

OPPORTUNITIES OF MODERN EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

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Abstract. *The article deals with the opportunities of modern education of preschool-age children. Scientific research proving that preschool childhood is a special period important for child's purposeful and high-quality education and his/her life both in present and in future has been discussed. The issues that are important for the expression of child's development, the opportunities of social, cultural, creative and other potential have been reviewed. The concept of modern education in the preschool sector is inseparable from the aims and objectives set in the European and Lithuanian strategic documents of education, from changes that are taking place in this sector. Teacher's professionalism, appropriately selected methods of education, educational environment friendly to child's self-expression, educational innovations applied, "new" pedagogical relations not only with children but also with parents have been presented in the article as a basis of modern education of preschool-age children.*

Keywords: *preschool-age children, modern education.*

Introduction

When Lithuania became a member state of the European Union (EU) education faced one of the main objectives – to ensure high-quality education already at the early age and the content of education meeting the demands of a contemporary child and changing society. A family because of many reasons not always can guarantee that a child will get high-quality services of education in family already since the early days. Therefore, the significance of a preschool institution as one of the most important centres of contemporary education is more and more actively emphasized talking about child's high-quality early education.

The problems of children's contemporary education and childhood as a social, cultural and pedagogical phenomenon has been analysed and assessed by many foreign and Lithuanian scientists: the ideas of child-focused learning are reflected in scientific works of Dewey (1961), Hardt and Negri (2001), Monkevičienė (2008), Juodaitytė (2004), Ruškus and Žvirdauskas (2010), Malinauskienė (2012, 2017), etc. The attitude towards childhood as a natural period of human social life valuable in itself and not only as a preparation for

future life in scientific works has been consolidated by Juodaitytė (2002, 2003). In the field of the scientific research of Monkevičienė (2008) two main directions of research have crystallized – peculiarities of the technologies of the implementation of the content of preschool and pre-primary education undergoing reforms and the changes in the training of a teacher focused on the systemic transformation of child's education and the development of professional competences. In the recent years in scientific research (Jurašaitė-Harbison, 2004; Neifachas, 2009; Ponelienė, 2014; Smilgienė, 2015) it has been stated that not understanding contemporary phenomena of the society influencing child's development and the context of their change it is difficult to construct high-quality process of education, to know the meanings of its outcomes and perceive why this process should be based on new pedagogical relations (interaction) with children. It is noted that for new pedagogical relations to form the educators' (teachers', parents') new social, educational and cultural world-view is necessary. Juodaitytė and Malinauskienė (2016: 40) point out that “contemporary education directs an adult to the new type pedagogical relations with a child when a child becomes an interesting and significant partner to the adult because of the specificity of his/her experience. In this case adults getting involved in the situation of the world of childhood become wise observers of this world and perceive information important from sociocultural and educational aspect, decoding which they can project a sociocultural dialogue between these two worlds, of children and of adults, attributing to the children's world the meanings given by children themselves not only by adults”. The research conducted by E. Jurašaitė-Harbison (2004) and J. Smilgienė (2015) highlighted teacher's abilities to get involved into the processes of the transformation of preschool education and strive for the quality of knowing the children and educating them when teachers constantly update their professional knowledge, which becomes an especially important focus analysing pedagogical relations as an important condition for contemporary education.

In order to help preschool education teachers to better know a contemporary child with his/her different needs and abilities and to temporarily model and construct the process of education two documents of education important to ensure the quality of preschool education have been prepared: *Description of Achievements of Preschool-Age Children* (2014) and *Methodical Recommendations for Preschool Education* (2015). The documents strive to ensure child-focused education acknowledging a child as an equal partner of the process of education and guarantee child's high-quality contemporary preschool education.

The assessments of the national and international (PISA, PIRLS, TIMSS) research on students' achievements, the results of which are used to regularly

monitor and improve the situation of education are becoming an important impulse for the transformation of contemporary preschool education and its content. The results of the research show that the achievements of the children who had participated in preschool education programmes at least for one year on the international scale are even by 36 points higher than of those who had not participated in these programmes (Jankauskienė, 2014). In the *Guidelines of the Transformation of General Education School* (2017) it is emphasized that “since 2006 Lithuania has been participating in the international programme of the assessment of students’ achievements. In all the fields of the research – literacy of the natural sciences, mathematical literacy and reading skills – the achievements of the Lithuanian students are lower than the mean of the countries participating in the research. The majority of the Lithuanian students successfully perform tasks of the reconstruction of the basic knowledge and application of familiar rules, however, they are much less successful in solving problem-based tasks and tasks requiring integral thinking and creativity. The researchers (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015) relate not very high assessments of the achievements of foreign students to the practice of children’s attendance of preschool educational institutions. The Lithuanian scientists Monkevičienė et al. (2009) by the conducted research confirm the international tendency: children’s better academic achievements now and in future depend on the beginning and duration of the attendance of a preschool institution, their living place and parents’ financial situation (Presentation of the Projects of the Description of Achievements of Preschool-Age Children and Methodical Recommendations for the Preparation of the Programmes of Preschool Education in Municipalities, 2013).

The regulations of national education and aspirations to make education contemporary, modern, refer to one’s native culture and develop the European citizenship, be accessible and of high quality, focused on the development and update of general human skills and ensuring the opportunities of life long learning are reflected in strategic documents on education of the EU states (including Lithuania) initiating qualitative changes in all cycles of education including preschool education (Guidelines of Education, 2002: 79).

Analysing the peculiarities and opportunities of children’s modern education the reference was made to the approach that education should be based on a child-focused paradigm, also the characteristics of contemporary children should be taken into account as well as the ideas of pedagogical relations “child-adult” when a child and his/her education are perceived as self-contained social, educational and cultural values of education.

The object of the research: opportunities of children’s modern education.

The aim of the research: to discuss the opportunities of children’s modern education in a preschool educational institution.

The methods of education: analysis of scientific, methodical, informational literature and strategic documents of education, meta-analysis.

Concept of modern education and its purpose

The concept of modern education is inseparable from the concept of the quality of education. In the documents of the European Union and Lithuania analysing the problems of the quality of education (Concept of the System of Ensuring the Quality of Formal Education, 2008; Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014), it is stated that the concept of quality is conventional and refer to the values and expectations of particular society. The quality of education and training and its management despite different national and international contexts undoubtedly remains a priority activity field of all the EU states and one of the main aspirations.

The concept of quality as a convention is also referred to by the institutions providing preschool education. In spite of social, economical, cultural and other differences between the states of the European Union the following can be considered as the most important criteria of the quality of modern education of preschool-age children (Cryer, 1999, cit. from *Methodical Recommendations for Preschool Education*, 2015: 7):

- Healthy, safe environment and child's good condition. Children have an opportunity to act, rest, develop in healthy and safe environment. Toys, equipment and furniture meant for a child are safe. Attentive care for a child by an adult corresponding to the child's age and abilities is ensured.
- Environment stimulating child's development. The conditions are established for a child to choose games and activity stimulating development in various fields: health, social, speech, cognition, art.
- Positive interaction with adults. The environment and interactions that create opportunities for children to trust in adults, to learn from them, to experience joyful emotions communicating with preschool education teachers who educate the child are established.
- Stimulation of individual social-emotional development. A child is encouraged, supported, motivated, therefore, he/she feels good, trusts in himself/herself and his/her abilities, acts safely and independently and collaborates constructively.
- Stimulation of positive relations with other children. Children are provided with adults' support that helps them regulate their interrelations and encourages children's positive interaction with peers

and friendly emotional environment created by the efforts of children themselves.

The distinguished criteria of the quality of modern education correspond to the essence of child-focused paradigm and create the condition for a child to feel as the most important participant of all the processes: creating, communicating and collaborating, searching and discovering, trusting, safe, actively participating in educational activities of various character.

In order to describe the understanding of modern education in more detail we have referred to the perception presented in the methodical book for teachers “Development of Competences” (2012: 8) that “in modern education it is the most important to focus attention on the development of a learner’s (child’s) personality, on his/her active, conscious learning providing him/her with appropriate support so that a child could develop competences important for his/her life”. It is a universal description of modern education that suits the concept of the education of a child of any age.

In Methodical Recommendations for Preschool Education (2015, chapter 10: 2) discussing the concept of modern education it is stated that effective preschool education is focused on the most important achievement – maturing child’s personality, also on successful progress of his/her education and good achievements in all 18 fields of achievements (everyday life skills, physical activity, perception and expression of emotions, self-regulation and self-control, self-perception and self-esteem, relationships with adults, relationships with peers, speech and language, exploration of environment, calculation and measurement, artistic expression, aesthetic perception, investigation, creativity, initiative and persistence, problem solving, knowing how to learn). The sum total of the fields of child’s achievements guarantees child’s high-quality holistic education and forms the basis of successful development of competences – social, health, communication, artistic, cognitive.

Contemporary education should meet the following principles (Development of Competences, 2012: 9):

- to be realistic, relevant, attractive, motivating;
- to be clear, precise, i.e. focused on a particular aim and addressee;
- to give autonomy to children;
- to be adjusted to learners of different educational needs and styles;
- to create opportunities to take different roles and responsibility;
- to expand horizons and motivate to strive for more.

Generalizing the concept of modern education and highlighting its essential features it is possible to refer to the aspects of the Good School (the notion of school comprises preschool institutions as well) discussed in the *Good School Concept* (2015), where two basic terms are among the most important –

education and learning. In the concept (2015: 3-4) it is indicated that: “Education is described by the following features: purposeful (selection of the aims and ways of education, planning of education based on knowing the children, monitoring, reflection and assessment of education); different for different (taking into account the differences in educational needs, choices, opportunities, styles and suggesting various opportunities of the pace, ways and techniques suitable to a child); flexible (applying various models of creating curriculum, grouping of children, using time, educational spaces and other resources); partnership friendly.

Learning is described by the following features: dialogue-based and investigating, interesting and bringing up (surprising, provoking, creating challenges, sufficiently broad, deep and optimally complicated); open and experiential (based on doubt, investigation, experimentation and creation, right to make mistakes, find one’s mistakes, correct them); personalized and self-governing (based on personal demands and questions, choice of learning objectives, pace, ways, sources and partners, self-monitoring and self-assessment); interactive (based on interactions and partnerships, dialogue-based, communal, network-based, going beyond school boundaries (global)); contextual, relevant (developing various competences necessary for contemporary life, related to life experience, preparing to solve actual global issues, use the variety of sources and information technologies)”.

Modern education in preschool educational institution

Having discussed the concept and main features of modern education we should present the characteristics of contemporary children in brief and answer the question “What education do they need?” In scientific literature on generations it is emphasized that modern education also depends on knowing contemporary children or the children of the new (Z) generation, their opportunities and needs, the experience they have. The scientists of different countries indicate different features of contemporary children that are assessed quite controversially. Their analysis in more detail allows defining the following tendencies of the expression of the peculiarities of the new generation, the modern concept of which includes preschool-age children as well, both in positive and in negative aspect. The scientists (Alonderienė, 2015; Солдатова, Зотова, Лебешева, & Шляпников, 2013; Tougu & Soans, 2010) state that modern children are intellectual, special, self-confident, having strong will, new social behaviour, interested in culture, tolerant for cultural differences and politically active. However, there is also another approach of scientists (Gippenreiter, 2008; Targamadzè et al., 2015; Горлова, 2009) stating that

contemporary children are problematic, complicated, disobedient, having complexes, hyperactive, unable to focus attention for a longer time and remain focused, having problems with concentration and unable to finish a task, etc. However, in spite of children's controversially assessed characteristics it is possible to state that the children of today are not worse than their peers from the past. They are just different (Лясковская, 2015). As an exceptional feature of the children of today all aforementioned scientists indicate the special relation of this generation with information technologies that have big influence on children's development, their activity, life style and undoubtedly on the content of modern education. Scientists, researchers and teachers pay especially much attention to the investigation, assessments and analysis of the expression of the features of children as the new generation. The research helps to construct a new understanding of the meanings of the quality of preschool education, apply the strategies of modern education and make the process of modern education more effective.

Modern education in preschool institution is emphasized as establishing as favourable as possible conditions for children's education. Such concept of education obliges to pay much attention not only to educational activity but also to establish favourable educational environment for child's self-expression that becomes an important educational factor helping a free and creative personality to develop. One of the main objectives set for preschool educators and other teachers working in a preschool group is to understand children, recognize their needs, personalize their education, i.e. to create educational situations and environments corresponding to the individuality of every child (Methodical Recommendations for Preschool Education, 2015: 2). This objective is especially relevant for teachers working with contemporary children that are different in their nature, sociocultural experience, needs, life style and whose education requires individual attention because in many educational situations traditional educational methods applied and educational aids and forms used do not suit children any more. The market of technologies of Lithuania and other countries recently has been receptively reacting to the peculiarities of the children of the new generation, their educational needs, transformation and organization of the process of education. The internet programme for preschool education "Toggolino" (Germany), where preschool-age children playing virtual games are taught the basics of counting and writing, knowing the colours, they learn to collaborate, their visual and auditory concentration of attention is stimulated, can serve as an example (Šiekštelytė-Valkerienė, 2014: 55). In the Lithuanian internet space it is also possible to find various educational programmes based on the elements and situations of game, educational cartoons, e-aids meant for children of early, preschool age and junior schoolchildren. Using the tasks of creative and logical character, game elements, folklore genres

children in a way that is attractive and accessible to them are introduced with the basics of natural sciences, mathematics, language learning, gain competences that are necessary for a child.

Challenges set for modern preschool education dictated by the changed approach towards children and their education, issues of the accessibility and quality of education, child's achievements and their evaluation, child's competences depend to a great extent on teacher's professionalism. In recent years when quality is becoming the most important strategical direction of education a teacher should take much bigger responsibility for the process of modern education and its impact on every child. It means that the programmes of future teacher training should be focused on invoking and maturing of teacher's vocation and the development of features and competences characteristic to the profession (The Project of the Concept of Teacher Training in Lithuania and Its Substantiation, 2016: 3). In 2014 qualification requirements for teachers who implement the programmes of preschool or pre-primary education were made stricter (teachers must have higher pedagogical education and educator's qualification) as well as the requirements for teachers of study disciplines participating in the implementation of the programmes of preschool or pre-primary education (teachers have to have attended 40-hour courses). General Description of the Study Area Group of Education and Training, defining the essential requirements for study programmes of the training of preschool and pre-primary education teachers and for their quality, helps to ensure the quality of the training of early education teachers (Review of the Situation in the Lithuanian Education in 2013-2016, 2016: 11).

Conclusions

The concept of modern education is inseparable from the concept of the quality of education. It is emphasized in the strategic documents of education of the European Union and Lithuania, the results of the national and international (TIMSS, PIRLS, PISA, etc.) assessment of students' achievements, research conducted by scientists and practice of education.

The concept of modern preschool education is focused on the most important achievement – maturing child's personality, on successful progress of his/her education and good achievements in all 18 fields of achievements.

Scientists pay much attention to the investigation, assessments and analysis of the expression of the features of children as the new generation. The research helps to construct a new understanding of the meanings and criteria of the quality of preschool education, helps to foresee and apply the strategies of modern education and makes the process of modern education more effective.

In modern preschool education teacher's preparedness for pedagogical activity mastering new competences necessary for the realization of teacher's new roles and functions is becoming especially important as well as his/her abilities to make himself/herself understood and understand contemporary parents, a modern approach towards children as the new generation, the disposition to construct modern preschool education as a process that is qualitatively important to children and that can have influence on child's academic achievements and life quality in present and in future.

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