

Guest editors' introduction to the special issue

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This issue is devoted to the problems of the organization of the environment of preschool education in the interests of supporting the well-being and development of the child. The content of the issue is divided into two parts: the first is connected with the use of the cultural-historical approach in preschool education, and the second is directly related to assessment of the quality of the educational environment.

A cultural-historical approach to child education and development has shown its effectiveness and attracts the attention of both researchers and practitioners (van Oers, 2012; Veraksa & Sheridan, 2018). The application of the cultural-historical approach to preschool education is, first of all, attentive to the means of mental activity offered to children. Vygotsky (1996) considered the emergence of higher mental functions as resulting from the transformation of the primary forms of the psyche due to the usage of cultural means of mental activity. He understood “cultural tools” to mean special forms of culture aimed at controlling human behavior (e.g., signs).

Leonid Venger has conceptualized visual models as a preschool child's means of mental activity (see Veraksa & Veraksa, 2018). The first study in this issue, carried out by **Yuri Karpov, Inna Rabinovich, and Vera Brofman**, specifically discusses the problem of means in the context of preschool-specific forms of children's activity, such as sociodramatic play, construction, reading, and storytelling. This study shows that, in the preschool age, it is necessary to conduct developmental activities—activities that lie in the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978). Creation of such a space is facilitated by the fact that children of preschool age are sensitive to the development of visual models. Sensitivity is confirmed by the fact that children of preschool age create a large number of drawings, which are in fact visual models. The results of the study show that mastering the ability to use visual models leads to the development of the self-regulation and symbolic thinking of preschool children.

Similarly, the role of children's play activity in the development of mental functions is addressed in this issue. Vygotsky (1984) noted that “play is a kind of attitude toward reality, which is characterized by the creation of imaginary situations or the transfer of the properties of some objects to others” (p. 348). The object to which the properties of another object are transferred is the substitute object. According to Vygotsky, play is characterized by the presence of an imaginary situation: for example, a child imagines being a hero, assumes the role, acts in accordance with the accepted role, and uses object substitutions. Vygotsky had emphasized the importance of play for the development of preschoolers.

The digitalization of childhood presents the question of whether role-play is still the leading activity in early years. The second study in this issue, by **Aleksander Veraksa, Darya Bukhalenkova, and Elena Smirnova**, shows the relationship between the components of the role-play (object substitutions, play interaction, understanding the

plot of the play) and the components of executive functions (inhibition, cognitive flexibility, working memory). Their results confirm Vygotsky's position on the effect of play on the development of children and justify the need to create for preschoolers the conditions for the development of role-play.

The third article, by **Nikolay Veraksa**, discusses the feasibility of the concept of "space for child realization" as an opposition to the "zone of proximal development." This new concept focuses on those practices in which a child not only follows an adult, mastering cultural samples, but also has the experience of putting forward their own ideas and implementing them, thereby creating works and presenting them to the social environment. In this case, the activity of the teacher should be carried out over two spaces: the zone of proximal development and the space of child realization.

The fourth article, by **Ole Hansen**, discusses the question of the interaction of teachers and children. Hansen identifies the various models of communication between children and adults that are established within a particular educational institution. The article shows these models of communication are crucial in children's development and that there is therefore a need to analyze the models of communication between children and adults to characterize the educational environments of nurseries and kindergartens.

In the fifth article, **Tatiana Le-van, Igor Shiyan, Olga Shiyan, and Sergey Zadadaev** assess the quality of the preschool educational environment in Russia using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised. The results show that the quality of the educational environment is a complex structure. They also establish that a factor significantly affecting the nature of the educational process is the number of children in a group and its ratio with the number of adults who work with them.

The final article, by **Maelis Karlsson Lohmander and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson**, discusses the development of early childhood education in Sweden as a process of gradually improving its quality. Following analysis, the authors come to a conclusion about the expediency of flexible organization for preschool education. The discussion of organization is centered on the transition from the group principle—according to which there are three employees per group of 15 to 18 children—to a more flexible organization—in which there are seven to eight adult teachers and childcare assistants per team of 40 to 50 children. The latter combination is supposed to contribute to more efficient use of the educational institution's resources. However, the authors' analyses of various research studies suggest that this flexible organization of large groups of young children may have a negative impact on children's learning, development, and well-being. Children need close relationships with adults to support their learning processes in a caring environment. Hence, there is no reason to assume that flexible groups will lead to improved quality in early childhood education.

From these six different articles, we see various aspects of organizational questions in early childhood education: from the organization of the settings as such to the organization of learning situations—all for the benefit of the children. The materials presented in the articles not only support children's activity but also reveal its significance for all participants in the educational process: children, parents and teachers.

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