

Polarities of Compulsory Education from the Perspective of Parents and Kindergarten Teachers

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Abstract

This empirical study deals with the issue of compulsory education in kindergartens, which was implemented in the Czech Republic in 2017. Children aged 5 must attend kindergarten or opt for individual home-schooling. The intention of this Czech educational policy step was to raise the preparedness and eligibility of children for compulsory primary school education and to eliminate or compensate for potential handicaps when detected. The aim of the research was to document the reflections of parents and kindergarten teachers on the realization of the compulsory pre-school education, specifically the concerns and other reactions of the adults and the children themselves. The data collection was performed by two means: a questionnaire filled in by 305 parents within which predominantly open questions were analyzed, and the method of thematic writing by kindergarten teachers. In the second case twenty-nine texts averaging 2500 characters were obtained. To process the data we used the content analysis method based on open coding. Several significant findings were disclosed characterizing compulsory pre-school education, notably regarding ambivalence. The parents' attitudes are based on preferences and necessities of pre-school education (as opposed to individual home-schooling) for their children's further educational career, however, the strict legal obligation to ensure children's kindergarten attendance was disputed. The teachers welcome the expected improvement of the children's preparedness; at the same time, they perceive a borderline shift regarding the follow-up childhood stage traditionally connected with entering primary school. The teachers also identify the changing attitudes of children in transition from an institution where they "go to play" while their parents work, to that of a learning place with a status similar to that of primary school.

Keywords: compulsory pre-school education, kindergarten teacher, parent, legislative change

Introduction

Pre-school education in the Czech Republic has undergone relatively important changes in recent years. One of the most significant shifts was a legislative intervention that caused a distinctive transformation of the overall character of pre-school education. Pre-school education, realized either as kindergarten attendance or as individual home-schooling, became a legal requirement in 2017. Czech pre-school education is built on a strong educational tradition. Implementing compulsory kindergarten attendance was seen to create several benefits, mainly the economic effects based on the financial return on investments into pre-school education along with social compensation benefits of education and specialized care for learners at pre-school age. This study presents the findings of a research survey realized within the framework of pre-school education after implementing the legal requirement of kindergarten attendance one year before entering primary school. The objective is to depict the reactions of parents, kindergarten teachers and children from the point of view of their teachers.

Theoretical and Legislative Framework

In recent years in the Czech Republic significant attention has been devoted to pre-school education. This can be observed not only at the level of scientific reflections through the increasing number of research and project activities realized in kindergartens or other institutions of pre-school education, but also in political interests that are reflected in conceptual and strategic documents of school policy (for instance, the governmental document *Strategies 2020*), as well as in real

legislative measures. One of them was the establishment of compulsory pre-school education to take effect in September 2017. The Czech Republic thus became a part of a consortium of states with compulsory pre-school education, which comprise about one third of the European Union member nations.

School policymakers came to the conclusion that compulsory pre-school education is the basis for increasing the preparedness and eligibility of children for further education at primary schools as well as of the possibility to eliminate potential children's handicaps when detected.

In practical terms, the implementation of compulsory pre-school education means that children who reach the age of five must begin kindergarten attendance from the beginning of the following school year, or their parents must opt for individual home-schooling. In such a way the skills and personal potential of children for further education is to be purposefully and systematically cultivated within the framework of state-guaranteed and controlled conditions one year before children's entry into primary schools. What needs to be stressed is that in the Czech Republic every six-year-old must enter primary school to undergo compulsory education. The average rate of pre-schooling (the attendance of kindergartens by five-year-olds) exceeds 90%. Thus even before implementing the compulsory pre-school education, voices could be heard indicating that this measure would concern only about 10% of children one year before entering primary school, which would make the measure redundant; with regard to the minority of specifically equipped parents it would even be non-functional (Smolíková, 2010).

According to the statement of reasons accompanying the legislative change (Důvodová zpráva [Statement of Reasons], 2015), a large group of children is still not predisposed to enter compulsory school education, notably including children from a socially disadvantaged environment. Another reason is the fact that the majority of these children participated neither in kindergarten education nor in preparatory classes for primary education. The point of departure is the fact that in kindergarten, as the first institution of life-long education, children adapt to new conditions, i.e. they become integrated into systematic and organized education which should be adjusted to their individual intellectual maturity, biological and psychological capacities and relevant social skills. The educational effort in kindergartens is directed towards the further development and cultivation of children's personalities. When the potentialities of pre-school education are not properly utilized before children enter primary school, the probability of problems in the initial phases of primary education increases. The benefits of pre-school education for children are thus indisputable and the obligation to participate in these programs at least one year before entering primary school also has a preventive and compensational impact. The overall evaluation of school education by the Czech public is positive, with the best evaluation ascribed to pre-school and primary school education (Walterová et al., 2010). Empirical studies have shown that parents of pre-school children mainly appreciate the socializing effects of kindergarten education and preparation of children for subsequent schooling (Šmelová, 2005; Majerčíková & Rebendová, 2016; Bernatíková, 2018).

Another option for fulfilling the compulsory pre-primary education requirement is individual education, typically provided for by parents in the home environment of the child. When parents decide to proceed in this way, a legal obligation arises for them (Act No. 178/2016 Coll.) to inform the headmaster of kindergarten located in the school district of the child's permanent residence not later than three months before the beginning of the school year in which the child was to begin their compulsory pre-school-education. This decision must therefore be taken well in advance and the parents must proceed accordingly. The specialized state supervision of individual education is guaranteed through the verification of the requisite development level by testing the knowledge and skills in the local kindergarten by agreement with the headmaster. Parents must thus provide home schooling in accordance with the aims and subject matter of pre-school education programs as stated in the fundamental curricular document valid for pre-school education in the Czech Republic. The obtained level should be verified between the third and fourth month from the beginning of the school year, i.e., from the commencement of compulsory pre-school education. The verification is obligatory and the parent must ensure that the child is present. The law enables the headmaster to terminate individual home-schooling in cases in which the child is not present at testing in the first nor alternative term (Act No. 178/2016 Coll.). If the optimal cognitive and social development of a child has been demonstrated, the individual home-schooling may continue. If the required competences have not been proven, the headmaster should advise the parent on alternative possibilities regarding the further education of the child so that adequate educational results can be reached. It is thus quite obvious that this may not necessarily be a conforming situation for parents.

The Czech educational system permits the option of home-schooling even at the follow-up level of education, which gradually enables the formation of alternative groups of parents as bearers of specific parental interests. The families of

home-schooled pre-schoolers and primary school pupils are obviously in the minority; however, the number of parents who have expressed interest in this option is growing, as expressed by their increasing feedback on topical social networks (Kašparová, 2017). It is nevertheless a fact that the majority of five-year-olds attends kindergarten, which is compulsory in the last year. In this case, the pre-school education parties, i.e., teachers, parents and children, find themselves in a completely new situation. Therefore, we posed a question regarding how all the parties have reacted.

The Research: Aims, Methods, Sample and Limits

Given the circumstances expressed above, kindergartens have been currently experiencing and developing a new educational reality which we have made the subject of the present research. Our findings depart from the accepted precept that first experiences can be only detected one year after implementing compulsory pre-school education, and that experiences can be deciphered as views of the new reality. Proceeding further, certain empirical proofs as contributions to the relevant evaluation of compulsory pre-school education can be presented.

The aim of the research was to uncover how parents and kindergarten teachers perceive the realization of compulsory pre-school education with regard to the interests of adults as well as children. The following research questions were asked:

How do parents perceive the implementation of compulsory pre-school education?

Based on their own experience, how do kindergarten teachers respond to the present realization of compulsory pre-school education?

Two research methods were applied in the research. The principal source of data were texts obtained from kindergarten teachers by the method of thematic writing. It seemed useful to use the potential of free writing, which enables insights into the participants' discourses and perspectives as well as provides the participants with an opportunity to meditate on their subjective attitudes without fear of reactions from other parties. The process of data collection was not interrupted by activities in environmental surroundings, which has been shown to clarify responses (Elizabeth, 2008). Overall twenty-nine texts averaging 2,500 characters were collected.

Further, two items in the form of open questions of a 21-item questionnaire distributed among parents were then used to gather data. The questionnaire asked for the parents' points of view, opinions and experiences regarding compulsory pre-school education. Data from 305 parents who have had experience with pre-school education of their children were gathered. Both groups of source data were further sorted and processed by the open coding technique.

The research sample. As has been noted, twenty-nine teachers participated in the research, all of which had taught in a kindergarten the year before. The majority had a secondary-school education. They were all female. The questionnaire respondents were also mostly women (96.7%), approximately three quarters of whom in the age category of 26 to 40. From the point of view of their education, 40% of the respondents had university degrees, 31% had a secondary school education and 10.5% had vocational training.

Considerations regarding the research limits primarily focus on the type of respondent and participant choices. Limits are also imposed by the size of the texts obtained by the teachers. Their willingness to share ideas would have been more greatly encouraged through face-to-face communication, which was not the case in this research.

Results

The research brought several significant findings which showed an ambivalent view toward compulsory pre-school education; for this reason, the title employs the term *polarities*. The findings show the key participants of education – children, parents and teachers – as those whose perceived impacts of compulsory pre-school education can be characterized as diversified.

Attitude of Parents to Compulsory Pre-school Education

Firstly, it must be stressed that the institution of the requirement for compulsory pre-school education in the Czech Republic was not accompanied by any significant public debate, and after the implementation no noticeable parental reaction was observed. The parents whose children had already attended kindergarten did not perceive this step as a principal change, as their children had already been through kindergarten. Uncommitted parents probably did not perceive the seriousness of this situation.

According to their own statements, the parents assign high importance to pre-school education, i.e. they understand its legitimacy. This view is closely connected to the sound preparedness of a child to enter primary school; the dimension of the child's educational perspective dominates. In parents' understanding, the child's development in kindergarten is thus not connected with cultivation of their present potentialities linked to the current life. One of the parents wrote in this regard:

"Socialization of a child in a group of others is important, as well as regularity of a daily regime, higher level of advertence and encouragement by peers, learning independence and overall development of a child. This all should lead to the most important goal – preparedness for primary school."

On the other hand, parents feel non-conformable in a situation in which kindergarten attendance is compulsory and they are obliged to observe this mandate. The symbol of this obligation is a written excuse which must be prepared in case the child is not present in kindergarten.

Parents prefer institutional education in kindergartens to that of individual education in the family.

"I take compulsory education as a great plus. I prefer education and preparation of children in a group of peers to stressful testing. Children learn to respect the authority of a teacher and concentrate on a given activity. They learn to respect differences among peers as well as self-assertion. I see the highest significance in working a group of peers."

This is closely linked to parents' positive attitude to strengthening the responsibility of the state for the preparation of children to enter primary school performed via compulsory education in kindergartens. This is natural, as until now the preparation for and taking the decision to attend kindergartens was purely in parents' hands. Such a delegation of responsibility to kindergarten is advantageous for them. In words of one teacher:

"Parents make great use compulsory pre-school education. The preparation of their child for primary school is very important to them and they expect (and I think to an even greater degree) that we will prepare their kid for school without creating more duties for them at home."

Teachers perceive and positively evaluate the signals leading to their growing professional prestige when they are able to provide the educational obligation in kindergartens both in terms of relationships with parents as well as with fellow teachers at primary schools. On the other hand, a higher responsibility for the preparedness of a child for primary school is binding, especially when teachers perceive the absolute delegation of these duties from parents. What is also significant is the growing nature of administration of kindergartens and teachers, for instance when excusing the child's absence is taken into consideration. One teacher sees it as follows:

"I perceive the compulsory kindergarten attendance in a way which is positive for children as their preparation for school. Both children and teachers will have easier time in primary schools. However, it is more demanding for the teachers, as they should better prepare the child for primary school, i.e. teach everything children would need before entering the first grade, and that is another great responsibility."

Compulsory Pre-school Preparation in the Kindergarten Environment

In a fashion similar to parents, teachers evaluate the introduction of compulsory pre-school education as a positive step leading to the support of children's education. Educators welcome the anticipated improvement in children's preparedness for primary school entry. Teachers point out the close link to follow-up school education in terms of competences development, which should help children to successfully adapt to the role of primary school pupils.

One of the leitmotifs of the Czech pre-school education is the individual approach to each child, a goal which should be applied across the age range of children attending kindergarten. Nevertheless, teachers claim it is the balancing of educational approaches towards children that implementation of compulsory pre-school education resonates with. This is an outcome undertaken with a vision of unified preparedness of all children for primary school education. One of the teachers claim:

"All the children have an opportunity to reach equal preparedness at a certain level, to socialize and learn, [...] which is not what all families can provide in a sufficient quality [...] differences can be eliminated. Children are also able to perceive an authority other than that of their parents [...] so entering primary school eventually isn't such a shock."

The requirements of primary schools for the adequate school preparedness of children has created an overlap of didactic strategies applied in kindergartens which result in adopting elements of regular school education into pre-schools. This pressure by primary schools on kindergartens seems to be increased by the compulsory pre-school attendance.

Naturally, children are generally not very aware or at least have not greatly reflected on the legislative intervention. According to teachers, however, learners are able to perceive the changes in the character of their pre-school education with respect to their age. Teachers identify this development in the children's attitude towards kindergartens from the age perspective as a shift from "the space for play to a space for learning." As play is generally understood to be the main activity of children in a kindergarten, indications toward learning are considered to signalize an important change in the character of pre-school education, a transformation perceived by teachers as a change in the very character of childhood. Educators evaluate this as the earlier onset of the next stage of childhood, a stage traditionally connected with entering primary school.

"Younger kids of 2 - 4 years think they go to the kindergarten to play while their parents work. They don't take it as a facility where they will learn something. Older children, to the contrary, begin to understand that kindergarten is here so they learn something to get ready for school when that time comes."

Conclusion and Discussion

It is obvious that by the implementation of compulsory attendance pre-school education has become a definitive part of life-long learning. The present research indicates that the change was positively accepted by both teachers and parents, although a certain ambivalence can be seen regarding the changing relationships among parents, teachers and children.

A question of preparedness for primary school entry which concerned both teachers and parents clearly dominated the research. This is a much-discussed topic in the Czech environment, since the primary-school entry of approximately 20% of six-year old children is postponed, mainly on the basis of appeals by parents. This means that once diagnosed, approximately one in every fifth child does not reach the required maturity for succeeding in primary school (Majerčíková, 2017). Opinions have been voiced, though, that these Czech data indicate an education system error, as the school system is not able to ensure the overall success of pupils, which should be about 97–98% within the population (Mertin, 2015), and not only 80%. Thus compulsory pre-school education should be one of the systemic solutions through which the number of children who are able to begin primary school on time can be increased.

The results also showed that, on one hand, teachers find the compulsory pre-school education administratively demanding, but on the other hand it is a platform for raising their professional prestige. This can be viewed as a positive result; as professional self-confidence of Czech kindergarten teachers has been found not to be high. One example of this can be seen in how kindergarten educators see themselves in relation to other colleagues. They compare themselves with specialists in various other fields (e.g. regarding the decision making to postpone school entry) such as psychologists or pediatricians. Research has shown that kindergarten teachers do not consider themselves as specialists (Majerčíková, 2017).

Compulsory pre-school education naturally concerns the perceived attitudes and abilities of kindergarten children as well, since children are viewed today through the prism of their abilities and personal qualities by which they are able to squeeze into current, relatively static school programs (May et al., 1994). Thus compulsory pre-school education is an opportunity to support children in these efforts, even if the goals of many of these programs come at the expense of the individualistic approach to children with the usage of educational strategies characteristic for primary schools.

No research observation data of this type regarding the described issues has been found. Based on the present research we can claim, however, that one year after its implementation the compulsory pre-school education is viewed as a measure the consequences of which reach into various levels of pre-school education. So far, what seems to have been privileged is the preparation of children for primary school using an academic approach even in pre-school education (Starting Strong, 2012) with the aim of relevant preparedness of each child for follow-up education.

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