994). Consequently, reflection – including subjective reflection (practice and relationships) – has become even more important in early childhood education than the measurement of quality. The reasons for this are obvious. Measurement implies that responsible experts measure quality (Dahlberg et al., 2007), while reflection in education means that educators themselves reflect on their practice and experiences. Accordingly, the reflective cycle is naturally structured as a process of thinking about experiences (Dewey, 1986), reflecting on how the experiences came about and why the situation is the way it is. Most importantly, the reflection process involves issues and authentic professional situations that are relevant to those reflecting and to their professional communities.

The concept and definition of participation in professional reflection include the opportunity to express and reflect, but it is also important that what is expressed is taken into account in decision-making regarding plans and changes in the future. This (i.e., planning actions for the future) is also the most challenging and proactive part of the reflection process. Real participation is not only talking or dealing with something but also an action that is part of something. This means that measuring quality (observing, measuring and reporting) and reporting to someone about quality are not the same as participating in that whose quality is being measured. This process, in which teachers are objects of the observation process, does not give teachers the opportunity to become aware of their attitudes, values, wishes, hopes and problems unless they have the opportunity to reflect, talk and discuss.

However, it has also been shown that children participate more in high-quality kindergartens, (quality assessed using ECERS by Sylva et al., 2010), than in other kindergartens (Sheridan, 2007). Nevertheless, we should expect equal opportunities for all children (Urban et al., 2012). Importantly, quality and professional development are two very closely related concepts (Urban et al., 2012). Professional development could lead to high-quality practices in kindergartens, but both the assessment of quality and professional development could be organised and implemented as a participatory process or as a process organised by others for others, without the involvement of educators, children and parents.

So, the question is always who decides for whom and why? The right question is no longer am I doing it right but rather am I doing the right thing (Peeters & Vandebroek, 2011) – not just in practice, as a practitioner, but also as a researcher or expert (Bijuklič, 2022)? Further, it is also important to ask who is organising this kind of process and why, as well as who am I with my values, attitudes, thoughts and experiences in this pro-

cess – the object or subject? Am I someone who can express themselves, or am I expected to regulate and control myself based on certain norms and expectations (Rose, 2016)?

2 Theoretical background and structure of the Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC

The development of the model was based on an analysis of relevant sources in the fields of assessment and quality assurance in ECEC (Laevers, 2005; Marjanovič Umek & Fekonja, 2005), the evaluation of participation (Lansdown, 2000, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Shier, 2001) and the promotion of children's expressive abilities (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark et al., 2003; Clark et al., 2005).

The model is based on the assumption that a higher level of quality of the ECEC process in ECEC settings, as conceptualised by Laevers (1994, 2005), leads to a higher level of child participation in education. Laevers (2005) argued that the level of children's involvement and their well-being in ECEC settings are indicators of quality. Specifically, the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC* is based on the following:

- Professional development as an exploratory and participatory process in which teachers, counsellors, parents and children must be involved with their own observations, reflections and discussions.
- The concept of children's participation with recognised levels of involvement (Lansdown, 2000, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Shier, 2001).
- The belief that a single method of reflecting and/or measuring quality does not guarantee quality improvements and changes in early childhood practice; rather, a clearly structured action research process is needed in which information and experiences (including feelings) of all partners in the process (teachers, parents, children, counsellors) are collected and reflected upon.
- The belief that the starting point for discussing preschool quality must be the individual child and his or her well-being and participation (Laevers, 2005), which provides an opportunity to reflect on the process components of quality (learning environment, interaction, parent involvement, meaningful learning, inclusion, assessment and planning, professional development) that need to be changed for a particular child or group of children.

In the development of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC*, we sought to identify and investigate the current state of children's participation and quality, integrate children's voices with strategies for expressing and listening to children in the process of investigating the state of the situation, and encourage teachers and counsellors to plan change based on their involvement in the research process. In doing so, we linked the identification of levels of participation to the concept of quality, where the starting point for identifying quality is the well-being, involvement (Laevers, 2005) and voice of the individual child. The purpose of this was to plan change in the cycle of professional development and ensure children's participation.

The model was designed as an action research process involving the child/children, educators, counsellors and parents. Through different forms of learning (questionnaires

or checklists, analysis of videos, children's statements, analysis of pedagogical preparations/planning), it allows educators to explore their own practices, children to reflect and express themselves, and counsellors to actively support professionals in ensuring children's participation.

In the following, a multi-perspective participatory approach is presented as an action research model for promoting children's participation in ECEC.

Table 1

A Multi-Perspective Participatory Approach to Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC: Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC

<i>Phases</i>	<i>Process</i>
Teachers' self-reflection on existing pedagogical practices concerning child participation	Teachers' and preschool counsellors' self-reflections on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Their own understanding/meaning of participation; <input type="checkbox"/> Self-reflection on the opportunity for children to participate; <input type="checkbox"/> Reflection on participatory situations in groups of children, in preschool and the local community in which teachers are employed.
Reflection on child participation and opportunities for child participation, based on children's well-being and involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Preschool counsellors (employed in preschools) observe the well-being and involvement of all children in the group (using the Laevers scale, 2005), identifying the level of involvement and well-being of each child in the preschool group. <input type="checkbox"/> Videotaping children and their interactions with the teacher and children in the group (children with high and low levels of well-being and involvement). <input type="checkbox"/> The preschool teacher and preschool counsellor together discuss the videotape using a checklist to evaluate the participation of children. The levels of participation have been developed and adapted from Lansdown (2004) and Shier (2001). <input type="checkbox"/> Comparing children's interactions and participation (children with high and low levels of well-being and involvement) based on differences in topics in which the children participate, the level of children's participation, and teachers' interactions with children.
Reflection, based on children's voices	In groups of children preschool teachers implement the following methods of listening to children (Clark & Moss, 2001; Clark, 2005): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> interview/talking to children (what they can and cannot decide on, whether they want to decide); <input type="checkbox"/> children's work; <input type="checkbox"/> children taking photos and videos (symbolic play, dramatisation with puppets, making plans, dancing). They compare and identify differences between the responses of children with different levels of involvement and well-being.
Reflection, based on children's participation in planning	Preschool teachers, together with preschool counsellors, look at long-term written plans that have already been applied in the preschool classroom. They assess how many times, in which content, and in what way children are involved in planning, implementation, evaluation and reflection (children with high and low levels of involvement and well-being).
Reflection, based on parents' views	Analysing expectations regarding children's participation in preschool for each child (parents of children with lower and higher levels of well-being and involvement).

Table 2

A Multi-Perspective Participatory Approach to Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC: Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC – Planning for Changes

<p>Guided recognition of existing practices, informed by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> children's well-being and involvement, <input type="checkbox"/> children's voices, <input type="checkbox"/> children's participation in planning, <input type="checkbox"/> parents' voices and planning for changes for an individual child and for a group of children.
<p>Planning for changes in the educational process – preschool teachers and counsellors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> For an individual child and/or for a whole group of children, based on the findings of the listening process, to address the need to improve the well-being and involvement of the child(ren) and to improve the participation of children in groups of children. Changes are planned based on indicators of the quality of the process (interaction, learning environment, teaching strategies, etc.). <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporating the suggestions, views, opinions obtained from listening to children into decisions at the institutional level. <input type="checkbox"/> Incorporating the suggestions, views, opinions obtained from listening to children into decisions at the local and national levels.
<p>Professional reflection after change implementation – preschool teachers and counsellors</p>
<p>Professional reflections of counsellors and teachers are included in the model for promoting children's participation.</p>

The purpose of the multi-perspective participatory approach to promoting children's participation in ECEC (the model for promoting children's participation in kindergarten) is to ensure and promote children's participation in ECEC through

- the self-reflection of educators and other professionals;
- observing the well-being and involvement of individual children in the preschool group;
- analysing children's participation based on videos;
- listening to children's voices through interviews and other listening techniques;
- listening to parents; and
- drawing on the professional reflection by practitioners (educators and counsellors) to improve children's involvement and well-being – or quality, as defined by Laevers (2005), and their participation in education.

In this paper, we present the insights obtained from preschool counsellors regarding the importance of the model in promoting children's participation, especially in terms of providing opportunities for children to express themselves. In addition, we present findings regarding children's participation in early childhood education and care based on the implementation of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC*.

3 Method

To evaluate the model, we carried out a qualitative study, based on a multi-perspective participatory approach to promoting children's participation in action.

Participants involved in the model for promoting children's participation

In testing the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC*, we included counsellors/persons responsible for providing teachers' professional support in ECEC (n = 20) and preschool teachers (n = 20), working with groups of five-year-old children, who were actively involved in the testing of the model. There were 20 children with high levels of well-being and involvement (Laevers, 2005) and 20 children with low levels of well-being and involvement. In addition, parents of children with low levels of well-being and involvement (n = 20) and parents of children with high levels of well-being and involvement (n = 20) were included. As preschool counsellors were involved in the entire process of implementing the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC*, this article presents the results of the counsellors' questionnaire from the last phase of the model implementation and evaluation.

Procedures of the multi-perspective participatory approach to promoting children's participation

- *Teachers' self-reflection on existing pedagogical practices in relation to children's participation*

Questionnaires were administered to teachers and counsellors with both closed and open-ended questions. This provided an insight into their opinions, assessments and beliefs about the current situation and the possibilities of children's participation in ECEC. The questionnaire was tested in advance on a small sample of counsellors and teachers. After testing, the questionnaire was also reviewed by experts in the field of early childhood education and research methodology, who also assessed the clarity of the criteria, the unambiguousness of the categories and their scope.

- *Reflection, evaluation of child participation and opportunities for children's participation, based on children's well-being and involvement*

The second phase of the model involved determining the children's degree of involvement and well-being according to Laevers (2005). A scale was used to determine the level of involvement and well-being of each child (range 1–5). The circumstances and events during the observation were normal (Laevers, 2005, p. 12), and the school day was organised according to the daily routine. Each child was observed in the group. The observation was repeated in the same week, possibly the next day, one hour later. After determining the level of involvement and well-being of all children in each group, one child was randomly selected with high involvement and well-being and one with low involvement and well-being from each group for the next phase.

Here, the starting point for assessing the quality of ECEC is the child – as described by Katz (1993), or in Slovenia by Marjanovič Umek and Fekonja (2005), in Sweden by Sheridan (2001, 2007) and in New Zealand by Podmore (2006). According to Laevers (2005), insights can be obtained into the situation of each individual child by using involvement and well-being as indicators of the quality of the approaches and activities that enable and promote different areas of children's development, and by determining whether the approaches enable and promote the development and learning of all children or only of some.

□ *Videotaping of selected children with low involvement and well-being and children with high involvement and well-being in the group*

First, one child with low involvement and well-being and one child with high involvement and well-being were selected from each group. Both children were filmed once, one child on one day and the other on the next day at the same time. We began by video recording the child in action in the morning while interacting with the material, the adults, and the children. The recordings were then analysed deductively (Vogrinc, 2008, p. 63) using two prepared coding tables.

The first coding table indicates how many of the initiatives are given to adults and other children by children with low and high levels of involvement and well-being, respectively, and how many of these initiatives are listened to, supported, and incorporated into decisions. The coding table contains the modified levels of participation defined by Shier (2001). The second coding table shows how and to what extent teachers involve children in decision-making in activities and in their interactions with children. The coding table contains the adapted levels of participation defined by Lansdown (2005b).

We investigated whether there were differences between children with low and high levels of involvement and well-being in terms of the number of initiatives presented to children and adults. At the same time, we were interested in whether teachers encouraged children to express themselves. If the children's expressions are only dependent on their spontaneous initiatives and the teacher's consideration, this would relieve the teacher of the responsibility of ensuring that all children have the opportunity to express their views and opinions.

□ *Reflection based on children's voices*

Using listening methods, we listened to children with both high and low levels of involvement and well-being, comparing and differentiating between their responses. Sheridan (2001) emphasised the importance of the child's perspective, particularly in monitoring quality, and found that children's opportunities to participate were related to the quality of ECEC. To ensure the validity of the results, all children were interviewed twice. The semi-structured interviews with the children were based on questions that have been asked of children in other studies to gain the child's perspective (Langsted, 1994; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Marjanovič Umek & Fekonja, 2005). The interviews were conducted in groups of children. Upon arrival, we introduced ourselves to the group, explained the purpose of the group visit, and asked the children if we could join them in the activities. We invited the two children involved in the further exploration to talk to us. We wrote down answers in front of the children, read them out, asked questions, and checked that we had written them correctly. We also asked if there was anything else to add.

□ *Reflection based on children's participation in planning*

The plans for the pedagogical work for the period when the monitoring of the children in the group took place were analysed. This was done to determine which and how many initiatives targeting children with low and high levels of involvement and well-being, respectively, were included in the written preparations/plans for the pedagogical work.

□ *Reflection based on parents' views*

The questionnaire was distributed to parents of children with both high and low levels of involvement and well-being. It provided an insight into the parents' perceptions of the children's competence, reflected in the parents' expectations of the children in terms of decision-making and participation in ECEC. Parents' expectations can provide contextual guidance for the planning of subsequent educational work.

□ *Guided recognition of existing practice and planning for changes for individual children and for groups of children*

A discussion was held with the teachers involved in the study after video recording children with high and low levels of involvement and well-being, and following the implementation of the child listening methods (implemented by the teachers in the group within the framework of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Kindergarten*). The discussions focused on the differences observed in the initiatives of children with high and low levels of involvement and well-being, respectively, and the possible reasons for these differences. By the time the discussions took place, the teachers had already gained an insight into the differences that were evident between these children. They received information about the children mainly through listening strategies (photographing the children, symbolic play of the children, children's products, interviewing the children) that were part of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC* and through the insights gained from the analysis of the video recordings.

□ *Professional reflection after change implementation*

The open-ended question survey collected professional reflections of counsellors who were involved in all phases of the model of promoting child participation. After the model implementation, we wanted to hear their views concerning the impact of the model on promoting children's participation and any new insights regarding children's participation in ECEC. The data were processed according to the principles of qualitative pedagogical research with open coding (Vogrinc, 2008), which allowed us to gain an insight into the meanings that practitioners developed during the process of implementing the model.

4 Results

Below, we present the findings, including the insights obtained from preschool counsellors on the importance of the child participation model for providing opportunities for children to express themselves. In addition, we present the findings on children's participation in kindergarten, based on the implementation of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care*.

Table 3

Impact of the Model in Terms of Promoting Children's Participation and Providing Children with Opportunities to Express Themselves

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Listening to children – the listening method	High communicative value of children's suggestions obtained through listening methods	"... a surprising communication of suggestions, ideas, feelings, based on a strategy of listening to children – during interviews, role-plays, photo shoots."
	An important source of messages for children's initiatives – the importance of multimodality	"... when the children took photos, I was surprised how many initiatives could be observed through the comments on the photos."
	Focusing on children's initiatives improves the level of children's participation	"... I was surprised that the very attention paid to the child's initiatives and to the consistent observance of the child's participation showed visible changes in the child with a low level of involvement."
Professional reflection	Provides the knowledge to foster children's participation	"... that educators would do it if they knew how and were not afraid of losing their authority in the group."
	Professional reflection requires video recording and reflecting on practice	"... each teacher should videotape herself several times a year and accurately assess the children's participation according to the criteria. They should especially overlook the average children, which make up the majority ... ignore the facial expressions, overhear the words...provide the help that the child needs and expects from you."
	Professional focus on participation has to be ensured every day in pedagogy in planning, implementing and evaluating activities	"... there is no evidence of jointly planned activities in the teacher's annual work plan." "... to write in our plans, in concrete terms, where we have taken into account the children's suggestions, how they have been implemented."

The counsellors involved in the study recognised that the model gave the children the opportunity to express themselves. When implementing the model, they perceived a high willingness on the part of the children to express themselves through the different means of expression (listening strategies), but they also noted that "*... the children with low levels of involvement and well-being became more autonomous and more confident in all areas after all the activities had been carried out*".

The results point to two fundamental components of the model:

- the provision of expressive opportunities for children, including those who rarely express themselves verbally or are not yet able to do so, and
- the provision of professional reflection opportunities, professional knowledge and professional development for preschool professionals.

The model enables children to express themselves – even those with lower levels of well-being and involvement. Thus, the model improves the quality of the educational process by listening to children and improving their participation in the process itself.

Table 4

Insights into Children's Participation in ECEC Based on the Implementation of the Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care

<i>Category</i>	<i>Code</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Expression depends on development, learning and the ability to articulate initiatives	The ability to take initiative depends on the individual social context and the development of children	“... that initiative skills depend on the individual (influence of the environment, socialisation, emotional development), that some children almost never take initiative – these children are little or hardly noticed.” “... I was particularly struck by the influence of temperament ...”
	Children also need to learn to take the initiative	“... children “have to” learn to cooperate (if they haven’t learnt it in the beginning, at home), because they cannot move from cooperating under the guidance of an educator to cooperating on their own if they haven’t been taught to do so.”
	Children have different needs and interests in taking the initiative	“Different children show different levels of interest in inclusion. Some do not need to be encouraged to participate (assuming the conditions are provided), while others need to find the ways and means to make them want to participate and contribute their views (possibility to participate at home?).”
Expression depends on organised pedagogical opportunities to express initiatives	Children make meaningful suggestions for change	“Children’s participation is reflected in many ways (if the conditions are right) ...children paid attention to the whole kindergarten (not just their playroom) and made very meaningful suggestions for changes in the kindergarten as a whole.”
	Children are often ignored in the expression of initiatives	“I was surprised to observe that the child is relatively often ignored in his or her attempts to take the initiative. While this is probably to be expected in such a large group, I have never observed it in a group in the way that I had in the survey.”
	Planning for children without involving children	“... we analysed the annual work plan and found that we plan activities for the children without taking them into account (pyjama parties, trips, meetings for parents, children’s week...). The activities are planned by the teacher and presented to the parents at the parents’ meeting, where they give their consent, suggestions and ideas for their children. But where is the voice of those for whom we have prepared all this?”

In examining their own practices, teachers and counsellors also gain insights into the educational process through reflection guided by the tools and activities in the model for promoting children’s participation. Deep self-reflection increases practitioners’

participation in co-creating the meaning of children's participation and how it should be implemented. The knowledge and meaning-making of teachers and counsellors is shaped during the process of exploring participation based on the insights of those involved in the process.

The counsellors noted that children's expressions and participation depend on their developmental characteristics, as well as on the opportunities they have to express initiatives in the home environment, to learn participation or initiative skills, and on the different needs and interests of individual children in taking the initiative. On the other hand, it was expressed "*... that the teachers are too attentive to children who are strong in the language area*".

We found that expressiveness also depends on planned and organised educational opportunities fostering initiative. Children make meaningful suggestions for change when they have the opportunity to take the initiative, and they are eager to participate in planning and evaluating the process when they have the opportunity to do so. At the same time, according to the counsellors, children are also often ignored when expressing initiatives, and the planning of pedagogical processes often takes place without children. They noted that "*... too little consideration is given to each child's individual initiatives in the planning process*".

The counsellors indicated that close and systematic observation of children, opportunities for children to express themselves, and the recording of children's and professionals' work are needed to determine the level of children's participation and well-being, and to review children's participation in decision-making. At the same time, they emphasised the need to give children the opportunity to express themselves. A child who is deprived of this opportunity, or who has been deprived of this opportunity during their socialisation, is not able to provide it for himself or herself. The general conclusions are that there are still many opportunities for children's participation in planning and self-evaluation and that children are often ignored when it comes to expressing their initiatives. Finally, the counsellors indicated that temperament has a strong influence on children's ability to express themselves. The children whose temperament leads them to take less initiative should be given extra support.

In addition, we have found that expression depends on planned and organised pedagogical opportunities to express initiatives. Children make meaningful suggestions for change when they have the opportunity to initiate them, and they are happy to participate in the planning and evaluation of the process when they have the opportunity to do so. Based on the implementation of the model so far, we have found that the joint participation of the teacher and counsellor as explorers of their own process is key to ensuring reflection and reflection on change in the pedagogical process. It has been shown that self-assessment based on current knowledge does not allow for change and that educators at all professional levels need new specific knowledge (Komočar & Čotar Konrad, 2022, p. 5). Moreover, self-evaluation without new knowledge and insights does not provide an understanding of the perspectives of different stakeholders. As the model foresees the involvement of the counsellor as professional support in carrying out professional reflection and promoting children's participation in education, it provides an appropriate theoretical basis for implementing the counsellor's tasks in ECEC, including the support of practitioners and head teachers.

5 Discussion

The model for promoting children's participation makes it possible to bring about changes in the educational process and thus, indirectly, in its quality. First, it can provide insights into the well-being and involvement of children (Laevens, 2005). In addition, it can obtain the expectations and opinions of parents regarding children's participation and the self-reflection of educators and counsellors.

Ultimately, the model helps to ensure children's self-expression and thus their listening by employing listening strategies (Clark & Moss, 2001); their direct participation in the research process to explore children-related topics (Štemberger, 2019, p. 19); and the planning of pedagogical change.

The methods of listening to children in the model can support practitioners in listening to children and increase educators' awareness of the realities of providing participation opportunities for groups of children. This in turn can lead practitioners to proactively face professional challenges and take the initiative in developing and implementing creative solutions (Drljić & Kiswarday, 2021, p. 5). These insights can provide a foundation for planning change – for the individual child and/or for the group as a whole.

Laevens' (1994) approach to quality serves as the starting point in the model to ensure children's participation in kindergarten. Prior to his theory of quality identification and quality assurance in ECEC, quality was assessed based on observing the work of educators. In other words, the starting point for quality assessment was the educator. Following Laevens' example, the direction of assessment has changed. Teachers can now reflect on their practices by observing children. When planning changes, they do not start from the mistakes or the lack of quality in their own practices, which would be judged by external experts. Rather, they start by reflecting on the quality provided to the child or what they want to change for the children based on what they see (observation of children). Additionally, direct information about children is obtained in the model by employing listening methods. Children's voices add the child's perspective, which is crucial to ensure the well-being and involvement/inclusion of all children. All information concerning children's participation maintains the content of acknowledged process indicators of quality in a particular professional discussion and professional context.

However, it should be noted that the counsellors involved in this study ascribed great potential to the model for promoting children's participation through professional reflection, monitoring, and quality assurance of the process. They also stressed that children need to learn to express themselves. Although research has shown that today's parents are sensitive to their children's needs (Cugmas et al., 2020, p. 127), and expect children's individual abilities to be encouraged in early childhood education (Hmelak, 2017, p. 15), our research shows that children's ability and need to express themselves also depend on opportunities and incentives to express themselves in their home environments. Therefore, it is necessary to organise and plan opportunities for all children to develop their ability to express themselves and participate in ECEC settings.

6 Conclusion

Children's participation in education is rooted in the discourse on children's rights, which is also legally grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Ensuring children's participation is a pedagogical, relational challenge in which the child increasingly assumes the role of interlocutor.

In this paper we present the insights obtained from preschool counsellors regarding the importance of the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in Early Childhood Education and Care*, especially in terms of providing opportunities for children to express themselves. In addition, we present findings regarding the current state of children's participation in early childhood education and care based on the implementation of the model.

The findings encourage us to study the pedagogical process systematically and in depth, and to explore it empirically and participatively. Above all, this would stimulate a process of professional reflection and planning for change in the environment in which it would be implemented. This is reflected in the counsellor's statement: "*We think we know the children, but we don't really know them. Only if we were to systematically observe and listen to what the child expresses...*"

The research findings suggest that in the future it will be necessary to

- provide opportunities for children to express themselves,
- listen to children, and
- create organised and planned opportunities for children to develop their ability to express themselves.

Moreover, it is crucial to provide guided and planned opportunities for practitioners to engage in professional reflection on the provision of opportunities for children's participation. Such reflection could be supported by the model.

In the *Model for Promoting Children's Participation in ECEC*, we have integrated all the key concepts of ensuring the democratisation of society:

- Evaluating and ensuring children's participation in education;
- Listening to children: methods of listening as a way for children to express themselves and participate in decision-making and meaning-making;
- Ensuring equal opportunities for all: social inclusion, positive recognition of parents and children with higher and lower levels of well-being and involvement;
- Ensuring the quality of the educational process and the quality assurance process for all children by involving children, educators, parents and counselling staff in a reflective research process.

We propose that this research model is suitable for ensuring and improving children's participation in ECEC in the future. The challenge is to ensure children's participation in education not only from the point of view of organising a pedagogical process in which children have the opportunity to participate in learning, cooperating with others, and community development, but also to involve all those involved in the educational process – children, parents, educators and kindergarten counsellors – in the process of ensuring children's participation.

Dr. Sonja Rutar

Spodbujanje participacije otrok v predšolski vzgoji in izobraževanju

Eden največjih pedagoških izzivov od sprejetja Konvencije o otrokovih pravicah (1989) je vprašanje, kako zagotoviti in spodbujati participacijo otrok v vzgoji in izobraževanju od predšolskega obdobja naprej. To zahteva zlasti spodbujanje razmisleka o praksah ter hkrati zagotavljanje ustreznega strokovnega znanja in podpore strokovnim delavcem v vrtcih.

Participacija otrok se začne z vzgojiteljevim/učiteljevim razmislekom o svoji vlogi v skupini (Kangas idr. 2016), zlasti z razmislekom o svojih vrednotah, poklicni identiteti, cilju izobraževanja (Korthagen, 2017) in razmislekom/odločitvijo o tem, kaj je pomembno v otrokovem življenju. Vendar ne moremo pričakovati bistvenih sprememb v delovanju vzgojitelja, če je, kot navaja Syslová (2019), refleksija omejena zgolj na njegovo samozavedanje in ni podprta s poglobljeno analizo ter če refleksija temelji zgolj na subjektivnih teorijah.

Namen prispevka je predstaviti rezultate raziskave, spoznanja o pomenu modela za spodbujanje otrokove participacije – pri zagotavljanju priložnosti za izražanje otrok – in ugotovitve o participaciji otrok v vrtcu na podlagi uvajanja Modela spodbujanja participacije otrok v predšolski vzgoji.

Glavni cilj Modela spodbujanja participacije otrok v predšolski vzgoji je vključiti otroke, vzgojitelje, starše in svetovalne delavce v predšolski vzgoji v participatorni pristop spodbujanja participacije otrok z njihovimi lastnimi refleksijami – kot nosilcev izboljšanja participacije otrok.

Razvoj modela je temeljil na analizi virov s področja spremljanja in zagotavljanja kakovosti v predšolski vzgoji (Laevers 2005; Marjanovič Umek in Fekonja 2005), spremljanja participacije (Lansdown 2000, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Shier 2001) in spodbujanja otrokovih izraznih zmožnosti (Clark in Moss, 2001; Clark, McQuail in Moss, 2003; Clark, Kjørholt in Moss, 2005). Temelji na predpostavki, da višja raven kakovosti procesa predšolske vzgoje vodi k višji ravni participacije otrok v izobraževanju. Laevers (2005) trdi, da sta stopnja vključenosti otrok in njihovo dobro počutje v okoljih predšolske vzgoje kazalnika kakovosti.

Pri razvoju Modela spodbujanja participacije otrok v predšolski vzgoji smo želeli povezati:

- proučevanje trenutnega stanja participacije otrok in kakovosti,*
- vključevanje glasu otrok s strategijami izražanja in poslušanja otrok v proces raziskovanja stanja ter*
- spodbujanje vzgojiteljev in svetovalnih delavcev k načrtovanju sprememb na podlagi njune vključenosti v proces raziskovanja.*

Pri tem smo ugotavljanje ravni participacije povezali s konceptom kakovosti, kjer je izhodišče ugotavljanja kakovosti dobro počutje in vključenost posameznega otroka (Laevers, 2005), glas otroka pa smo vključili v načrtovanje sprememb v ciklu profesionalnega razvoja in zagotavljanja participacije otrok.

Model je zasnovan kot proces akcijskega raziskovanja, v katerem sodelujejo otroci, vzgojitelji, svetovalni delavci in starši. Z različnimi oblikami učenja (samorefleksijo,

opazovanjem stanja, analizo videoposnetkov, izjavami otrok in analizo pedagoških priprav/načrtovanj) vzgojiteljem omogoča raziskovanje lastne prakse, otrokom razmišljanje in izražanje, svetovalnim delavcem pa aktivno podporo strokovnim delavcem pri zagotavljanju participacije otrok.

Za ovrednotenje modela smo izvedli kvalitativno študijo, ki temelji na večperspektivnem participatornem pristopu spodbujanja participacije otrok. V testiranje modela za spodbujanje sodelovanja otrok v vzgojno-izobraževalnih ustanovah so bili vključeni svetovalni delavci/odgovorne osebe za strokovno podporo vzgojiteljem v vzgojno-izobraževalnih ustanovah ($n = 20$), vzgojitelji ($n = 20$), ki so delali v skupini petletnih otrok, aktivno vključenih v testiranje modela – 20 otrok z visoko stopnjo dobrega počutja in vključenosti in 20 otrok z nizko stopnjo dobrega počutja in vključenosti (po Laeversu, 2005). Vključeni so bili tudi starši otrok z nizko stopnjo dobrega počutja in vključenosti ($n = 20$) in starši otrok z visoko stopnjo dobrega počutja in vključenosti ($n = 20$). Svetovalni delavci so bili vključeni v celoten proces izvajanja modela za spodbujanje participacije otrok v vzgoji, zato v tem članku predstavljamo spoznanja, ki smo jih pridobili na podlagi vprašalnika za svetovalne delavce iz zadnje faze preizkušanja modela. Podatki so bili obdelani po načelih kvalitativnega pedagoškega raziskovanja, z odprtim kodiranjem.

Po mnenju v raziskavo vključenih svetovalcev je model otrokom dal priložnost, da se izrazijo. Pri izvajanju modela so zaznali veliko pripravljenost otrok, da se izrazijo z različnimi načini izražanja (strategijami poslušanja), uporabljenimi v študiji, ko so otroci to priložnost dobili. Rezultati kažejo na dve temeljni sestavini modela:

- zagotavljanje možnosti izražanja za otroke – tudi tiste, ki se redko ali še ne izražajo verbalno, in
- zagotavljanje profesionalne refleksije, profesionalnega znanja in razvoja za zaposlene v predšolski vzgoji.

Model omogoča otrokom izražanje – tudi otrokom z nižjo stopnjo vključenosti in dobrega počutja. To pomeni, da model sam izboljšuje kakovost vzgojno-izobraževalnega procesa, saj prisluhne otrokom in izboljša participacijo otrok že v samem procesu.

Ob preverjanju lastne prakse vzgojitelji in svetovalni delavci prav tako dobijo vpogled v vzgojno-izobraževalni proces z razmislekom, ki ga vodijo inštrumenti in dejavnosti, razvite v modelu za spodbujanje participacije. Poglobljena samorefleksija zmanjšuje izključno moč in avtoriteto zunanjih ekspertov ter povečuje sodelovanje praktikov pri soustvarjanju pomena participacije otrok in načina njenega izvajanja. Znanje in razumevanje pomena participacije se med procesom proučevanja participacije oblikuje s pomočjo vpogleda vseh, ki so vključeni v proces.

Svetovalni delavci so izpostavili, da sta izražanje in participacija otrok odvisna od njihovih razvojnih značilnosti, pa tudi od možnosti izražanja pobud v domačem okolju, učenja večšin sodelovanja ali dajanja pobud ter različnih potreb in interesov posameznih otrok za dajanje pobud.

Ugotavljamo, da je izražanje odvisno tudi od načrtovanih in organiziranih vzgojnih priložnosti za izražanje pobud. Otroci dajejo smiselne predloge za spremembe, ko imajo priložnost, da prevzamejo pobudo, obenem pa otroci z veseljem sodelujejo pri načrtovanju in vrednotenju procesa, kadar imajo to možnost. Po mnenju svetovalnih delavcev so otroci pri izražanju pobud pogosto prezrti, ravno tako načrtovanje pedagoškega procesa pogosto poteka brez otrok.

Menijo, da je treba zagotoviti skrbno in sistematično opazovanje otrok, priložnosti za izražanje ter spremljanje otrok in priložnosti za spremljanje dela strokovnih delavcev, da bi ugotovili raven vključenosti in dobrega počutja otrok ter participacije otrok pri sprejemanju odločitev. Hkrati pa so poudarili, da je treba otrokom omogočiti, da se izrazijo. Otrok, ki je prikrajšan za to možnost ali je bil zanjo prikrajšan med socializacijo, si je ne more zagotoviti sam. Splošna ugotovitev je, da je priložnosti za participacijo otrok pri načrtovanju in samoevalvaciji še vedno veliko. Nazadnje ugotovitve svetovalnih delavcev kažejo, da na sposobnost izražanja otrok močno vpliva njihov temperament. Otrokom, ki se zaradi svojega temperamenta manj izražajo in dajejo manj pobud, je treba nuditi dodatno podporo pri izražanju.

Rezultati tudi kažejo, da je izražanje odvisno predvsem od načrtovanih in organiziranih pedagoških priložnosti. Otroci dajejo smiselne predloge za spremembe, kadar imajo možnost, da jih izrazijo. Otroci tudi z veseljem sodelujejo pri načrtovanju in vrednotenju procesa, kadar imajo za to priložnost. Pri dosedanjem izvajanju modela smo ugotovili, da je skupno sodelovanje vzgojitelja in svetovalnega delavca kot raziskovalcev lastnega procesa ključno za zagotavljanje refleksije in razmisleka o spremembah v pedagoškem procesu. Pokazalo se je, da samoocenjevanje na podlagi trenutnega znanja ne omogoča sprememb. Prav tako samoevalvacija brez novega znanja in vpogleda ne omogoča vpogleda v perspektive različnih deležnikov. Ker model predvideva vključevanje svetovalnega delavca kot strokovne podpore pri izvajanju strokovne refleksije in spodbujanju participacije otrok v vzgoji in izobraževanju, predstavlja ustrezno teoretično podlago za izvajanje nalog svetovalnega delavca v VIZ, ki vključuje tudi podporo strokovnim delavcem in ravnateljem.

Vendar je treba opozoriti, da so svetovalni delavci, vključeni v študijo, modelu za spodbujanje sodelovanja otrok pripisali velik potencial za profesionalni razmislek, spremljanje in zagotavljanje kakovosti procesa in participacije otrok. Hkrati so poudarili, da se morajo otroci naučiti izražanja in da je zato treba organizirati in načrtovati priložnosti za participacijo v okoljih predšolske vzgoje.

Ugotovitve nas spodbujajo k poglobljenemu in sistematičnemu proučevanju pedagoškega procesa z empiričnim in participatornim pristopom, kar bi lahko spodbudilo proces profesionalnega razmisleka in načrtovanja sprememb, kar je značilno za Model za spodbujanja participacije otrok v predšolski vzgoji in izobraževanju. Ugotovitve raziskave kažejo, da bo v prihodnje treba:

- zagotoviti priložnosti za izražanje in poslušanje otrok ter*
- zagotoviti organizirane in načrtovane priložnosti za razvijanje sposobnosti izražanja otrok.*

Za strokovne delavce pa bo treba zagotoviti vodene in načrtovane priložnosti za profesionalni razvoj in razmislek o zagotavljanju priložnosti za participacijo otrok v vzgoji.

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