

# The Importance of Compulsory Pre-School Education from the Parents' Perspective in the Czech Republic

Beata Horníčková, Sona Lorencová

**Abstract**—The study deals with the presentation of the results of quantitatively oriented research. The research was conducted as part of a questionnaire survey with the aim to find out what are the attitudes of parents to compulsory preschool education in the Czech Republic. This research presents results from the area of importance of compulsory pre-school education from the parents' perspective. The research method was a questionnaire, which was distributed to respondents through an online platform. The research involved 107 parents, who answered a total of 36 questions that found out their attitudes to last year's compulsory preschool attendance. The results show that compulsory pre-school attendance has increased the importance of pre-school education. However, the results also show that the compulsory last year of preschool education is not more important according to parents than in previous years. Most participants consider compulsory pre-school attendance to be important and are happy that their child attends it. The results reveal the fact that the introduction of compulsory pre-school attendance has contributed to the importance of parents' perceptions of pre-primary education.

**Keywords**—Compulsory pre-school education, education of preschool children, kindergarten, parents.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**D**ISCUSSION regarding compulsory preschool education is held at all levels – from legislators and the professional teaching community to parents. Experts base their arguments on the fact that preschool education is crucial for children's social and emotional development. The added value for these development components are targeted activities which contribute to a child's overall development. The foundations for literacy are laid down in preschool education (language and literary, mathematical and scientific literacy, etc.), while the child's volition and ethical foundations are also strengthened, and last but not least psychomotor development occurs. It provides targeted support for key competencies important in the child's further education and in ordinary life. Preschool education should not be viewed from a short-term perspective – it does not just influence the individual at the particular time, but it produces a chain reaction. Preschool age children grow into adult individuals who will be members of society, and it is therefore important to pay attention to their education from an early age [1]. These arguments are even more evident in the context of children from socially disadvantaged families, minorities, and from a global perspective also those in less

developed countries in the world. In these cases, the importance of preschool education is all the stronger. We are, of course, aware that the issue requires a much more comprehensive approach than merely legislating for compulsory preschool education, although this is perceived as a possible partial step towards supporting nursery school attendance [2].

There is very little research into parents' attitudes to compulsory preschool education. Nevertheless, some such studies have shown that parents are aware of the benefits arising from preschool education, including in the relationship to further education, and they would agree to it becoming compulsory [3]. Concerns may arise, however over an over-formalisation of education and pressure on improving results [4] and premature scholarisation [5].

Parents mostly expect support in the development of their children's social skills from a nursery school, in particular for younger children, as well as learning to share, expressing oneself effectively, developing self-confidence and establishing effective communication. Other reasons include managing inappropriate behaviour, supporting physical skills, and language development. Significant values have also been reached in the finding that nursery schools are expected to provide preparation for primary education [6].

Parents identify the ideal age to begin preschool education in accordance with the child's abilities. According to [6], 4 years was described as the best time. The main reason was that the preschool offered a broader social environment which the family could no longer secure.

Within the Czech Republic, no public debate has been held regarding the introduction of compulsory preschool attendance, and nor was any perceptible reaction from parents observed [7]. According to [7], parents ascribe great importance to preschool education, and this is often based on it preparing the child for beginning primary school.

The final mentioned perspective is that of nursery school teachers. They perceive the legislative change as an opportunity for their professional prestige to grow in relation to parents, and also to their colleagues at primary schools. Contrasting with this is a higher level of responsibility for preparing children for primary school [7].

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## II. THE OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY OF THE INVESTIGATION

The main objective of our research was to ascertain the attitudes of parents of children visiting nursery school, with a particular focus on its importance. The premise for a change in the status (importance) of preschool education is when it was made compulsory through legislation in 2017. This research was undertaken in 2020, and 107 respondents took part, all parents of preschool age children. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents using an online platform.

### Information on Respondents

Women and men with an average age of 26 years took part in the research. Respondents reported their educational attainment ranging from secondary school, college to university level. For the needs of the research, respondents' marital status was also ascertained. Detailed percentages are given in Figs. 1-3.

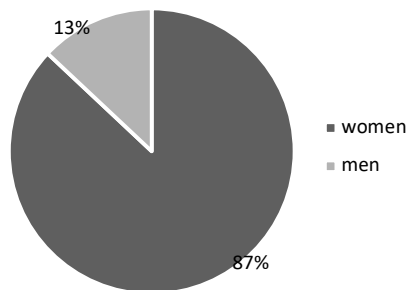


Fig. 1 Sex of respondents

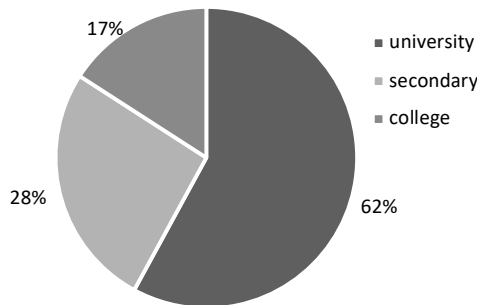


Fig. 2 Educational attainment of respondents

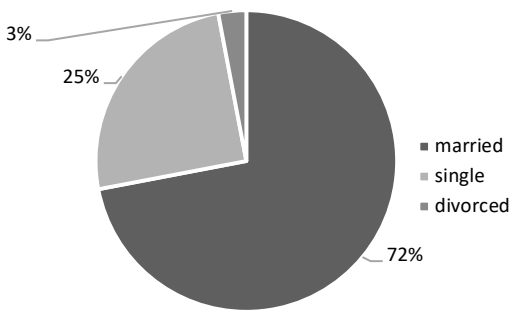


Fig. 3 Marital status of respondents

The questionnaire ascertained respondents' attitude to compulsory preschool education. Attitude here is considered to mean an individual's assessment in regard to their surrounding

environment, another subject or also towards themselves. Attitudes are relatively stable and determine an individual's behaviour [8]. An attitude can be a positive or negative assessment; it can be perceived as a point of view. Attitudes contain three dimensions. These are the cognitive dimension, which relates to opinions and ideas, the emotional dimension, which relates to what a person feels about the object, and the conative dimension, which relates to a predisposition towards behaviour or acts in relation to the subject of the attitude [9].

The most common methods for investigating attitudes are surveys, observations or textual analysis. One of the most reliable techniques is said to be the Likert scale [9], which was also used in our research.

## III. RESULTS

Areas relating to the importance of preschool education contained statements, the responses to which are subsequently presented in graphical form. We divided up responses on the importance of preschool education into 5 groups: a) The effect of introducing compulsory preschool education on the importance of nursery schools; b) The compulsory year of preschool attendance compared to prior years of preschool attendance; c) The usefulness of compulsory preschool attendance from the parents' perspective; d) Parents' attitude towards compulsory preschool attendance; e) Parents' attitude towards the expansion of compulsory preschool attendance.

### A. Parents' Attitude to Compulsory Preschool Attendance

Many parents and children have come to take preschool education for granted, but we wanted to ascertain whether they also perceive the compulsory preschool year in this way too. Our findings have shown that in general parents' attitude to compulsory preschool education is favourable, with most parents (57%) unable to imagine that their child could not attend the compulsory preschool year. However, 32% of respondents did not agree with the statement. The remaining 11% did not take any position in regard to the statement.

Statement: I cannot imagine my child not attending nursery school in the year prior to beginning primary school.

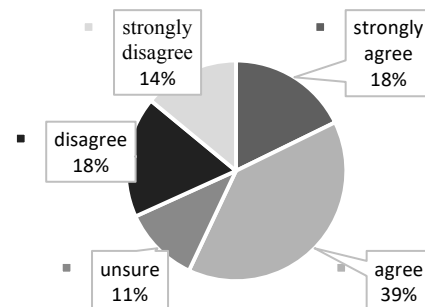


Fig. 4 Attitudes of parents in percentages to the compulsory last year of preschool attendance

### B. Usefulness of Compulsory Preschool Attendance from Parents' Perspective

The usefulness of preschool attendance has been demonstrated by a lot of research [10]-[12], but here we have

tried to ascertain the usefulness of the compulsory final preschool year from the perspective of parents. Our results show that most parents (60%) perceive compulsory preschool attendance as useful. Just 24% of parents do not agree with the statement. The remaining 16% of respondents were unsure.

Statement: I think children’s compulsory nursery school attendance is very useful.

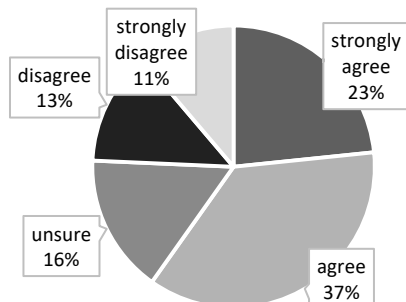


Fig. 5 Attitudes of parents in percentages to the usefulness of preschool attendance

*C. The Effect of Introducing Compulsory Preschool Education on the Importance of Nursery Schools*

The question of the effect of compulsory preschool education on the perception of the importance of nursery schools has remained a topical issue since 2017 when attendance was made into law. The research found that most respondents (44%) agreed with the statement, while 39% of respondents did not agree with the statement. The remaining 17% said that they were unsure.

Statement: The introduction of compulsory preschool education made me realise the importance of nursery school for my child.

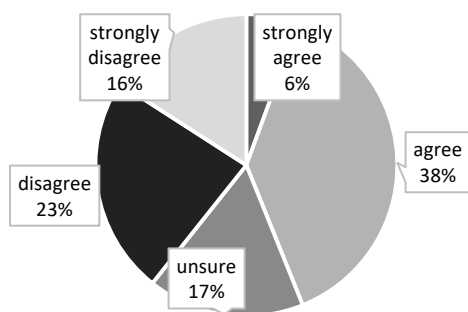


Fig. 6 Attitudes of parents in percentages to the importance of preschool attendance

*D. Compulsory Year of Preschool Attendance vs. Prior Years of Attendance at Nursery School*

Respondents were asked whether they perceived the compulsory year of preschool attendance as more important than attendance at nursery school in prior years. Most respondents (68%) said that they disagreed with this statement. Just 20% expressed their agreement, and consider the compulsory year of preschool attendance to be more important. The remaining 12% were unsure.

Statement: The compulsory attendance at nursery school in the year before starting primary school is more important for

children than attendance at nursery school in years prior to this.

*E. Parents’ Attitude towards Expanding Compulsory Preschool Attendance*

Linked to the issue of compulsory preschool attendance being put into law is the question of whether preparation for primary school and the school regime should also be compulsory in prior years too. Here, the majority of respondents (71%) did not agree with the expansion of compulsory preschool attendance to include earlier year groups. Only 24% of respondents agreed with the statement. This statement saw the lowest level (5%) of parental indecision.

Statement: Compulsory attendance at nursery school should apply to children even outside the year prior to beginning primary school.

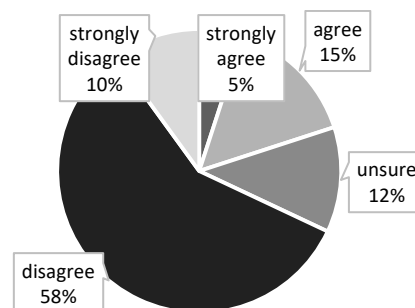


Fig. 7 Attitudes of parents in percentages to the importance of the last year of preschool education

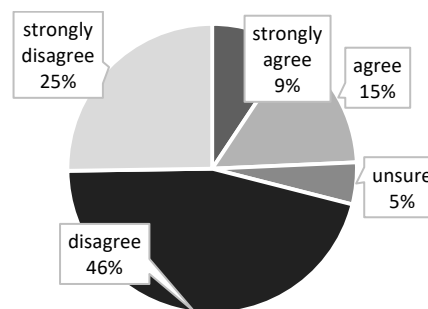


Fig. 8 Attitudes of parents in percentages to the extension of the obligation of preschool attendance

IV. DISCUSSION

The objective of our research was to ascertain attitudes to compulsory preschool attendance, with a particular focus on its importance. Our questionnaire survey using a Likert scale ascertained parental attitudes in the following areas:

- i. Parental attitudes to compulsory preschool attendance.
- ii. The usefulness of compulsory preschool attendance from parents’ perspective.
- iii. The effect of introducing compulsory preschool education on the importance of nursery school.
- iv. Compulsory year of preschool attendance vs. prior years of nursery school attendance.
- v. Parental attitudes to the expansion of compulsory preschool attendance.

There were clear findings in the first area, with parents taking

a positive attitude to compulsory preschool attendance. Preschool education has a long history in the Czech Republic, and strong foundations. During the period of Czechoslovakia in 1989, almost 90% of children aged between three and five were admitted to preschool education. After Czechoslovakia's dissolution, by 1997 83% of children were admitted to preschool education, of whom 90% were five years old, i.e. the age of current compulsory preschool education [10]. Prior to compulsory preschool education becoming law in 1997, the participation of five-year old children in preschool education was around an average of 92%. Once attendance became law, this rose by just under 5% [11]. The resulting findings thus confirm that parents continue to take a positive attitude towards preschool education in regards to children aged 5 years.

Another area was our finding regarding the usefulness of compulsory preschool attendance. Again, we can build on findings that in the past have demonstrated the usefulness and also return on investment of preschool education [12], [13]. Here there is a clear link and continuing positive approach to preschool attendance, which has not changed by it becoming compulsory. For many parents, this did not result in any major changes in their child's planned nursery school attendance. This finding also supports the idea that the Czech public values preschool education, seeing it as beneficial [14].

Parents' attitude towards the statement on the effect of compulsory preschool education on the importance of nursery school was in line with the previous findings. The positive attitudes of parents found show that the introduction of compulsory preschool education led in some parents to a realisation of the importance of preschool education, which corresponds with the objective of "showing the importance of preschool education to all parents," [15], which was specified by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

Responses to the perceived importance of the compulsory preschool year compared to prior years of attendance at nursery school led to the finding that a significant proportion of parents do not agree that this final year of attendance is more important than those prior to it. This finding can be perceived in the context of three to four years of attendance as a positive one. This finding correlates with the results of research by [16], in which principals and teachers at nursery schools consider the objective of the compulsory year to be the all-round development of the child, which, however, is also supported in prior years.

It may appear surprising in the context of the previous findings that respondents expressed a significant disagreement with the expansion of compulsory preschool attendance to lower year groups, i.e. for children from three years of age. One possible interpretation of this finding could involve the individual differences between children. The issue of children's readiness and maturity for primary school is dealt with a lot in academic literature [17]-[19] in relation to teachers, children and parents, although the issue of children's maturity for beginning nursery school is not dealt with so extensively in research [20]. Developmental psychology, including the specialist pedagogical community, agrees that the rate of maturity is individual for each child. Even with voluntary

nursery school attendance, there are often problems such as separation anxiety, and problems with the nature of self-care, operating within a social environment, and so a successful adaptation. In this point, however, it is up to parents to consider the state of their child, and on the basis of this, or independently, to decide whether they want to enrol them at nursery school or not. Parents' conviction on their child's readiness plays a crucial role in their decision to enrol their child for nursery school [21]. The legal amendment which would expand compulsory preschool attendance would rob them of this choice, and it is also possible that they might even encounter rejection from society.

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