Nada Turnsek
Assistant Professor, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Between the Right to Choose and Children's Participation in Slovenian Kindergartens

With the new paradigm of sociology of childhood (Prout and James, 2006) the traditional notion of childhood as a developmental phenomenon was replaced by the recognition that childhood is an integral part of society and culture rather than its "predecessor", and that children should be regarded as social actors rather than “human becomings” (Uprechard, 2008). As emphasized by Kirby, Lanyon, Cronin and Sinclair (2003), childhood is not a state of immaturity, incompetence and inability to understand the world, but rather children should be seen as significant contributors to society and culture. The concept of “the competent child” (Malaguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 2006), and the related concept of children's participation raises theoretical, professional, as well as practical dilemmas. The paper discusses the results of several quantitative studies (involving 810 respondents) as well as qualitative research carried out in the period from 2006 to 2013 (Turnšek, 2007, 2008, 2009) examining Slovenian preschool teachers' attitudes toward the child's participation as well as their practices. Analyses of qualitative data (categorization) were carried out, as well as descriptive statistical analysis and cluster analysis – Ward’s method. Research suggests the following conclusions: children’s participation is closely linked to the level of decision-making provided to their educators within pre-schools; there is a significant gap between the teachers’ and children’s perception on the level and content of participation provided to the children; for most educators the meaning of child participation is confined to the child's right to choose among the alternatives provided by the adults/educators. There is a clear division between the group of educators who support the traditional notion of childhood and those who support the concept of a competent child based on the belief that children also create their own choices and alternatives. Factors related to the differences in the educators’ attitudes are also presented.