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## Teaching staff background of reforms in Russian preschool education and the professional development of teachers

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### Abstract

The article presents the international assessment system «Early Child Environment Rating Scale (revised edition)» (ECERS-R) as the tool for enhancing of preschool education quality in Russia and for professional development of teachers. The discussing points of the survey of teachers' readiness to the educational reforms are revealed. Some ways of staff training with the help of ECERS-R are discussed which were designed in the Laboratory of Child Development (Institute of System Projects of Moscow City University).

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### 1. Introduction

Early childhood learning experiences can meaningfully influence short- and longer-term life outcomes of people ([1]; [2]; [3]). Therefore, the responsibility of teachers in creating a child's well-being during his or her preschool education is strong. The impact of teacher-child interaction and all other aspects of preschool teacher's professionalism into a child's development is associated with a human well-being, as well as with his educational success and the quality of education, in general [4].

The great changes in preschool education in Russia have been started since the Federal State Preschool Curriculum and the new Federal Law of Education in Russia were adopted (2012-2013). It is accompanied by the

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process of becoming new principles of quality of education and new ways of its assessment, on one hand. And, on the other hand, it is followed by the vital changes in the system of teacher training for preschool education.

Principal «learning by doing» (Dewey, Kerschensteiner, Kilpatrick, Freinet, Montessori, etc.) is considered to be worth using in professional development because it better forms professional consciousness, professional conduct and set up appropriate professional activity. So, it's helpful to use some practical-oriented means to enhance staff competences or to train students of teacher training universities.

Teaching all over the world demands following some rules, and many systems of teacher training support students to be guided by the following professional code, such as University of Dublin (Ireland), Victoria, Brandon and Simon Fraser (Canada) require that teachers should be ready to discuss with colleagues, pupils and their parents / guardians the quality of its teaching and professional duties [5]. And it is important for this requirement to have some sort of a guide and be aware of what is the quality of education, what is a professional duty in creation of learning environment for children's well-being. On the same idea the Russian system of preschool teacher training should be based, as we consider.

## 2. Method

A questionnaire was designed based on some important indicators of ECERS-R (Early Children Environment Rating Scale, revised edition [6]), which are included to the good and excellent levels of quality of education. Preschool teachers and head-teachers (N=531 from 27 regions of Russian Federation, among them – 353 preschool teachers, 100 head-teachers) were proposed to answer the questions about criteria of learning environment quality assessment. The participants had to answer 3 types of questions about each criterion: does the situation in their preschool meets these criteria; is it possible to meet these criteria under the existing conditions; are these criteria necessary for a high learning environment quality. The participation was anonymous, online (Google-form), involving was not obligatory. The answers were compared to the results of learning environment quality assessment by ECERS-R (2015 [7]).

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1. Teachers' opinion VS experts' assessment of learning environment

The majority of teachers accept the value of early childhood learning environment quality criteria stated in ECERS-R. The participants consider it necessary / important that the learning environment is organized in accordance with certain positions of ECERS-R. Statistically significant differences were not found between the groups "teachers" and "head-teachers". The average percentage through all the questions for the teachers is 83,62%, for the head-teachers is 87,56%. That means that preschool staff adopts the new guidelines which were shown in Federal State Preschool Curriculum (2013), such as the individualization of learning, the transit from a verbal instruction to knowledge in action, the change of the educational paradigm from "classroom" format to the "playful learning" format, etc.

A comparison of the results to experts' assessment scores shows that teachers and head-teachers overestimate the quality of the educational environment in their kindergartens and ability to bring it into line with ECERS-R criteria. For example, the item "Informal use of language" (the indicator "Children are asked questions to encourage them to give longer and more complex answers") was scored during the experts' observations as appropriate in 13,95% cases, but the questionnaire figured out 94,9% participants as they met this criterion in their regular practice. Some more examples of such comparison: the item "Encouraging children to communicate" (the indicator "Staff balance listening and talking appropriately for age and abilities of children during communication activities") – observations as appropriate in 30,23% cases and the teachers' opinion in 93,3% cases; the item "Child-related display" (the indicator "Most of the display is work done by the children") –

expert assessment gave 56,51% of positive scores and the teachers' answers figured out 63,2%; the item "Schedule" (the indicator "Variations made in schedule to meet individual needs") – observations as appropriate in 32,56% and the teachers' opinion in 88,1% cases. This tendency corresponds with the surveys of other authors, such as A.S. Sidenko [5], who covered out that "for the teacher, having 30 years of experience, satisfaction with the results of his/her activities, it's quite difficult to see, understand and accept the new values: the stereotype of consciousness prevents the "best in the world of Soviet education" and the vision him/herself as a successful teacher". The factor analysis of the participants' opinion towards the item "Informal use of language" in the points "age group" and "vocational education" figured out the following. Age doesn't influence the answers: teachers of two age groups were compared (25-35 and 36-59), and both have almost equal ranks of those responders who ask questions to encourage children to give longer and more complex answers and who do not (72,28 and 73,99% who ask, 27,72% and 26,01% who don't). Other age groups don't have enough responders to compare with. But the teachers who have vocational education in the area of pedagogy state that they provide adequate informal use of language more often than teachers without such education (with vocational education - 74,05% provides, 25,63% don't; without vocational teacher training – 66,67% provides, 33,33% don't).

The head-teachers evaluate the quality of the learning environment more critically than the teachers. The percentage of the head-teachers' positive answers in 9 of 10 items is lower, only one item "Staff interaction and cooperation" (the indicator "Program promotes positive interactions among staff members" which corresponds with the management style) faced higher head-teachers' scores in opinion than teachers' scores. But the statistically significant differences were found between the groups "teachers" and "head-teachers" only in the items: "Encouraging children to communicate", "Space for privacy", "Informal use of language", "Schedule", "Interaction". Most of these items deal with positive non-formal relationships and interaction between children and adults, appropriate learning opportunities in language and thinking, consideration of each child's personality as a value. The indicators of such kind are not so evident for self-estimation. The other reason for this difference is that the teacher doesn't properly understand the guidelines of Federal State Preschool Curriculum, whereas the head-teachers are more close to it.

It's worth mentioning the opinion of participants of our survey towards the item "Provision for children with disabilities", because it's a global tendency to support such children, to give them equal rights, social and learning opportunities in inclusive way of education. So, both – teachers and head-teachers – consider the inclusive education as the feature of enhancing the quality of preschool education (77,08% of teachers and 83,33% of head-teachers noticed that integration of children with disabilities into the group is a value and worth doing, that is statistically significant ( $p < 0,05$ ); 71,7% responders mentioned that in their practice children with disabilities are integrated into the group and participate in most activities). Nevertheless, 13,5% of responders doesn't suppose it's worth mentioning if there are such conditions for children with disabilities. And 6,6% responders consider it to be dangerous or not applicable. This item is the only one were negative answers about this value were evident. That reveals anxiety of teachers' community towards the problem of integration.

Deficiencies in the detail-spatial environment are reflected by teachers better than the deficits in child-adult cooperation. For example, the item "Child-related display" has only 6,69 points difference between responders' opinion and experts' assessment scores, but the item "Encouraging children to communicate" has 63,7 points difference.

And one more item is supposed us to be discussed – the space for privacy. 71.1% of responders consider that their classroom has the space for privacy as it is described in the indicator ("Space set aside for one or two children to play, protected from intrusion by others (Ex. No-intrusion rule; small space protected by shelves)"). In spite of that the expert observation in 2015 and in 2016 figured out that set up space for privacy is an untypical practice in Russian preschool education. The usual scores are 3 "minimum" (no set up place, but children are allowed to play alone or with one partner) or 1 "inadequate" (no opportunity for privacy). It happens because of the number of children in the group (30 or more) and because of not-accepting such value by teachers.

### 3.2. Staff training with the help of ECERS-R

The international experience of ECERS-R (for example, in the USA, Sweden, Germany, Singapore), followed by the position of its authors themselves [6], indicates the possibility of using ECERS-R for assessment the quality of preschool education in the field of management development of the education system. It can be used for teaching staff training on the basis of an independent educational enhancing assessment.

The analysis of international experience in the application of the scale ECERS-R and its testing in the educational system of Moscow led the team of The Laboratory of Child Development (ISP MCU) to the implementation of the project «Development and testing of a model of the independent educational enhancing assessment of preschool education quality with the help of the international assessment tool ECERS» (2015-2016) with the support of the Moscow City Department of Education.

There were three vectors of enhancing work with teaching staff with the help of ECERS:

- Independent assessment by experienced assessors followed by workshops with staff;
- Self-assessment which is compared with independent assessment by experienced assessors – the results should be discussed with the staff through reflexive training;
- Serial discussions of ECERS items and its indicators and though it – the values of preschool education and appropriate for child well-being learning environment.

During the implementation of the project it became evident that preschool groups in which teachers consciously or intuitively realize the idea of “emerging literacy” (Developmentally Appropriate Practice) (Bredekamp, 1986) and are based on the concept of “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1931-1960), reveal higher scores in the experts’ assessment (especially for components related to the organization of children activities, interactions and also for items of personal care routines, space and furnishings, etc.).

## 4. Conclusion

The results of teachers’ self-assessment with ECERS-R, as shown by our study, are the starting point for their revision of approaches to the organization of the learning environment (creative solutions for taking in consideration children’s needs, the elimination of the risk of children’s cognitive and speech retardation, etc.).

Self-assessment is the way to develop professional positions and adopt «the spirit of the scale» [6] which helps teachers to stand on a child-oriented position instead of instruction-oriented position.

Thus, Federal State Preschool Curriculum is a significant achievement of the Russian system of education management. It causes the enhancement of axiological grounds of teaching and provides the important values of early childhood. And for creating optimal learning environment for children’s well-being the pedagogical community is expected to develop its understanding of the high quality of preschool education through the usage of the reliable and valid means, such as world-wide known assessment tools. The items and indicators of learning environment quality can surely become the key points for establishing early childhood values among teachers and head-teachers, and community in general.

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