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## THE COMMUNICATION POLICY OF THE KINDERGARTEN – REALITY AND PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** Constant interaction with the parent community and the creation of conditions for their active inclusion in the activities of the kindergarten is the key to an effective partnership in creating trust between contact groups and shared responsibility in developing children's knowledge and skills, supporting their personal development and ensuring equal access to pre-school education. Achieving a fruitful interaction between the family and the kindergarten is a problem for Bulgarian preschool education. Although meetings between teachers and parents are daily, activity and especially initiative on the part of parents is not always observed. Not all parents are involved in their children's education and their adaptation to the educational environment. In this context, the policies of the kindergarten to ensure active cooperation between the family and the institution are of interest to the research practice, including the planned measures and activities to attract the parent community into the life of the institution, the implemented activities to adapt the children to the environment in the kindergarten with the participation of the parents, the implemented joint initiatives with them, etc. The article presents a study of developed models for working with families and children in 36 kindergartens from seven administrative districts in Bulgaria, namely Burgas, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven, Ruse, Silistra, Shumen. The preschool organizations were selected on a random basis and include those operating in different types and sizes of settlements. A content analysis and a comparative analysis of institutional documents providing information on the policies developed in the kindergarten for cooperation with parents were carried out. Data from the official websites of preschool institutions were used. The documents cover the strategies for the development of preschool educational organizations and the established program systems as part of the strategies, regulations for their activities and other plans and programs in the context of the subject and in relation to the specific features of the particular kindergarten. The conclusions that follow from the conducted study are about insufficient publicity of the intended forms of interaction with parents, despite the developed models for working with families and children in the period of adaptation from the family environment to the kindergarten by 72.22% of the studied kindergartens. Most preschool educational institutions emphasize in their plans and programs the informing parents about the achievements, adaptation, obstacles and difficulties in the individual development of children, participation of parents in pedagogical situations and holidays of groups or the institution, counseling parents, and, to a lesser degree any specific activities related to the support of children's personal development, research of parental opinion, joint activities for the prevention of early dropping out of the education system, negative manifestations, bullying and aggression and others, for which they are given recommendations for enabling cooperation.

**Keywords:** communication, communication policy, cooperation between participants in the educational process, interaction with parents

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The necessity and importance of creating a cooperative community in the kindergarten are advocated in several scientific publications by Bulgarian and foreign authors. The creation of an effective partnership is justified by the shared responsibility for the development of children, the creation of conditions for mutual trust and respect, for the active and committed participation of parents in the activities of the institution, with the understanding of the different points of view in the education, upbringing and socialization of children and their future school preparation. A group of authors analyze entering kindergarten as a key transition experience for children that has lasting consequences for their academic development and suggest transition practices combined with forms of collaboration with families to overcome some structural barriers related to communication (Marvin et al. , 2020). Other authors highlight external policy factors – such as quality assessment systems – that shape transition practices (Purtell et al., 2020). N. Mateeva pays attention to the adaptive transition of the child from the family environment to the kindergarten, related to many changes in the life of the child and the family, tracing various practical approaches to adapting to the kindergarten, based on the main psychological theories and establishing the influence of specific socio-psychological factors related to these processes (Mateeva, 2020). More specific practices for involving parents focused on the families of children with a lower socio-economic status are also proposed, such as increasing the participation of parents in preschool STEM education (Aleksieva, Mircheva, 2022), resource support for families in connection with the school integration of children with special educational needs in the educational process (Yankova, Damyanov, (2013). The state educational standard for preschool education regulates the creation

of a model for working with families and children in the period of adaptation from the family environment to kindergarten, which is an integral part of the Kindergarten Activity Regulations (Article 39, Paragraph 2 of Ordinance No. 5/03.06.2016). The model must include the short-term presence of parents in the kindergarten and the activities in which they participate, which are defined within the framework of individual meetings between teachers and parents. The standard defines obligations for planning activities for interaction with the parent community and in the kindergarten program system, which is a comprehensive concept for the child's development with approaches and forms of pedagogy interaction subordinated to a common goal, including a mechanism of interaction between participants in preschool education (Art. 29 of Ordinance No. 5/03.06.2016). Good cooperation with families facilitates the well-being, development and learning of preschool children, which, according to publications, is not reached to an optimal extent, especially in areas with a different ethnic composition of the population, the presence of socially weak parents or those with a low educational status. Problems of communication in the conditions of a multicultural environment, related to insufficient social and cognitive skills in children, worries on the part of parents when communicating with teachers due to insufficient command of the Bulgarian language, insufficient self-esteem in children from ethnic minorities, lack of interest on the part of parents are touched upon and transfer of parental responsibilities to the teacher, etc., determining the need for alternative forms of communication and additional activities to include both children and parents in kindergarten activities (Bozhilova, 2022). Insufficient or ineffective communication requires the provision of a supportive educational environment through the management and implementation of "educational institution-family" interaction models, as well as the introduction of family-oriented models to overcome reflexive factors leading to difficult communication between participants in the educational process (Kamenov, 2020). In creating good and productive relationships, the role of the director is key, with his leadership abilities, in the context of his management functions and skills, he can create conditions for the formation of a leadership community that understands, shares and supports the vision for the development of the institution, exhibits a culture for generating innovative ideas and actively engages in strategy implementation activities (Dobрева, 2022). In the context of the existing challenges to kindergarten-family communication, the thesis of the study is related to the insufficient provision of a variety of communication channels and activities with the participation of parents, and making recommendations for improving the communication policies of preschool educational institutions.

## **2. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

An initial step in creating a productive cooperative relationship between the families of children in the kindergarten and the institution is planning activities - strategic and operational for effective interaction. In this regard, documents of 36 kindergartens from seven different administrative regions in Bulgaria - Burgas, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven, Ruse, Silistra, Shumen, published on the official websites of the institutions - were examined. Planned goals and activities in the development strategies of the preschool educational organizations and established program systems were tracked as part of the strategies, regulations for their activities and other plans and programs for which the kindergartens are obliged to provide publicity. There are two main criteria that show the purposefulness of the planning - the communication channels between the institution and the family and the planned activities with the participation of parents. The models available in kindergartens for working with families and children during the period of adaptation from the family environment to the kindergarten were also used for the research, according to the requirements of the regulations. A content analysis and a comparative analysis of what is included in the documents of the different kindergartens in the context of the topic of creating effective communicative relations between pedagogical specialists and parents were carried out.

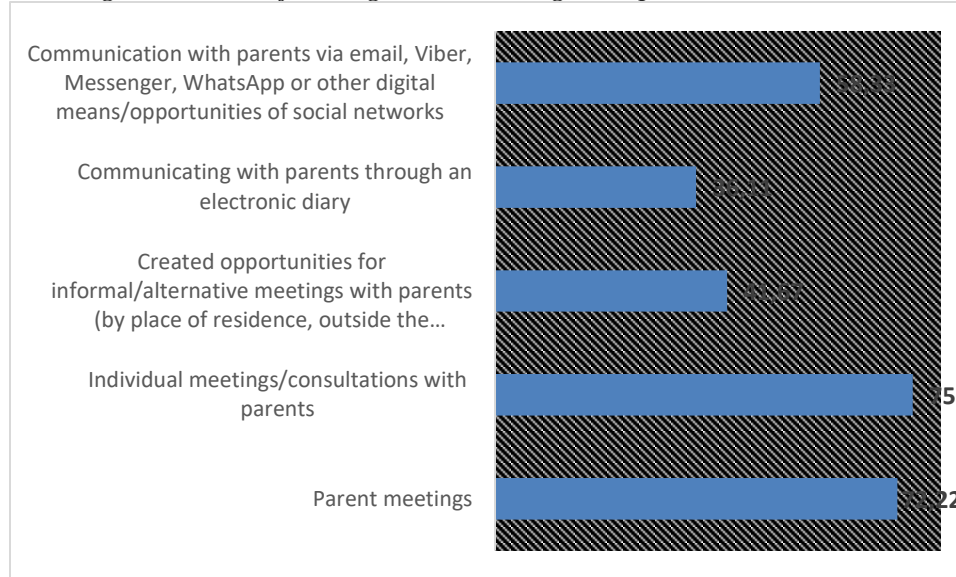
## **3. RESULTS**

The results prove the original thesis of insufficiently planned activities for effective communication between the kindergarten and parents. Regulations for the activities of preschool institutions were published by 32 out of a total of 36 tracked kindergartens, or 88.89% of those surveyed. It is likely that the other four also developed documents regulating the structure and activities of the kindergarten, and two of them do not have any official website or are currently under development, they only have a Facebook profile or there is information on the website of the municipality that does not represent planning details. In 26 of the regulations, which make up a share of 72.22% of the total number of kindergartens examined, activities for children's adaptation are provided and models have been developed. In one of the remaining 10, a mechanism for interaction with parents has been developed, and in four others it is embedded in other documents (a program for working with parents and a plan for working with parents). Half of the strategies for the development of kindergartens contain goals concerning cooperation with the family, with or without specific activities and measures planned according to the specifics of the institution. It is possible that the other five kindergartens also planned forms of interaction with parents, but these were not visible to the

public and publicity was not ensured. Some of the web pages are not systematically updated and the information is not up-to-date.

The content analysis shows a preference of the surveyed kindergartens for planning individual meetings with parents and consultations as a type of communication channel for interaction, as well as for traditional parent meetings (in 72.22% and 75% of institutions). A high share of 58.33% is also occupied by alternative forms of interaction, and communication through an electronic diary and informal meetings are established in less than half of the tracked documents (in 36.11% and 41.67% of kindergartens) (Diagram 1).

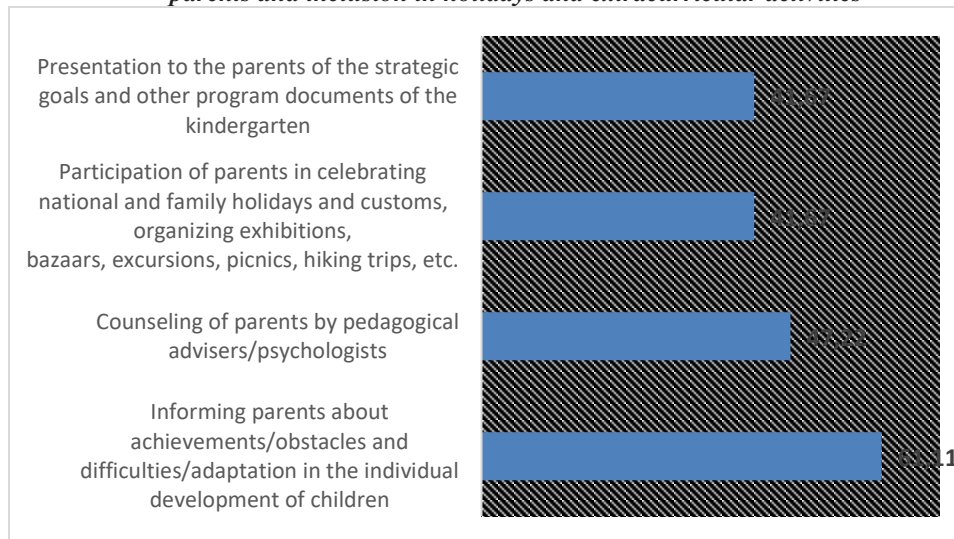
**Diagram 1. Percentage distribution of kindergartens according to the planned communication channels**



Source: The author

Informational activities and the involvement of parents in holidays and extracurricular activities have a higher share of the opportunities created for direct participation of parents in pedagogical situations and support of children's personal development. In 61.11% of the institutions, it is planned to inform the parents about the achievements or encountered difficulties in the education and adaptation of the children (Diagram 2).

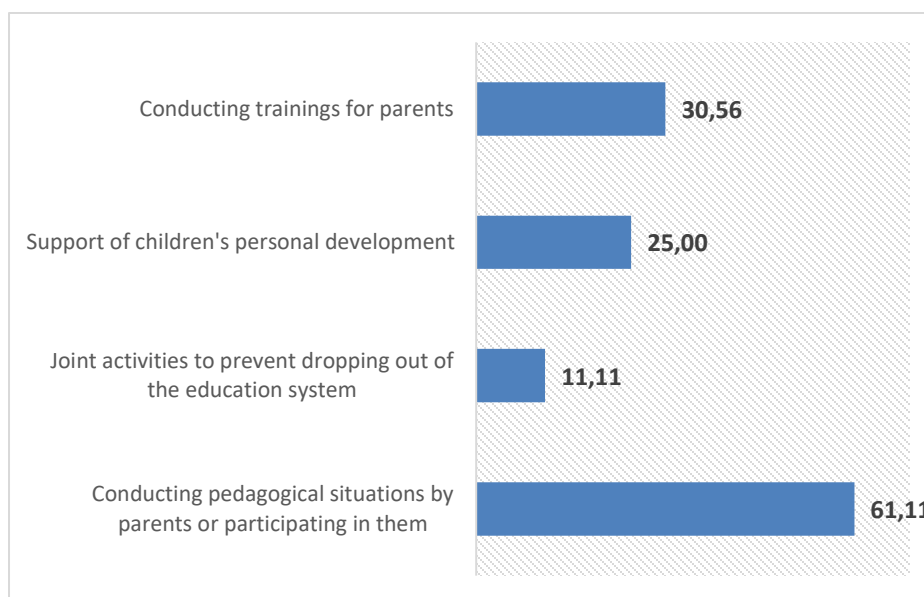
**Diagram 2. Percentage share distribution of kindergartens according to planned activities for informing parents and inclusion in holidays and extracurricular activities**



Source: The author

The participation of parents in pedagogical situations is the most preferred activity for involving parents as active participants in the process of learning, upbringing, socialization and raising children, which is observed in 61.11% of kindergarten documents - rules, strategies, plans and programs. In 38.89% of preschool institutions, open days are planned, and in 30.56% of them, parent training is planned. The support of children's personal development is carried out with the consent and participation of parents, which is why in this context joint activities are planned in 25% of kindergartens. An equal share of 11.11% is occupied by preschool institutions, in which cooperation with families is planned in the activities for the prevention of early leaving the educational system, as well as related to the career guidance of children through presentation by parents of the professions they exercise (Diagram 3). It is noteworthy that only in three kindergartens, occupying a share of 8.33%, a survey of parents' opinions is provided. In two of them (5.56%), joint competitions for children and parents are planned, which is not observed in the plans of the other institutions.

**Diagram 3. Percentage share distribution of kindergartens according to planned activities for inclusion of parents as active participants in the process of education, upbringing and socialization of children**



Source: The author

#### 4. DISCUSSIONS

Communication in the kindergarten community between the participants in the educational process and with stakeholders is essential to ensure the quality of education, upbringing and socialization of children. In this context, especially in regions with families that do not recognize education as a value, it would be good to have communication strategies developed to interact with parents that lead to convincing them of the benefit of education, to their involvement in the education of their children and activity and participation in kindergarten activities. The study indicates that such strategies have not been developed and adopted in preschool institutions, and in most of them the requirement to develop models for children's adaptation, in which parents are included, has been met. Some of the institutions rely on an established mechanism for interaction with parents. It is noteworthy, however, that regardless of whether a model or interaction mechanism is used, in most cases traditional parent-teacher meetings are relied upon, which have long been proven to be only informative, but not conducive to cooperation and support between teacher and parent for better development of the child. Part of the kindergartens also plan alternative forms of interaction, including individual meetings, open-door days, participation of parents in pedagogical situations, in children's career guidance, etc. Open days are a very good option for communication, as they provide an opportunity to familiarize parents with the institution and the conditions for learning, upbringing and socialization in it, to present policies and goals, activities of interest, achievements of children and teachers, etc. The open days also allow open and joint practices to be held, where parents can attend (if they wish) and get to know the ways of teaching and raising children in the kindergarten, the approaches and methods used, the psychological atmosphere in the classroom, the method of pedagogical interaction, etc. The participation of parents in the career

guidance of children by presenting professions and the conditions for their exercise also gives a chance to include families in the life of the institution and improve interaction. It is also an opportunity to be present in pedagogical situations with such themes. Conducting training for parents, foreseen in about 1/3 of the institutions, is important for such families who do not have sufficient competencies for raising their children, as well as for coordinating policies for the quality of education. Researching the opinions of parents, as well as other participants in the educational process, is significant for determining and analyzing the needs of children and parents, but it is not often found as a plan in kindergarten documents. Information from conducted surveys serves to plan activities that are expected by the families or they have expressed a desire to participate in them, to create opportunities for their inclusion in the management of the institution according to the expertise of the parents and ultimately to make them active participants in the educational process, concerned about the education and development of their children.

As a result of the comparative analysis of the planned activities for cooperation with children's families in the kindergartens studied, recommendations can be made for more active planning of specific activities that lead to adaptation and socialization of children, and not just setting goals and intentions, which are not measurable. These are the alternative forms of cooperation: participation of parents in pedagogical situations; interest activities in which they can present crafts, customs, professions, etc.; participation in open days; joint competitions and tournaments, hikes, excursions, etc. Ultimately, feedback should be available to assess the improvement of interaction and the benefit of joint activities.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The modern education system faces the challenges of a dynamic environment to fulfill its functions in the new realities and responsibilities according to the Preschool and School Education Act and at the same time apply an integrated approach to fulfill the requirements of European and international legislation in the field of education. Not only the concept of education and upbringing, and putting the child at the center of education are changing, but also the relationships in the education system. Quality interaction of pedagogical specialists with children and provision of support for their personal development is required; collaboration between teachers, between teachers and the parent community, and with stakeholders. The goal is wider participation in management and decentralization, with the application of participatory models, i.e. co-management with the participation of parents and the public while respecting the needs and interests of children and parents. Changes to the educational environment are related to meeting the needs of students and parents, but also providing the most appropriate conditions for learning and integration, tailored to the individual characteristics of each child. Educational integration and interaction are especially important in kindergartens, where children and parents are carriers of different ethnocultural specificities, to form intercultural competencies and civic values, to create opportunities for equal access, quality education and the exclusion of social isolation.

Children go through different stages in their development, part of which is their adaptation to the educational environment, which is why planning activities together with parents is necessary for full socialization and acceptance of education as a value. The adaptive transition from the family to the institutional environment requires parents to be actively involved in the life of the kindergarten and together with teachers, assistant educators and management to participate in the inclusion of children in the educational environment so that their full potential can be developed; to successfully transition from pre-school education to the various stages of school education and to be prepared with the necessary competences for a quality and fulfilling social life.

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