TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PROMOTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Abstract. *In democratic society, participation is child's right from an early age. Within early childhood educational practice, teachers should create diverse and meaningful situations in which children can get experience of how to be part of a group or community. The aim of the study was to examine teachers' perspectives on promoting children's participation in early childhood education. A survey of teachers involved in 5- and 6-year old children's preparation for school was conducted. 2419 teachers representing 741 educational institutions of Latvia participated in the survey. Using a 6-point Likert scale, respondents assessed different statements regarding children's participation in early childhood education. Teachers' preparedness to carry out the children's participation in their educational practice was self-assessed as well. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The analysis of the survey data shows that teachers consider children's participation a significant component of the educational process. The involvement of children in the discussion of important group issues and their influence on decision-making as well as teachers' respect of children's questions during the play-based lesson time was ambiguously assessed. Most teachers declare appropriate self-assessed competences to promote children's participation in their educational practice.*

Keywords: children's participation, early childhood education, Latvia, teachers' perspectives.

Introduction

In democratic society, participation is child's right from an early age. Thus, active children's participation in learning is central in modern early childhood education.

Since 2018, competence-based learning content is being introduced in educational institutions of Latvia. The project "Competency-based Approach in the Curriculum" implemented by the National Centre for Education, well-known in Latvia by its brand "School 2030", envisages the development, approbation and

successive implementation of competence-based learning content (Delijeva & Ozola, 2021). Children's participation is an important part of the educational process.

The State Guidelines for Pre-school Education (Ministru kabinets, 2018) emphasize the transversal skill of participation. It requires that the child participates in the development and discussion of the order and safety rules, understands, accepts, and follows them, learns to observe and respect the needs and rights of others, learns to act in an environmentally friendly manner by choosing resources which correspond to work and handling them with care. In order to promote children's participation, teachers' attitudes and competences should be changed in order to create a different teaching and educational process to promote children's participation (Crowley et al., 2020; Oliņa, et al., 2018; Svence, 2020). The learning process shall ensure a relation with his or her [child's] experience and daily life and involvement in the taking of decisions on his or her life (Ministru kabinets, 2018).

According to Recommendation on the participation of children and young people under the age of 18, participation is about individuals and groups of individuals having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity" (Council of Europe, 2012).

The aim of the study was to examine teachers' perspectives on promoting children's participation in early childhood education. The following research questions were posed: (1) what is the participation of children pre-school educational institutions of Latvia; (2) what is the self-assessment of pre-school teachers about their readiness to promote children's participation in their practice.

Theoretical framework

Although the concept of children's participation is not new researchers acknowledge that there is a range of meanings assigned to the phrase (Percy-Smith &Thomas, 2010). The concept of "participation" is linked to a number of related concepts including "active agency", "participation", "involvement" and "empowerment", "active life position" (Lysgaard & Simovska, 2015; Simovska, 2007).

In general, the following key features of the concept can be identified in the literature:
- participation, active working together, which is at the same time an active attitude towards oneself, other people, work and nature, towards the society and the world in general (Lysgaard & Simovska, 2015; Špona, 2022);

- the opportunity and right to be part of something, also referring to the feeling of being taken seriously and of being able to influence the processes and events in which one participates or in which one can participate (Simovska, 2007);
- in an educational context, the integration of community activities into learning courses, which can have two purposes: to benefit the society (in the narrow and broad sense) and to achieve academic learning goals (Bringle, Brown, Hahn, & Studer, 2019);
- a process of shared decision-making that affects the life of the individual and the community in which they live and work; it is active, conscious and voluntary involvement in decision-making (Hart, 1992);
- civic participation, which is seen as a sense of belonging to one's country, community, family, educational institution, and is expressed as an internal position (attitude, willingness to engage), activity (action) and responsibility (Bringle, Brown, Hahn, & Studer, 2019; Miķelsone & Ozols, 2018).

The concept of participation as an educational ideal is mainly linked to three different understandings of the benefits of engaging in educational activities.

Firstly, participation as a child's right to express his or her opinion, to be heard and to be taken seriously. This argument depends on the relationship between educational institutions (other formal and non-formal institutions for children's education) and communities, which creates space for democratic learning processes that are inclusive in meaningful ways (Hart, 1992; Lysgaard & Simovska, 2015).

Secondly, participation as beneficial for the social and psychological development of the child and thus contributing to better educational outcomes. Children's empowerment and competence to act have been discussed among important potential personal development outcomes of participation (Schnack, 2008).

Thirdly, high expectations are also placed on participation as beneficial for society as a whole, as it potentially strengthens democratic processes and perceptions of sustainability (Lysgaard & Simovska, 2015).

The Latvian education standards use the concept of "civic participation", which is seen both in terms of a child's ability to engage in the processes of managing the activities of education and the surrounding community, making responsible decisions and demonstrating actions that are directed towards the public interest, but also to make decisions related to the learning process that ensure meaningful learning and self-development of the child according to his or her maturity and mental capacity. Three elements are distinguished in the structure of this concept: holistic understanding (the child's knowledge and skills that enable participation, i.e. access to the environment and information), involvement itself (active action, agency and the possibility of receiving the

necessary support) and personal significance (the meaningfulness of the process, conformity to cultural understanding) (Oliņa et al., 2018; Svence, 2020).

To a large extent, the content of this concept is in line with and explicit in the aspects of child participation included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child:

- children have the right to express their opinions and thoughts freely;
- the right of children, in accordance with their level of maturity, to receive information that is relevant to them personally and to the society around them;
- the right of children, in accordance with their level of maturity, to make decisions about their own activities (to participate in decision-making);
- the right of the child to participate, to be involved in the culture of society (United Nations General Assembly, 1989).

Thus, in line with Hart (1992), it can be argued that the child's participation allows him to be meaningfully included in the surrounding society, in his personal learning process. Such participation depends on the environment and the teacher's actions, as well as on the child's level of maturity. It can be assumed that in the first three years of life the child is only acquiring the skills necessary for participation, so that the child's participation is illusory. The next levels of the participation ladder involve the child becoming more and more deeply involved, according to the maturity of the child.

The authors of the article, using a part of R. Hart's (1992) ladder of participation as a basis, adapted this model to the early childhood education, defining the roles of the child and the teacher in the process of participation (see Table 1).

*Table 1 **The roles of the child and the teacher at specific stages of participation** (Hart, 1992; Kārkliņa, Lauka un Lazdiņa, 2020)*

Level of participation	Child's activity	Teacher's role
Assigned but informed	Children (1) understand the intentions of the project, (2) know who made the decisions about their involvement and why (3) have a meaningful role and (4) volunteer for the project after being told clearly why and what to do.	Teacher ensures that all children understand the meaning of the project, supports children's independent work and possible initiative.
Consulted and informed	Understands the nature of the project, draws on knowledge and experience, expresses opinions, ideas. Consciously and meaningfully engages in consultation and action. Independently chooses from what is offered by an adult.	Teacher guides conversations, offers different versions for discussion. Takes children's opinions into account in the project implementation, offers own ideas. Makes final decision, provides explanations.

Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children	Children are not offered ready-made ideas, they discuss them themselves, also identifying everything needed to implement the ideas.	Takes up the initiative, initiates the idea, discussion, consequently plays the role of observer and consultant, if necessary – partner.
Child- initiated and directed	Projects are initiated by children. It is important for children to demonstrate their independence; they are usually reluctant to accept adult help. Equality in decision-making.	The teacher creates an environment suitable for children's activities. The teacher is a supporter and advisor.
Child-initiated shared decisions with adults	The basic idea of the projects is that the initiative belongs to the children, being aware of the problems of the environment. Make joint decisions with adults, divide roles and responsibilities.	Teacher creates situations in which children can become aware of problems and needs. Participates equally in decision-making, takes on certain responsibilities along with children.

Looking at the data in the table, it should be stressed that the teacher's role in the participation process is gradually changing. In assessing changes in the teaching process and content in Latvia and Europe, Svence (2020) identifies three important conditions: the learning environment, teacher's self-efficacy and appropriate methods.

The choice of methods has to take the willingness of children and teachers to participate into account. The following factors are mentioned:
- understanding of the application (meaning);
- self-confidence (attitude towards oneself);
- a positive attitude towards the subject (the social environment in general);
- an environment conducive to learning (in this case, an environment in which the child can actively participate);
- positive emotions – for both teacher and child;
- availability of resources: the educational establishment must provide resources and an environment that enable children to participate actively in projects that are meaningful to them;
- the child's participation does not conflict with the protection of rights (the teacher must have a good understanding of children's rights and the deeper meaning of rights protection in a democratic society;
- child participation is different from adult participation: the teacher and the child always have different roles and responsibilities, in terms of experience, knowledge, maturity;
- empowerment: participation promotes children's rights and increases civic engagement; to remove barriers to children's empowerment, adult attitudes need to change and resources need to be controlled;

-   participation is a right, not an obligation: both the child and the teacher participate in projects voluntarily (Ročāne, 2019; Lysgaard & Simovska, 2015).

The degree of teacher control varies in different types of educational activities, depending on the maturity level of the pre-school children. Research shows that too much control can limit children's participation, but that too little control can only encourage children to participate on their own terms if they have access to sufficient information, skills and experience. Accordingly, an important issue for children's participation is the teacher who creates meaningful contexts where teacher control is emotionally present, supportive and responsive (Emilson & Folkesson, 2007).

Using teacher self-assessment sheets, the following aspects of teachers' roles were identified (Wysłowska et al., 2021):

-   teacher's activity in finding new ways of interacting with children;
-   creating a positive emotional environment;
-   involving children and parents in a common exchange of experience and knowledge;
-   supporting children in long-term projects;
-   helping children to understand their rights;
-   supporting children in expressing their views and participating in decision-making;
-   using different strategies to ensure that the interests and needs of different children are met, etc.

Overall, based on the analysis of the literature, a number of problematic areas can be identified (see Table 2) which are mentioned by researchers, but which still require further research (Bae, 2009; Batistič Zorec, 2015; Crowley, Larkins, & Pinto; 2020; Einarsdottir, Purola, et al., 2015; Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013; Kangas, Venninen, & Ojala, 2016; Stavropoulos, Karachristos, et al., 2021; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2013; Turnšek, 2016).

*Table 2 **Research areas of children's participation in early childhood education** (authors' development)*

children's day-to-day cooperation in early childhood education	participation in the documentation of early childhood education practices	preschool teachers' use of language to promote children's participation	children's participation in infancy	children's participation in early literacy learning	children's participation as a democratic value in the early childhood education program	teachers' views on children's participation

These areas of research should be identified as the basis for empirical research. The above study areas are defined as a basis for empirical research.

Research methodology

To monitor the implementation of children's participation in early childhood education a survey was conducted by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia in April 2021. The current study is based on analysis of the data from the survey.

Based on the theoretical knowledge on children's participation and its specificities in the pre-school environment, a questionnaire was developed, including 24 statements on children's participation. Each statement corresponded to one of the identified areas of children's participation, namely children's right to information, children's right to express their views or children's involvement in decision-making. Teachers were also asked to self-assess their competence, i.e. knowledge, skills and implementation in practice, in the area of children's participation.

The questions can be divided into four groups according to the theoretical framework:
- the child's right to information: access to information for the child's own use; access to information for the child through the teacher;
- the right of the child to express his/her opinion: listening to the child's opinion; encouraging the child to express his/her opinion;
- involving children in decision-making: discussing relevant issues with children; taking children's views into account in decision-making; encouraging children to make their own decisions;
- self-assessment of teachers' competence in child participation, teachers' views.

The survey also included socio-demographic questions on respondents' gender, age, level of education, work experience in early childhood education and the implemented curriculum as well as questions on the educational institution represented, its type, founder and region of location.

The survey questions were structured as follows: main section, statements contained therein. The choice of statement formats: strongly agree, agree, rather agree, rather disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. In order to avoid routine responses, the reverse statement form was chosen for some statements, where the preferred response option is "disagree" or "strongly disagree".

The invitation to participate in the survey together with a link to the online questionnaire was sent to the official e-mail addresses of educational institutions implementing pre-school curricula. The institutions were asked to involve all teachers working with children aged from five to six.

2419 preschool teachers participated in the survey representing 741 (82.89%) out of 894 educational institutions that implemented preschool curricula in the school year 2020-2021.

The data revealed that the main part of the respondents were municipal educational institutions (691 institution of 788). 563 preschool educational institutions, 225 other educational institutions (elementary, primary and secondary schools and 1 institution for interest-related education) were among the respondents. The most of institutions were located in cities.

Descriptive statistics such as absolute and relative frequencies and graphic analysis were used. The data were processed and analyzed using the statistical software IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0.

Findings

Prior to data analysis the internal reliability of the scale was measured. Cronbach's α (α = 0.738) indicates acceptable internal reliability.

The first section includes statements about the children's right to information. The first group includes statements on the availability of information for children to use independently – this is based on visual information such as visual reminders, talking wall, pictograms. Most teachers answer "agree" or "strongly agree", with up to 95% of responses being affirmative, as in the statement "I change the visual information in the group according to the topic" (see Fig. 1).
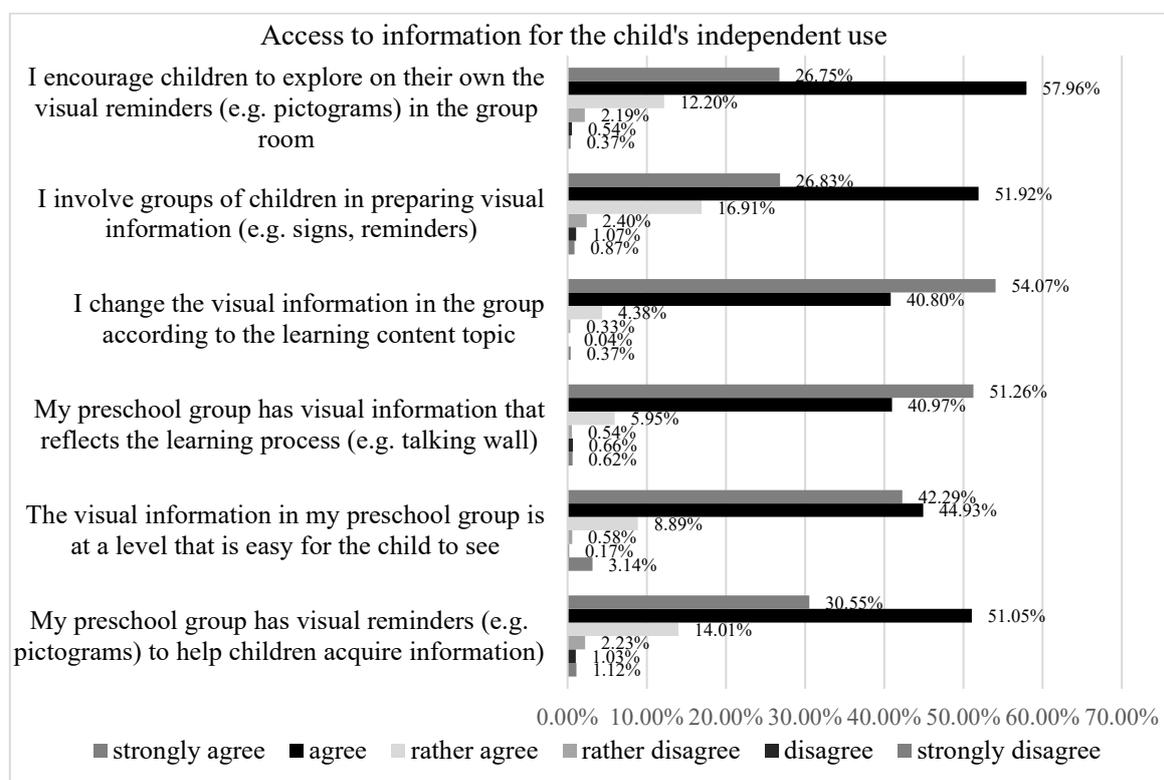

*Figure 1 **Access to information for the child's independent use** (authors' development)*

The second group includes statements about the information the child receives through the teacher, including statements about reciprocal questioning: child-to-child, child-to-teacher.
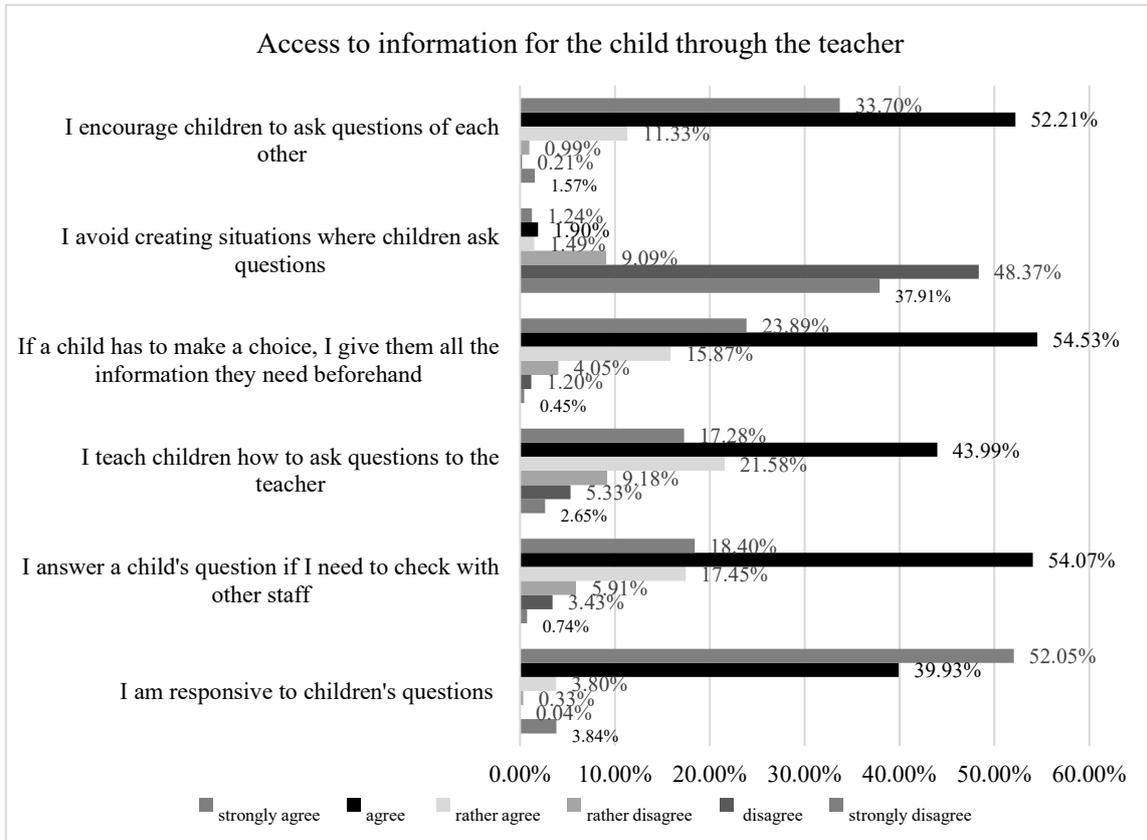

*Figure 2 **Access to information for the child through the teacher** (authors' development)*

For example, in the statement "I am responsive to children's questions", 92% of teachers answer "agree" or "strongly agree", while in the statement "I teach children how to ask questions to the teacher", 61% of teachers "agree" or "strongly agree". This suggests a focus on promoting this skill in children on a daily basis (see Figure 2).

The second part of the questions – the right of the child to express his or her views. The first group of statements includes statements on listening to the views of the child. For example, 96% of teachers "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "I teach children to listen carefully to other children's ideas", while 96% "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "I respond empathetically to information expressed by a child through facial expressions or body posture". 64% of teachers. Similar results, at 65%, are found in the reverse statement, indicating "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the statement "I correct the creative work produced by the child".

The second group includes statements about encouraging children to express their opinions. For example, 95% of teachers "agree" or "strongly agree" with the statement "I encourage children to express their thoughts in creative works". On

the other hand, the statements "There is a designated place in the premises of the educational establishment or group for children to submit suggestions and complaints" and "I have informed children about the possibility of submitting written information to the educational establishment" are the least likely to be answered "agree" or "strongly agree" by teachers. 21% and 27% respectively. This leads to the conclusion that this area of participation is not sufficiently addressed.
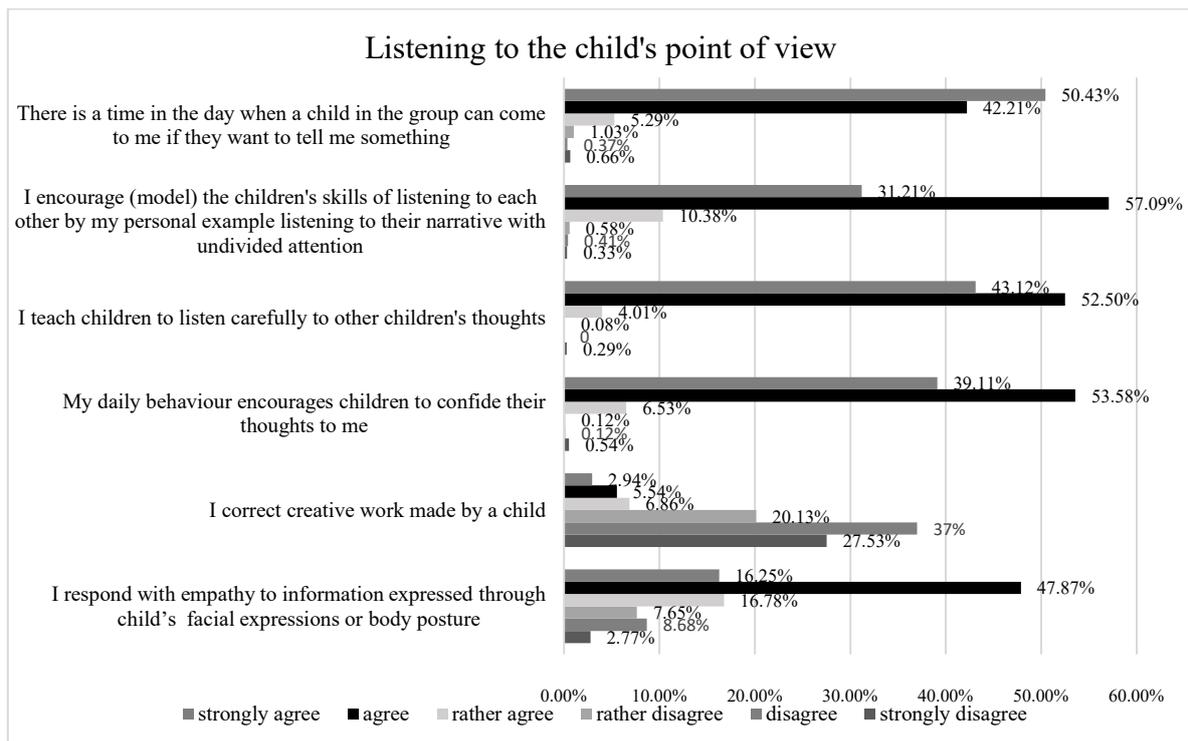

*Figure 3 **Listening to the child's point of view** (authors' development)*

There may be confusion about how to submit the application if a child cannot write independently (see Figure 3).

Third section – Involving children in decision-making. The first set of questions includes statements about discussing issues with children. For example, for the statement "I teach children to be respectful of other children's suggestions", the answers "agree" or "strongly agree" are given by almost all, 97% of the teachers surveyed. The statement "I teach children to wait their turn to speak and not to interrupt each other" is also "agreed" or "strongly agreed" by 94% of teachers.

The second group includes statements about taking children's views into account in decision-making. For example, for the statement "when we discuss children's suggestions in group, I teach children to justify their thoughts", 92% of teachers answered "agree" or "strongly agree", while the reverse statement, "disagree" or "strongly disagree" for the statement "if a child's suggestion cannot

be implemented in the near future, I do not try to remember it" was given by 64% of teachers.

The third group includes statements about encouraging children to make independent decisions. The statements "I teach children to work together to make a joint decision"; "I provide the necessary support to enable children to carry out an activity they devise independently in the group" and "I set aside time in the daily group time for children to plan activities on their own initiative" are answered "agree" or "strongly agree" by 93% and 91% of teachers respectively.

The fourth section of questions – teachers' perceptions of children's participation and self-assessment (see Fig.4).
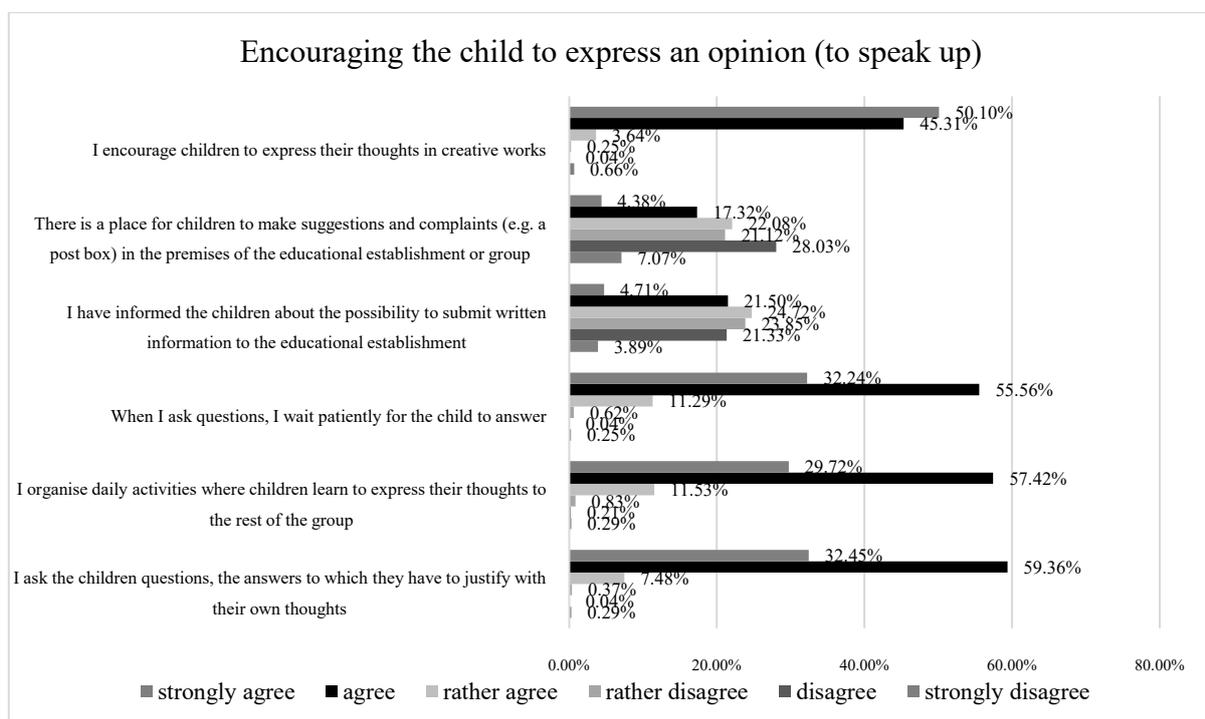

*Figure 4 **Encouraging child to express opinion** (authors' development)*

96% of teachers answer "agree" or "strongly agree" to the statements "the teacher's role is to encourage children to express their thoughts" and "what the child says helps the teacher to understand the child", while 59% of teachers answer "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the reverse statement "children's questions get in the way of the lesson".

For the statements "taking children's suggestions into account builds children's self-confidence" and "teacher's encouragement helps children express their ideas", 93% and 95% of teachers answer "agree" or "strongly agree" respectively, while 68% of teachers answer "agree" or "strongly agree" for the statement "time should be set aside to discuss children's suggestions".

Similar results are found in the two reversed statements. 62% of teachers give the answer "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the statement "only the

teacher makes decisions in the group" and 67% to the statement "discussing important issues with the children is a formality".

82%-85% of teachers "agree" or "strongly agree" that they have knowledge of children's participation rights, that they have the skills to implement them in early childhood education and that children's participation rights are respected in education. Thus, about 15% of teachers rate their knowledge and skills in this area as insufficient.

Conclusions

The results of the study allow to draw the following conclusions.

Children's participation requires a broad perspective and a flexible approach on the part of the adult, allowing children not only to express their views but also to have a real impact on their daily lives. There is a risk that the adult, motivated by positive intentions, assumes the role of interpreting the child's needs without consulting the children themselves.

The results of the monitoring show that children's participation in pre-school education is implemented in accordance with the guidelines for children's participation in educational policy of Latvia.

In line with the results of the survey:
- there is a need for increased focus on promoting children's questioning skills, which would increase children's participation;
- there are teachers who correct children's creative work and there are teachers who do not show enough empathy to children; this creates a need to create greater awareness among teachers of the child's right to express his or her views, this area of children's rights is insufficiently addressed;
- although teachers indicate that children mostly have the opportunity to be involved in decision-making, there are also signs of formal involvement;
- the results of the teachers' self-evaluation suggest that children's views are not always given sufficient consideration in the educational process; some teachers do not pay enough attention to discussing children's suggestions.

The teacher plays an important role in facilitating children's participation. According to the results of the study, the teacher should pay more attention to children's suggestions and complaints, and to empathy with children's non-verbal expressions, including in creative work. Teachers need to improve their skills in involving children in group decision-making and giving children choices.

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