

Parents' Opinions on Compulsory Pre-school Attendance in the Czech Republic

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Abstract—The study deals with the presentation of the results of qualitatively oriented research, which was carried out in the scope of determining the attitudes of parents to preschool education in the Czech Republic. The research is conceived as an entry into the field of the researched issue and aimed to support the effectiveness of the items of the questionnaire, which was subsequently created based on the parents' statements from interviews. The research method was interview with 15 parents of preschool children. The main aim of the interviews was to find out their views on the compulsory attendance of their children in kindergarten. Compulsory pre-school attendance has been introduced in the Czech Republic since 2017/18 with the aim of reducing delays in the entry of children into primary school and eliminating subsequent school failures. The findings offered a look at the differing views on compulsory kindergarten school influenced by the different socio-economic status of parents. Parents with a higher socio-economic status attached greater importance to the educational component of compulsory preschool attendance as a preparation for primary school, while parents with a lower socio-economic status emphasized the educational component. An interesting finding is also a statement from interviews of a parent who does not find benefits in compulsory preschool attendance.

Keywords—Compulsory pre-school education, education of preschool children, kindergarten, parents' opinions on pre-school education.

I. INTRODUCTION

COMPULSORY pre-school education entered into force in the Czech Republic in 2017 with an amendment to Act No. 561/2004 Sb., the Education Act. Amendment No. 178/2016 Sb. applies to children who have reached five years of age before the start of the academic year until the beginning of compulsory primary school attendance. The main objectives pursued by this compulsory pre-school education were to support children from a socially-disadvantaged environment who do not normally attend kindergarten, and to reduce school attendance deferral rates. Compulsory pre-school attendance takes the form of regular daily attendance on week days, with a minimum of four consecutive hours [3].

Pre-school education is a crucial stage in a child's development. Pre-school education has the highest return in terms of the results achieved and the social adjustment of children. EU countries should invest more in pre-school education as a foundation for onward education. This prevents early school-leaving and increases the fairness of results and

overall skill levels. A lack of investment in pre-school education leads to far higher remedial costs later on, which is less cost-effective and might even be linked to higher spending on health, unemployment, crime control, and other social policies [4].

According to the Czech Republic's education policy strategy to 2020 [9], such compulsory pre-school attendance was targeted at increasing the availability and quality of pre-school education, and was a tactic to reduce the number of school attendance deferrals.

For children who did not attend kindergarten, the year of compulsory attendance is a major milestone. For the first time they encounter a new group of people and new authority outside the family, they have their first experience of a larger number of their peers, discover new ways of interaction and, in particular, new educational situations in which they engage with their peers. This adaptation to the social and educational environment through an educational institution is of paramount importance to children. However, as research [3] shows, kindergartens have recorded only minimal increases in the children for whom compulsory school attendance was primarily introduced. According to the Minister who signed the amendment, however, "the main objective was not to attract all children to kindergarten, including those from socially weak families, but above all to show the importance of pre-school education to all parents" [8, p.1].

Research focusing on the attitudes and opinions of kindergarten principals has also been carried out within the context of statutory compulsory pre-school attendance. The results of the research point to a slightly different understanding of the objective of compulsory pre-school attendance (i.e. to support children from a socially-disadvantaged environment and to reduce deferrals in compulsory education) to the one in practice.

Research [10] found that kindergarten principals do not consider preparation for school attendance as the primary objective of pre-school education, and two thirds of the principals asked do not consider balancing the differences between children with different socio-economic backgrounds to be a priority. In most cases, principals cited the universal development of the child as the mission of compulsory pre-school education. On the question of reducing differences arising from different socio-economic environments, most principals tended to think that it is more about developing what children bring from home than about a targeted effort to reduce the differences between them. The question of deferring school attendance is also debatable. The principals of kindergartens generally support deferral. Roughly half of

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the principals think that deferrals are a useful tool that makes it possible to compare the different levels that children are at when they start school. The other half were of the opinion that deferrals should only be used in exceptional cases [10]. Compulsory pre-school attendance does not therefore concern children from a socially-disadvantaged environment only, but those from middle-class families whose parents have chosen to educate their children individually at home.

Here we will therefore address the issue of compulsory pre-school attendance through the prism of the parents. Parents were at the center of research carried out by author [12], who looked at their views and expectations of pre-school education throughout the course of pre-school attendance at a time when the obligation announced last year had not yet been set out in law. However, it still provides a perspective on parental opinions about the concept of pre-school education. The results show that parents are most likely to expect kindergartens to prepare children to enter primary school, to contribute to its development, to provide attractive and interesting content, such as playing the flute and foreign language teaching, to help raise children, to take a nice approach to children, and to make sure that children are happy and look forward to going to kindergarten. Parents most appreciated a quality education programme, an individual approach to the child and good equipment at the kindergarten.

It follows from above that, surprisingly, there is no consensus between parents and kindergartens in the Czech Republic. The issue of a compulsory final year of pre-school education is controversial for a number of reasons, both for kindergartens (excessive bureaucracy, insufficient capacity, finances, etc.) and for parents. Research [13] focused on the reasons why children do not go to kindergarten, with the accent on the attitude of the parents whose decision-making is not limited by socio-economic disadvantage. The study pointed to parents' arguments about leisure time, which from their perspective can be used for a variety of educational activities as they wish. They perceive kindergarten as a facility that helps parents when they cannot attend to their children because they work. From the parents' perspective, the social benefit is replaceable in a way other than that offered by the kindergarten. Other arguments include a strong, protectionist style of upbringing in the family, the elimination of deficiencies from the parents' own childhood, and premature scholarisation. The last reason is debatable, in light of the enacted final year before compulsory school attendance.

Here we find the question of what parents' views are of pre-school attendance, as imposed on their children by law. As with any programme that is being implemented or innovated, it is important to check its effectiveness and impact on those involved. That is why we consider it important to carry out research into compulsory pre-school attendance from the perspective of kindergartens and of parents. Also, the fact that compulsory pre-school education is only 3 years old in the Czech Republic brings with it confusion on the part of the kindergartens and the parents alike. In the long term, it is still too early to anticipate the successes and limitations of compulsory pre-school attendance in the Czech Republic. This

research therefore at least facilitates a view of the parental perception of compulsory pre-school attendance.

II. THE OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE INVESTIGATION

The main objective of our research, which was intended as an introductory look into the field of research, is to discover parents' views on compulsory pre-school attendance. The research was carried out in 2020 as part of research to examine parents' attitudes toward pre-school education under the conditions in the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic within an IGA project (internal grant agency). The research involved 15 parents of children who either attend or had been required to attend the final year of pre-school education in the past three years. The participants were selected only on the basis of this criterion. Table I presents information about the participants, obtained with their prior consent.

TABLE I
 OVERVIEW OF BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Parent No.	Marital status	Age	Education	Estimation of socio-economic status	Number of children
1	married	35	university	higher	2
2	married	37	university	higher	2
3	married	31	secondary	average	2
4	married	32	university	average	2
5	married	42	secondary	average	2
6	single	38	university	average	3
7	married	32	secondary	average	2
8	married	35	university	average	2
9	married	25	secondary	low	1
10	single	31	university	average	3
11	single	37	primary	low	3
12	married	30	secondary	average	1
13	divorced	33	secondary	low	2
14	married	39	secondary	higher	3
15	married	29	college	low	3

A semi-structured interview was held with the participants. A semi-structured interview indicates a defined purpose and a specific outline, but there is on the other hand considerable flexibility in the information gathering process as a whole [6]. These characteristics made the semi-structured interview seem an appropriate method for introducing ourselves to the area under investigation. The participants' statements and questions that subsequently emerged during the interview were used as the basis for creating a questionnaire. The questionnaire aims to identify attitudes, which are perceived as "psychological tendencies, expressed by an evaluation of a particular entity with a certain level of agreeability or disagreeability" [5, p.598]. Attitudes are explained as a three-component model: affective, cognitive and conative [7]. The participants' response to the questions in the semi-structured interview contributed to the creation of a questionnaire that was balanced in terms of its composition. With their responses, the participants inspired the broadening of questions to concern predominantly affective components in the questionnaire.

The characteristics of the questionnaire aim to capture a broader spectrum and a larger number of respondents. The

semi-structured interview thus contributed to the development of items in a questionnaire examining parents' views of compulsory pre-school attendance in the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic.

Participants' responses were recorded with their prior consent, and then transcribed. The text was subsequently subjected to open coding, in which phenomena were searched for and a unique code assigned to them. Categories were created by grouping similar codes, categories that provide a picture of parents' views of a particular phenomenon in relation to compulsory pre-school attendance.

The questions in the semi-structured interview focused on the following: 1. How do parents rate compulsory pre-school attendance? 2. What impact did/does it have on their family? 3. In their opinion, how did/does compulsory pre-school attendance affect enrolment for primary school? These basic questions were used solely to elicit the specific information required. Probing questions were allied to those questions to broaden the answers of the participant, and are thus purely characteristic of the semi-structured interview [2].

The main objective of the following article is to map out parents' views of the abovementioned topics in a descriptive way.

III. RESULTS

We identified the following topics in our research: a) compulsory pre-school education as help for parents, b) a change in the family's lifestyle, c) compulsory pre-school attendance for successful enrolment in primary school.

The different categories will be described in greater detail in the sections which follow.

A. Compulsory Pre-School Education as Help for Parents

According to the answers which parents provided, compulsory pre-school education is in most cases perceived as helping them in their preparation at home. Responses often showed that even if the final year of pre-school attendance was not imposed by law, parents would still take advantage of that possibility. Parents agreed that although compulsory pre-school attendance supports children in their adaptation to the school environment, they would not want this final year to be undertaken in a primary school environment, which could have negative effects on the children.

"...we are also preparing at home, of course. But home preparation is more like repetition than drilling...I always ask what they did at kindergarten and then repeat that. I am glad that the weight of preparing for enrolment is not left to me alone. This method of preparation suits me."

"We put our little boy into kindergarten even earlier. The fact that the final year is compulsory changes nothing for us - he would go anyway."

"I think it's a good step for people who normally don't put their children into kindergarten...I personally don't need a law to do it."

"It's good that it's likely that those children who go to the final year of kindergarten together will continue together at school...it certainly softens the blow of

changing environment and, most importantly, the shock of new responsibilities. I think that kindergarten is a friendly environment in which to get children to learn the school regime...certainly better than if that preparation were already in primary school. Children could develop an unnecessary fear of school."

Although the prevailing view was that the final year of pre-school education should primarily serve the education of children, there were also arguments about premature scholarisation.

"Kindergartens should definitely focus more on learning, so that the kids know something...it shouldn't just be about playing any more...."

"I wanted our little girl to take English in the final year. I think it's perfectly common nowadays and it should be automatically offered by every kindergarten."

"It's a kindergarten, not a school, they'll have plenty of time for learning. Kindergarten should mainly be about playing and running, not about swotting. If they do learn something, it should come naturally and only be what they truly need."

The preparedness, qualifications, and experience of the teacher logically relates to the topic of compulsory pre-school attendance. In this regard too parents are clear and believe that a compulsory year should be provided by teachers with special training, which they consider lies in deeper knowledge of developmental psychology and pedagogy for primary school.

"I don't think that teachers in a compulsory pre-school year need have a university degree or extra-long experience; rather they should have some special training or course on how to manage children of this specific age, when they are leaving the role of child at kindergarten and entering primary school as a pupil."

"They (teachers) should certainly know exactly what the children need, shape them more into future pupils and not keep treating them as little children who will be returning to kindergarten after the holidays. I don't want to say that it should be like at primary school, but that it really should be a transition, something in-between... I think the compulsory year serves or should at least serve this purpose."

In addition to special training for teachers, parents also demand greater cooperation with various professionals, such as speech therapists or psychologists. However, opinion was divided on the issue of working with a primary school through a kindergarten.

"I think it would certainly be beneficial for children if there were also a speech therapist available at the kindergarten. Children have plenty of speech defects, but these can be corrected quickly at this age when a speech therapist gets involved. This means that the child does not have to go to primary school with an unnecessary handicap."

"I don't view the final year as help for the child alone, but for us parents too...kindergarten should provide opportunities to better understand primary school. Personally speaking, I obviously want to know as much

about primary school as possible. After all, a child spends nine years there, and that's quite a long time."

"We will choose a primary school ourselves. I'm not interested in the kindergarten being my middleman. I find out all the information I need myself."

Parents' views on the content of compulsory pre-school education are more inclined toward acquiring new knowledge and skills, even beyond the education programme (e.g. language clubs). These requirements are mostly found in families with a higher socio-economic status.

B. Changing the Lifestyle of the Family

Lifestyle changes mostly occurred in families where children did not attend kindergarten even in previous years. The paradox is that compulsory pre-school attendance was mainly established for children from families with a low socio-economic status, and it was precisely those families who said that this change caused them partial financial and organizational problems.

"I don't have time to keep taking a child to kindergarten, I have other things to do ...another thing is that it costs something...I don't like it that compulsory attendance starts from kindergarten...nobody asked if it suits me...what if it doesn't?! ...And if he doesn't go, the duty is on me, and there's the test anyway... I don't like that either."

Some parents see compulsory pre-school attendance imposed by law as being restrictive - according to the amendment to Act 561/2004 Sb. (The Education Act) [1] a child must either attend kindergarten in person or have individual education, which takes place at home and for which parents are responsible. This sort of preparation, however, is not a "hidden escape route" from education. The principal of the kindergarten recommends to parents the areas in which the child is to be educated. These areas draw on the Framework Education Programme for Pre-School Education. The parent is obliged to educate the child in these areas, and the acquired knowledge and skills are subsequently checked by the kindergarten, usually between the third and fourth months after the beginning of the school year. If the parent and the child do not appear for such a test, the principal may end individual education.

Parents who are not entirely convinced of the importance of compulsory pre-school attendance are thus faced with another issue: namely excusing the child. The question of excusing children from compulsory pre-school education has proved ambiguous. Parents split into two camps - parents who understand excusing the child to be a matter of course and part of the set rules of the kindergarten, which they respect, and the other group of parents, to whom excusing is an irritant and perceived as an invasion of family privacy.

"...I excuse (the children) from the primary school too, so I don't see it as a problem. I have never thought of it as a problem."

"I excuse the children from primary school - fine; but why kindergarten? When (the child) does not go, the teacher asks where he was... what we do is none of her

business...we probably have something better to do."

Some parents say that compulsory pre-school attendance is time-consuming for them, and that their roles most often must be taken up by grandparents. Compulsory pre-school attendance can be emotionally demanding for children who have not previously attended kindergarten. This situation, however, affects the emotional lives of the grandparents too, for whom spending time with their grandchildren is an important part of life.

"Unfortunately, my husband and I go to work early in the morning, and that's why granny has to take my daughter to kindergarten. But that's not ideal either. She was used to being at home with the little one and having their own programme. Going to the park or going for a walk was something for them to do all morning, but now she needs to take the girl quickly in the morning, and it is stressful for her too. What is more, they have a good relationship and were used to spending time together. Now it's quick, quick to the kindergarten, after which she (grandmother) has virtually nothing to do... it is sad, they were so used to each other. And the little one obviously doesn't want it either."

Getting used to the new rhythm of life with a child attending compulsory pre-school education is not easy for parents who have not sent their child to kindergarten in previous years. In addition to financial and organizational problems, they might also feel a certain restriction of freedom, to which they are often unable to respond in the optimum way through individual home preparation of the child. However, if individual home preparation were to take place anyway, the question arises of whether compulsory pre-school attendance would then be irrelevant. The level of mastering knowledge and skills from the framework pre-school programme and guaranteeing social adaptation to the school environment would both be questionable.

C. Compulsory Pre-School Attendance for Successful Enrolment in Primary School

Most parents see the sense of compulsory pre-school attendance as primarily being in the increased success of enrolment at primary school. Some parents even believe that attending kindergarten and the final year will make the child more successful throughout primary education as a whole.

"I certainly believe that she (the child) will be more successful at enrolment...the teachers already know exactly what will be there and know how to specifically prepare the children ...I mean, I know how to prepare her myself, but here it's also about her being in a group, the surroundings...she's tested by a teacher, not by mum...she learns to work with nerves more"

"I see kindergarten as a sort of pre-stage, where the children gain awareness of learning and responsibilities in a playful way, so that they are not freaked out when they go to primary school...I think it improves the first five years of school, maybe even further...."

Some parents do not view compulsory pre-school attendance as being for enrolment purposes only, but see it as

positive for the future years of the child at primary school.

"...My view is that it's not just about enrolment... it's about the fact that the children learn to live in that group...and it's not just about the group, it's also about teachers as an authority, the school environment, the whole regime of the day, which is actually a bit similar to that of the primary school. They have to get used to the school environment and start getting used to changes...."

Compulsory pre-school attendance also has the task of reducing the number of primary school deferrals. Parents, however, do not always share this view.

"I don't think that it (compulsory pre-school attendance) has any extra effect on deferral. Either the child has what it takes and is at a certain level or is not."

Parents do not have high expectations of compulsory pre-school education, but generally take the view that it is of some benefit. When, however, the view appears that compulsory pre-school attendance does not contribute significantly to the development of a child, this conceals criticism of a particular kindergarten and its work with children, which, according to the parent, is insufficient.

"I don't have high expectations, but it certainly makes sense. It's definitely not a waste of time...."

"I don't think attendance has any benefit, it only lasts a year, and the work with the children is not exactly intensive...."

In general, it could be said that most parents see compulsory pre-school attendance as being an opportunity to increase the chances of successful enrolment in primary school and continuing in onward studies. In addition to this preparation, they also see social adaptation and support of the child's maturity and readiness for compulsory education as being worthwhile.

IV. DISCUSSION

The aim of our research was to find out parents' views of compulsory pre-school attendance. The research was conducted as our introduction to the field of research and aimed at contributing toward the development of a questionnaire to be used in further quantitatively oriented research. The responses provided by parents inspired the shaping of items in that questionnaire. This research focused mainly on three areas relating to compulsory pre-school attendance: evaluation of pre-school attendance from the parents' point of view, the impact on the family, and the impact on the success of enrolment in primary school. The areas were broadened even further in the questionnaire. Categories emerged from a semi-structured interview with 15 parents with open-coding to describe parents' views on individual issues.

The first category was saturated with statements by parents who perceived compulsory pre-school education as helping parents. Some parents even demand educational activities beyond the regular education programme, for example English courses. This issue was mostly raised by parents of a higher socio-economic status. In opposition, however, there were a few cases of views regarding premature scholarisation, in that

children should still "enjoy" play time and not be unnecessarily burdened by learning. This view was mostly held by parents of a lower socio-economic status. Compulsory pre-school attendance is also seen by parents as an opportunity to cooperate with experts such as a speech therapist. By contrast, differences of opinion appeared with regard to the mediation of cooperation with a primary school. Some parents saw this cooperation as being beneficial, while a different group of parents called for a certain degree of autonomy to be maintained in this respect.

Another category referred to the change of family lifestyle that compulsory pre-school attendance brought with it. Here we mentioned a statement made by a parent of lower socio-economic status, for whom such attendance paradoxically meant financial and organizational difficulties. Parents often use grandparents to deal with organizational and time-related problems brought about by compulsory pre-school attendance. For grandparents, time spent with grandchildren is often a full-day event, and provides them with internal fulfillment. Compulsory pre-school attendance therefore inadvertently affects the lives of the grandparents too. Reference [14] supports the home environment over compulsory kindergarten attendance. It is claimed here that the Czech public acknowledges pre-school education and considers the school to be a beneficial institution, but we should nonetheless support the family and the people close to the child. At the same time, it takes the view that if a child does not go to kindergarten, he/she is not fatally harmed. Another topic discussed was checking the results of individual education at home. Reference [3] identified significant shortcomings in this respect. Formal checking through kindergartens does not provide legal guardians with the necessary feedback. The result of the check has no specific consequence. The necessary support for children, for whom pre-school education is a suitable opportunity to increase the chances of school success, given the less stimulating family environment, is not therefore provided.

The final category presented the views of parents who see compulsory pre-school attendance as a chance of higher success in enrolment and as an investment in onward education. The overall assessment of compulsory pre-school attendance from the parents' perspective is positive, but there are occasional views that it does not benefit children to the extent claimed. Similar views are to be found in the expert community [11]. The authors argue that compulsory pre-school attendance removes parents' freedom of decision-making and should not be based on obligation, but on choice. It is therefore possible to think that compulsory pre-school attendance should only be for parents from families of a low socio-economic status, but here too arguments can be brought to the table that 10 months is not enough to compensate for the differences between children from different families [14].

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was created with the financial support of the project IGA *The attitudes of parents towards pre-school education under the conditions of Czech and Slovak Republics*

(IGA/FHS/2020/002), which is realized at Tomas Bata University in Zlín, Faculty of Humanities, Department of School Education.

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