

Preschool: a social-cultural context of childhood

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Summary: In this paper, contemporary conceptualizations and institutionalization of childhood are considered, in the context of preschool. From the perspectives of social and temporal conceptualization, childhood is a social and historical construct, and children, like adults, are valuable beings and becomings. Preschool context is considered from adults' and children's position in relation to restriction and regulation, i.e. guidance with the possibility of choice and negotiation. Insight into adult practices and children's experiences in everyday interactions with adults is regarded as promising for comprehension of childhood and attributes of the institutional context of children's life.

Key words: childhood, institutionalization, children, adults, preschool

In current political debates in EU states about child well-being and education, there is a dominant understanding about social investment strategies i.e. expected social investment profit¹. The background of this is the instrumental approach to children, who are viewed only as a supplement to the discourse about their well-being. To "be a child", means to be in a preparatory stage of adulthood and citizenry. Modern Western societies (and those who strive to become ones) are unimaginable without institutionalized childhood.

If the basic function of the "welfare state" is maintaining the economical and social order, and if the generational order is one of the most important assumptions of economy and democracy, than the main motivation of the "welfare state" is to reproduce this order. Specifically, this means regulation of childhood in various areas of life: from care to education.

State well-being is in front of child well-being. Instead of viewing childhood in the present, there is a dominant view of children as future citizens and workforce, in accordance with the proclaimed global and national policies. Contrary to this are new conceptualizations of childhood in social sciences. Hereinafter, the focus of attention is on the "new" view of childhood in theory and practice.

In contemporary sociology of childhood, children are considered active agents in the construction of their own culture and in the production of the adult world^{2,3,4}. Children are "human beings", and not "human becomings", i.e. children are human beings and becomings⁵. Dimensions of being and becoming are considered in relation to the present and the future. Through agency – the ability to act independently, as a generic attribute of children and childhood, attempts are made to resolve problems of exclusiveness of developmentalism and social reproduction. We advocate the position of social and temporal conceptualization of childhood, expressed in the assumed statement about childhood as a social-historical construct and children as valuable beings, who are, like adults, characterised by being and becoming.

¹ *Alanen, L.* Theorizing children's welfare.

http://www.ciimu.org/webs/wellchi/reports/workshop_1/w1_alanen.pdf. 30th October 2012.

² *Mayall, B.* The sociology of childhood in relation to children's rights // *The International Journal of Children's Rights*. 2001. 8. 3. P. 248.

³ *Corsaro, W. A.* *The sociology of Childhood*, 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks. 2005. P. 7.

⁴ *James, A., Prout, A.* *A New Paradigm for the Sociology of Childhood? Provenance, Promise and Problems // Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, 2nd edition / edited by A. James, A. Prout. London., 1997. P. 26.

⁵ *Lee, N.* *Childhood and Society: Growing up in an age of uncertainty*. Buckingham., 2001. P. 2.

In theory and practices of childhood institutionalization, the dominant metaphor of “being” and the metaphor of the child as a “project” (“the child as a being and the child as a project”^{6,7}) reflects the adult image of children, formed by social expectations and adult interpretations. On the one hand, there is an acknowledgement of children’s competency and children’s perspective, and on the other, an accentuation of children’s imperfection. Both views, embedded in the dynamic relationship of adults and children, express the necessity of protection and provision of child well-being, accepting a child’s personality, the connection between the family and the social environment.

An important issue within the multiple views of childhood is the social space of childhood. Contemporary childhood is determined by institutionalization (nurseries, preschools, schools). Institutions for children are places where children live a part of their everyday life, places where adults are (preschool teachers, teachers, parents), and places that testify about the contemporary childhood. Children’s potentials and the importance of investment in learning for life and the future, are arguments for children’s inclusion in the institutional context. Institutions for children, as structured social spaces, regulate time and activities, and are viewed in literature as institutions of “discipline” and “control” of children in the sense of social regulation and in accordance with the demands of social and educational policies and practices of institutions for children. At a very young age, children learn where, when and how they can spend time during their stay at nurseries and preschools. Specifically, where they can reside at a specific time, which spaces are available and when, which behaviours are acceptable in specific spaces.

In consideration of contemporary problems of preschool education, individualization, possibility of choice and content integration are advocated as basic principles of development-oriented programs of early childhood education and care. In accordance with the set aims of development-oriented programs (children’s physical and psychical health, child’s individuality, subjectivity in relation to self and others), child-centred interaction between adults and children is especially significant in the frame of “psychological-pedagogical conditions”⁸.

The discourse about preschool as a social-cultural context of learning and development has lately, more visibly and fiercely indicated the relevance of adults’ and children’s perspectives about the institutional setting of children’s life (and growing up). Perspectives in the sense of implicit and elaborated views of a certain phenomenon.

The structured space and time in preschools can be viewed differently by children and adults: as restrictions and regulation and/or as guidance with the possibility of choice and negotiation. Restrictions and regulation can be viewed from the adult perspective as ways of socialization for children’s well-being, and from the children’s perspective as ways of submission to dependence and obedience.

Institutionalization of childhood is related to surveillance and regulation, which means structural dependence and autonomy restrictions^{9,10}.

The point of departure in understanding adult and children’s perspectives about preschool can be autonomy, connection and regulation. Autonomy in the sense of being and becoming independent, connection in the sense of permanent relationships between adults and children

⁶ Hallden, G. The metaphors of childhood in a preschool context. <http://www.aare.edu.au/05pap/hal05001.pdf>. 30th October 2012.

⁷ Edwards, E. Introduction // Children, Home and School. Regulation, Autonomy and Connection? / edited by R. Edwards. London., 2005. P. 11.

⁸ Rubcov, V. V., Yudina, E. G. Sovremennyye problemy doskol'nogo obrazovaniya // Psihologicheskaya nauka i obrazovanie. 2010. 3. <http://psyjournals.ru/psyedu/2010/n3/index.shtml>. 30th October 2012.

⁹ Edwards, E. Introduction // Children, Home and School. Regulation, Autonomy and Connection? / edited by R. Edwards. London., 2005. P. 13.

¹⁰ Woodhead, M. Changing perspectives on early childhood: theory, research and policy // International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood. 2006. 4. 2. P. 22.

and regulation in the sense of informal and formal restrictions imposed onto children, so as to achieve social demands – “forming” the future generation, future adults¹¹.

The view of children as autonomous and active participants in activities with adults signifies a structuring of space and time that includes guidance of children with the possibility of choice and negotiation. Children’s experiences with space and time in preschools indicate how restrictions can be a challenge to seek opportunities to negotiate about them.

Children’s perception of their environment includes institutional (nursery, preschool) and familial setting. An important component of children’s perception of these settings is the perception of own participation and action related to the characteristics of the setting and processes. Participation and action in the sense of deciding, which includes the possibility of choice and influence over issues important for children, such as space, activity time, relationships. In research¹² about children’s conceptions of participation and influence in preschool, it has been concluded that children have limited opportunities for decision-making. Primarily, children decide on the activities and play that is self-initiated, and rarely on the structure, routines, content and activities initiated by preschool teacher. The point of decision-making from the perspective of children depends on who and in what contexts makes decisions. Most children understand the purport of decision-making in doing the right thing, what is allowed or forbidden. In research¹³ about learning and teaching in preschool, similar results have been obtained. Specifically, an identified asymmetry in relation to competence and power (at the level of estimation and experience), which can be an obtrusive factor in conciliating perspectives and comprehension between adults and children in the sense of domination, taking over and imposing of adults while doing tasks.

We see the value of comparative research about children’s perception of institutional context and family in gaining a more holistic insight into the relationships between the adult world and children’s world. Especially in relation to autonomy, connection and regulation, which are visible in various aspects of children’s reality of life.

This is confirmed in research¹⁴ about how the characteristics of social systems (family and institution) determine children’s experiences and activities from their perspective. The societal positioning of children in preschool and family differs (object-subject); informal functioning of family and formal functioning of preschool; holistic, flexible family and closed, fixed preschool etc.

The findings of these researches indicate the difference in understandings of adults and children. Day-to-day interactions of adults and children are an indicator of quality of the institutional setting. From children’s perspective, spatial and temporal structure of the preschool setting are the most significant areas of action and decision-making of adults, because there they have the most power and control.

Insight into the practices of adults (parents and professionals) and children’s experiences in everyday interactions with adults, primarily from children’s perspective, is one of the promising paths to comprehension of characteristics and influence of the institutional setting on children’s experiences and activities and on the institutionalization of childhood.

If interaction between children and adults, and children amongst themselves includes opportunities for active participation, with children and adults; if during construction and progress of joint activities children and adults participate as partners of different opportunities and levels of decision-making; if children practice their opportunities for decision-making and

¹¹ *Backe-Hansen, E.* Young people between home and school // *Children, Home and School. Regulation, Autonomy and Connection?* / edited by R. Edwards. London., 2005. P. 170.

¹² *Sheridan, S., Pramling-Samuelsson, I.* Children's Conceptions of Participation and Influence in Preschool: A Perspective on Pedagogical Quality // *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood.* 2001. 2. 2. P. 188.

¹³ *Babić, N.* Djeca i odrasli uče zajedno // *Dječji vrtić – mjesto učenja djece i odraslih – zbornik radova* / edited by N. Babić, Z. Redžep-Borak. Osijek., 2009. P. 25.

¹⁴ *Mayall, B.* Children in Action at Home and School // *Children's Childhoods, Observed and Experienced* / edited by B. Mayall. London., 1994. P. 125.

taking over control in joint and individual activities; if there is negotiation in various areas of learning and teaching, then it is possible to speak of preschool as a place where children and adults learn jointly and mutually.