Material environment and knowledge enabling children’s participation in ECEC institutions

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In this presentation, participation is understood as a human agency that takes place in social interactions basing on voluntary involvement and equality. Participation activity requires mutual negotiations for joint agreements among participants and provides them with a feeling of influencing on issues that are meaningful for them in their daily life. This determination can be applied into any context. Here the focus is on children’s participation in the institutions of early childhood education and care (ECEC). The fundamental prerequisites for children’s participation concern such intertwined factors as trust, communication, knowledge, and material resources. This presentation deals especially with the two latter ones – knowledge and material resources.

The younger are the children the more strongly are their ideas for actions influenced by their immediate physical environment. In order to make meaningful initiatives and suggestions for activities they need to have reasonable access to and information of the material resources available for them. Accordingly, it is worthwhile to study what is the meaning of these material resources for children’s participation, how are the things and places accessible for the children, how can the children have information of the existence, availability and ways to use these, and how can the children influence on forming their material environment and the knowledge of that.

The data for answering this study task consist of short written narratives about children’s participation in ECEC context (N < 600) collected from educators attending in-service training days organised by municipalities around the country during the last twelve years. In the categorical-content narrative data analysis (Hiles & Cermák, 2008) all those narratives that included content relevant to the set research task were selected for a closer qualitative content analysis. According to the results children can use creatively and meaningfully the materials and places if they have information of and access to these resources. They can also give reasonable suggestions regarding to information of the material world and how to modify these environments. Educators’ sensitivity and responsiveness to the children’s varying individual capacities, and positive attitudes towards children as experts of their daily material environment are important keys to children’s participation.

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