

# THE QUALITY OF CHILD TRAINING IN THE PRE-SCHOOL INSTITUTION: PARENTS' POINTS OF VIEW

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## Abstract

*Lately, strategic documents prepared by Lithuanian and foreign educational institutions and recent discussions held by pedagogical societies and stakeholders have considered the issues of education quality. The question of ensuring quality has become one of the key priorities of educational policy assisting the system of education in Lithuania with integration into the space of European context. The status of the family can hardly guarantee the required conditions for self / educating children at home in all cases. Therefore, high-quality facilities should be a crucial aspect of training provided by the educational institutions since early childhood. Pre-school education in Lithuania, as one of the stages of a successive educational system, meets the basic needs of a child, including safety, activity and self-expression. Therefore, assessing a real situation in pre-school institutions seems to be an important point providing information on the needs for obtaining high quality self/education and training services, which is the way to implement one of the purposes of pre-school education – to help the family with fostering all qualities of a child (intellectual, emotional, volitional and physical) determining personal maturity and social success thus offering the programme of pre-school education and/or required educational help for the child or family.*

*Empirical research has revealed parents' points of view to the quality of education and quality evaluation and helped with identifying the factors that may have an impact on child self/education.*

**Key words:** children, education quality, institution of pre-school education.

## Introduction

Recently, the process of worldwide globalization has covered all areas of human existence, including the system of education. *Dakar Plan of Action* (2000) points to the quality of education as to the primary goal allowing the implementation of strategy for *Education for All*. These days, strategic documents prepared by Lithuanian and foreign educational institutions and discussions held by pedagogical societies and stakeholders have intensively debated the problems of education quality. The concept of education quality formulated by the Commission of the European Union introduces that quality is a relative understanding of a phenomenon and is based on values and expectations. Quality establishment must be a dynamic, continuous and democratic process highlighting conformity to the major posed challenges (Quality targets in services for young children, 1996). *The Conception of the System for Ensuring the Quality of Formal Education* (legal act No ISAK-3219 issued by the Minister of Science and Education of the Republic of Lithuania on 24 November 2008) defines that “the conception of education quality is of a contextual and changing character”. The idea can be considered taking into account personal and public needs prevailing at a particular period of time, the conception of the educational mission and established goals for education. Some scientists (Barkauskaitė,

Bruzgelevičienė, 2002; Želvys, 2003; Monkevičienė, Glebuviėnė, Stankevičienė, etc. 2009) emphasize that the conception of education quality, including its features, can be agreed. Education quality can be accepted as the wholeness of the contractual features of the value showing the degree, method and tools an educational institution demonstrates to achieve the established educational goals appropriate for the education system, to meet the needs of the learners, to help with approaching personal maturity and to assist in managing different processes and conditions.

The conception of quality as the idea of agreement should be followed by the institutions responsible for pre-school self/ education. For the last two decades, this question has remained a burning issue as in-depth discussions have been held to introduce changes in the system of pre-school education and to present the performance of those changes determined by approaches to the child. Fluctuations in the points of view to the child as a unique personality along with the attitude to childhood as an intrinsically valuable period of social human life have forced changes in the position on child education (Monkevičienė, 2009). The prevailing methodological provision for recent education for children is based on a child-focused paradigm that requires the total approach to child's personality, including his/her abilities and aspirations for free individual activities (Juodaitytė, 2002).

O. Monkevičienė (2008) suggests that education in the institution of pre-school education can be viewed as the process offering more favourite conditions having an impact on developing the internal power, self-expression and self-development of the learner. Such conception of education obliges the teachers working at the institutions of pre-school education with creating high-quality conditions for self/education so that to help with training a free and creative personality. The idea has been supported by a number of scientists-practitioners. D. Prakapienė and A. Malovikas (2006) find education a modern and powerful tool intended to create conditions for all learners to acquire inherent abilities, broad knowledge, social skills and professional competence thus helping a person with gaining strength to protect himself/herself from different "social manifestations of evil".

S. Neifachas (2007) specifies the conception of received quality self/education as a phenomenon and maintains that learner's self/education must be integrated into child's everyday life, family, surroundings and nursery school. The scientist believes that educational programmes play a crucial role in education quality in the establishment of pre-school education. Moreover, it should be taken into account that the effectiveness of education depends on the learners and experts along with their abilities and methodology. An educational environment and work in groups are also crucial factors determining the effectiveness of quality education. The educational environment is social and cultural space of the educational institution where a diverse process of learner training and self-education takes place and where children are offered conditions for feeling safe, cosy and comfortable. Cherishing personal qualities of a child is another fundamental aspect. Thus, in this case, recently gained experience should either correlate with the previous one or broaden it. Properly arranged educational activities and close interrelations between a child and his/her family, between a child and a teacher and between the family, educational institution and community should help with gaining knowledge about the child and surroundings, the formation of his/her lifestyle and assistance in finding a suitable place in the world of adults. Investigations conducted by foreign scientists (Bryant; Peisner – Feinberg & Miller – Johnson, (2000); Henderson & Mapp (2002); Fan & Chen, 2001 etc.) have disclosed that the quality of child self/education must cover any age and be integrated into the activities of people engaged in partnership with child self/education: teachers, parents, etc.

A group of Lithuanian scientists (Monkevičienė, Glebuviėnė, Stankevičienė etc., 2009) have conducted research *Quality Analysis of Implementing the Content of Pre-School Education*. The study extensively analyzes the field of conceptions describing the quality of implementing the content of pre-school self/education considering different positions of the representatives

of education policy, administration offices, teachers, parents, etc. This field requires constant public attention and more detailed research conducted by educators, which allows assessing a real situation in terms of quality self/education at the institutions of pre-school education of a certain region. It is supposed that parents have the closest relation with their children, and therefore can most objectively examine the current situation.

## Research Methodology

### *General Characteristics of Research*

The conducted research is aimed at examining parents' attitudes to educating children at the pre-school institution and at evaluating the indicated educational factors that might have an impact on the quality education of the learners. To perform research, a questionnaire reflecting the quality parameters of education at pre-school institution was created. The questionnaire was designed on the basis of a report produced by a group of scientists that undertook research *Quality Analysis of Implementing the Content of Pre-School Education* (Monkevičienė, Glebuviienė, Stankevičienė et al, 2009).

### *Research Sample*

The sample was made using simple random sampling. The parents of the children attending the institutions of pre-school education in the city of Šiauliai were given 125 questionnaires 106 of which were accepted as useful for further investigation. Only properly filled questionnaires were processed. The degree of accepting the questionnaires is rather high. It should be taken into account that many more female (84.7 %) rather than male (15.3 %) participated in the research. The questionnaires were offered to the parents who either took their children to or picked them from pre-school, which shows that mothers rather than fathers more frequently see their children at the kindergarten. The other reason is that female rather than male respondents more carefully fill in the questionnaires.

Parents' distribution according to the age differs. The sample of research in this case fluctuated from 25 to 50 years, which is 37.5 years old on average. The majority of the surveyed participants (55.7 %) are middle-aged (31 – 40 years old), 38.6 % of those are young up to 30 years old and the rest (5.7 %) is older respondents between 41 and 50. The results of research indicate a different level of education gained by the respondents: almost half of those (49.0 %) are graduates from different universities and have university education, 19.0 % of parents have vocational education, 16.0 % - secondary education, 16.0 % - higher vocational education.

### *Instrument and Procedure*

The questionnaire was the main instrument for obtaining research data and included introduction and the main part. The introduction presented information on how to fill in the questionnaire and personal details in case a respondent could encounter some problems. To obtain reliable and valuable data, the survey was of an anonymous and confidential character.

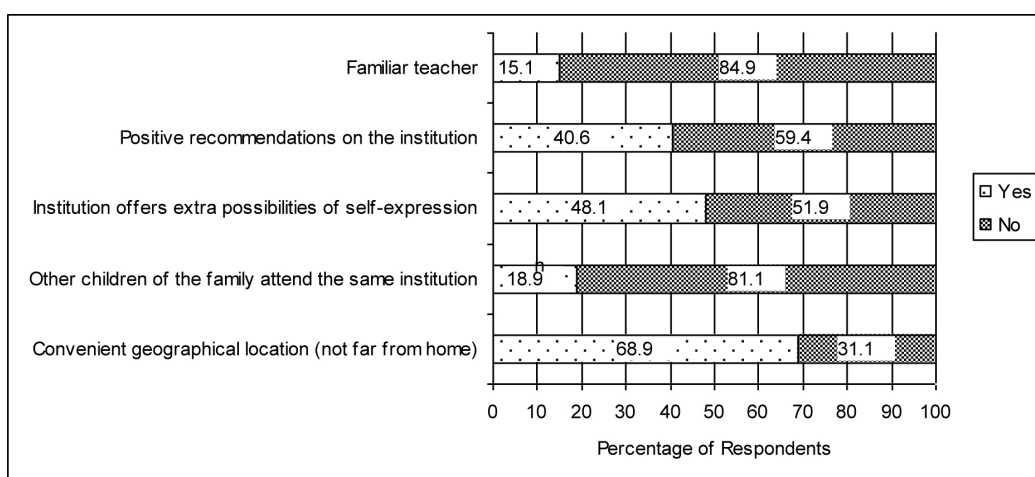
The main part of the questionnaire provides questions that fall into 2 diagnostic blocks: demographical data on the participants of the survey and quality evaluation at the institutions attended by the children of the respondents.

*Data Analysis*

For data analysis, the method of descriptive statistics, including absolute and relative frequencies and standard deviation was applied. The index of the significance of statements reflecting the criteria for quality education was calculated. The above mentioned statements were ranked following the before described index. To establish possible differences between frequencies, chi ( $\chi^2$ ) criterion was employed.

**Research Results**

Research on child education in terms of quality has discovered the motives that inspired parents with choosing a pre-school institution attended by their child. The results are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure1: Motivation for choosing the institution of pre-school education attended by the child (N=106).**

Research results reveal that a convenient geographical position (not far from home) has been the most appropriate option for the majority of the respondents (68.9 %), i.e. the location of the institution close to the living place has been the main reason for making a choice. It is supposed that the choice based on the principle of convenience has the weakest possibility of being a factor ensuring the quality of education. However, quite a few parents have chosen the institution with reference to other motives: 48.1 % of the surveyed participants prefer one or another pre-school institution due to extra possibilities of self-expression. 40.6 % of the respondents state that positive recommendations on the institution of those whose children attended the kindergarten put some weight to making a decision. The latter aspects of motivation related to extracurricular educational activities in a certain institution and positive recommendations of teachers' work are the evaluation criteria for quality education.

Statistical significant deviations in terms of parents' age can be noticed between two alternatives for why a child attends particularly this institution of pre-school education: *the institution offers extra possibilities of self-expression (dancing, music, chess, arts, etc.) what is missing in other similar establishments* ( $\chi^2=8.847$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.012$ ), *positive recommendations on the institution* ( $\chi^2=8.421$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.015$ ). The parents aged between 31 and 40 as well

as those between 41 and 50 prefer the places paying attention if *the institution offers extra possibilities of self-expression what is missing in other similar establishments* (55.9 %, 83.3 %) and accept *positive recommendations on the institution* (45.8 %, 83.3 %). The results show that middle-aged and senior parents feel more responsibility for evaluating a choice of the institution of pre-school education and prefer quality criteria reflecting additional educational facilities ensuring the development of individual self-expression possibilities.

Comments on the opinion if children are required early quality education yet at a pre-school age disclose that 86 % of the respondents find it *very important* while the rest (14 %) agree it is *important*. It can be maintained the parents understand the essence of early education as all the best must be given to the child as early as possible. The fundamentals of child education must be learned at an early age thus ensuring quality education. In this case, parents' point of view was unambiguous and no other options of the provided answers such as "education is not that important (not important) at this age" were chosen.

The parents were also asked to identify the main criteria for quality education. The obtained results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. The distribution of the most important criteria for quality education at the pre-school institution.**

Quality may involve:	N	Minimum	Maximum	SI	SD
A loving caring teacher	106	0.50	1.00	0.91	0.13
Good emotional well-being of a child (wants to go to meet his/her friends, etc.)	106	0.50	1.00	0.91	0.12
Good child care (good nutrition, rest, health care)	106	0.50	1.00	0.88	0.14
Achieved educational objectives (remarkable progress, proper development, preparation for school)	106	0.50	1.00	0.88	0.13
Encouragement to know yourself	106	0.00	1.00	0.87	0.16
Encouraging creative activities	106	0.25	1.00	0.87	0.15
Happy life in a group of children of the same age (freedom to play games, interesting activities and events)	106	0.25	1.00	0.86	0.16
Developing child competencies	106	0.50	1.00	0.84	0.14
Research on the personal self/development of a child	106	0.00	1.00	0.83	0.18
Discovering and using individual possibilities of a child	106	0.50	1.00	0.83	0.17
Properly arranged educational environment of the institution (much space, plenty of toys, tools, aesthetic, comfortable)	106	0.25	1.00	0.83	0.16
Educational programmes aimed at demonstrating child needs in practical activities	106	0.00	1.00	0.82	0.20
General abilities, competencies and methods applied by the experts in the field at work	106	0.25	1.00	0.81	0.17
Continuous service improvement	106	0.00	1.00	0.81	0.19
Collaboration between the office and head of the institution and teachers, parents and children	106	0.25	1.00	0.81	0.16
Child preparation for life in a changing environment	106	0.25	1.00	0.80	0.19
Organization and implementation of the educational process	106	0.00	1.00	0.80	0.16
Teacher training	106	0.00	1.00	0.79	0.18
Values held by a learner	106	0.00	1.00	0.79	0.17
Constant changes in activities stimulating advancement	106	0.00	1.00	0.79	0.19
Adequacy for provided achievements represented by pre-school learners	106	0.00	1.00	0.79	0.18
Child training for academic activities	106	0.50	1.00	0.78	0.17
Creating an educational environment	106	0.00	1.00	0.77	0.18
General purposes of education in the activities stimulated by the institution	106	0.00	1.00	0.76	0.19
Involving parents into the educational process	106	0.25	1.00	0.76	0.18
Citizen expectations ensuring their social welfare and occupation	106	0.00	1.00	0.67	0.23

In terms of importance, the analysis of research results shows that the indicated statements are either significant or highly significant. The parents find quality education associated with a loving caring teacher, good emotional well-being of a child (wants to go to meet his/her friends, etc.) and child care (good nutrition, rest, health care). The first most important criteria distinguished by the parents reflect emotional, social and biological needs of a child. Other criteria are related to the needs for child education and self-expression and include achieved educational objectives (remarkable progress, proper development, preparation for school), encouraging creative activities and happy life in a group of children of the same age (freedom to play games, interesting activities and events). These statements have been evaluated as the crucial ones for quality education. The evaluation of other statements is also high enough, which, according to the parents, shows only lesser importance.

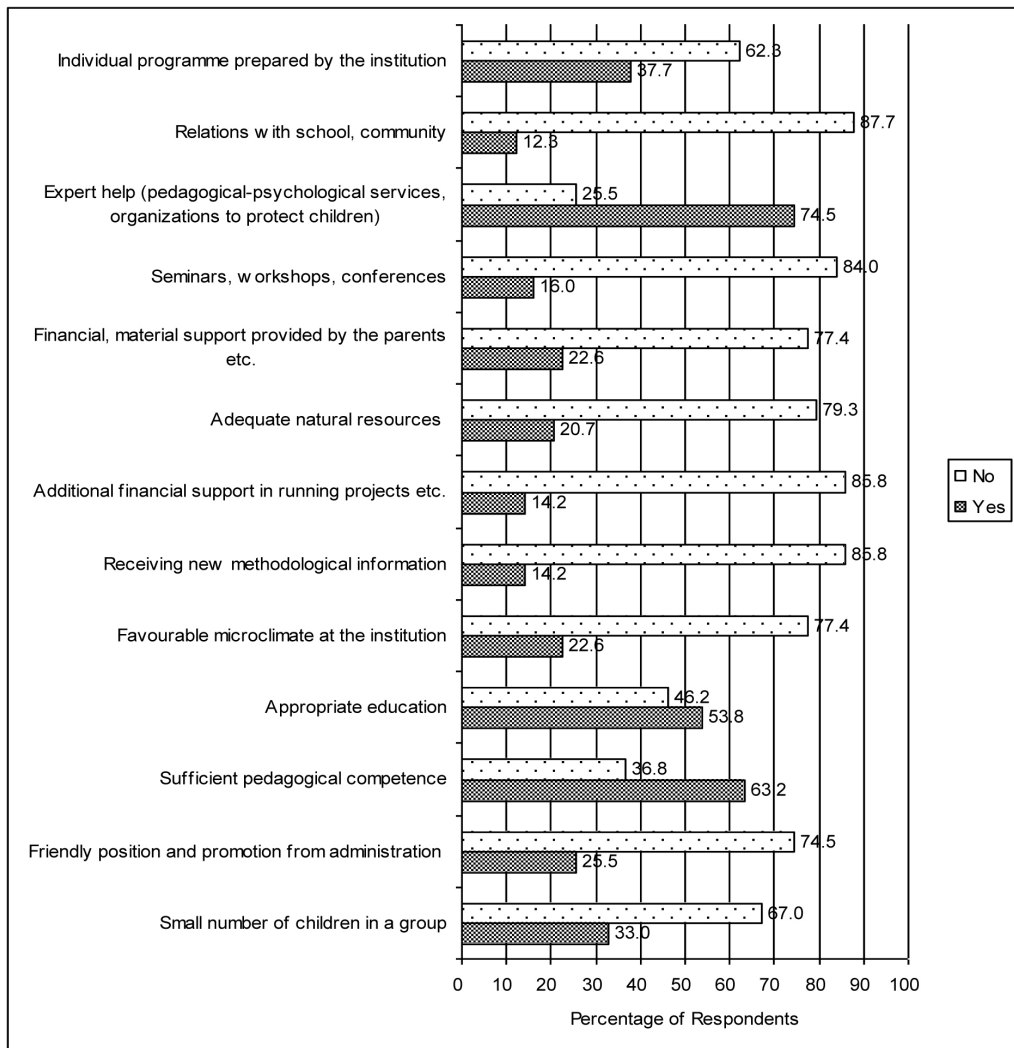
In conclusion, the obtained results reveal that the parents link quality assurance with good emotional well-being, self-realization and interesting creative activity, which should be guaranteed by a loving caring teacher.

Statistical significant deviations in terms of parents' education can be noticed analysing the 4 statements most frequently related to creating quality education for children at the institution of pre-school education: *the degree of achieving educational goals* ( $\chi^2=22.055$ ;  $df=12$ ;  $p=0.037$ ), *encouragement to know your-self* ( $\chi^2=28.497$ ;  $df=12$ ;  $p=0.005$ ), *general abilities, competencies and methods applied by the experts in the field at work* ( $\chi^2=23.563$ ;  $df=12$ ;  $p=0.023$ ) and *properly arranged educational environment of the institution (much space, plenty of toys, tools, aesthetic, comfortable)* ( $\chi^2=24.899$ ;  $df=12$ ;  $p=0.015$ ).

Education quality related to *the degree of achieving educational goals* has been evaluated by 37.5 % of the respondents having secondary education and by 42.9 % of those having vocational education. In comparison, in the majority of cases, *encouragement to know your-self* has been positively evaluated by 69.3 % of the respondents having university education. As for quality education related to *general abilities, competencies and methods applied by the experts in the field at work* and *properly arranged an educational environment of the institution (much space, plenty of toys, tools, aesthetic, comfortable)*, these criteria have also been positively evaluated by the surveyed participants having university education – 55.8 % and 51.9 % respectively. The comparison was made considering the opinion of the parents having basic education – they chose statement „agree“ as the highest evaluation making 50%.

The parents also evaluated the factors encouraging and preventing from quality education (Figures 2 and 3).





**Figure 2: Factors encouraging quality self/education in a group (N= 106).**

The parents agree that, in the majority of cases, the quality of education depends on expert help (pedagogical-psychological services, organizations to protect children) (74.5 %), sufficient pedagogical competence of the teachers working at the institution of pre-school education (63.2 %) and appropriate education of teachers (53.8 %).

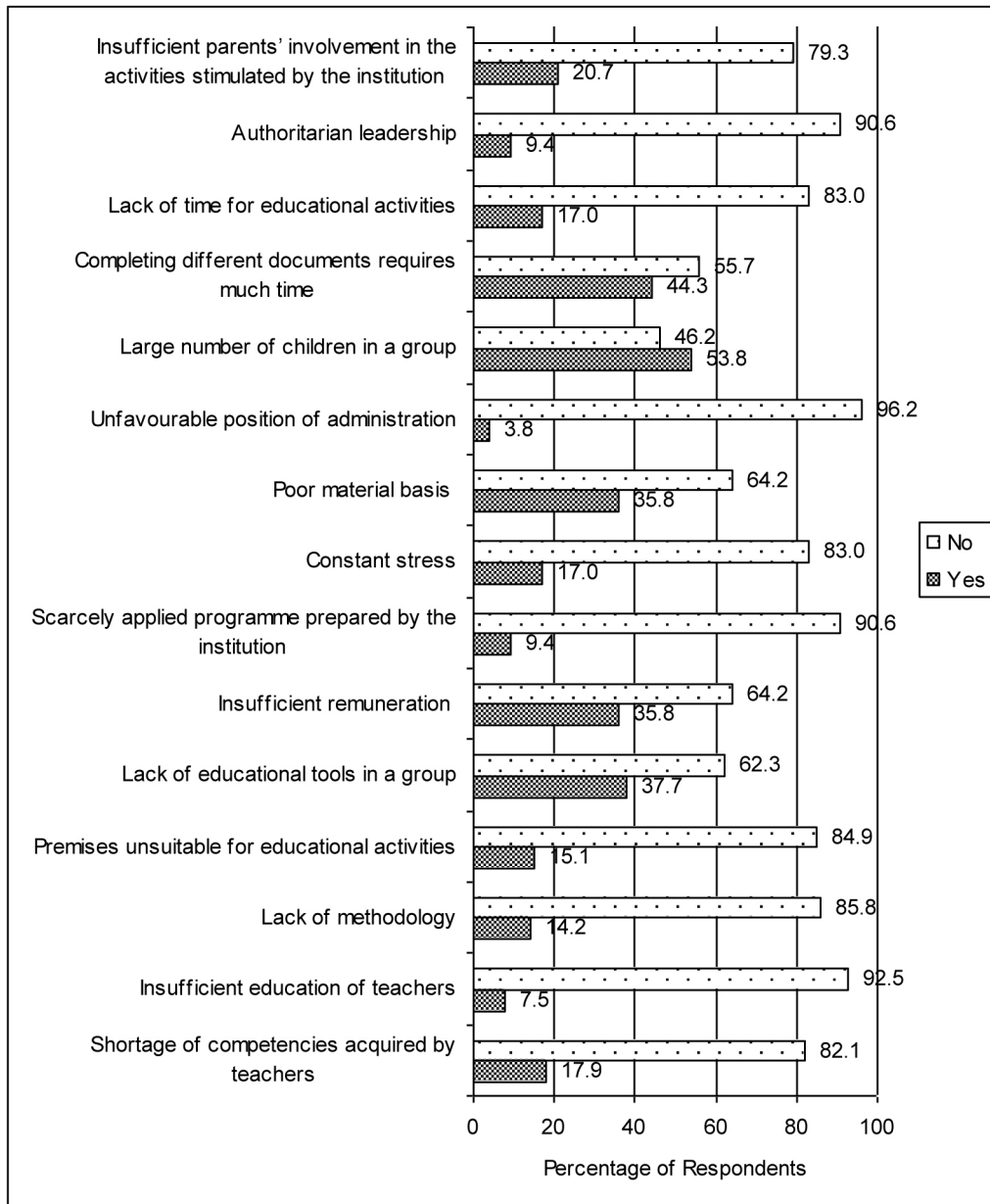
To sum up, the parents mostly appreciate and trust the teachers having decent education and professional competence. They believe that teachers play a crucial role in the educational process and their personal, professional, etc. abilities have a major impact on their children.

Statistically significant deviations, in terms of parents' age, have been established between two factors encouraging the quality education of children: *appropriate education of teachers* ( $\chi^2=7.614$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.022$ ) and *individual programme prepared by the institution* ( $\chi^2=12.526$ ;  $df=2$ ;  $p=0.002$ ).

The results also indicate that *appropriate education of teachers* is positively evaluated in the group of parents aged from 31 from 40 and makes 64.4 %, whereas those up to 30 and in the range of 41 – 50 years old find it negative – 56.1 % and 83.3 % respectively. *An individual*

programme prepared by the institution has been positively evaluated by the respondents of up to 30 years old (58.5 %), and has some contrast opinions by those aged from 31 to 40 (76.3 %) and from 41 to 50 (66.7 %).

Parents' position on the factors preventing from quality education is presented in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Factors preventing from quality self/education in a group (N=106).**

The respondents state that the major setback for quality education can be a large number of children in a group (53.8 %). Another obstacle is that teachers spend much time for completing different documents (44.3 %). The parents suppose that a real situation considering quality education in the kindergarten is not that bad. The parents also emphasize a large number of children in a group because a teacher on his/her own may encounter difficulties in equally



paying attention to everyone to make activities individual and to create conditions for personal self-expression.

Statistical significant deviations in terms of parents' education have been established between three setbacks preventing from quality education in the group of children: *shortage of competencies acquired by teachers* ( $\chi^2=12.557$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p=0.014$ ), *a large number of children in a group* ( $\chi^2=13.020$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p=0.011$ ) and *completing different documents requires much time* ( $\chi^2=10.245$ ;  $df=4$ ;  $p=0.036$ ). The first factor - *shortage of competencies acquired by teachers* – as the major setback has been stressed by 75% of the parents having basic education. This statement has not been supported by the parents having education higher than the basic one. The second factor as a setback - *a large number of children in a group* – has been mentioned by 59.6% of the parents having university education, whereas the respondents having basic (100 %) and higher vocational education (76.9 %) have different opinion about this factor. The surveyed participants having secondary education have some doubts about the number of children in the group, and therefore 50% of the parents agree and 50% disagree with this statement. The third factor - *completing different documents requires much time* as a setback – is positively evaluated by 71.6% of the respondents having university education.

## Discussion

Lately, strategic documents prepared by Lithuanian educational institutions and recent discussions held by pedagogical societies and stakeholders have considered the issues of education quality. However, for a long time, the quality of pre-school education in Lithuania has been irregularly researched thus constantly emphasizing changes in improving the aspects ensuring the quality of the first educational stage. Alterations in the attitudes towards the child as a unique personality and towards childhood as an intrinsically valuable period of social human life have encouraged changes in the idea about child's self/education. As one of positive pushes for quality education, in 2009, Lithuania started implementing the project *The Development of Pre-School Education* financed by European Structural Funds. A group of Lithuanian scientists (Monkevičienė, Glebuvienė, Stankevičienė etc., 2009), in the frame of a project, conducted research *Quality Analysis of Implementing the Content of Pre-School Education*. The study extensively analyzes the field of conceptions describing the quality of implementing the content of pre-school self/education considering different positions of the representatives of education policy, administration offices, teachers, parents, etc. The conducted investigation allows acknowledging the importance of the first stage of education assessing international experience. The results of research *Quality Analysis of Implementing the Content of Pre-School Education* has revealed that the decentralization of the content of pre-school education poses a challenge to the teachers and institutions of pre-school education to model educational content and ensure the quality of pre-school education so that to satisfy different needs for education. In this case, pre-school education plays a crucial role. Researches state that if children are exposed to a poor-quality environment, whether at or outside home, they are less likely to be prepared for school demands and are more likely to have their socioemotional development derailed (Ramey, Campbell, Burchinal, et al. 1999). Pre-school quality education is gaining more and more attention in a number of different countries. For instance, since the 1990s, the Korean government has been striving to expand full-day kindergartens (Moon, 2010). Researchers from the U.S.A. have proved that the parents rather than teachers or representatives of education policy approach the quality of pre-school education in a broader manner. Parents characterized quality care as providing an emotionally safe and responsive environment while academically preparing children for kindergarten (Barbarin, McCandies, Early, Clifford, Bryant, Burchinal, Howes, Pianta, 2006). Pre-school quality education in Australia is also one of the major priorities. Investigations show that children's experiences and outcomes, and especially

for those at risk or from disadvantaged backgrounds, are optimised when they participate in high-quality early childhood programs or in programs targeting specific areas of development such as early literacy (Elliott, 2006).

The conducted research has been based on a child-oriented paradigm analyzing parents' needs/motives and evaluating education quality. The study has identified and carefully defined educational factors determining the quality of pre-school education and examined parents' evaluations that can help the community of educational institutions with self-assessment and making corrections to successfully develop individual child socialization within the process of quality education.

## Conclusions

The analysis of scientific literature indicates that the current methodological provision prevailing in child education apply to the child-oriented paradigm that requires a holistic approach to the child as a personality and his/her abilities and ambitions to independently perform.

The performed investigation has also revealed that to choose an institution of preschool education, the major part of the respondents prefer a convenient geographical location that is usually not far from home. Probably, the choice based on the grounds of comfort cannot be a sound reason for ensuring the quality of education. However, when choosing an educational establishment, a large part of the parents give other reasons for motivation such as the institution offers extra possibilities of self-expression or have positive recommendations on the institution earlier attended by the children of friends, relatives, etc. The latter motives for choosing an institution related to extra-facilities offered by the educational institution and positive evaluation/recommendations of teacher activities are the criteria for assessing quality education.

Research results show that the parents refer to ensuring quality as to the good emotional well-being of a child, self-realization and creative activity ensured by a loving caring teacher.

The evaluation of the factors encouraging quality self/education discloses that the parents prefer educated and competitive teachers. They find it as one of the crucial factors as personal, professional, etc. abilities of teachers make an impact on child education. The obtained results show that the parents trust the teachers and are satisfied with the work done.

Nevertheless, a large number of children in a group and too much time spent for completing different documents are the major setbacks for quality education.

Considering the age and education of the respondents, statistical significant deviations have been noticed.

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Received: June 15, 2012

Accepted: July 21, 2012

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