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contributions of experts in pre-primary
education from Slovakia, Czech Republic,
Poland and Austria

Innovation in pre-primary education

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of the proceedings was to bring together experts from four countries - Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland and Austria on the topic of innovation in pre-primary education. The collection contains seventeen scientific contributions that can be useful for researchers, educators and educational policy makers. They bring new knowledge and information that can be used for international comparison. They offer suggestions for further research and innovation in educational work.

There are several reasons for innovation in pre-primary education in the 21st century. There is certainly a need to adapt educational systems and processes to social and technological progress. Also, new findings from neuroscience and developmental psychology lead researchers and educators to innovate educational means, goals and contents of education. Changes in pedagogical approaches and support measures according to children's needs are also inevitable. A new generation of children is growing up in different social and cultural conditions. Quality pre-primary education is a priority.

Innovations in pre-primary education aim to improve its quality, to support children's holistic development and to prepare them for future challenges in a globalised and technologically oriented world. We hope that this collection of papers will contribute in a small way to achieving this through your work, inspired by the texts of the papers.

Editors

INNOVATIONS IN PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC (2021-2023)

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Abstract

The information paper presents new processes that innovated the system of pre-primary education in the Slovak Republic in the years 2021-2023 according to the amendments to the Education Act No. 245/2008. Specifically, it concerns compulsory pre-primary education, individual education, free compulsory pre-primary education, education, the right to pre-primary education and support measures. These have been supported by state solutions in the form of calls for projects by kindergarten founders. Specifically, the calls were: Capacity Building of Kindergartens, Health Worker, Assistant Educator and Pre-school Teachers. The reform of the school guidance and prevention system was also carried out during this period. The paper is one of the outputs of the KEGA project 001UMB-4 and VEGA project 1/0505/24, whose principal investigator is the author of the study.

Keywords: innovation, kindergarten, pre-primary education.

Innovation as new processes

The informative paper presents innovations in three years that have brought something new, which was not previously in the system of pre-primary education in the Slovak Republic. It was the implementation of new processes that were legally established by the National Council of the Slovak Republic. These processes were carried out with the support of state measures to make them work in practice. The capacity of kindergartens in which the number of children exceeded the capacity was gradually increased. The intention was that every child aged from three years until the start of compulsory schooling should be able to participate in pre-primary education from 1 September 2025. The specific needs of the children were addressed by the State's call for "Assistant teacher for kindergartens". The aim of the call was to support kindergartens and special kindergartens by employing an assistant teacher as a non-teaching staff member. He was to assist children with disabilities and children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in pre-primary education. The next state call for project solutions was "Preschoolers II". The aim of the call was to equip the newly created classrooms and temporary premises intended for the provision of pre-primary education with the necessary equipment, aids and toys for the holistic personal development of children. The 'Health worker in school' call aimed at providing health and nursing care, carrying out health screening of children, preventive and counselling activities in the field of promoting healthy lifestyles and disease prevention and other health activities. These new staff, together with the teaching staff and professional staff of the kindergartens, form the school support teams. At the same time, Act No 415/2021, Section 130 reformed the guidance and prevention system in five interrelated levels of child support: class teacher, school support team, professional staff, school special educator, professional staff in guidance and prevention centres. Two types of counselling centres have been established: the Counselling and Prevention Centre and the Specialist Counselling and Prevention Centre. Both types of newly established counselling centres will also provide closer support for school support teams, which provide support care for children directly at school.

Table 1. Overview of new Processes in Pre-primary Education in the Slovak Republic.

Year	Name of innovation	Innovation by law
2021	<i>Compulsory pre-primary education</i>	From 1 September 2021, pre-primary education in kindergartens is compulsory for 5-year-old children (Act No. 245/2008). From 1 September 2021 to 31 August 2026, compulsory pre-primary education is also provided in a pre-primary education establishment which does not have the status of a kindergarten. These are establishments for children up to three years of age, which fall under the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (Law No 273/2021).
2021	<i>Individual education</i>	The Education Act (No. 245/2008) allows for the fulfilment of compulsory pre-primary education in the form of individual education in state kindergartens.
2022	<i>Free compulsory pre-primary education</i>	On 1 January 2022, Amendment No. 415/2021 to the Education Act came into force, which (among other things) established free compulsory pre-primary education in state kindergartens.
2023	<i>Right to pre-primary education</i>	With effect from 1 September 2023, Act No 182/2023 introduced the right to enrol a child in pre-primary education in kindergarten from the school year following the school year in which the child reaches the age of three.
2023	<i>Support measures</i>	Law No 182/2023 introduced support measures in the form of the Catalogue of Support Measures with accompanying materials on support measures.

Compulsory pre-primary education

The key period for the start of the new processes was 2021. Compulsory pre-primary education was legally established. From 1 September 2021, it is compulsory for every child who reaches the age of 5 by 31 August. It takes place in kindergartens (state, private, religious). They must be included in the network of schools and educational establishments. Children for whom pre-primary education is compulsory are preferentially admitted to kindergarten (Act No 245/2008, Art. 28a). There were 81 420 children in compulsory pre-primary education (as of 30.9.2023), representing 46.5% of all children in kindergartens. The share of 5-year-old children in kindergartens out of the total number of 5-year-old children in the Slovak population in 2023 (91 %) was 60 650 children in total. The number of 3-6-year-old children in kindergartens out of the population of these children in the Slovak population was 74%, which is 178,694. The number of 3-6-year-old children in the population of the State was 240 456 children in total (Centre for Scientific and Technical Information, Statistical Yearbook - Kindergartens, Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic). Children aged 3-6 may also attend facilities for children up to the age of three. The numbers of these children are not included in these statistics. Up to the age of three, they may be at home with their parents who receive parental allowance. This may be granted up to the child's sixth birthday, according to the conditions laid down by law. Thus, the enrolment rate of pre-school children in pre-school institutions is considerably higher.

From 1 September 2021 to 31 August 2026, compulsory pre-primary education may also take place in pre-primary education establishments (Act No. 273/2021, § 161 I). Thereafter, the conditions laid down in the school legislation apply to these establishments. These are establishments for children up to the age of three, which are predominantly private and are governed by the relevant legislation of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and the Ministry of Health. Compulsory pre-primary education may be carried out in institutional and individual form. If a child has not attained school eligibility after the age

of six, he or she may continue compulsory pre-primary education with the written consent of the competent educational guidance and prevention establishment, the written consent of the general practitioner for children and adolescents and the informed consent of the legal representative or the representative of the establishment. If the child has not attained compulsory school attendance even after the continuation of compulsory pre-primary education, the child shall start compulsory school attendance in a primary school no later than 1 September following the day on which the child reaches the age of seven. Compulsory pre-primary education in kindergartens and pre-primary education establishments shall be inspected by the State School Inspectorate. Both institutions issue a certificate of completion of pre-primary education. The municipality shall designate, by a generally binding regulation, a catchment kindergarten for children residing in the municipality in which they receive compulsory pre-primary education. If the municipality is the founder of several kindergartens, it shall designate a part of its territory for each catchment kindergarten by a general binding regulation. If a municipality does not have an established kindergarten, it may conclude a written agreement with another municipality on a catchment kindergarten" (Act No. 273/2021, § 8a).

On 1 January 2022, an amendment to the Education Act No. 415/2021 came into force, which (among other things) regulated:

- free education in a kindergarten established by a local government education authority or a local government authority (state school) for children for whom pre-primary education is compulsory;
- kindergartens may be part of schools with other levels of education; which means that a school may be established as a single legal entity by combining any combination of kindergarten, primary school or secondary school. Schools and educational establishments may be merged or grouped together into one legal entity.

If the legal representative fails to ensure the proper fulfilment of compulsory pre-primary education, the head of the kindergarten is obliged to report this fact to the municipality in which the child resides and to the office social affairs and family office according to the place of residence of the legal representative (Act No.596/2003). The neglect of the proper implementation of compulsory pre-primary education shall be assessed and dealt with by the competent office social affairs and family office in accordance with Law No 600/2003 and Law No 596/2003.

Individual education

The Education Act (No. 245/2008) allows for the implementation of compulsory pre-primary education in an institutional form. The child regularly attends kindergarten on weekdays, for at least four hours a day. Individual education is the equivalent of fulfilling compulsory pre-primary education in an institutional form in a kindergarten that is registered in the network of schools and educational establishments. A child shall not cease to be a child of a mainstream kindergarten when fulfilling compulsory pre-primary education in an individual form. Individual education must be requested by the child's legal representative. The application shall be accompanied by a written consent from the general practitioner for children and adolescents or a recommendation from the counselling and prevention centre. It shall be provided by the tribal kindergarten for at least two hours per week. The teacher providing the child with individual education shall submit a half-yearly written report on the process to the principal of the kindergarten. The expenses related to the individual education of the child shall be borne by the legal representative. The mainstream kindergarten, in cooperation with the legal representative, shall determine the content of the child's individual education. If the child does not fulfil it, the head of the kindergarten may change the individual to the institutional form of compulsory pre-primary education. According to legal procedures, the director may also exempt the child from the obligation to attend kindergarten for health reasons if it is compulsory pre-primary education (Act No 245/2008).

Right to pre-primary education

Act No. 182/2023 brought a new principle into the Education Act No. 245/2008 with effect from 1 September 2023. It is the right to enrol a child in pre-primary education in kindergarten from the school year following the school year in which the child reaches the age of three. Each municipality therefore

has a legal obligation to create the conditions for the implementation of compulsory pre-primary education, including the exercise of the right of admission to pre-primary education in the kindergartens of which it is the founder. Children for whom pre-primary education is compulsory must be admitted in priority, followed by children who have the right to be admitted to pre-primary education. If a child is eligible for admission to pre-primary education, the application for admission of the child to pre-primary education shall be submitted by the legal representative or the representative of the establishment to the head of the catchment kindergarten, unless the application for admission of the child to pre-primary education is submitted to the head of a church kindergarten or a private kindergarten. If such a child is not admitted to pre-primary education in a kindergarten which is a state school, according to the child's permanent residence, the entitled person shall be entitled to a parental contribution according to a special regulation. A catchment kindergarten is intended for children from a certain area of the municipality who have permanent residence there. The municipality shall determine this by a generally binding regulation. If a municipality does not have an established kindergarten, it may conclude a written agreement with another municipality on a catchment kindergarten (Act No 596/2003 Coll., as amended by Act No 182/2023). It should be as close as possible to the child's place of residence. It should have the best accessibility by public transport from the child's place of residence. The kindergarten shall provide pre-primary education to a child who is eligible for admission to pre-primary education on weekdays during school hours for at least four hours a day.

Support measures in education

Law No 182/2023 introduced support measures. A support measure is a measure provided by a school or a school establishment necessary to enable a child to participate fully in education and training and to develop his or her knowledge, skills and abilities. The Catalogue of Support Measures specifies the educational support measures provided by a school or school establishment that are necessary to enable a child to participate fully in education and training and to develop his or her knowledge, skills and abilities (<https://podporneopatrenia.minedu.sk/katalog-podpornych-opatreni/>).

The following support measures are implemented in kindergartens (Act No 182/2023, § 145a):

- (a) Provision of education and training on the basis of adjustments to the objectives, methods, forms and approaches in education and training;
- (b) the provision of education and training on the basis of adjustments to the content of education and training and the evaluation of the results achieved by children in education and training;
- (c) the provision of activities for the development of motor skills, sensory perception, communication skills, cognitive skills, social-communication skills, emotionality and self-care;
- (d) activities to promote the achievement of school competence;
- (e) the provision of a course in the language of instruction of the school or other support for the acquisition of the language of instruction of the school;
- (f) the provision of tutoring or targeted learning to achieve the child's highest individual cognitive potential;
- (g) improving the conditions for the education and training of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds;
- (i) ensuring special forms of communication between the disabled child or pupil with a disability and the school or school establishment;
- (j) activities to promote social inclusion;
- (m) the provision of a teaching assistant in the classroom;
- (n) the provision of health care;
- (o) the provision of self-service activities in accordance with a special regulation at the time of the educational process;
- (p) the provision of special educational publications and compensatory aids;
- (q) provision of adaptations to school premises designed to promote perception and the acquisition of skills;

- (r) the removal of physical barriers on the premises of the school or school establishment and organisational barriers to education and training;
- (t) prevention to promote physical health, mental health and prevent the occurrence of risky behaviour;
- (u) crisis intervention.

The support measure shall be provided on the basis of a statement by a teaching staff member in the category of teacher or school special educator, a statement by a school professional staff member or a statement by a counselling and prevention facility. The statement of purpose for the provision of a support measure may be requested from the head teacher by the child's legal representative, a pedagogical staff member or a professional staff member. In the case of a child, the opinion of the counselling and prevention establishment for the purpose of providing a support measure may be requested only with the informed consent of the legal representative. The statement of purpose and the provision of support measures may be requested in writing (both in hard copy and electronically).

The head of the school or the head of the school establishment shall comment in writing on the proposal for the support measure set out in the statement and on the proposed scope of its provision, taking into account the school's staffing, space, material and technical and financial conditions. The written statement shall be provided by the head of the school or the head of the school establishment to the persons within 10 days of the date on which the request for the provision of the support measure was made, or within 20 days in a justified case (Act No 182/2023, § 145a).

CONCLUSION

The paper presents key innovations in the pre-primary education system over three years (2021-2023). The introduction of innovations is related to support measures by the state. The paper names those that have been legislated or addressed through calls for projects for kindergarten founders. Sub-processes of support are not mentioned in the paper. They depend to a large extent on the quality of the processes in individual kindergartens. Informing about what is new that has not been there before is important. It serves to raise public awareness, also as a basis for making comparative studies between countries. It will also be important to monitor the effects of new processes in pre-primary education.

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- Act No. 600/2023 Coll. on Child Benefit and on Amendments to Act No. 461/2003 Coll. on Social Insurance. https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2003/600/vyhlasene_znenie.html

ANALYSIS OF INNOVATIONS IN PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC 2022-2023

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Abstract

This paper presents new processes that have innovated pre-school education in the Czech Republic between 2022 and 2023, specifically inclusive education in kindergartens. There was analysed the accessibility of education in kindergartens, the diversity of education by nationality, the provision of preschool education for children with special educational needs its anchoring in documents and provision in personnel conditions. The study is the output of an analysis tracking education from the publicly available database of the Czech Statistical Office and documents published by the Ministry of Education for the school year 2022/2023.

Keywords: innovation, kindergarten, pre-primary education.

Innovation as new processes

Innovation in early childhood education plays a key role in strengthening the quality of educational programmes for young children. Educational programmes are an essential element in early childhood and have a significant impact on children's development and personal growth. The content of innovative educational programmes is targeted at innovations that are by their nature a response to changes in society, social, economic and technological. Teachers apply innovative educational content and innovative approaches in their professional educational work. Innovative approaches may focus on different aspects of early childhood education, including pedagogical methods, the educational setting, family involvement and the use of modern technology and inclusive approaches. Inclusive approaches are innovations aimed at providing an inclusive environment that promotes the participation of all children, including children from foreign countries and children with special educational needs, and respects the individual differences and needs of each child. In their professional activities in kindergarten education, teachers focus on supporting the overall development of the child and adapting to his/her individual needs and interests. They contribute to the preparation of preschool children for schooling and their successful and smooth entry into the formal education system.

Innovation in early childhood education plays a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of educational programmes for young children. These programs are essential during early childhood and significantly impact children's development and personal growth. Innovative educational programmes address changes in society, social dynamics, economic factors, and technology. Teachers incorporate innovative content and approaches into their professional work, focusing on various aspects of early childhood education such as pedagogical methods, the learning environment, family engagement, and the integration of modern technology and inclusive practices. Inclusive approaches aim to create an environment that fosters the participation of all children, including those from foreign backgrounds and those with special educational needs. Kindergarten teachers prioritize overall child development, adapting to individual needs and interests, and preparing pre-schoolers for a successful transition into formal education.

Availability of education in kindergartens in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, parents and legal representatives show significant interest in pre-school education provided by kindergartens. These educational institutions cater to children aged 3 to 6 years, with admission not permitted before the age of 2. The upper age limit of 6 years applies until the child begins formal schooling.

According to Act No. 561/2004 Coll., known as the Education Act, every child is entitled to free pre-school education starting from the school year following their fifth birthday. This education remains compulsory and free, even if the child has received a deferment from compulsory schooling. The target group for compulsory pre-school education includes children aged 5 and above as of September 1, 2017.

While the Education Act outlines priority criteria for kindergarten admissions, two-year-olds are not among the prioritised groups. Legally, two-year-old children do not have an entitlement to kindergarten admission. Admission is only possible from the age of three, effective September 1, 2020. However, some kindergartens may accept two-year-olds based on available capacity and suitable conditions for education and care.

In 2023, the total population of preschool-age children, including 2-year-olds, stands at 588,721. Among them, 470,187 children have legal entitlement to preschool education, while 112,223 do not. The actual enrolment in preschool education is 369,205, representing an increase of 8,715 children—the highest in nine years. This growth was influenced by the arrival of Ukrainian refugees. Additionally, 6,700 children participated in preparatory classes within primary schools (which increased by 15.5% compared to the previous year) (CSO- analytical part).

Table 1. Population status in 2023

Population status in 2023		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • of which number of children from 2 to 6 years • Number of children in pre-school education
Population in the Czech Republic		10 827 529
Two-year-old children		112 223
Three-year-old children		115 010
Four-year-old children		117 703
Five-year-old children		118 940
Six-year-old children		118 534
Number of children with Czech citizenship		349 638
Total number of children with foreign citizenship		19 567
In that	EU countries	3 633
	other European countries	11 988
	other countries of the world	3 956
Number of children in pre-school education		369 205
Number of children in pre-school education in primary school		6 700

Source: the Czech Statistical Office, public database

Kindergartens by founder - number of classes in kindergartens, of which with different founder

In our analysis, we focused exclusively on pre-school education institutions listed in the register of schools and educational establishments according to Section 144/1a of the Education Act. This excludes

children's groups, clubs, and unregistered kindergartens, which lack authorization to offer compulsory pre-school training. Schools with the authority to provide such education fall into three categories: kindergartens, preparatory classes within primary schools, and preparatory classes within special primary schools.

Table 2. *Kindergartens by founder*

Total number of kindergartens	5 374
Public Kindergartens	4 877 - 90,8%
Private kindergartens	447 - 8,3%
Church kindergarten	50 - 0,9
Total classes	17 120
of which private	894
of which religious	108

Source: the Czech Statistical Office, public database

Number of children by founder / its diversity

In the Czech Republic during the 2022/2023 school year, pre-school education was predominantly provided by kindergartens founded by municipalities or local districts. However, there are also kindergartens established by individual regions, with 7 directly under the Ministry of Education and 1 kindergarten established by the Ministry of Agriculture. Additionally, children have alternative options for education, including private and religious kindergartens. Some kindergartens are affiliated with healthcare institutions, established by municipalities or regions, specifically for children who spend extended periods in hospitals or psychiatric facilities, as well as children's hospitals or convalescent homes (The Czech Statistical Office - further CSO- analytical section).

Table 3. *Number of children by founder / its diversity*

Number of children			
<i>Total number of children</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Church</i>
369 205	352 222	14 782	2 101
of which asylum seekers			
<i>Total number of children</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Church</i>
6 904	6 666	193	45
of which Ukrainians			
<i>Total number of children</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Church</i>
10 718	10 237	393	88

Source: performance data

Age composition in kindergartens

Regarding age composition in kindergartens, the education landscape has been influenced by the war in Ukraine. Ukrainian refugee children have contributed to an overall increase in kindergarten enrolment, particularly among 3-5-year-olds. Admission of children under 3 years old to kindergartens occurs only if places are not filled by older children. Notably, the number of children with deferred school attendance—those aged 6 years and older as of August 31—has risen to 6.3%. This percentage represents a slight increase from the 2012/13 to the 2020/21 school years, prompting experts to address the overuse of deferrals and work toward a more balanced approach (CSO- analytical part).

Table 4. Age composition in kindergartens

Children under 3 years	32 100 - 8,7%
Children 3 years old	96 400 - 26,1%
Children 4 years old	107 000 - 29%
Children 5 years old	111 600 - 30,2%
Children 6 years and older	22 100 - 6%

Source: the Czech Statistical Office, public database

Diversity of education in kindergartens

In the school year 2022/23, 48% of children with disabilities attended mainstream kindergartens—an integration rate more than double that of ten years ago when only 22.1% of children with disabilities were part of mainstream classes. Specifically, 6,252 children with disabilities participated in mainstream education during 2022/23, representing an increase of 2,156 children compared to 2012/13. When comparing founders, public kindergartens had a lower proportion of children with disabilities (3.5%) than private schools (3.7%) and especially church-founded schools (8.0%) (CSO- analytical part).

The number of children with foreign citizenship in Czech kindergartens has surged. As of September 30, 2022, the count of foreign-citizen children in kindergartens has grown 3.6 times compared to a decade ago—rising from 5,434 in 2012/13 to 19,567 in 2022/23. This increase is largely attributed to Ukrainian refugee children. Consequently, the proportion of children with foreign nationality now stands at 5.3%, up from 3.4% in 2021/22 and 1.5% ten years ago (CSO- analytical part).

Table 5. Diversity of education in kindergartens

Number of children with disabilities in kindergartens	13 031	
	13share of the total number of children in kindergarten	
	share in the total number of children in kindergarten - 3.5%	
Total number of foreigners	19 567	
Of which	Ukraine	10 718
	Socialist Republic of Vietnam	2 606
	Slovak Republic	2 181
	Russian Federation	712

Source: the Czech Statistical Office, public database

Education of children in kindergartens in legislative documents of the Czech Republic

Act No.561/2004 Coll., on pre-school, primary, secondary, higher vocational and other education (Education Act), as amended, stipulates that, with effect from 1 September 2016, pre-school education is organised for children aged, as a rule, 3 to 6 years, but not earlier than 2 years. A child under 3 years of age is not legally entitled to admission to kindergarten.

However, admission of children aged 2 to 3 to kindergartens is still possible, but the kindergarten should ensure the appropriate conditions in case of their admission, which are described in this material and subsequently elaborated in the Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education (RVP PV).

Pre-school education is compulsory for a child who will have reached the age of five by the start of the school year. Compulsory education begins at the beginning of the school year following the day the child reaches the age of six. The legal guardian must be present at the registration for compulsory primary school attendance even if he/she wishes to apply for a deferment of compulsory school attendance. The child does not have to appear in person for enrolment. He or she can apply for a postponement of compulsory school attendance at the time of enrolment. The request must be made in writing to the head of the primary school and must be supported by a recommendation from the relevant school counselling centre and a specialist doctor or clinical psychologist (a recommendation from a general practitioner for children and adolescents is sufficient for this purpose). These assessments may be supplied later in the course of the administrative procedure for the application.

Table 6. Education of children in kindergartens in legislative documents of the Czech Republic

<i>Education of toddlers in kindergartens from 2 years</i>	<i>Legal entitlement to a place in kindergarten education</i>
§ 34 Act No. 561/2004 Coll.	has no legal right to be admitted to kindergarten
<i>Compulsory pre-school education in legislative documents</i>	<i>Deferment of school attendance</i>
2 § 34a Act No. 561/2004 Coll.	/3 §37 Act No. 561/2004 Coll.
<i>Individual (home) education for children in the last year of pre-school education</i>	
§ 34b Act No.561/2004 Coll. on pre-school, primary, secondary, higher vocational and other education (the Education Act), as amended,	

Inclusive education and its provision in state documents

These documents and initiatives aim to ensure that children with special educational needs have access to education and care appropriate to their individual needs and abilities, and that equal opportunities are provided for their full development.

Provision of teaching assistants for children with disabilities, health and social disadvantages - a teaching profession, legislatively anchored in the Ministry of Education:

- Act No. 561/2004 Coll., on pre-school, primary, secondary, higher vocational and other education (the Education Act), as amended,
- Act No. 563/2004 Coll., on teaching staff and on amendments to certain acts,
- Decree No.72/2005 Coll., on the provision of counselling services in schools and school counselling facilities, as amended,
- Decree No. 27/2016 Coll., on the education of children, pupils and students with special educational needs and the education of children, pupils and students with exceptional talents, as amended,
- Decree No. 492/2005 Coll., on regional norms, as amended.
- Information of the Ministry of Education on the provision of education for children, pupils and students with special educational needs with the support of assistance No 14 453/2005-24 on the

function of teaching assistant for pupils with disabilities, teaching assistant for children with social disadvantages:

- General Provisions The information describes the functions of teaching assistants for pupils with disabilities and teaching assistants for pupils with social disadvantages, which are support services that enable better quality education for many pupils with special educational needs.

Teaching assistant for children with disabilities

The special education centre or the pedagogical-psychological counselling centre shall determine the necessary time scope of the teaching assistant's support, including the recommended workload, in the documents relating to the provision of the teaching assistant. He or she shall also clearly define the respective competences of all teaching staff who simultaneously provide educational activities in a class, department or educational group. It is recommended that the educational activity be managed by a teacher who coordinates the activities of other collaborators - another teacher or educator in the classroom and the teaching assistant so that the education of the children entrusted to him/her, including children with disabilities, proceeds as effectively as possible.

Inclusive education and its provision in programmes

In the Czech Republic, inclusion in education is implemented through various state educational programmes and legislation that supports an inclusive approach to education. Some of the main programmes and documents related to inclusion in education in the Czech Republic are:

1. The Framework Educational Programme for Primary Education (RVP PV): the RVP PV is a key document that sets out the basic objectives, content and principles of education for kindergartens in the Czech Republic. It also contains recommendations for inclusion and support for children with special educational needs.
2. Strategy for Inclusive Education in the Czech Republic 2016-2020: this strategic document aims to promote and develop an inclusive approach to education in the Czech Republic. It contains specific measures and recommendations for supporting pupils with special educational needs in mainstream schools.
3. School Education Programmes (SEPs): individual schools develop their own SEPs, which focus on the specifics of the school and may include specific measures and strategies to promote inclusion.
4. Individual Education Plans (IEPs): Individual Education Plans are developed for children with special educational needs, setting out specific objectives, methods and means of support for each individual child.

These documents and programmes together form the framework for the implementation of inclusion in education in the Czech Republic and provide guidelines for supporting the education of all, children regardless of their individual needs or disadvantages.

Development of personnel conditions for inclusive education in kindergartens

Innovation in the context of inclusion in education involves the development and implementation of new methods, technologies and strategies that support inclusion and improve the learning environment for all students. This may include, for example, the use of technological tools for personalised learning, strengthening support services for children with special needs, or creating environments that promote diversity and respect for individual differences.

Overall, the aim of inclusion in education and innovation in this area is to strengthen the accessibility, availability and quality of education for all teachers, regardless of ability, health or social background.

The implementation of new methods for inclusion in education can involve several steps and strategies:

1. Research and analysis: start by conducting thorough research on existing methods and continuously monitor trends and innovations in the field of inclusion in education. Identify the needs of your students and consider how new methods can better meet those needs.

2. Training and professional support: provide teachers and other staff in the school or educational institution with appropriate training and professional support on the new methods. This training should cover not only the techniques and strategies themselves, but also the principles of inclusive education and working with diverse groups of learners.
3. Pilot programmes: consider introducing pilot programmes where you can try out new methods with smaller numbers of students or in selected classes. This will allow you to evaluate the effectiveness of the methods and get feedback from teachers, students and their families.
4. Monitoring and evaluation: the introduction of new methods should be accompanied by regular monitoring and evaluation of their effectiveness. Focus not only on learning outcomes but also on student engagement, student satisfaction and the overall atmosphere of the classroom or school.
5. Flexibility and adaptability: be open to adjusting and adapting new methods based on feedback and changes in your learning environment. Each group of learners may require a different approach, and it is important to be flexible and adapt to individual needs.
6. Sharing best practice: if you are successful with new methods, be willing to share your experience and best practice with other schools or educational institutions. Collaboration and knowledge sharing can lead to wider dissemination of inclusive practices and innovations in education.

Table 7. Staff representation in kindergartens in terms of educational attainment

Teachers	32 785,44
Minimum education	high school diploma, university degree, Bc, Mgr.
Teaching assistants	4 319
Education	§2 of Act No. 563/2004 Coll.
Professional staff of kindergartens	66- special educators 4- psychologists- 2 educators
Minimum education	high school diploma, university degree, Bc, Mgr.
Support staff	10 219- non-teaching staff

Source: the Czech Statistical Office, public database

CONCLUSION

The paper presents several key innovations that have been supported by government action. These innovations included both changes in legislation and calls for projects for kindergarten founders. The selected innovations tracked are inclusion and support for children with special educational needs, which were significantly supported by state measures between 2022 and 2023 to ensure that children in inclusive education have equal access to quality education. The information provided serves to raise public awareness and also as a basis for comparative studies between countries. It will also be important to monitor the effects of new processes in pre-school education.

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INNOVATIONS IN PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION IN POLAND IN THE SCHOOL YEAR 2022/2023 IN THE FIELD OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The article focuses on presenting an innovative approach to preschool inclusive education, which has introduced innovations in education, especially in terms of system changes in the 2022/2023 school year in Poland. Statistical data on the accessibility of pre-school education, the conditions that Polish legislation imposes on pre-school institutions in terms of organising the process of supporting children with special educational needs were analysed. The legal basis for inclusive education was also presented, as well as the staffing conditions necessary for the implementation of inclusive education.

Keywords: innovation, kindergarten, pre-primary education, inclusive education.

Innovation as new processes

In today's rapidly changing world, education faces the need to adapt and innovate to meet the demands of modern society. Traditional teaching methods, based on rigid schemes and one-sided transmission of knowledge, are giving way to new, creative solutions that emphasise active student involvement, the development of critical thinking skills and collaboration. Innovation in education is not only about technology, but also about new pedagogical approaches, didactic methods and organisational changes in the learning process. Innovation in education focuses on making positive changes that improve the functioning of the school or classroom and enhance the delivery of the curriculum.

Contemporary pre-school education is undergoing a significant transformation, driven by a growing understanding of the crucial role of early childhood in human development. New research and technological advances are opening up a wide range of opportunities for teachers and educators to implement innovative educational methods and tools. These innovations aim not only to improve the quality of education, but also to adapt it to the individual needs and potential of each child.

Today's approach to education increasingly recognises the importance of including all children, including those with special educational needs, in a common educational space. As an innovative approach, inclusive education emphasises the integration of children with different abilities, including those with learning difficulties, children with disabilities, and children with different cultural or social backgrounds into one cohesive pre-school group. The approach promotes equality, acceptance and understanding, while offering every child the opportunity to participate fully in the education and upbringing process. Inclusive education not only enriches children's learning experiences, but also builds the foundations of a society based on empathy, cooperation and mutual respect.

Availability of pre-school education in Poland

Polish educational policy is influenced by political, social, economic, historical and demographic realities. It covers the organisation of the teaching process, methods of education and upbringing, and defines the programme of the state's activities in the field of education, defining its material and economic foundations and the principles of managing educational institutions. It provides all citizens with the opportunity to acquire an education and guarantees children's right to care and upbringing. The first and vital element of the education system is pre-school education. Pre-school education covers children from the age of 3 until they start elementary school until the end of the school year in the calendar year in which the child turns 7. The legislator allows, in particularly justified cases, the

admission of 2.5-year-old children, provided that the institution has free places and provides an adequate number of age-appropriate staff and their number. All children enrolled in preschool education are provided with qualified care and support for all-round development aimed at preparing them for school (Prawo oświatowe, art. 14 ust. 1). According to the Act, a public kindergarten is an establishment which, inter alia, implements pre-school education programmes compliant with the core curriculum of pre-school education and provides free education, upbringing and care at the time established by the competent authority, however, for no less than five hours a day (Education Act, Article 13, paragraph 1). Children between the ages of three and five have the right to benefit from pre-school education, while older children, in particular six-year-olds, are obliged to undergo annual pre-school preparation from the beginning of the school year preceding the start of compulsory education (Leżańska, Płóciennik, 2021). Ensuring the conditions for the fulfilment of this obligation and respecting children's right to pre-school education is the municipalities' own task (Prawo oświatowe, art. 13 ust. 1).

Pre-primary education in Poland may be carried out in public and non-public kindergartens, kindergarten division in primary schools and other forms of pre-primary education: nursery education complexes and nursery points. The conditions for establishing other forms of pre-school education are specified in the regulation. In addition to public kindergartens, which are established and run by local government units at municipal level, there are also non-public kindergartens in Poland. The latter may be established and run by other legal persons, such as associations, foundations, workplaces, religious associations, or by individuals, referred to as private. The organisation and financing of kindergartens is supervised by the founding authority, while pedagogical supervision, which covers both public and non-public kindergartens, is exercised by the local school superintendency (Leżańska, Płóciennik, 2021).

In 2022, the number of Polish citizens was 37,635,000. In the 2022/2023 school year, there were 1,534,212 pre-school children (accounting for 4.07% of the total number of citizens), which is 4.02% more than in the 2021/2022 school year (Central Statistical Office (polish: GUS), 2023).

In 2022, there were 13,756 kindergartens with 1,241,687 children attending 60,538 branches, including 606,709 girls and 634,978 boys.

Table 1 Population status in Poland

Population status in 2023; of which number of children aged 2 to 6 years; number of children in pre-school education	
population in PL	37 636 508
of which 2 year olds	24262
of which 3 year olds	3155 42
of which 4 year olds	371785
of which 5year olds	407786
of which 6 year olds	400 957
number of children with PL citizenship	257300
number of children with foreign citizenship	15432

Source: Central Statistical Office (polish GUS), 2023

As at 30 September 2022, 94.9% of children aged 3-6 were using various forms of pre-school education. In the school year 2022/23, there were 22.5 thousand pre-school education establishments in Poland, 75 more than in the previous school year (including 13.8 thousand kindergartens, 7.3 thousand kindergarten divisions in primary schools and 1.4 thousand nursery points), covering 1.5 million children in pre-school education, i.e. 61.6 thousand children (4.2%) more than a year earlier. The majority (68.3%) of pre-school education establishments were run by public managing authorities (Central Statistical Office (polish GUS), 2023).

Table 2 Number of pre-schools in Poland

Specifications	Institutions	Preschool department	Children	
			total	per department
Total	22505	76002	1534212	20
pre-schools	13756	60538	1249173	20
of which special kindergartens	350	1547	7486	4
commune self-government	4836	23513	534264	22
county government	2515	13963	316418	22
Societies and social organisations	551	1830	27096	14
Religious organisations	463	1648	32246	19
Commercial companies	904	3798	66725	17
Individuals - Employers	3728	13074	226612	17
Other	749	2690	45626	16
nursery education complexes	45	45	664	14
nursery points	1399	1399	24140	17
kindergarten division in a primary school	7305	14020	260235	18

Source: Central Statistical Office (polish GUS), 2023

Inclusive education in preschool education in Poland

The transformations taking place in Europe have contributed to the introduction in Polish legislation of numerous regulations aimed at opening society to people with disabilities. This is evidence that comprehensive support for children and young people with disabilities has become one of the priorities of state policy. The basic legal act that normalizes the social integration of people with disabilities is the 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland (Art. 68 Constitution of the Republic of Poland of 2 April 1997 r., Dz. U. z 1997 r. nr 78, poz. 483). Relevant regulations can also be found in such documents as the Family and Guardianship Code of 1964 (Polish Family and Guardianship Code, 1964), the Education System Act of September 7, 1991 (The Act on the Education System, 1991) and executive acts to this Act, as well as in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by Poland in 1991 (CRC, 1991). The 1997 Charter on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities contains assumptions on the development of people with disabilities (Charter of Rights for Persons with Disabilities, 1997). In 2012, the President of Poland ratified the 2007 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This Convention regulates all aspects of the lives of people with various types of disabilities, based on the principles of respect for their dignity, non-discrimination, full inclusion in society, respect for difference, equality of opportunity, accessibility, respect for the developing capacities of children with disabilities and respect for their right to preserve their identity. According to Article 24 of the Convention, in order to realize the right of persons with disabilities to education, the state must ensure access to inclusive and free education, so that persons with disabilities receive the necessary support within the universal education system (Szeroczyńska, 2013). According to the recommendations, the educational system should include a full educational pathway for children with disabilities, from early development support

in kindergarten to college education. Meanwhile, according to the Law of September 7, 1991 on the Educational System, which was amended in 2017, among other things, students with disabilities should be allowed to extend their compulsory education to the age of 16 at the elementary school level (The Act on the Education System, 1991).

The concepts and theories of education emphasize the need to realize such education in which all children could participate, regardless of the degree of their disability (physical, mental, intellectual or social). The idea of so-called “inclusive” education is based on the principle of equal treatment of all people and the provision of appropriate education and support, enabling them to achieve the most normal functioning in society.

Support activities for students with an evaluation of the need for special education in kindergarten or school can be divided into three main areas:

- adaptation of educational requirements to the psychophysical capabilities of students and adaptation of the kindergarten curriculum or definition of the expected achievements of a child with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities;
- adaptation of the conditions for the realization of developmental and educational needs;
- adaptation of the conditions for the organization of education (Łaska, 2019).

The Ministry of National Education in Poland defines inclusive education as an approach in the process of education and upbringing that aims to increase educational opportunities for all students by providing conditions for them to develop their individual potential. It aims to enable full personal development and full inclusion in society (MEN, 2024). Thus, inclusive education is a response to the diversity of society, aimed at equalizing educational opportunities, which requires the identification of specific needs and resources. As Iwona Chrzanowska and Grzegorz Szumski (2019) emphasize, it is a long-term and continuous process: the achievement of inclusive education does not depend on the current state of schools, kindergartens or the education system, but on their readiness resulting from the recognition of students' rights, which initiates a process of continuous reform, continuous improvement towards inclusive schools and institutions.

Education of children with disabilities and children with special educational needs

In Poland, the population of 1,534,212 children of preschool age includes 47,798 children with disabilities (accounting for 3.11% of the total). Special kindergartens were attended by 7486 children with disabilities, while 40,312 children with disabilities were in other preschool education institutions.

Since 1993, the law in Poland has allowed children with disabilities to receive inclusive education. On August 9, 2017, the Minister of Education published a Regulation on the conditions for organizing education, upbringing and care for children and youth with disabilities, socially maladjusted and at risk of social maladjustment (MEN, 2017). It came about as a result of grassroots initiatives by citizens seeking to integrate children with disabilities into the environment of their non-disabled peers.

Beginning in 2005, when the first regulation on the organization of special education in mainstream and integrated schools was published, the Ministry of Education amended the regulations, introducing increasingly precise provisions on, among other things, multidisciplinary assessment of a child's level of functioning, an individual educational and therapeutic program and cooperation between teachers and the participation of parents in the educational planning process for a child with disabilities.

Table 3 Pre-school education establishments in Poland. Status on 30 September 2023

Specifications	Institutions	Preschool department	Children	
			total	with disabilities
Total	22505	76002	1534212	47798
pre-schools	13756	60538	1249173	37630
of which special preschools	350	1547	7486	-

inclusive nursery schools	424	1610	-	5627
preschools with inclusive departments	511	3449	-	5521
preschools with special departments	79	500	-	1349
preschools with integrated and special departments	121	938	-	3558
other preschools	12271	52494	-	21575
nursery education complexes	45	45	664	16
nursery points	1399	1399	24140	4913
kindergarten division in a primary school	7305	14020	260235	5239

Source: Central Statistical Office (polish GUS), 2023

In the 2022/23 school year, there were 350 special kindergartens, attended by 7,500 children with disabilities. The largest number of children attending special kindergartens were 7 years old (26.7%). Boys predominated among children in special kindergartens (70.8%). The remaining kindergartens and other preschools were attended by 47.8 thousand children with disabilities, who accounted for 3.1% of the total number of children. Most of the children with disabilities attended mainstream kindergartens (78.7%), including kindergartens with integrated branches (11.6%) and integrated kindergartens (11.8%). In kindergarten for all children, including those with intellectual disabilities, the core curriculum of preschool education applies. In addition, in the case of children with an evaluation for special education.

Children are entitled to benefit from inclusive education: disabled, socially maladjusted, at risk of social maladjustment, with behavioral or emotional disorders, with specific learning difficulties, with competence deficits and language skills disorders, chronically ill, in a crisis or traumatic situation, experiencing educational failure, environmentally neglected due to the living situation of the child/student and his/her family, having adaptation difficulties related to cultural differences or to a change in the educational environment, including those related to previous education abroad, particularly gifted.

The legal basis for inclusive education

The introduction of inclusive education in the Polish educational system results from legal regulations in force in all European Union member states. Inclusive education involves the joint participation of all students in the same classes, with individual support for children and young people who need additional help. In accordance with the current provisions of the Education Law, the educational system has the task of ensuring that every student has access to content, methods and organization of teaching adapted to their psychophysical capabilities, as well as to psychological and pedagogical assistance and special forms of didactic work. Legislation on inclusive education guarantees students with disabilities, socially maladjusted and at risk of social maladjustment the possibility of education in all types of schools, as well as the individualization of forms, curricula and remedial classes.

The most significant changes occurred under the Regulation of the Minister of Education and Science of July 22, 2022, amending the Regulation on the principles for providing and organizing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public schools and institutions.

Each child identified as having a need for support is provided with psychological and pedagogical assistance, regardless of whether he or she has an opinion or a decision of a psychological and pedagogical counseling center. The implementation of support measures can result not only from the initiative of teachers and specialists, but also the parents of a student can report the need to cover their child with psychological and pedagogical assistance. This assistance is provided in the course of

ongoing work with the child and through integrated activities of teachers and specialists, as well as in the form of: classes developing talents, specialized classes: corrective-compensatory, speech therapy, developing emotional and social competencies and other classes of a therapeutic nature, individualized path for the implementation of compulsory annual preschool preparation, and advice and consultation provided to parents. Another of the forms of support provided is Early Development Support (WWR). Early Childhood Development Support, a set of specialized classes designed for children with developmental disorders, aims to improve the functioning and development of children with disabilities and disorders, as well as to prevent the emergence of further problems. Early development support includes both children with disabilities and their families. It is implemented from the moment a child is diagnosed with a disability until the child starts school. Classes are held from 4 to 8 hours per month, depending on the psychophysical capabilities and needs of the child, and are conducted individually with the child and his family. For children who have reached the age of 3, early intervention classes can be conducted in groups of 2 or 3 children, with the participation of their families. The place where these classes are conducted is determined by the director of the relevant kindergarten, and the early support classes are conducted by the Early Childhood Development Support Team, which is appointed by the director of the kindergarten. The Team is composed of persons with training in working with small children with impaired psychomotor development, including an educator with qualifications appropriate to the type of disability of the child, in particular: oligophrenopedagogue, tyfopedagogue, surdopedagogue, psychologist, speech therapist and other specialists - depending on the needs of the child and his family.

For children who have an “evaluation of the need for special education” issued by a public Psychological and Pedagogical Counselling Centre, special education is organized. In the case of disabilities, we are talking about children who are: deaf or hard of hearing, blind or visually impaired, with motor disabilities, with aphasia, with mild, moderate or severe intellectual disabilities, with autism, with Asperger's syndrome, with multiple disabilities. Then the director is required to hire additional teachers with qualifications in special education and a teacher's aide.

The Polish legislature has prepared a number of changes for inclusive education. The most important of these are contained in the Act of May 12, 2022 on amendments to the Law on the Educational System and certain other laws (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1116). It introduces an obligation to employ specialist teachers (pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, special educators) in public and non-public units: in kindergartens other than special kindergartens, including kindergarten units in elementary schools.

On September 1, 2022, new standards for hiring teachers apply pedagogues, special educators, psychologists, speech therapists and educational therapists in both mainstream and integrated kindergartens and schools. Another increase in the employment of specialists is planned from September 1, 2024. Ultimately, thanks to the changes introduced, the number of employed teachers will increase specialists from the current approx. 22 thousand to 51 thousand, or by 143%. The Polish legislature has prepared a number of changes for inclusive education. The most important of these are contained in the Act of May 12, 2022 on amendments to the Law on the Educational System and certain other laws (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1116). It introduces an obligation to employ specialist teachers (pedagogues, psychologists, logopedists, occupational therapists, special educators) in public and non-public units: in kindergartens other than special kindergartens, including kindergarten units in elementary schools. On September 1, 2022, new standards for hiring teachers of pedagogues, special educators, psychologists, speech therapists and educational therapists in both mainstream and inclusive kindergartens and schools will take effect. Another increase in the employment of specialists is planned from September 1, 2024. Ultimately, thanks to the introduced changes, the number of employed specialist teachers will increase from the current approximately 22,000 to 51,000, or by 143%. A mandatory position of special educator has also been introduced to support teachers and carry out specialized activities directly with children. Depending on the number of children, the size of full-time specialist positions will be as follows:

- up to 30 children - 0.25 FTE,

- from 31 to 50 children - 0.5 FTE,

- from 51 to 100 children - 1 FTE,

- more than 100 children - 1.5 FTE + 0.2 FTE for each additional 100 children (Karta Nauczyciela, art 42d, 2024). From the beginning of the new school year 2024/2025, new, stricter requirements for hiring specialists will apply.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive education in Polish kindergartens is a step toward a more equitable and inclusive educational system. Despite the many challenges accompanying this process, positive changes are already noticeable. Key elements of success are the continuous improvement of educational practices, support for teachers and close cooperation with families and the community. Inclusive education provides opportunities for the full development of each child in an atmosphere of acceptance and support.

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QUALITY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AUSTRIA

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Abstract

In an effort to offer equal access to education for all children and their families and to support the development and early education of children in the best possible way, issues of quality in early childhood education centers wins increasingly socially importance, not just with parents and in practice, but also in science and politics and consequently in professionalization of early childhood educators and training contexts in general. This article highlights the different dimensions of quality and refers to relevant research results. On this basis current developments in Austria are critically examined and some development opportunities are summarized.

Quality in early childhood education

The quality of the early childhood educational work influences the outcome. This means that high-quality early childhood education can have a short, medium and long term impact on child development and education (Tietze, 2008; Wertfein, Müller & Danay, 2013). The better educational quality, the greater the positive effect on children and parents. Long-term influences show advantages for children who attend high-quality early childhood education facilities in preschool age for language development, social-emotional skills as well as mathematical skills (Walter-Laager et al., 2016).

Better preparation for further education as well as benefits in cognitive and social-emotional development of children in early childhood education centers with high-quality standards are confirmed also by Roux and Tietze (2007). Regarding the topic of equal opportunities results show that children from disadvantaged groups can make development progress and that there are further compensatory effects when they attend high pedagogical quality settings (Roux & Tietze, 2007; Walter-Laager, & Meer Magistretti, 2016). However quality differences in early childhood education institutions can lead to educational and developmental differences among kindergarten children (Tietze, 2008, p.24).

When trying to define quality for early childhood education, it must be clearly emphasized that *quality* in this area can't be understood as a finished state achieved and fixed once by the team of early childhood education teachers. Rather, quality describes a process that is constantly being driven forward and, in order to proceed well, there must be taken into account all relevant perspectives, both from experts, science and politics as well as from the consumers themselves, the children and their parents or guardians (Nentwig-Gesemann, Walther & Thedinga, 2017). "*In reality quality is a layered concept which reflects a range of assumptions about childhood and about provision for and practice with young children*" (Penn, 2011, p. 5).

Dimensions of quality in early childhood education

Depending on the perspective from which quality is to be measured, different parameters can be used. In professional discourse, reference is repeatedly made to the quality dimensions of *structural quality, orientation quality, process quality, quality of the family attachment, organization and management quality as well as team quality* (Hartel et al., 2019; Leyendecker et al., 2014; Stamm & Edelmann, 2013; Wertfein et al., 2013).

The orientation quality is based on the professional convictions of early childhood education teachers and their impact on their pedagogical actions. Socially and professionally desirable orientations are described in Austria's educational framework plan and are incorporated into professional socialization: "orientation quality includes, among other things, the image of the child, the understanding of the role of

educators and principles for the design of educational processes" (CBI, 2009, pp. 25-26). Basic pedagogical attitudes are formed during initial, further and continuing training as well as on the basis of personal biographical experiences and are part of professionalism.

Structural quality refers to the framework conditions in elementary education facilities, such as the staff-child key, the spatial-materials equipment or the qualification of staff (CBI, 2009). High structural quality requires an appropriate staff-child ratio, manageable group sizes and non-cramped room conditions. Connections between these aspects and elementary educational processes are found: a better staff-child ratio has a beneficial effect on cognitive and linguistic development and the well-being of children in the facility, staff-child ratio is considered as an indicator of high structural quality (Ahnert et al., 2006; Bäuerlein et al., 2013; Burchinal et al., 2008; Goelman et al., 2006).

Interactions between early childhood education staff and children in small groups of three to five children as well as in one-to-one situations are particularly valuable more intensive conversations are possible and the supportive presence is also increased (Sylva et al., 2004). The younger the children are, the stronger the staff-child ratio has on the quality of interaction (De Schipper et al., 2006). Determinations of the threshold values of an ideal staff-child ratio vary depending on the age of the children: Based on empirical data, a ratio of one or two children per trained early childhood education teacher is required for infants under one year of age. For children aged 1 to 2 years, a ratio of 1:2 to a maximum of 1:6 children per trained educator is recommended. For the group of 2 to 3-year-olds, the recommendations are 1:3 to a maximum of 1:8 and for 3 to 6-year-olds 1:7 to 1:15 (Viernickel & Fuchs-Rechlin, 2015).

Further effects of structural quality can be seen in stable staffing levels, among other things. These are a great advantage for children's development (Tran & Winsler, 2011). The size, equipment and design of the rooms are relevant in several respects: a) Outdoor spaces are among others crucial for the variety of movement options and influence health aspects such as sleeping patterns or weight (Söderström et al., 2013). b) Indoor spaces influence inter alia children's behavior and creativity and have an impact on learning (Bensel et al., 2015).

Process quality refers to the direct interaction between professionals and children and is particularly crucial for successful elementary educational processes (Smidt, 2012). Empathetic and stimulating interactions by early childhood educators can predict progress in language acquisition as well as cognitive and social skills (Burchinal et al., 2008). However, tried and tested strategies such as "waiting for the children's answers", "entering into dialogue" and "jointly developing an idea" or "redirecting" interactions to other children who are not yet involved are also effective for language development (Löffler & Vogt, 2015). Naturally, process quality is linked to an appropriate staff-child ratio (Viernickel & Schwarz, 2009).

Process quality is even more important in the education of the youngest children (0 to 2 years). In the concept of sensitive responsiveness postulated for high quality working with young children, early childhood education teachers demonstrate a high level of presence, recognise the child's signals, interpret them correctly on a solid professional basis and act promptly and appropriately (Schmelzeisen-Hagemann, 2017). They provide stimuli, co-regulate emotions and accompany the toddlers in conflict situations until they find their way back into play. They have a secure relationship with the children (Walter-Laager et al., 2018).

The quality of the family relationship is a further aspect that takes into account the interaction between a child's various caregivers and aims to connect the different areas of the child's life with each other and thus jointly shape the child's education in the form of an educational partnership with the parents (Hartel et al., 2019).

The scientific evaluation of quality in early childhood education has so far mostly been carried out using standardised procedures that do not reflect the perspective of the children themselves (Becker-Stoll & Wertfein, 2013). Based on the principle of participation (CBI, 2009) and on the postulate of encountering the child as a person (Holztrattner & Kobler, 2020), the children's perspective on quality within early institutional education is particularly interesting.

Quality dimensions from the perspective of children

The study "Daycare centre quality from the children's perspective - QuaKi" was designed from the outset as an exploratory study: On the one hand, the aim was to use an open, hypothesis-generating approach to find out what constitutes *good* early childhood education from the children's perspective and not to focus on specific topics or questions from the outset" (Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2017). The results

show three main quality categories from the children's perspective, to which different indicators can in turn be assigned:

Table 1 Quality dimensions from the perspective of children: Nentwig-Gesemann et al., 2017, p. 26.

1. Individuality and belonging: feeling a sense of belonging to a community and feeling valued in your own individuality	2. Experiencing competence: Experiencing oneself as competent and being recognised as competent	3. Autonomy and participation: opportunities for self- and co-determination
1.1 Feeling valued and visible as an individual personality: <i>"This is me, these are my things, I did this."</i> 1.2 Withdrawing and developing undisturbed play worlds in 'secret' places: <i>"Here we can play undisturbed and let our imaginations run wild."</i> 1.3 Feeling connected and secure through rules, rituals and community: <i>"We organize everyday life together and belong together."</i>	2.1 Feeling encouraged and strengthened in your own abilities: <i>"I can do something! I'm trusted to do something."</i> 2.2 Moving freely and in space: <i>"I can move freely and experience the whole room."</i> 2.3 Exploring oneself and the world and dealing with existential issues <i>"We explore the world and look for answers to difficult questions."</i> 2.4 Knowing your way around the institution and being informed in everyday life: <i>"We know our way around here."</i>	3.1 Feeling respected with regard to one's own rights and decisions: <i>"I am allowed to decide about myself, my boundaries are not violated."</i> 3.2 Participating, having a say and (co-)deciding: <i>"We are included and can (co-)decide."</i> 3.3 Experiencing exceptions to the rule: <i>"We were allowed to do that once."</i>

Current developments in Austria

The childcare rate for 0 to 2-year-olds in early childhood education institutions is currently 29.9%. This represents an increase of 9.1 percentage points compared to 2012/13. 94.4% of children in the age group of 3 to 5-year-olds are currently cared for in early childhood education institutions. Compared to the reference year 2021-22, the rate in this cohort has risen by 0.6 percentage points (Statistics Austria, 2023).

2009 Austria has implemented the cross-state educational framework plan in all early childhood education institutions, in which the three quality dimensions of structural quality, orientation quality and process quality are listed and are to be implemented in early education centers on a mandatory basis (CBI, 2009).

The aim of safeguarding central quality criteria is to ensure that the physical and psychological development of children is optimally supported and, at the same time, that families experience relief in coping with everyday life (Hartel et al., 2019): "Pedagogical quality in a kindergarten is given when the respective pedagogical orientations, structural features and processes promote the physical, emotional, social and intellectual well-being as well as the development and education of the children (...)" (Tietze, 2008, p. 17). Professionalization initiatives in Austria in form of further qualification at tertiary, higher education and university levels across the board since 2018 should primarily address the aspects of orientation and process quality. The curricula of the Bachelor's degree programmes in early childhood education include a focus on management and leadership. Quality development and quality assurance topics are also focussed on in these curricula. This means that graduates of the Bachelor's programme are sensitised to the quality discourse and are involved in implementing quality management structures in early childhood educational institutions. With regard to structural quality characteristics, it should be noted that they differ in the nine federal states, as these are not uniformly defined nationwide but are subject to the administration of the federal states.

The massive shortage of early childhood educators in Austria recently led to a change in the recruitment laws for specialised staff in some federal states, so that in emergency situations additional staff (with

little or no qualification) can take over the tasks of fully trained early childhood education teachers in practice for a certain period. This currently means that affected children in Austria can generally spend (parts of) their kindergarten time in facilities without fully qualified teachers. Parallel to these questionable political (emergency) decisions for deprofessionalisation measures, there are broad training initiatives for specialist and supplementary staff from various providers. This desired broad diversification of staff in early childhood education facilities requires an expansion of management skills in the sense of leading multi-professional teams with a focus on strength-oriented differentiation and individualization in the selection and assignment of tasks. "The need for ever new changes requires a very specific type of new individual attitude" (Adorno, 1969).

CONCLUSION

If the results of the studies on children's perspectives on quality in early childhood education institutions are taken into account, around ten different quality dimensions can currently be distinguished for early childhood education. The complexity of early childhood education requires, among other things, a comprehensive and well-founded qualification of professionals in order to be able to deal with the various quality dimensions. Based on the nationwide challenges in elementary education, a quality framework plan for staff in elementary education institutions has also been developed over the past two years as part of the TSI project "Improving the framework conditions for staff to increase quality in early childhood education and care in Austria" (2022-2024) for the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. Results from this European Union-funded project (<https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/Ministerium/Presse/20221201a.html>), which was developed with national stakeholders in elementary education in Austria, will (expected) be presented in autumn 2024.

In addition to these initiatives, it is important to generate quality in the form of individuality and belonging, experience of competence, autonomy and participation in the daily production processes of practice, based on the children's perspectives on the topic of quality, so that as many children as possible can achieve a high level of well-being and benefit from positive outcome options. Awareness of this can be strengthened through professionalization initiatives in various training and further education contexts.

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INNOVATIONS IN INITIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMES FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS IN GERMAN-SPEAKING REGIONS

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Abstract

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of university-level study programs in early childhood education across German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland), employing a multi-case study methodology as outlined by Yin (2018). The main objective is to examine the evolution and current frameworks of initial professional studies, qualification pathways, and Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) programs in Germany (focused on childhood pedagogy) and Austria (focused on elementary pedagogy). The research utilizes content analysis techniques (Kuckartz, 2018) on 27 degree programs, complemented by interviews with their respective supervisors (n=27). The study systematically compares the formal and substantive characteristics, as well as the disciplinary and theory components of these programs. It highlights the interdisciplinary approach, the development of reflective competencies, the cultivation of a scientific habitus, the integration of theory and practice, and the emphasis on inclusion, management, and counselling.

Keywords: Initial Professional Studies, Early Childhood Education, Bachelor's Degree Programmes, German-speaking countries.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present study is to compare the concept of university education for early childhood educators in German-speaking countries. Recent advancements in initial professional studies reflect the evolving paradigms in teacher preparation within Western European nations and the European Union (Cochran-Smith et al., 2008; European Council, 2020). These regions, characterised by their longstanding democratic traditions, are currently exploring pedagogical strategies to address the increasing diversity in early childhood education. One significant response to these challenges is the push towards professionalisation and the enhancement of the proportion of academically qualified practitioners (European Commission, 2023; Oberhuermer & Schreyer, 2024). The framework of pre-school education is intrinsically linked to the professional development of educators, which has undergone substantial transformation in the 21st century, particularly in German-speaking countries. A defining feature of pre-school systems in Germany and Austria is the *socio-pedagogical approach*, which distinctly contrasts with *pre-primary pedagogical approaches* (Bennett, 2005). Conversely, over the past three decades, Swiss pre-school education has aligned itself with a pre-primary model, integrating two years of pre-school education into the primary school system and incorporating initial professional studies into combined degree programs with primary education. Nevertheless, there are currently no longer separate programmes focusing solely on the preparation of teachers for pre-school education. For this reason, we have excluded Swiss programmes from the comparison of undergraduate programmes qualifying teachers to work with children aged 0-6 years.

METHODOLOGY

The study employs historical institutionalism as an interpretive framework for the analysis of pre-service education in German speaking countries (Dvořák, 2011; Steinmo, 2008). Epistemologically, it is based on a constructivist research paradigm. It analyses the processes of institutionalisation of higher education preparation. In line with comparative research approaches in education (Bray et al. 2014; Walterová, 2006), it characterises the development of initial professional preparation of educators in the context of the development of early childhood education (Phillips, 2006). The study contextualises it at the macro/micro level (Shehadeh, 2020), in relation to political, social and educational changes. Despite

the same intention of professionalisation and academisation at the beginning of the 21st century, the structures of the professional preparation of early childhood educators have been profiled differently in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The research (Loudová Stralczynská, 2024) employs a comparative research methodology and is structured as a multi-case study (Yin, 2018). The theoretical framework is informed by an analysis of initial education systems of early childhood professionals in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), utilising legislative and curricular documents, historical sources, and national statistics as data sources. The empirical component involves a content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) of module catalogues from selected German (n=20) and Austrian (n=7) Bachelor programs. Secondary data sources include interviews with program supervisors (n=27) specialising in Childhood Pedagogy (Germany) and Elementary Pedagogy (Austria). These interviews facilitated data triangulation and provided insights into the programs' origins, conceptualisation, and implementation conditions. The categorial system was developed in two branches (module catalogues and interviews), interconnected by main categories. MAXQDA (2022, 2024) software was utilised for coding. The data collection took place between 2011 and 2023.

RESULTS

Different paths of innovation in the professional preparation of early childhood professionals

Despite the same desire for professionalisation at the beginning of the 21st century, the structures of professional preparation of pre-school educators have developed differently. The universities of applied sciences are striving to improve the quality of professional development of pedagogues as well as their professional status. Germany and Austria have retained a specific profile of educators working with children in early childhood education. Due to economic and political pressures, childhood pedagogy in Germany has expanded from a narrowly focused period (ages 0–6 years) to working with children aged 0–10 years (ISCED 0 and other day care settings). A tool for the quality development in childhood pedagogy curricula is the compulsory orientation framework *Childhood Education and Training* (KMK, 2010) and, more recently, the so-called *Core Curriculum Childhood Pedagogy* (FBTS & EWFT, 2022). This document identifies 10 common core areas and contents within 120 ECTS for the Bachelor of Education in Childhood Education. Although there is considerable plurality in the German education system as a whole and in the professional development of educational staff as a result of the federal structure of the country, these documents provide a tool for quality development, but also for coordinating the objectives and content of pre-service education. Nevertheless, as our analysis has shown, the content diversity of accredited programmes remains high. The programmes are influenced by the specific context of the educational system in the federal state, the type of university, the professional biography of the programme guarantor as well as the focus of the university (social vs. pedagogical orientation).

In Austria, the Bachelor of Elementary Education programmes (preparing pedagogues for work in pre-school facilities, ages 0-6 years) are significantly closer to each other and focus on professional preparation of pedagogical professionals, particularly in the areas of leadership, management and inclusive early childhood education. These programmes are very young, having been launched in 2018 and so far only open on a part-time basis. Universities in four regions of Austria have worked together to develop four main programmes, which have subsequently been autonomously accredited by the universities. A specific feature of the Austrian programmes is that they are only open to graduates of vocational secondary education in early childhood education who are also usually working in practice. Both countries emphasise the specific nature of the professional preparation of educators in ECEC (ISCED 0) as distinct from the concept of teacher education (ISCED 1, 2 and 3).

Switzerland, on the other hand, followed a different path. Pre-primary education professionals have the status of teachers. Since the end of the 20th century, their training has undergone a fundamental change. It has been upgraded from secondary education to the Bachelor's level of study, which is carried out at universities of applied sciences. The profile of the programmes is no longer narrowly focused on pre-primary education (i.e. work with children aged 4-6) but has been broadened. It now covers pre-primary education and then part or even all of the 6 years of primary education. This new concept of teacher training is linked to the innovation of the whole system of compulsory education, which starts at the age of four in pre-primary education (ISCED 0) and continues through six years of primary school. However, both stages are already considered as the first stages of primary school, which can take three

organisational forms (2-year-old kindergarten and the first grade following it, the so-called *Grundstufe* and *Basisstufe* models, which combine two years of pre-school with 1 or 2 first grades of primary school). At the national level, the so-called harmonisation concordat of 2009, which came into force in 2015 and according to which the curricula in all three main language areas of Switzerland (German, French and Italian) have been adapted in recent years, anchors this setting. The new concept of teacher training for pre-primary and primary education corresponds to this new structure of educational levels and the current curriculum frameworks. However, Bachelor's degree programmes preparing teachers combine preparation for both the pre-primary (ISCED 0) and primary levels (ISCED 1), and a focus on primary pedagogy predominates. This is offset by the importance given to play in children's learning. Therefore, Switzerland was not included in the empirical part of the study.

Key characteristics in the academic preparation of early childhood professionals in Germany and Austria

Programmes in both countries aim to provide a foundation in a wide range of disciplines and theory of education. Both types of programmes are built on modules. In the German programmes we found an interdisciplinary approach both at the level of modules and often also at the level of sub-courses, if the modules are structured in sub-courses. The Austrian early childhood education programmes are mostly interdisciplinary only at the module level, but the sub-courses are already mostly structured according to subject areas. German childhood education programmes generally consist of 20-29 modules with a study load of 6-13 credits. Universities are characterised by a high diversity of study structures and modules. Early childhood education programmes in Austria are characterised by a more uniform approach, as the number of modules is also very similar (35-36), with only the universities in the south-eastern part of Austria offering 20 modules.

Degree programmes in childhood education in Germany cover a range of 180 or 210 credits. The seventh semester is usually included in the programme because of the compulsory internship (a semester of internship during or at the end of the programme), which is a condition for state recognition. The second reason is the link to Master's programmes, which in some countries include a seven-semester bachelor's degree. In Austria, only 180 credits are awarded across the board for study programmes in elementary education. In the vast majority of cases, both early childhood and elementary education programmes do not allow for specialisation through a specific focus during the course of study. Students can individually choose a sub-profile (within the optional modules).

The thematic focus of childhood and early childhood pedagogy follows the scientific orientation and personal and professional development of students throughout their studies. It aims at forming a reflective attitude of educators based on quality information sources. Although childhood pedagogy is a qualification in Germany, relatively little space is devoted to the various disciplinary theories of education (usually around five credits per discipline). The study programmes in childhood education are characterised by an extremely heterogeneous structure and representation of theories of education. However, a didactic framework predominates, integrating subject-specific theories within interdisciplinary modules. These modules encompass aesthetic subjects, language, communication, speech and their specialised educational support, socio-pedagogical counselling, natural sciences and technology, motor development, movement, and speech, among others. Language development is a key issue in both countries. The area of language and communication is on average endowed with twice as many credits as all other theories of education. Issues of inclusion and special pedagogical approaches are also represented as separate modules, but in addition permeate the modules on subject-specific theories of education and practical training as a cross-cutting theme. Aesthetic education and physical education have a lower or equal subsidy than the areas of media, mathematics, science and digital preliteracy. Intercultural education, interreligious dialogue and ethics have an important place. In both countries, management, group management and interaction with different partners in the socio-pedagogical space are an important part of the study content. Child protection and the development of competences in health and safety (in a broad sense) is a topic with new importance that needs to be strengthened in the future. In Austria, the early childhood education curriculum builds on the didactic foundation acquired in secondary vocational education. Nevertheless, it devotes about a third of the study scope to subject-specific theories of education, in which interdisciplinary overlaps are also sought.

CONCLUSION

All programmes analysed in Germany and Austria organise their content in interdisciplinary modules. Practice and evidence-based approaches, the development of a scientific habitus, a focus on children's communicative competences, multilingualism, inclusion, educational diagnosis and the theme of quality are all prominent. These emphases can be an inspiration for the further development and innovations of initial professional study programmes in Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

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THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SIX EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Selected results of the comparative study

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present selected results from case studies of six European countries on the teaching profession in early childhood education in five categories of comparison. The main inspiration for writing the paper came from the case studies in the publication *Education of Kindergarten and Primary School Teachers Today* (Loudová-Stralczyńska, Stará, Selbie, Ristić, eds., 2022) and the SEEPRO project. We found that 29 education systems in the EU require (ISCED 02) kindergarten teachers to have a bachelor's degree and 4 countries (France, Italy, Portugal and Iceland) require a Master's degree. 8 education systems accept a lower level of qualification (Austria, Czech Republic, Ireland, Malta, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Scotland (ISCED 3)). In most EU countries, the education of teachers in kindergartens has moved to university level.

Keywords: comparison of education systems, pre-primary education, teaching profession

INTRODUCTION

The Seepro project contains detailed data and analysis of early childhood education and care systems in all European countries. The comparative study in this project for the Slovak Republic was co-authored (2021-2023) by Mgr. Zuzana Lynch, PhD, PaedDr. Monika Miňová, PhD and Assoc. PaedDr. Milena Lipnická, PhD. under the supervision of Pamela Oberhuemer and Inge Schreyer (<http://www.seepro.eu/English/Home.htm>). This was a study in the horizontal line of comparison, where the educational systems and practices of countries at the same time are compared with each other (Kosova, 2000). In times of detailed databases of data and central coordination of information at the EU and national levels, such studies have the character of being largely statistically based claims. Comparative reports, databases and statistics on country data are available on the European Commission's website. National data are also available on the websites of the relevant institutions in each country. How then do they differ when they are guided by common European and global values and standards? What is important are their interpretations, which, despite shared values and norms, tell us about the specific conditions and traditions of educational systems and practices in each country. In particular, we consider an effective comparison to be one in which certain areas of status and development can be compared across all countries studied. In this case, we have focused on the Council of Europe's measure on high-quality early childhood education and care systems (2019/C 189/02). It recommends that European countries ensure the attractiveness of the teaching profession and its status in terms of education, further education and career opportunities. The aim of this paper is to present selected results from case studies of six European countries on the teaching profession in early childhood education in five categories of comparison.

METHODS

In order to compare the teaching profession in pre-primary education in six European countries[A1], we have selected four justifiable priorities from the above mentioned European Council Recommendation (Table 1.), namely the availability of pre-primary education and training, the professionalisation of teachers, the required education and training of teachers, and their support through teaching assistants.

Table 1. Four justified priorities and categories of comparison

Selected priorities	Cited recommendation	Category of comparison
Availability that all children have access to high-quality early childhood education and care whenever parents request it (31). ... from birth to compulsory school age	law
	By 2030, all girls and boys should have access to quality early childhood development, care and education systems.	duty
Professionalisation there is a positive correlation between higher levels of training and better quality of service and higher quality of staff-child interactions and therefore better outcomes in terms of children's development (24).	learning
Education comprehensive knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as a full understanding of child development and knowledge of early childhood pedagogy.	education
Assistants	They are usually less qualified than teachers. In many countries, it persists that a person who does not meet the qualification requirements is an assistant. Professionalisation is therefore essential for teaching assistants (25), as is the continuous improvement of their competences.	teaching assistants

Source: own elaboration based on (2019/C 189/02).

Five categories of benchmarking emerged from the European priorities (2019/C 189/02) - the right or obligation of pre-school education and care in the country, teacher education and in-service training, and the possibility or obligation of the participation of teaching assistants in the educational process in kindergartens (Table 1).

RESULTS

The results of the comparison show that the name of the profession does not differ particularly in the countries studied. In Germany, also because of the general pedagogical and socio-pedagogical education in the profession, the term educator is used. In almost all the countries surveyed, children can be admitted to kindergartens from the age of 2 years, in Slovenia from the age of 1 year, and in Portugal it is statutory from the age of 3 years (Table 2).

Table 2. Age groups of children in kindergarten and names of teaching professionals

Country	Schools/facilities/ age group of children	Appointments of teaching professionals
Czech Republic	Kindergarten 2/3-6/7 years	Pre-school teacher (kindergarten teacher)
Germany	Kindergarten (<i>Kindergarten</i>) 2/3-6 years	Educator/teacher (<i>Erzieher/Erzieherin, Kindheitspädagoge</i>)
Hungary	Kindergarten (<i>Óvoda</i>) 3-6/7 years	Pedagogue (<i>Óvodapedagógus</i>)
Portugal	Pre-school facility (<i>Jardins de Infância</i>) 3-6 years	Teacher in kindergarten (<i>Educadoras(es) da infância</i>)
Slovakia	Kindergarten 2/3-6/7 years	Kindergarten teacher
Slovenia	Pre-school facility (<i>Vrtec</i>) 1-6 years	Teacher in kindergarten (<i>diplomirani vzgojitelji/diplomirana vzgojiteljica</i>)

Source: own elaboration according to Loudová-Stralczyńska, Stará, Selbie, Ristić, eds., 2022.

The observed data also showed that compulsory pre-school education and care is not compulsory in every country. Germany, Portugal and Slovenia ensure children's attendance at kindergarten through statutory law. In Hungary, children as young as 3 years old are obliged to attend kindergarten. In Slovenia, on the other hand, children have the right to pre-school education and care from the age of 11 months. These facts are determined by various factors in social and economic policy, e. g. the length of parental allowance. Slovakia is one of the countries where it is provided for the longest period of time. The comparison of average numbers of children per teacher and per classroom is approximately the same. The highest number of children per teacher is in Portugal, where the maximum number of children per class is 25. Germany has the highest number of teachers per number of children (Table 3).

Table 3. *Obligation or right to pre-school education and care in the country*

Country	Compulsory attendance at kindergarten	Age of child attendance obligations	The legal right to pre-school education and training	Number of children per 1 teacher calculated in schools. system (2019/2020)	Average number of children in classes (2019/2020)
Slovakia	yes	5-years		10,5	
Czech Republic	yes	5-years	yes	11,3	22,4
Hungary	yes	3-years		10,4	21,5
Germany	no	-	yes	8,5	22,4
Portugal	no	-	yes	12,5	
Slovenia	no	-	yes from 11 months of age		22

Source: own elaboration according to Loudová-Stralczyńska, Stará, Selbie, Ristić, eds., 2022.

In every country surveyed, teaching assistants work in kindergarten classrooms. The differences are in the possibility or obligation to have them. In our country it is recommended that they are in the classrooms, while in Hungary, Portugal and Slovenia it is compulsory. However, this provision of the law also takes into account other staffing conditions, e. g. in our country there are 2 teachers per classroom, whereas in Portugal there is one. Slovenia has the most favourable conditions, with one teaching assistant per teacher. The professions of professional staff in kindergartens are comparable. Unlike teachers, they have a low percentage in the countries studied (Table 4).

Table 4. *Participation of teaching assistants in the educational process in the kindergarten*

Country	Teacher's assistant	Professional staff
Slovakia	a teaching assistant may also work in the kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> professional staff
Czech Republic	teaching assistants for 1 child, or are shared	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> teachers for special educational needs, psychologists, special educators, social workers and others.
Hungary	it is compulsory to have 1 teaching assistant per 3 groups of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developmental educators, special educators (speech therapists); psychologists

Germany	childcare assistants/social assistants;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social educators; • special educators • psychologists
Portugal	assistants, 1 assistant compulsorily per 1 teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social workers; • special educators • psychologists,
Slovenia	1 mandatory assistant per 1 teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional staff - psychologists, social pedagogues, speech therapists • teachers for children with SEN, • educational counsellors

Source: own elaboration according to Loudová-Stralczyńska, Stará, Selbie, Ristić, eds., 2022.

In the countries surveyed, all but Slovakia and the Czech Republic require a university degree, and in Portugal even a master's degree. As regards study programmes, teachers receive a variety of qualifications. In the Czech Republic, for example, only kindergarten teachers study for a bachelor's degree. In the Slovak bachelor's programme in Pre-school and Elementary Pedagogy, in addition to this qualification, they also obtain qualifications as a pre-school teacher and a pedagogical assistant. Preschool Pedagogy Mgr. is a non-teaching study in our country. On the basis of these programmes, our universities can organise extension studies in Teaching for Kindergarten. Interestingly, in Germany only more than 1% of kindergarten teachers have a university degree focusing on preschool pedagogy. Two thirds of them graduated in Pedagogy and Social Pedagogy. The situation is similar in Hungary in the Master's degree. Their Bachelor's degree programme focuses on primary education. Teacher education for primary schools is valid under certain conditions both in Portugal and here. Thus, several countries have widespread opportunities for qualification (Table 5).

Table 5. Higher education requirements and study programmes for qualifications in the kindergarten

Country	Obligation of higher education in kindergarten	Study programmes
Slovakia	no	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preschool and Elementary Pedagogy (Bc.) • Preschool Pedagogy (Mgr.)
Czech Republic	no	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kindergarten Teaching (Bc.) • Preschool Pedagogy/Pedagogy of Preschool Age (Mgr.).
Hungary	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor of Basic Education (B.Ed.). • Programmes in social sciences or humanities and pedagogy, not only focused on preschool pedagogy (Mgr.)
Germany	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogy or social pedagogy (Bc. and Mgr.). • Only 1.36% have a university degree in a field focused on early childhood education.
Portugal	yes (Mgr.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bachelor of Basic Education (B.Sc.) • Early childhood education or 1st level of primary education (Mgr.)
Slovenia	yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master's programmes: Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Pedagogy,

Source: own elaboration according to Loudová-Stralczyńska, Stará, Selbie, Ristić, eds., 2022.

In European countries, 33 education systems currently require a university degree for kindergarten teachers. Some countries have multiple education systems, e. g. Germany. Only 8 education systems accept a lower level of qualification, but even in these countries teachers with bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees work.

CONCLUSION

Can we ask whether it is still meaningful to compare in a horizontal direction when European values, priorities, standards, guidelines, recommendations bring us closer together, make education systems and practices similar? The answer is certainly yes, at least insofar as it does not overcome the traditions and conditions typical of the economic and social progress of the country in question. These are mainly cases in which we are looking for inspiration to improve the current situation at home, in the European and global area. Of course, it is always important to look and reflect on where we are in relation to others, where we are and where others are, and what we can do if something works better for them. In doing so, we should not forget where we are different and better. On the basis of the analyses carried out, we can conclude that the possibilities for professionalising kindergarten teachers in our country are comparable at European level, although there is still room for improvement or new innovations. The teaching profession should be encouraged to prevent the aging of the teaching force, to motivate young teachers to enter and remain in the profession, and to increase the proportion of college-educated teachers in kindergarten practice. In line with European values of inclusion, staffing is an important area of support for teachers. Teachers inherently cannot manage inclusive education on their own. By expanding teachers' competences and activities in line with the diversity of children and the introduction of support measures, it is possible to anticipate teachers leaving the profession. It should be compulsory for every classroom to have a teaching assistant. At school level, a school support team with professional staff in accordance with the current educational needs of the children in the kindergarten. At the same time, we need to reflect on how well teachers in universities are prepared for kindergarten practice and whether they have the competences that practice expects. In addition to these, there are other challenges for improving the quality of the teaching profession not only in our country but also in the education systems of the countries from the comparative study presented here.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNALIZATION FOR THE SOCIALIZATION AND PERSONALIZATION OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

The presentation discusses empirical studies conducted by the Department of Primary and Pre-Primary Education on the educational and social context of preschool children's lives. Our focus was on the formation of the concepts of love and friendship, which we observed through fieldwork. These studies are in line with international and domestic trends in education policy.

Keywords: Equal opportunities in education, inclusion in school, ISCED0, ISCED1, research.

BACKGROUND

In line with European requirements, the priority of the current education system in the Czech Republic is to provide for all necessary conditions for all children to achieve a corresponding level of education and the development of their individual skills in the context of inclusion. At the Department of Primary and Pre-Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc, we focused on finding relevant information about the current situation in schools in terms of the readiness of the school and social environment. We therefore consider inclusion a complex problem affecting all children (preschool age), pupils (younger school age) and other actors in education, where the prerequisite for successful education is a non-restrictive environment based on accessibility, vertical and horizontal permeability of the education system, providing a diversified offer, continuity and variability, reflecting the needs of all children and pupils, with the aim of maximal development of the potential of each individual.

At the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, one of the priority goals of education policy is inclusive education. In 2010, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic (hereinafter referred to as MEYS CR) issued the *National Action Plan for Inclusive Education*, where it defined the basic goal of *increasing the level of the inclusive concept of education in the Czech education system. The ultimate goal is to prevent social exclusion of individuals and entire social groups and to contribute to the successful integration of individuals with disabilities or disadvantages into the social, political and economic activities of civil society.* The implementation of the tasks defined in the *National Action Plan for Inclusive Education* should gradually contribute to the increase of social cohesion in Czech society in the coming years. In the Czech Republic (referred to as CR) the current system of pre-primary, primary and secondary education is highly organized and has adequate staffing, funding and methodology that provides for education of learners in schools specially established for specific groups of pupils with special educational needs. In the long term, educational needs of children with health disability are fulfilled in the area of special education. The inclusion of these children in mainstream education is less common. It is usually triggered by the wishes and needs of the child's family but is not sufficiently supported by the provision of the necessary special educational support (Provázková Stolinská, 2015).

Education policy efforts to address the situation accelerated on 1st September 2016, when the Amendment to the Education Act on Inclusion came into force. Since the beginning of its existence, the Department of Primary and Pre-Primary Education, Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc has focused on educational and research activities in the field of primary and later also pre-primary education. Moreover, in the last 10 years, members of the department have focused on the contextual interconnection of the concepts of primary and pre-primary education because in terms of content, they

see a significant correlation between the two disciplines – the output level of the pre-primary level is also the input level of the primary level.

Our aim is to respond to current domestic educational trends that strongly influence the dynamic development of schools. Specifically, addressing access to inclusive education has become one of these determinants, and our efforts are moving towards mainstream education. We look at this issue from the perspective of finding opportunities to eliminate risks, which can promote equal opportunities in education. We rely on a number of foreign approaches and experiences we have gained by working with foreign partners (Ekins, 2017; Heimlich, Kahlert, 2014; Hornby, 2014; Guralnick, Gottman, Hammond, 1996; Rizzo, Corsaro, 1988).

Cooperation is currently established with the following countries (this is a selection of universities with which we cooperate regularly; countries with short-term cooperation are not included) – Sweden (Uppsala), Norway (Trondheim), Spain (Madrid, Coruña), Austria (Klagenfurt), Germany (Erlangen-Nürnberg), Hungary (Sopron), Slovenia (Koper, Maribor), Croatia (Zadar, Rijeka), Lithuania (Panevėžys), Slovakia (Ružomberok, Prešov), Russia (Moscow) and the UK (Winchester). Cooperation with these departments is carried out at the following levels:

- Research and project activities – international projects of a research or application nature,
- Presentation and publication activities – active participation in international scientific congresses, conferences and symposia, publications in foreign journals, as well as membership in editorial boards of foreign journals and organizing teams of foreign conferences,
- Student and teaching mobility within the Erasmus+ project – high success rate of our students in foreign mobility and study groups of foreign learners studying at the department, as well as the two-way success rate of teaching mobility of experts.

We reflect on the current view of the situation in mainstream schools when implementing the inclusive approach. We present the transformation of Czech schools on the example of three waves after 1989, with the third wave declared by the Amendment to the Education Act on Inclusion.

Based on the visions and their reflection in research, we try to outline possible steps to support the concept in the real practical environment in our schools (Provázková Stolinská, 2021; Provázková Stolinská, Rašková, Šmelová, 2019a; Provázková Stolinská, 2016).

METHODS

We analyse the issue of inclusion through empirical studies focused on the social environment of children. One of the aspects is the concept of love in preschool children, which subsequently raised our interest in understanding their concept of friendship. This is where we see the potential for socialization and personalization, thus promoting education in the context of ensuring equal opportunities (Provázková Stolinská, Rašková, Šmelová, 2021).

In the applied research study, which builds on the long-standing research plan of our department, a qualitative approach was used. For data collection, an extensive research method was used, namely structured interviews with open-ended responses from preschool children (last year in kindergarten) and younger school-age children (1st and 4th grade). We deliberately chose these age categories in order to follow the development of the concept of friendship. The responses of children and pupils were anonymously recorded on a voice recorder and evaluated in the process of categorization. The interview focused on five questions relating to friendship with an emphasis on joint activities, satisfying one's own needs and strengthening one's own status.

1. Who are your friends?
2. Why are they your friends?
3. What do you like to do with your friends?
4. What do you like about your friends?
5. Do you think it is important for you to have friends?

The aim of our qualitative research study was to find out how preschool children and younger school-age pupils perceive the concept of friendship, what they imagine under it in the context of joint activities, satisfaction of their own needs, and strengthening their own status.

RESULTS

In preschool age, children are already able to establish relationships with their peers, although various factors enter these relationships, e.g. meeting of families, attending clubs together. The need for a relationship is a sign of a degree of the child's maturity. Peer relationships in preschool age are usually symmetric, both peers are equal, they have similar competences and status. From a psychological perspective, an important aspect is especially agreement in the area of external features and manifestations, children's need for shared activity is stronger (Lechta, 2016; Helus, 2004).

In younger school age, relationships with peers are further developed. First there is a need for self-benefit, but in the second period of primary school, this need develops towards mutual sharing.

The psychological statement concerning friendship from the perspective of preschool children and younger school-age pupils has been fully confirmed. The participants have clearly confirmed the generally acknowledged and fixed criteria for the selection of friends. Significant criteria in this age include a link with a specific peer or peers; mutual sharing in various activities (usually playing games); nice appearance and positive behaviour; as well as ownership of things that children like or that resemble their own things.

Our study has confirmed that in this age, the selection of friends is not influenced by any handicaps; children are not affected by social prejudices. For the child, it is important to satisfy one's needs; internalization is strongly affected by matching needs and interests. An important role here is played by the teacher and his/her equal treatment of children and pupils. On the contrary, if a handicapped friend needs help, children and pupils are very happy to help. This also applies to parents and their attitudes towards children and pupils with special educational needs. If the school implements inclusive education, it should focus on systematic cooperation with all actors in education. Building on the results of our own previous research, we can conclude that it may be an impulse for us that targeted emotional development and support for pro-social behaviour can have a significant positive impact on the implementation of an inclusive approach in practice. Our aim is not to judge whether inclusion is a right or wrong step in education. Inclusion is determined by law. It is now important to look for ways to apply it as effectively as possible (Provázková Stolinská, Rašková, Šmelová, 2019b; Provázková Stolinská, Rašková, Šmelová, 2018; Provázková Stolinská, Rašková, Šmelová, 2017; Provázková Stolinská, Částková, 2015).

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RESILIENCE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT IN UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

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Abstract

The aim of the research conducted over a period of 23 years is to identify protective factors in subjects from high-risk environments. The study was carried out between 2002 and 2024 at universities in Slovakia and Argentina (Slovakia – 27 individuals; Argentina – 103 individuals). The subjects came from problematic primary families, characterized by low cohesion among family members and weak emotional bonds between parents and subjects. The research has a qualitative longitudinal design. The subjects were selected using intentional selection. Each participant was interviewed four times a year. In total, 9,922 interviews were conducted. Based on these interviews, case studies of the subjects were prepared, highlighting significant protective factors that support personality resilience. The data were analysed using the ATLAS.ti 7 program. The most significant protective factor identified was the ability to become deeply immersed and engaged in an activity – known as the state of flow. It was also confirmed that despite the long-term negative influences of the primary family environment on individuals, the presence of a significant natural authority during early and middle adulthood positively affects their behaviour and decision-making. This was especially true when this authority figure communicated with the subject with dignity, demonstrated proper behaviour patterns, and invested their enthusiasm into the subject to help them discover their unique abilities and qualities.

Keywords: personality resilience, primary family, risk factors, protective factors

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic and demanding educational environment, resilience, or the ability to withstand and adapt to stress and adverse situations, is a key competence even for university teachers. This study focuses on examining the factors influencing the development of resilience in teachers and identifying effective strategies to strengthen it. The research has a qualitative design. The results indicate that the key factors supporting the development of resilience include social support, professional development, a positive school climate, and personal stress-coping strategies.

Psychological resilience is an individual's tendency to cope with the consequences of stressful life situations and misfortune. "Resilience can be understood as a specific counterpoint to vulnerability, in a broader sense as a designation of personality dispositions influencing an individual's resistance to stressful influences, and in a narrower sense, only for the designation of some types of this resistance, most often resilience in the sense of hardiness (Kebza, 2005, p. 94)." It refers to the process of good adaptation after experiencing a long-term problematic period or a period of risk that could have come suddenly after several years of happy life, but it can also refer to good adaptation to a permanently existing negative state. This can include adaptation to relationship problems, serious health issues, stressful work factors, and financial problems. Resilience is studied in various situations and cultures (Gilligan, 2000). Most studies point to the fact that resilience results from the ability to communicate with an individual's current environment. Currently, there are countless definitions of resilience, but all point to the individual's ability to maintain, restore, or even improve mental state after serious, stressful situations and life events (Gilligan, 2000). The professional literature mentions basic approaches to understanding resilience; we highlight the two most relevant to our research concept (Ungar, 2006; 2008).

THEORIES

Personality Traits and Resilience

Flexibility is one of the most important personality traits related to resilience. This is understood as the ability to adapt to environmental changes without feeling upset or disheartened. Flexibility enables an individual to seek resources in the external environment, significantly aided by another trait, sociability. Sociability facilitates easier acquisition of resources and support from the surroundings. Another significant factor in the process of developing resilience is cognitive factors. Cognitive abilities have been repeatedly confirmed as strong and consistent predictors of resilience in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The crucial aspect here is not just the cognitive abilities themselves but also the content of individual cognitions. Self-efficacy represents the belief that desired goals can be achieved, and self-esteem arises from the recognition of one's own value, including the anticipation of future positive outcomes. Luthar, Sawyer & Brown (2006) emphasize the general importance of education and learning. School education helps children overcome the adversities in their lives in several ways: academic success or other professional achievements compensate for failures in family life and provide opportunities for alternative supportive relationships and a sense of self-worth. The results show significant differences in favour of adults who excelled in school. It appears that educational success is one of the main points in developing resilience. Even for those who did not achieve significantly good results in their studies, resilience can be developed through success in non-academic school subjects (sports, music, visual arts). The ability of the school environment to act protectively against numerous negative circumstances and support desirable development is so significant that many authors refer to it separately as academic resilience (Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006). Academic resilience provides a sense of competence to children, adolescents, and adults. It gives them the opportunity to experience success and the feeling that they are capable of handling various tasks and coping with problems. School, and later university can serve as a temporary escape from an undesirable family environment (Satirová, 2007). By experiencing the reality of a positive environment, functional relationships, personal success, and recognition there, individuals gain the possibility to transform their world-view and ultimately themselves in a more desirable direction (Luthar, Sawyer, & Brown, 2006). Academic success can also act as a significant motivational factor, not only for further education but also as a way to break free from their current environment and create a better quality of life based on interpersonal relationships that they did not experience in their primary family.

Protective Factors and Resilience

The search for factors supporting the creation of a resilient personality is currently receiving global attention. Researchers focus on describing specific processes involved in coping with negative life circumstances. The results of many studies directly describe protective factors, which are then used to create intervention programmes for people (both children and adults) who are at significant risk due to substantial stress sources originating from their primary families. The word "flow" is derived from the English verb "fly." In psychological terminology, it expresses a harmony with the activity, being carried by the activity. Some subjects describe this state as "floating." Csikszentmihalyi (1997) characterises flow as a state of consciousness where a person becomes deeply immersed in an activity, with all other feelings and thoughts remaining outside. In this experience, joy replaces boredom, and interest suppresses the reluctance to work. Emotions are fully activated, balanced, and aligned with the task at hand. Characteristic features of the flow experience include spontaneous joy (even ecstasy) while performing the activity that induces flow (Nakamura, Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

METHODS

Method for Analysis of Research Data – Interview

The interview is not only a method of data collection but also has an intervention character. Initially, it always involved establishing a relationship of trust and ensuring consent for recording the interview. Among the main types of in-depth interviews, we chose the semi-structured interview, which is based on a prepared list of topics. The semi-structured interview is the most widespread form of the interview method (Miovský, 2006). It requires more demanding technical preparation. A specific scheme was created, which was binding for the researcher, defining the core of the interview (a minimum of topics and questions). In the research interview, the approach should proceed from the general to the specific and from the individual to the general. To conduct in-depth interviews, four meetings per year (every

three months) were organised with each subject over a period of 23 years. The interviews took place either on university grounds or in psychologists' offices. The shortest interview lasted an hour and a half. The average duration was two hours. In total, 9,922 interviews were conducted.

Method for Analysis of Research Data – Grounded Theory

To analyse the data from the interviews, we used the Grounded Theory method with the ATLAS.ti 7 software. We began by identifying meaningful units in the text. We merged separate parts of the text that had a certain semantic connection. Then, we proceeded to open coding, assigning meanings to text segments to allow better and quicker orientation within the text. After identifying these basic categories, we moved on to axial coding, where we searched for and identified relationships between these categories (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009). This enabled us to establish a core central category. We then linked this central category with the already created categories and their relationships, adding additional auxiliary categories. This process is known as selective coding.

RESULTS

We described the identified protective factors in several categories:

People:

Teachers, leaders of artistic groups: An authority figure who serves as an inspiring role model for the subject.

Supervisors at work: Significant assistance in developing work plans, strategies, and procedures from supervisors, friends, and distant family members (“they are not alone in this”). Inspirational conversations with their supervisors often result in states described as deep immersion in the activity – flow.

Activities:

Sports, artistic activities, employment:

Engaging and fulfilling work activities where subjects describe complete immersion, losing track of time, and achieving planned goals within a set time frame – flow as a significant protective factor

Place:

Work environment: More teamwork, willingness, and ability to form strong relational bonds. Caring about team members, seeking the best solutions for all parties, supporting personal development, and helping colleagues achieve their goals.

Impact of the Protective Factors on Subjects

Behaviour:

Focus on solving current problems: Concentrating on a small part of a task that is part of a larger complex problem.

Thinking:

Orientation towards the present: Not paying attention to past failures.

Improved self-reflection – increased self-confidence based on recalling the list of tasks accomplished.

Emotions:

More frequent experiences of joy and hope, feeling that they can change situations, decide how they feel, and are not helplessly driven by emotions.

CONCLUSIONS

A primary family characterised by frequent authoritarian behaviour and destructive criticism increases the likelihood of difficulties in social relationships in subsequent life stages of an individual. The results of our research indicate that individuals from these families may have greater challenges in forming and maintaining healthy social relationships, which can manifest at various stages of life. On the other hand,

this experience can also prepare individuals to deal with people who lack empathetic behaviour, thereby better equipping them to handle such interactions. The research raises further questions for the study of personality resilience, the verification of expressed assumptions, and further analysis of the obtained data. It would be beneficial to study resilience in individuals from families where problematic communication between members and authoritarian parenting approaches were absent, to better understand the differences in resilience development.

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PEDAGOGUE IN SUPPORTING PARENTS IN THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION AND UPBRINGING THROUGH TUTORING

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Abstract

The article presents a specific range of theoretical and practical issues concerning the participation of the educator/teacher and parent(s) in the education and upbringing of the young child. The focus is on one of the commonly used forms of interaction, i.e. the organisation and conduct of individual meetings with the parent(s). These allow a focus on the individual child and his/her family and, if complemented by elements of tutoring, can contribute to a deeper interpersonal relationship, trigger/strengthen the parent's involvement in supporting their child's development, as well as identifying the potential, the possibilities for the parent himself/herself to be involved in the areas of pre-school/school-family cooperation.

Keywords: kindergarten, school, forms of teacher-parent interaction, family tutoring, tutoring for parents, personalised individual meetings

*The parent is not a "problem"
but an important ally in the educational process*
(Boszczyk, 2020, p. 116)

Making parents and teachers active to integrate and collaborate for child development – introduction

Nowadays, it is very common for the documentation of the educational establishment, i.e. the statutes of the kindergarten/school and the teachers' work plans, to give importance to the cooperation between parents and teaching staff. It is usually seen as an opportunity for valuable education and more effective upbringing of the young child and a chance for the participants to reflect on the "now and here" in terms of the development of the child and the choice of strategies by the teacher and the parent(s). This approach is an expected orientation of the kindergarten/school in the regulations. Among the strategic aims of the Polish law, it is indicated that the preschool/school should support the development of children, taking into account their individual situation (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 11 August 2017 on requirements for schools and institutions (Journal of Laws, item 1611; Journal of Laws. 2020, item 2198 as amended) - the fifth requirement for nursery schools and primary schools) and mutual involvement of parents and teachers in the activities of the pre-school/school in terms of the requirements *Parents are partners of the pre-school* and *Parents are partners of the school or establishment* (Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 11 August 2017 on requirements for schools and institutions (Journal of Laws, item 1611; Journal of Laws. 2020, item 2198 as amended) - the sixth requirement for pre-schools and primary schools). The teaching staff and specialists in the Slovak education system have similar obligations, namely the kindergarten is to take care, in close cooperation with the family, of the all-round development of children from the age of three until they start primary school, and at school the guidance and professional assistance related to upbringing and education should be provided to the pupil and legal representative - regularly informing the child, pupil and legal representative about the progress of their studies (Lipnická, 2023, p. 22, 25).

The support of the child's/pupil's development is related to meeting the needs of his/her biological, psychological, social, cultural development and depends on the knowledge of his/her individual dimension of functioning: state of health; level of development of cognitive structures; needs, aspirations; state of functioning of the nervous system; regulatory processes; predispositions, abilities

resulting from general development (talents, disabilities, chronic illness, disorders and deficits in development). On the other hand, "a teacher oriented towards the progress of his students works (...) always in openness to the environment from which they come. He or she knows that his or her work will only make sense if, having familiarised himself or herself with that environment, he or she takes into account its specificities". Thus, it is oriented towards getting to know the functioning of the child in the environment, the conditions of his/her life - the situation in the kindergarten/school; the family situation of the child including family structure, material conditions, parental attitudes, the status of the pupil and his/her family (student from migrant families *"temporarily residing in our country or having a non-uniform refugee status, asylum seeker"* (Olechowska, 2016, p. 266); re-migrant student, student belonging to a national minority, ethnic group; student from binational families) and crisis situations - circumstances, behaviour disrupting normal human functioning as a consequence of a single traumatic event or long-lasting educational neglect. Paying attention here to the situation of a child/student with different individual characteristics, who acts in the face of the demands made in kindergarten, school, in the face of the characteristics of the environment, justifies the necessity of constant maintenance of contacts and understanding between teachers and parents of pupils, who precisely from them (the closest and significant people at this period of development) expect support, help in meeting the demands, especially when their biopsychic state, abilities, predispositions are inadequate to meet them on their own. Therefore, only the complementarity of environmental interactions - family and kindergarten/school - can create the conditions for comprehensive development. Undoubtedly, it is a matter of setting priorities for joint action, ways of supporting the pupil in maintaining the optimum state of his/her developmental progress and inhibiting factors that interfere with learning, compounding educational difficulties.

Individual meetings with parents

Considering one of the overriding aims of the kindergarten/school and family interaction, which is a mutual concern for the well-being of the individual kindergarten pupil/student - to learn about his/her development, educational progress, social relations, needs, interests and to voice his/her concerns, comments - it is important to maintain continuity in the contacts between the actors involved. This underlines the importance of the first level of cooperation between the family and the educational establishment, which is the level of the individual, when parents directly (individual meetings, consultations with the teacher/specialist, verbal exchanges) or indirectly (telephone, e-mail, diary, text message) contact the educational staff to discuss child-related issues (Węgrzyn-Jonek, 2015). The multidimensional organisational arrangements for the interaction (especially indirect) should be adapted to the potential capacities, qualifications of the actors. The chosen channel, the platform of communication should be agreed, as well as the principles of communication, e.g. content should be communicated in a concentrated way, grouped thematically, at a fixed time and in advance (Burkovičová, et. al. 2023, p. 239).

From the teacher's and parent's point of view, it is useful to be in constant contact, and various instant messaging services, including the increasingly common electronic diary, make it possible to communicate information in a quick, simple written message. However, there are situations that this type of information exchange between teacher and parent (and vice versa) is fraught with misunderstandings. For various reasons - e.g. lack of specified content, misreading of the message's intention by the recipient/sender - this type of information flow is not harmonious and can cause parents and teachers to become increasingly distant from each other, representing resentment, opposition to each other. Of course, taking into account the time possibilities, it is worth agreeing on and choosing a convenient medium for the transmission of current information, but on the other hand, *"it is necessary to create as many opportunities as possible for so-called dense interaction: face-to-face meetings"* (Boszczyk, 2020, p. 129).

Interaction, especially face-to-face meetings based on conversation, helps to get a better insight into the other person's perspective - his/her needs, expectations and emotions. If the interlocutors stop limiting themselves to general information, passing remarks and expressing grievances, they create a new quality of these meetings. Then these meetings are characterised by features such as *"being with the other"*, interacting, presenting certain ways of thinking about educational issues, agreeing on ways to proceed. This is when insightful information flows, issues are confronted and opinions are exchanged on issues of mutual interest. The educational staff (teacher/school pedagogue/specialist) then puts the issues of the individual child and his/her family at the centre. Teachers/school pedagogues are the educational experts, but the perspective of the individual child/student is the parent's, because the parent is constantly present in the child's life, perceives the child's possibilities, likes and dislikes and

limitations, knows the child's needs and how to meet them, knows the different ways to react in many situations, and all this knowledge is valuable for planning educational support and assistance for the individual child/student. The parents also feel that they have a say in their child's learning and upbringing and that their opinion is taken into account in order to agree on and implement educational measures in the educational establishment and the family home. In addition, the teacher sees that he/she is not alone in the educational process and has the opportunity to recognise the intentions, expectations and intentions of the parents of his/her pupils to participate in the process. Numerous studies (Smykowska, 2008; Chojnacka-Synaszko, 2011; Banasiak, 2013; Pulak et al., 2019; Boszczyk, 2020) confirm that parents need contact with the teaching staff:

- feel the need to receive information from teachers, advice from teachers,
- at the same time, they do not want to be treated as people who can only be lectured to, to have tasks and ways of doing things imposed on them, to make generalisations without valid justifications, to be treated without respect, and yet respect is conducive to the elimination of humiliation, acceptance of otherness, tolerance of beliefs, recognition of dignity, and is combined with delicacy and tact in the transmission of information, especially difficult information.

Parents - regardless of the scope of their pedagogical knowledge - want to be taken seriously and during meetings with a teacher/specialist, they want their experiences, attempts at action and choices related to their needs and possibilities to be noticed. Thus, they do not want to be in the role of passive recipients in the process of supporting their child's development, but are interested in co-presence, which takes *"an interactive form - enabling active participation and mutual interaction - opens up space for a reciprocal community"* (Chojnacka-Synaszko, 2023, p. 191). Tutoring is a method - which can be used during interaction - that allows parents and teachers to be actively involved, stimulates reflection and fosters analytical and critical skills. It is based on the idea that the tutor is a partner for his/her ward (ang. tutee), a participant in the discussion, is not a dominant person imposing his/her beliefs and interpretations (Hejwosz, 2010, p. 210).

Building a relationship with the parent(s) through tutoring

My own reflections so far have focused on the fact that educational activities are to be primarily subordinated to the child's well-being and implemented both in the kindergarten/school and in the family. This *"well-being of the child"* can be understood in a very broad sense and can be linked to:

- with the creation of conditions that strengthen the chances of experiencing success despite differing abilities,
- responding to the interests and needs of the child,
- creating learning situations that allow the child to express him/herself freely, to experience the joy of creation, to actively explore the environment.

This kind of activity, in turn, involves thinking about and searching for answers to the questions: What kind of person could a child be? What kind of person would a child want to be? What could a child do, know, experience? How would a child want to do something? What would a child want to know, know, experience and why? Of course the educators/specialists get the answers to these questions by being with the child/student during the activities and by being in constant individual contact with the child's parent(s), especially if the tutoring proposal is used.

Tutoring is a variant of a personalised approach, an individualised influence focused on the needs and potential of the child/student. It covers two areas of the pupil's development: didactic and personal (Budzyński, et al. 2009). Thus, the child/student can progress in both learning and personal development, gaining self-confidence, developing character traits and competences desirable in today's world: responsibility, the ability to make decisions, or to set and achieve objectives. A space that reinforces and maximises the effects of education by directly influencing the consistency of educational and upbringing requirements between the educational institution and the family environment is created by family tutoring. Its aim is to help parents to raise their child, to understand their child's developmental characteristics and their child's functioning in kindergarten/school, and to strengthen the parents' active

role in their child's education. (*Tutoring rodzinny*, 2020). It includes systematic meetings between the teacher/pedagogue/specialist and the parent(s), but also does not exclude so-called trilateral meetings in which the pupil is actively involved. These are conducive to shifting the responsibility for learning from the parent to the pupil and also make it possible to show the parent how to work with the child, to create arrangements with the child, to motivate learning.

The approach - both in working with the child/student and his/her parents - based on tutoring puts the mutual relationships at the forefront. I will refer here to factors that facilitate the creation of lasting relationships between people, because for me they constitute an excellent context for presenting exemplary approaches and proposals for activities related to tutoring, which teachers/pedagogues can consider and then implement in practice when planning to strengthen their cooperation with students' parents and to awaken/sustain their active involvement in the didactic and educational process of their child.

Building developmental, lasting relationships involves showing HELP/SUPPORT, it involves wise guidance, direction, but not taking over and imposing ideas, solutions, strategies, but rather giving energy and showing a broader perspective (Boszczyk, 2020, p. 69). Relationships are created on the basis of reciprocity, i.e. during the conversation there is a mutual exchange of thoughts, views, exchange of constructive comments to think them over and implement them in the scope of a supporting plan for the development of the child/student. Taking into account the approach based on tutoring, I propose to use the following variants of action:

1) defining the sphere of influence

Mutually establish what the parent can be responsible for and what the teacher can be responsible for - establish rules for mutual cooperation, individual meetings (together create and adopt a contract). The rules of cooperation are mainly guidelines on how to work together in order to improve joint activities. Issues discussed may include what kind of help and support the parent needs, what the parent wants to achieve in bringing up their child, what the organisation of joint meetings should look like (location, number of meetings, frequency of meetings etc.). In addition, boundaries can be set - how the parties want to be treated, what they agree on, what they will not accept. Neither an aggressive nor a submissive teacher is a good support.

2) establishing the minimum scope in the area of support

Raising awareness of what is happening here and now. Finding out what is most important for the education and upbringing of the child/student at the moment and identifying important needs, goal orientation. It is important to ask parents about their own goals and values, as this can be helpful in finding strategies in this area for the child. There may be parents with specific expectations, but they may also represent those who are open to the teacher's actions and do not have specific needs. *"The system of needs and aspirations and the underlying values on the one hand, and on the other the way of thinking about oneself and the world, as well as all the life experiences accumulated so far - all these have an impact on the readiness to learn of both the teacher and the pupil or his parents. Thus, the cognitive structures, personality and social relations characteristic of both parties, as well as the living conditions - of the pupil and the teacher, the parents and the child - constitute an important internal and external context for their individual functioning and functioning in relation to each other"* (Brzezińska, Rycielska, 2009, p. 22).

3) focusing on solutions

It is useful to start the search for solutions by visualising where the child/student is, where the parent supporting him/her is, and where he/she wants to get to, e.g. by using scaling (on a scale of 1 to 10):

- identifying the current situation, the current involvement of the parent in supporting the child's development,
- finding out where he/she is on the way to the chosen goal, as defined in the previous step,
- recognising what has been done, what has already been achieved - here three areas for discussion can be suggested: a) reminding the parent that if something is working well in the child-rearing process at home and is having the desired effect, it should not be removed; b) it is useful for the parent to repeat those activities, behaviours that he/she is convinced are helpful;

c) it is important to collectively acknowledge and identify what is not having the desired effect and why, and to introduce a different approach.

Often parents count on the teacher/educator as an educational professional to provide specific tips, solutions, methods and techniques to help in the education and upbringing of the child. Then the educator, wishing to apply the subjective approach to the parent, may first ask permission, i.e. ask whether the parent is actually interested in what the teacher has to propose. There should also be a number of different solutions to give the parent the opportunity to choose, rather than trying to convince the parent to accept a single solution suggested by the teacher. Once the parent has decided on a solution, it is also useful to ask the parent's opinion on the solution, why it was chosen by the parent, what more information the parent would like to know about the solution, etc. (Rosengren, 2013).

The actions taken by parents and teachers *"create situations in which pupils also take action, accumulating as result experiences that change the way they think and behave, their knowledge of their surroundings and of themselves, their ways of self-realisation and finally their style of social functioning. However, by shaping a certain behaviour - in this and not in that situation - we always affect the whole person living and acting in a specific social context"* (Brzezińska, Rycielska, 2009, p. 21-22).

When focusing on building relationships with people, you can't ignore focusing on the other person, or MINDFULNESS. This state can be described as *"curiosity mode about the other person"* (Boszczyk, 2020, p. 69). The teacher can be curious about the parents, ask them about the things that are important to them in the upbringing of their child, try to understand what their values are, what their beliefs are, and in the process say what is important to them in terms of the educational process. This, of course, requires a shift to listening to the other person, to active listening, i.e. to perceive not only what the parent is saying, but also the significance of what they are saying. Thus, the educator, as an active listener, should be sensitive to nuances in tone, manner of speaking and non-verbal signals. Such an approach protects against creating the labels of a demanding parent, an overprotective parent, etc. It is useful to ask the parent what is behind their words and behaviour in a given situation, and to use checking statements, which are a repetition of the message heard from the parent, a certain rephrasing of the message, as well as statements to deepen understanding by adding meaning to the statement, referring to a metaphor, naming the feeling of the other person, in this case the parent.

Attentiveness involves making an effort to understand what the interlocutor is feeling, what motivates or discourages him or her to do something. Particularly from the perspective of parents, who show limited or passive involvement in their child's/student's education together with the teacher, it is important to focus on their resources. Parents always have some resources, inner strengths that need to be released, as they may be needed in the organisation of the child's/student's educational process. These inner strengths of the parent/family can be located in several areas: abilities, competences, talent, courage, possibilities, expectations, promises. Exploring, bringing out and strengthening the potentials, possibilities of the parents/family, which can be useful in achieving a goal in the process of supporting the child's development, makes parents feel more competent, their sense of self-worth increases and they show more willingness to cooperate with the teacher. Thus, when talking to parents, it is worthwhile to use a message expressed in terms of possibilities (you can) and skills (you can), rather than in terms of properties (you are; you will succeed). Identified resources and potentials can also help the child to decide for possible roles in the pre-school/school/classroom.

Additionally, lasting relationships with people require devoting your TIME to them (Boszczyk, 2020, p. 68). The idea is that the time should be reserved for the parent concerned, planned, but above all adapted, taking into account both the professional responsibilities and the personal situation of the teacher and the parent(s). Time is the key to making personalised meetings with parents satisfying. Dedicated time is needed to calmly 'talk through' difficult issues, to seek advice, to understand each other's perspective and to make a joint decision on the use of approaches in the educational process. Thus, great importance is attributed to the openness of both cooperation actors to a flexible arrangement of meetings, a space to talk under appropriate conditions.

Summarising the above considerations, the organisation of individual meetings with the parents of students, which involves the use of an in-depth conversation on joint support for the development of the child/student, on the use of elements of the tutoring method certainly raises the pedagogical culture of parents and serves their personal development, strengthens their sense of value and, above all, I believe that it is part of the so-called engaged style of implementing parenting, otherwise known as attentive parenting (Błasiak, 2017, p. 32). This parenting is characterised by: acceptance of the role; interest in the changing child; interaction; responsiveness of the parent; balance between closeness and autonomy

of the child; change in the parent's activity towards the child according to the child's needs and developmental possibilities; care for the child; active participation in creating an optimal developmental environment.

Obviously, the indicated approach in the organisation of personalised meetings with pupils' parents involves taking into account the changes "in the relationship between teachers and parents, which are easy and difficult. Easy, because they depend on the interested parties themselves - the participants of education, difficult, because they require changes in well-established, comfortable patterns, they concern changes not only on the behavioural level, but also on the cognitive and emotional level - thoughts, judgements, beliefs, values" (Bibik, 2009, p. 159). Educational staff in their role as "hostess" in an educational organisation can start by analysing their working style and the basis of their actions. Inner change involves taking a permanent look at oneself, becoming aware of one's competences and limitations and working with beliefs. Such work on the teacher's self - alone or with the support of a specialist - is a priority, because being in contact with other teachers, students and their parents, he or she works primarily using his or her interpersonal skills (Boszczyk, 2020, p. 96). Furthermore, "building (...) a good relationship, inspiring, developing a motivating purpose, setting appropriate tasks and enforcing them - these are the things that allow teachers to spread their wings" (Czekierda, 2009, p. 16).

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CHANGES IN APPROACHES TO EARLY YEARS EDUCATION IN REVISIONS TO THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This information paper presents an analysis of the transformation of the English national curriculum framework, *the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS), in terms of the role of pre-school education. In its original innovative 2007 version, the core pillar of the EYFS was the promotion of children's natural development and free play. In subsequent revisions (2012, 2021), however, the focus of the EYFS has narrowed to the child's readiness for school, which is clearly woven into the formulation of the educational goals of pre-school education. This article focuses on the most recent revision of the EYFS in 2021, which introduced challenging early learning goals in the areas of mathematics and literacy, and definitively confirmed the direction of the EYFS to focus pre-school education on measurable learning outcomes, primarily in the cognitive domain and with an emphasis on school readiness.

Keywords: EYFS, review, pre-school education, school readiness, early learning goals.

Moving from experiential learning to school readiness

In 2007 *the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) was published in England, replacing the first-ever national curriculum for pre-school years, *the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* of 2000.

The EYFS was praised by the professional community for its emphasis on spontaneous and natural child-centred education and free play (Boyd & Hirst, 2016). It defined the child's own experience, the child's experience, and a safe and happy childhood as key elements in determining the child's future life course. The intention of the EYFS was to set standards for children's development and learning, to ensure equal access to pre-school education for all children without distinction, to promote collaboration with families, to improve the quality of pre-school settings and, ultimately, to lay the foundations for future learning (DSCF, 2007).

Since its first edition, the EYFS has undergone revisions (2012, 2021) that have departed significantly from the original conception of pre-school education. The revisions to the EYFS gradually shifted the emphasis from an approach that promoted holistic child development and learning through play to 'planned, purposeful play' (DfE 2012, p. 10) and began to emphasise the aspect of school readiness.

The term 'school readiness' emerged in English education policy and professional discourse in the first decade of the twentieth century (Whitebread & Bingham, 2012). Until then, entry into compulsory schooling was only considered on the basis of reaching the set age of 5 years. However, a changing view of the role of pre-school education suggested that children needed to demonstrate progress towards set goals (Alexander 2010; Eke et al., 2009; Trevor et al., 2020) and meet developmental milestones 'typical for their age' in order to be 'adequately prepared for the start of compulsory schooling' (Wilshaw, in Jones, 2015, p. 22).

The 2012 revision of the EYFS reduced the number of learning goals (in the original version, the expected outcomes from each learning area were articulated in great detail in 69 learning goals, which were generalised to 17 in the revision), but at the same time increased the demands in the areas of literacy and numeracy and declared the importance of pre-school education in ensuring children's school readiness (Cohen et al., 2018; Faulkner & Coates, 2013; Moss, 2014). Thus, the goal of pre-school education was no longer simply to create an environment for a child's safe and happy childhood and experiences, but more importantly to provide a quality education that would enable children to reach their maximum potential. Pre-school education should ensure that children are ready for school.

The second review of the EYFS in 2021 confirmed and deepened this direction. The aim was to reformulate the learning goals so that they were clearer and more specific, and so that teachers could assess them more accurately. At the same time, however, the revision brought an escalation of the challenge of cognitive learning goals in literacy and numeracy (see Table 1). Emphasis was also placed on strengthening language and vocabulary development (especially for disadvantaged children). The new learning goals were intended to be informed by the latest evidence on child development and to reflect the strongest predictors of future outcomes¹ (DfE, 2021; EYA, 2023). In the revised EYFS, the objectives were also more closely linked to subjects in primary education². By meeting the learning targets, children were expected to have a good foundation in these areas by the start of Year 1.

Emphasis on school readiness in the reformulation of learning goals

The move away from promoting children's holistic development and interest in learning through self-discovery and experimentation is clearly evident in the formulation of early learning goals in selected areas of communication and language; mathematics; literacy (reading and writing).

Table 1. Comparison of early learning goals from selected learning areas in the EYFS 2007, 2012 and 2021

By the end of pre-school education (before entering compulsory primary education at the age of 5) children should:

	EYFS (2007)	EYFS (2012)	EYFS (2021)
Communication and language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation. - enjoy listening to and using spoken and written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning. - sustain attentive listening, responding to what they have heard with relevant comments, questions or actions. - listen with enjoyment, and respond to stories, songs and other music, rhymes and poems and make up their own stories, songs, rhymes and poems. - extend their vocabulary, exploring the meanings and sounds of new words. 	<p>Listening and attention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listen attentively in a range of situations. - listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. - give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity. <p>Understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - follow instructions involving several ideas or actions. - answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories or events. 	<p>Listening, Attention and Understanding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listen attentively and respond to what they hear with relevant questions, comments and actions when being read to and during whole class discussions and small group interactions. - make comments about what they have heard and ask questions to clarify their understanding. - hold conversation when engaged in back-and-forth exchanges with their teacher and peers. <p>Speaking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - participate in small group, class and one-to-one discussions,

¹ For example, the learning goals in mathematics focus more on counting and comparing quantities (at the expense of working with shape, space and measure) as they are supposed to be the strongest predictors of later mathematics achievement (EYA, 2023).

² For example, the 'Understanding the world' learning area is a precursor to history in primary school. Children learn to distinguish between the past and the present by working with books and through their own experiences of visiting historical sites and museums (Crawford, 2021).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - speak clearly and audibly with confidence and control and show awareness of the listener. - use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences. - use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events. - retell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories. - show an understanding of the elements of stories, such as main character, sequence of events and openings, and how information can be found in non-fiction texts to answer questions about where, who, why and how. 	<p>Speaking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - express themselves effectively, showing awareness of listeners' needs. - use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. - develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events. 	<p>offering their own ideas, using recently introduced vocabulary.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - offer explanations for why things might happen, making use of recently introduced vocabulary from stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems when appropriate; - express their ideas and feelings about their experiences using full sentences, including use of past, present and future tenses and making use of conjunctions, with modelling and support from their teacher.
<p>Mathematics</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - say and use number names in order in familiar contexts. - count reliably up to ten everyday objects. - recognise numerals 1 to 9. - use developing mathematical ideas and methods to solve practical problems. - in practical activities and discussion, begin to use the vocabulary involved in adding and subtracting. - use language such as 'more' or 'less' to compare two numbers. - find one more or one less than a number from one to ten. - begin to relate addition to combining two groups of objects and subtraction to 'taking away'. - use language such as 'greater', 'smaller', 	<p>Numbers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - count reliably with numbers from 1 to 20, place them in order and say which number is one more or one less than a given number. - using quantities and objects, they add and subtract two single-digit numbers and count on or back to find the answer. - solve problems, including doubling, halving and sharing. <p>Shape, space and measures:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - children use everyday language to talk about size, weight, capacity, position, distance, time and money to compare quantities and objects and to solve problems. - recognise, create and describe patterns. - explore characteristics of everyday objects and 	<p>Number:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - have a deep understanding of number to 10, including the composition of each number. - subitise (recognise quantities without counting) up to 5. - automatically recall (without reference to rhymes, counting or other aids) number bonds up to 5 (including subtraction facts) and some number bonds to 10, including double facts <p>Numerical Patterns:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - verbally count beyond 20, recognising the pattern of the counting system. - compare quantities up to 10 in different contexts, recognising when one quantity is greater than, less than

	<p>'heavier' or 'lighter' to compare quantities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - talk about, recognise and recreate simple patterns. - use language such as 'circle' or 'bigger' to describe the shape and size of solids and flat shapes. - use everyday words to describe position. 	<p>shapes and use mathematical language to describe them.</p>	<p>or the same as the other quantity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - explore and represent patterns within numbers up to 10, including evens and odds, double facts and how quantities can be distributed equally.
Literacy Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - attempt writing for different purposes, using features of different forms such as lists, stories and instructions. - write their own names and other things such as labels and captions, and begin to form simple sentences, sometimes using punctuation. - use a pencil and hold it effectively to form recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds. - also write some irregular common words. - write simple sentences which can be read by themselves and others. - some words are spelt correctly and others are phonetically plausible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - write recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed. - spell words by identifying sounds in them and representing the sounds with a letter or letters. - write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others
Literacy Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - hear and say sounds in words in the order in which they occur. - link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet. - use their phonic knowledge to write simple regular words and make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words. - explore and experiment with sounds, words and texts. - read a range of familiar and common words and simple sentences independently. - know that print carries meaning and, in English, is read from left to right and top to bottom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - read and understand simple sentences. - use phonic knowledge to decode regular words and read them aloud accurately. - also read some common irregular words. - demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - say a sound for each letter in the alphabet and at least 10 digraphs. - read words consistent with their phonic knowledge by sound-blending. - read aloud simple sentences and books that are consistent with their phonic knowledge, including some common exception words.

Sources: DfE, 2012, 2021; DSCF, 2007

Communication and language

The original EYFS emphasises the joy of learning, the child's initiative and emerging skills, evidenced by verbs such as 'enjoy listening', 'explore', 'extend', 'make up own stories' and 'show awareness'. In the 2012 revision, the focus shifts to correct expression - the children 'accurately anticipate key events, 'use past, present and future forms accurately' and 'develop their own narratives... by connecting ideas'. The 2021 revision deepens the focus on developed communication skills - the children are supposed to be 'making use of recently introduced vocabulary' and 'express their ideas and feelings using full sentences'.

Mathematics

The 2007 EYFS requires only a basic knowledge of the concept of numbers from 1 to 10 and a developing understanding of mathematical operations and concepts relating to shape, space and measurement ('say and use number names in order in familiar contexts'; 'count reliably up to ten everyday objects'; 'begin to use the vocabulary involved in adding and subtracting'; 'use language such as 'circle' or 'bigger' to describe the shape and size of solids and flat shapes'). The 2012 revision significantly increases the demands on the mastery of basic mathematical operations ('count reliably with numbers from 1 to 20'; 'use quantities and objects to add and subtract two single-digit numbers'; 'use everyday language to talk about size, weight, capacity... '). The 2021 revision focuses on a deeper understanding and mastery of the concept of number and number relationships from 1 to 10 and recognising quantities up to five by estimation. In contrast, shape, measurement, space and making regular patterns do not appear at all in the early objectives.

Writing

The 2007 EYFS Early Learning Goals focus on laying the foundations of writing skills ('attempt writing for different purposes'; 'write their own names'; 'use a pencil and hold it effectively to form recognisable letters'). The 2012 revision focuses on whether the child is beginning to write in line with previous knowledge and experience of writing vowels ('use their phonic knowledge to write words in ways which match their spoken sounds'). In EYFS 2021, the focus is already on accuracy of letter formation and range of knowledge ('writes recognisable letters, most of which are formed correctly'; 'spells words by identifying sounds in them and representing the sounds with a letter or letters').

Reading

The original EYFS (2007) again focuses on the development of reading skills and emphasises the child's own initiative ('link sounds to letters, naming and sounding the letters of the alphabet'; 'use their phonic knowledge to... to make phonetically plausible attempts at more complex words'). The 2012 revision emphasises reading comprehension ('read and understand simple sentences'; 'demonstrate understanding when talking with others about what they have read'; 'use phonic knowledge to decode regular words'). The 2021 revision then requires the acquisition of a certain amount of knowledge ('say a sound for each letter in the alphabet and at least 10 digraphs') and reading skills ('read words consistent with their phonic knowledge by sound-blending'; 'read simple sentences and books that are consistent with their phonic knowledge').

Emphasis on the measurability of learning outcomes

Overall, the most recent review of the EYFS in 2021 confirmed the trend towards greater emphasis on the acquisition of cognitive knowledge and the measurability of learning outcomes, which had previously been confined to compulsory education in England. Professional responses to the revised EYFS have been mixed. Experts (Kay & Fairchild, 2020; Pilcher, 2021; Trevor et al, 2020) have expressed concern about the way in which the role of pre-school education is changing. Neil Leitch, Director of the Early Years Alliance, a major professional body for early years practitioners, commented on the publication of the new curriculum:

Rather than reinforcing the need for and value of a child-centred approach to early years practice, the new framework appears to represent a shift towards a much more formal approach to provision, and one where

the EYFS is seen as preparation for Key Stage 1 [in primary education], rather than a vital stage in and of itself (Leitch, 2021).

The final outcomes have become narrow measures of child outcomes designed to link pre-school and primary education, rather than reflecting a broad, developmentally appropriate educational provision. This approach also does nothing to address the worrying trend towards assessing educational outcomes against clearly defined criteria, and in fact reinforces it (Kay & Fairchild, 2020; Pilcher, 2021).

The strengthening and broadening of the expected learning outcomes that a child should achieve before entering compulsory education raises concerns that an approach is being promoted that leads to 'ticking boxes' from a list of stated goals, rather than holistically supporting a child's development and learning.

Emphasis on efficiency in education

The increased emphasis on 'academic' skills in the EYFS is closely linked to the effectiveness of education. In March 2022, the White Paper, *Opportunity for all: Strong schools with great teachers for your child*, was published which sets out strategic education goals for 2030. The most important of these is to increase the number of pupils reaching the expected level of literacy and numeracy by the final year of primary school. By 2030, 90% of 11-year-olds should achieve this, compared to 65% of pupils in 2019. This means that currently more than a third of English pupils at the end of primary school at age 11 do not reach the expected level in the skills that are the starting point for further learning.

The pressure for greater efficiency in primary education is also reflected in the current conception of early childhood education and care, which emphasises the organisation of the child's targeted intellectual development. The pre-school period is seen as a period of purposeful preparation for the next stage of education. Methodological materials to support the implementation of the EYFS in practice draw directly on the work of Lev Vygotsky and his theory of the zone of proximal development.

When children are at a lower level of development than expected, it is important to notice what they like to do and also to identify where their difficulties may lie. They need more help from us to gain confidence in the early stages of development. It will not help if we wait until they are 'ready' (DfE, 2020, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

The recent revision of the EYFS confirmed a move away from the original innovative curriculum design (respecting the developmental needs and individual characteristics of the pre-school child) towards increased academic pressure on cognitive knowledge. The child is no longer given time to mature at his or her own pace, according to his or her own disposition, in the stimulating environment created by the teacher. It is now the teacher's task to support the child in achieving the goals set out in the curriculum within a defined period of time.

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GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN KINDERGARTEN

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to draw attention to the demographic changes in modern European countries and the role of preschool education in preparing children for active aging and establishing good relationships with seniors. The aging population is not only an individual problem, but also a social problem. What is disturbing is the negative, indifferent perception of older people by young people and their fear of their own old age. To counteract this, individuals should be prepared for active and healthy old age and taught to establish positive intergenerational relationships, i.e., educated about old age and educated for old age. This education should be carried out from the earliest years of a child's life, including preschool age. This is important because the lifestyle developed in childhood and youth influences good or bad adaptation to changes associated with the age of 60+, and positive attitudes towards seniors are an opportunity to improve intergenerational relations.

Keywords: old age, kindergarten, gerontological education, demographic changes

INTRODUCTION

The modern world is associated with numerous civilization and social changes dominated by the so-called popular culture. It is strongly associated with the mass media and promotes the cult of success, pleasure, youth and prosperity. These new trends shape young people focused on consumerism, and existing values related to human dignity and respect are changing. Unfortunately, in times of progressive aging of societies, not only in Europe, but all over the world, seniors are marginalized, and old age is depreciated and arouses fear (Steuden, 2015, p.134-136). The changes also concern the family, which prefers a two-generation model in which grandmother and grandfather are not present on a daily basis, which adversely affects intergenerational relations. Moreover, in families there is a phenomenon of autonomy of individuals. The young generation, "chasing" for a better and more prosperous life, has no time or inclination to take care of older family members - for example, parents. Young people do not want or are not prepared to help the elderly, and sending parents or grandparents to nursing homes, hospices or hospitals is becoming more and more common and natural. It is disturbing that at a time when the number of seniors is constantly increasing, we increasingly forget that the elderly constitute an integral and important social group. To counteract this, education and upbringing of children should, to a greater extent, include building a positive vision of old age, teaching respect and kindness towards older people, and intergenerational integration (Deręgowska, 2008, p. 25-27; Guzy-Steinke, 2008, p. 282; Maciantowicz, 2006, p. 236; Rudnik, 2016, p.104-105).

The process of population aging – causes and effects

Aging is an individual, social and demographic phenomenon. Demographic aging means an increase in the number of older people (people aged 60+ or 65+) in the total number of inhabitants of a given country (Worach-Kardas, 2015, p. 15-16).

According to global demographic standards (World Health Organization), demographic old age is defined by an indicator exceeding 7% of people aged 60+ in the general structure of society. So:

- if seniors constitute less than 4% of all inhabitants of a given country, it is a country of young people = a young society;
- if people of retirement age constitute from 4% to 7% of a given society, it is a country of mature people = mature society;

- if people aged 60+ constitute more than 7% of the overall structure of society, it is a country of old people = a demographically old society (Śledzianowski, 2001, p. 13).

According to current statistical data, demographically old countries include: Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria and Portugal. In all indicated countries, the percentage of seniors exceeds 20% of the total population (Worach-Kardas, 2015, p. 16).

The reasons for the aging of modern societies include:

- decreasing birth rate - in today's world, the priorities for young people are: professional success, well-paid job, beautiful apartment/house, good car, exploring the world and an attractive social life. This consumerist lifestyle causes young people to postpone the desire to have a child or to give it up completely in favor of a comfortable, prosperous life;
- life extension - the development of medicine, increased access to medical care, better social and living conditions, popularization of general and health knowledge improve the quality of life of seniors and, as a result, translate into their longer life;
- migrations - the increase in migration is related to, among others, with a given country's accession to the European Union or people escaping from the danger associated with the war taking place in a given country. The phenomenon of migration is very important because the inflow of immigrants may partially slow down the aging process of a given society (Balicki, 2016, pp. 27-29).

Therefore, the increasing number of seniors in most countries poses new challenges for the field of social sciences - geriatricians, gerontologists, psychologists of old people, sociologists, and educators, because the aging population is not only an individual problem, but also a social problem.

The issues of demographic changes and the quality of life of seniors in Poland were dealt with by the "Polska 2000 Plus" Forecasts Committee operating at the Polish Academy of Sciences. Scientists call for the development and implementation of a comprehensive policy program in times of demographic change. The most important state activities addressed to seniors include:

- stable pension system,
- access to public healthcare,
- providing seniors with home care if necessary,
- development of the construction of seniors' homes,
- preventing social exclusion of seniors,
- restoring programs on old age, aging and older people in public media,
- stabilization of regulations related to the possibility of paid work for people aged 60+,
- supporting the sector of services for older people,
- establishing reliefs and privileges for seniors (Rajkiewicz, 2008, p. 13-15, 23-24; Perek-Białas, Worek, 2005, p. 16-20).

In addition to the state's obligations towards people of retirement age, scientists dealing with the aging process are now also focusing on making old age a time of activity, health and satisfaction, as well as professional and social opportunities for older people. This is the so-called concept of active healthy aging (Active Aging Index). It assumes the implementation of activities in four areas, which include:

- professional activity,
- social and family activity,
- activity for a healthy and independent lifestyle,

- creating an environment friendly to establishing and maintaining intergenerational relationships (Worach-Kardas, 2015, p.17; Perek-Białas, Worek, 2005, p. 20-22; Steuden, 2012, p.165, 175).

According to Adam A. Zych, in order for the four areas mentioned above to be implemented and for the old age period to be satisfactory, the so-called aging prevention, i.e. gerontological prevention, is also important. Its goal is to maintain physical, mental and social health until the end of life. Therefore, it is important to shape and implement the desired attitudes and behaviors, which include:

- health promotion, keeping active and physically fit until late in life;
- ability to cope with new and difficult situations, such as: illness, pain, suffering, stress, loneliness, death of loved ones, etc.;
- taking care of healthy eating and leading a healthy lifestyle;
- optimism, joy of life, kindness, understanding of others, because these are the features that influence relationships with other people;
- good relationships at home and in the local community;
- free-time interests (Zych, 2012, p.109-111).

Nowadays, recognizing the demographic changes taking place in societies is very important. Its aim is to undertake long-term, institutional actions that will result in positive changes in the future in terms of improving the quality of life of seniors and intergenerational contacts. The essence of systemic tasks addressed to seniors is to improve the quality of their lives and to prepare the current generation of young people for their future old age and for life in a demographically old society. Therefore, there is a need to shape, already in preschool children, a positive perception of old age as a valuable time providing many development opportunities and to build a positive image of seniors as people: wise, experienced, active and creatively spending time (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2007, p. 212-213).

Gerontological education in kindergarten – new tasks

Nowadays, the world is becoming more and more complex and changeable. With constant changes, new and difficult tasks appear before the kindergarten and the teacher. Institutional education is to prepare young people for life not here and now, but for life in the future - technological, old demographically, intercultural, increasingly consumerist (Wollman, 2013, pp.15-16). To keep up with these changes, a teacher must constantly improve his/her work skills, because the quality of education (including pre-school education) depends on meeting the current educational needs of educators, i.e. the level of their education, professional experience and continuous supplementation of knowledge and competences through self-education (Fodorová, 2017, p. 229-234; 2018, p. 83).

The question arises: what educational and upbringing challenges do educational institutions and teachers of the 21st century face? In pedagogical practice, the following tasks are mentioned to support child development:

- education in the developmental aspect - it is supporting the proper physical and mental development of the student, which is important at every stage of life;
- upbringing in the social aspect - it is preparing the child for life in society (including the society of old people) and acting in accordance with the desired norms and value system;
- education in the cultural aspect - this is the transfer of cultural heritage, teaching respect for history and the people who create it and pass it on to the young generation, and arousing curiosity and interests in this area (Prokosz, 2014, p. 212).

The role of educational institutions (and therefore also kindergartens) in the field of education for old age was emphasized by Aleksander Kamiński. According to the researcher, education and upbringing are intended to support physical, mental, social and cultural activity of people of all ages. He also emphasized that the way we live in childhood and youth affects the quality of life in old age, so we must

prepare appropriately for this stage of life. It is important to develop in every young person the ability to independently carry out specific tasks throughout life, which will help them adapt more easily to changes related to retirement age in the future.

Kamiński defined the main, lifelong gerontological tasks:

- encouraged us to be professionally active as long as possible, but also to carry out various household chores, because this type of activity prevents decrepitude and makes our lives meaningful;
- he also emphasized the role of free-time interests that enable physical, mental and cultural activity and influence contacts with people, which in turn prevents loneliness and is a source of joy and satisfaction;
- it is also important to skillfully establish and maintain social contacts - at home, in the local community, with peers and young people;
- he urged people to take care of the development of physical activity from an early age and follow the rules of personal hygiene, because it helps maintain good psychophysical condition (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2019, p. 54).

However, Bogna Żakowska-Wachelko (2002, p. 111) emphasizes that in the aging societies of contemporary Europe, counteracting the negative effects of demographic old age should develop in two directions:

- the first one is about shaping appropriate attitudes and ways of life in students from early childhood, which will enable better adaptation to changes related to retirement in the future. This is about developing habits of active rest, proper nutrition, and active participation in social life. It is also important to build attitudes of respect and kindness towards other people, including seniors;
- in the second direction, it is important to meet the needs of old people and reduce problems in the mental, biological, social and economic spheres by families and institutions working to help seniors.
- Taking into account the above classifications and considerations, more detailed tasks of a kindergarten teacher can be indicated, which include, among others:
- taking care of children's safety, health and hygiene - this means organizing various physical activities in the kindergarten and in the yard (games and activities, walks); developing hygiene habits, which has a positive impact on health; learning the culture of eating; familiarizing pupils with emergency numbers and occupational health and safety rules;
- providing appropriate conditions for learning and playing - this means organizing various types of games and activities to develop children's individual interests;
- helping children learn - individualization of the education process and cooperation with parents and specialists in this area;
- implementation of activities aimed at shaping a healthy lifestyle and an assertive attitude towards threats;
- group integration and shaping habits of social coexistence - this is learning the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with peers and adults, based on respect, kindness and cooperation;

- developing emotional resilience and the ability to undertake and cope with new tasks and solve problems;
- developing patriotic feelings - arousing interest in the immediate environment, culture of the region and country, cultivating traditions and rituals by preparing preschoolers to participate in various celebrations;
- developing sensitivity and creative activity - conducting art, technical, musical and sports classes, participating in performances, concerts, competitions, competitions in order to develop children's abilities and interests (Ibidem, p. 213-214).

All these tasks equip children with knowledge and skills that influence the quality of their lives today and may contribute to better adaptation to changes related to the aging process and old age.

Referring to the above-mentioned tasks of a modern teacher, one should try to answer the question: What role does a modern teacher play in educating preschoolers into old age? Szarota (2004, p. 59-60) believes that the role of the teacher in this respect is - at the physical level - shaping children's habits of practicing sports, recreation, attention to hygiene, health and proper nutrition, maintaining the greatest possible physical fitness to maintain independence and good health. However, at the psychological level, it is important to shape positive thinking about one's own future, which means reducing fears about one's old age and perceiving old age as a natural phase of human life. However, in terms of intellect, it is important to stimulate interests and spend free time creatively. The social scope includes eliminating negative stereotypes about old age, introducing children to social activities, initiating and maintaining social, family and social contacts, engaging in the activities of various associations, taking on new social roles, which helps prevent social isolation and loneliness (Ibidem; Kłosowski, 2015, p.187-197).

Taking into account the advice of educators and gerontologists, I have developed a number of tasks related to the gerontological education of pupils that should be implemented in kindergarten.

The first group consists of tasks aimed at preparing the child for an active, healthy old age in physical, mental and social aspects. The point here is to shape lifelong behaviors and attitudes in students that will influence their future good quality of life at retirement age. The kindergarten's tasks in this regard include:

- expanding children's knowledge about the periodization of human life, the specificity of human development and functioning at different ages, taking into account old age as a period not only associated with difficulties, but also with many development opportunities;
- building a positive vision of aging, old age and seniors in order to get used to this stage of life;
- introducing children to physical, mental and social changes during life, including old age;
- awareness of the importance of lifelong preparation for one's own old age - active, healthy and independent. This is possible by:
 - developing children's ability to adapt to various life situations, including new and difficult ones that will occur during retirement,
 - developing the ability to cope with stress,
 - developing interests, developing passions,
 - promoting lifelong physical activity,
- teaching children the ability to cooperate in a group;
- teaching how to establish and maintain positive relationships with other people (including seniors), the ability to build friendships - at home, in kindergarten, in the neighborhood;
- learning to lead an active, healthy lifestyle, in which the most important thing is physical activity and a healthy diet, which is important at all ages, especially at retirement age;
- shaping personality traits such as: kindness, respect, empathy, independence, creativity, hard work,

positive attitude to life, posing new challenges, looking for activities that will be a source of pleasure and satisfaction.

The second group consists of tasks aimed at shaping social attitudes and intergenerational relations. Belong to them:

- making children aware of the demographic changes that are currently taking place;
- discussion of stereotypes existing in our country related to seniors and old age;
- enabling intergenerational meetings in kindergarten to show that seniors are also healthy, attractive, active and open to social contacts;
- teaching children the ability to cooperate with seniors, establish and maintain positive relationships with them;
- making preschoolers aware of their responsibilities towards older family members;
- emphasizing the role of the family in a person's life at every stage of his life, also in old age;
- integrating children with seniors, i.e. organizing intergenerational meetings in kindergarten (Trzcionka-Wieczorek, 2023, p. 214-215).

All these activities are aimed at familiarizing children in kindergarten with the positive and difficult aspects of the process of human aging; eliminating the fear of one's own old age; realizing that old age can be as good, active and interesting as youth; taking care of one's own health and safety; developing interests; openness to social contacts, including intergenerational ones.

CONCLUSION

The life of a 21st century person is full of changes in the functioning of societies, as well as enormous scientific, technical and cultural progress, changes in behaviors, norms and values, which have a particular impact on the lives of seniors. Their well-established system of perceiving the world continues to experience revolutionary changes that they must navigate. Due to these transformations, aging and old age have a new meaning today - they face postmodernity, which has never been so dynamic. Civilizational transformations also affect social relations - they weaken bonds between people, especially intergenerational bonds. A person living and acting in a changing world cannot be passive. The lack of ability to adapt to life results in the exclusion of seniors from social, cultural and economic life, which in turn causes frustration and loneliness (Pikuła, 2015, p. 13-17). To counteract this, it is necessary to develop in children the ability to lead an active, healthy lifestyle and cope with problems and new situations from the preschool period; develop interests; teach how to establish good relationships with peers and adults - based on kindness and cooperation. We should also make people aware that old age can be a period that gives a person many development opportunities; indicate ways of active, healthy and independent living in old age, but also enable intergenerational contacts. Shaping the desired personality traits in preschoolers will have a positive impact on their relationships with seniors and will also allow them to better adapt to changes related to old age in its various aspects in the future.

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ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS OF PRESCHOOLERS

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a quantitative research study. The objective of the study was to determine the knowledge of six-year-old children at the conclusion of their pre-primary education in specific areas of environmental education. The research objective was achieved through the research of six sub-objectives of the research, which involved testing children's knowledge. The results are based on the calculation of the percentage score of correct answers in individual test items within the thematic areas of environmental education. The following areas were included in the examination: environmental pollution and methods of its protection, health protection, protected plants and animals, the basics of geography and phenology, cultivation and soil cultivation, and ecosystems and living organisms in them. The worksheets were developed at the University of Kielce in Poland.

Keywords: Early childhood education, environmental education, environmental knowledge, scientific literacy, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, the primary objective of environmental policy has been to enhance environmental awareness and engagement among citizens. A fundamental prerequisite for the advancement of society in accordance with the principles of sustainability is the establishment of a comprehensive system of environmental education, training, and educational activities. As posited by pedagogues and experts in the field of developing environmental awareness and developing human natural science literacy, environmental and ecological education is already justified in the education of preschool children (Doušková & Tomkuliaková, 2012; Miňová & Sokáčová, 2012; Bernátová, 2013; Gallayová et al., 2015; Wu, 2024). The integration of environmental education into the curricula of kindergartens enables teachers to facilitate the development of children's perceptions and relationships with nature and the environment. Children are taught to coexist with nature, recognizing it as an inexhaustible source of inspiration, peace, relaxation, diversity, and examples of the positive and negative consequences of human activity on the environment. Children are taught the fundamental principles of ecology, which serve to reinforce their conservation attitudes and behaviours. As defined by Platková Olejárová (2010, p. 155), environmental education is the cultivation of a person's moral identity, the development of their moral judgments and consciousness in the spirit of pro-nature (respect for nature) and respect for other moral values, such as human dignity and life, humanity, justice, responsibility, etc. The objective of environmental education is to cultivate an environmentally conscious and morally responsible individual.

The Slovakian educational system has included environmental education since 1996, when the so-called "Environmental Minimum" was introduced. The objectives and content of environmental education at primary and secondary levels were established. The introduction of the school reform in 2008 saw the extracurricular curriculum replaced by the cross-cutting topic of Environmental Education. At present, within the framework of the state educational programme, environmental education is perceived as a means that can, to a certain extent, influence children feelings and behaviour towards the environment. Teachers have an irreplaceable role in this, as they can contribute to the deepening of students' environmental awareness thanks to their professional skills (mainly subject-specific, psychodiagnostic and reflective skills of their own activity) (Fryková, 2010). Environmental education does not have a special status as a cross-cutting theme in the state curriculum for pre-primary education in kindergartens (2016). However, its basic principles, contents such as environmental protection, specifics of the country, region, geography, protected flora and fauna, etc. are mainly integrated within the educational areas Man and Nature (*Človek a príroda*), Man and Society (*Človek a spoločnosť*). As

part of the integration of environmental education into pre-primary education, the child has the opportunity to develop their personality holistically, that is to say. In all areas of development. In the cognitive area, the child is expected to gain an adequate understanding of nature protection, develop basic habits of ecological behaviour, learn about nature and its importance, learn inquiry-based methods, and discover the specifics of the immediate surroundings, region, and country. In the social-emotional domain, children are encouraged to develop an emotional relationship with nature, to recognise the value of life, to appreciate the beauty of nature, to express their feelings towards the environment, and to learn to take responsibility for their actions. In the perceptual-motor domain, children are taught to develop sensory perception, to coordinate sensory and motor organs, to develop motor skills and self-service work habits that are necessary for the protection of nature and the environment.

Uváčková (2013) posits that there are significant divergences in the methodologies and pedagogies employed in environmental education, with the outcomes observed in students' knowledge varying considerably across educational institutions and geographical regions. In recent years, no research has been conducted to map the knowledge of children in specific areas of environmental education, using a sample of children in preschool or younger school age. In light of the aforementioned considerations, the objective of our research was to ascertain the extent of children's knowledge of individual areas of environmental education at the conclusion of pre-primary education, or upon their entry into primary education. A quantitative study was conducted at the end of the 2019/2020 academic year to assess the knowledge of environmental education among six-year-old children. The study was conducted on a sample of 100 children aged six at the end of their pre-primary education. The selection of kindergartens and classes was conducted in a available selection. A total of five classes from three kindergartens in the Banská Bystrica self-governing region participated in the study.

METHODS

We used a test in the form of 16 worksheets, which the child filled out anonymously. The author's worksheets were created by a research team at the University of Kielce in the Republic of Poland. In order to facilitate a potential comparison of the results across the countries involved in the research, the worksheets were minimally altered. However, it was necessary to make changes to the worksheets in order to accommodate specific species of protected plants and animals that are unique to each country. The test set consists of sixteen worksheets, where the teacher reads the question and the child marks his answer by circling the picture. The worksheets were thematically divided into six thematic areas I. - VI.:

Area I.: Area related to the causes of environmental pollution and methods of saving. (Deals with issues of environmental pollution and, consequently, the method of its protection; worksheets No. 1, 2, 3).

Area II.: Area related to health protection. (Appropriate spending of free time, healthy nutrition and care of the human body are included here; worksheets no. 4, 5, 6).

Area III.: Area related to protected animals and plants. (worksheets No. 7, 8 - This is about identifying protected species of plants and animals in the pictures.)

Area IV.: Area related to the elements of geography (worksheets No. 9, 10. The four pictures show the sea, the river, the marsh and the pond. The children's task is to match the pictures with their correct name; in worksheet No. 10, there are four pictures the four seasons are shown. The children's task is to arrange the seasons as they follow each other.)

Area V.: Area related to soil care. (In terms of content, the area is focused on researching knowledge about working in the garden, the method of growing basic crops and knowledge of the tools that are necessary for working in the garden; worksheets no. 11, 12).

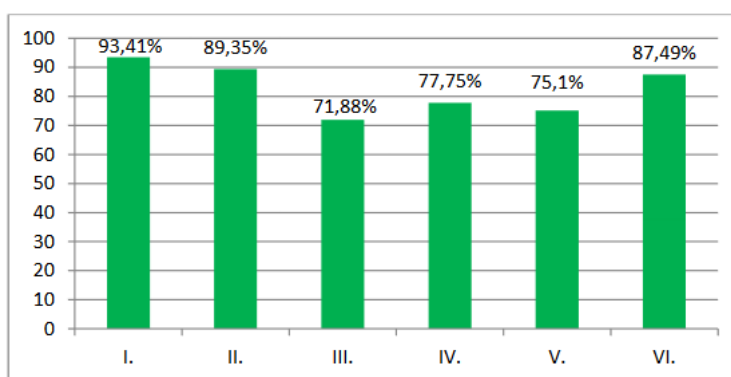
Area VI.: *Area related to ecosystems and the organisms living in them* (worksheets no. 13, 14, 15, 16). In this area we deal with topics such as migratory birds, the usefulness of animals for humans, different types of ecosystems, deciduous and coniferous trees and their fruits.

RESULTS

Due to the limited scope of the post, I will provide a summary overview and description of the differences within individual thematic areas.

The data presented in Graph No. 1 represents the average percentage success rate of responses within the six thematic areas pertaining to environmental topics. Additionally, it compares the average success rate across the aforementioned thematic areas, designated as I through VI. It is evident that there are notable differences in the average percentage success of answers across the various thematic areas.

Graph 1. *The percentage success rate of answers within the thematic areas of EE.*



The data presented in Graph No. 1 indicates that the success rate of preschoolers in all areas was above 71%. The children demonstrated no significant difficulties with any of the topics. Notwithstanding the disparate outcomes in individual areas I–VI, it is notable that there was no appreciable decline in the proportion of correct responses across all areas.

The highest success rate of preschoolers' answers, 93.41%, was observed in the field of *environmental pollution and methods of its protection*. A comparison of the percentage of correct answers on the individual worksheets of the given area reveals that worksheet no. 3 achieved the highest success rate at 98.17%. In this worksheet, the students correctly identified the presence of odour and thus also the cause of environmental pollution. The success rate was somewhat lower in Worksheet No. 2, at 97.4%. The most erroneous labels were registered in the image depicting the girls' inappropriate behaviour towards the environment, namely, the disposal of garbage on the ground in the forest. The lowest percentage of correct responses was observed in Worksheet 1, with a success rate of 84.67%. In this particular worksheet, the children demonstrated the greatest number of errors in relation to the image of the girl watering the plant with water from a bucket. This resulted in 27 incorrect responses out of 100. It should be noted, however, that the children might have considered watering the flowers to be a waste of water, given the topic.

The second field with the highest score, 89.35%, is *Health Protection*. Of the individual worksheets within the thematic area, the highest score was achieved by Worksheet No. 5, with a score of 95%. The picture of dairy products was the source of the greatest number of errors among the children, with 22 of them incorrectly identifying it as an unhealthy food. The success rate of the aforementioned worksheet was slightly lower. The fourth and final field, with a score of 91.67%, is also worthy of mention. The lowest percentage of correct answers was recorded for the picture of the boy watching TV. Fourteen children considered watching television to be an appropriate use of their leisure time. The lowest percentage score of success was achieved by Worksheet No. 6, with a success rate of 81.38%. This was in response to the question of circling an unpleasant sound for the child.

The third area with the highest score, 87.49%, is that of *Ecosystems and organisms living in them*. The children demonstrated no difficulty in learning about different types of ecosystems, including coniferous

and deciduous trees and their fruits, as well as useful animals for humans. The lowest percentage of success was observed in the knowledge of migratory and non-migratory birds, which was 67.6% (in Slovakia it is a curriculum of elementary Science at primary school).

The mean success rate for the thematic area pertaining to the *Elements of geography and phenology* is 77.75%. A review of the individual items indicates that the children demonstrated an understanding of the elements of the country. The results were less favourable for worksheet number 10, which concerned the identification of individual seasons. Some children demonstrated difficulty in correctly sequencing the images according to the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

The penultimate area, and thus the area with a lower level of knowledge, is that of cultivation and soil cultivation, with a percentage of 75.1%. The children demonstrated an aptitude for identifying the tools used in gardening. The success rate for worksheet no. 11 was 91.5%. The success rate for worksheet no. 12 was 32.8% lower than that of worksheet no. 11. The children demonstrated difficulty in organising the work process when planting in the garden.

The lowest percentage of success was recorded among six-year-old children in the field of environmental education in the field of protected plants and animals, with an average score of 71.88%. The children demonstrated a greater familiarity with protected animals than with protected plants. The discrepancy in success rates is 15.39%. The task involved classifying specific species of plants and animals as protected species. One of the reasons for the lower success rate compared to other items is that, according to educational standards, this subject is included only in higher years of primary education.

The mean success rate for the entire research project, which maps children's knowledge of EV across multiple domains, is 82.49%. In light of these findings, it can be concluded that preschoolers who have completed pre-primary education have acquired a sufficient amount of knowledge about environmental education, possess the appropriate knowledge and understanding of environmental education in accordance with the educational standards of pre-primary education, and are cognitively prepared for the further development of environmental literacy.

CONCLUSION

In the context of sustainable development, we are concerned with a gradual change in behaviour, attitudes, value orientation, ways of solving problems and achieving set goals. This is with the aim of achieving the highest possible quality of life for the individual, for the entire society, but also for life on planet Earth (Hajdúková, 2013). A study of six-year-old children in Slovakia revealed that preschoolers have acquired knowledge in the field of environmental education, providing them with the necessary foundations and prerequisites to actively participate in the development of functional science literacy and environmental awareness, which are essential for the sustainability of life on Earth. The mean percentage of success across the entire research project, which maps children's knowledge in individual areas of environmental education, is 82.49%. Based on these findings, it can be assumed that the majority of preschoolers leave pre-primary education with a sufficient amount of knowledge about environmental education, have knowledge and understanding of environmental education that is aligned with the educational standards of pre-primary education, and are cognitively prepared for the further development of environmental literacy. In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the situation in the given area, it would be beneficial to expand the research sample. A comparison of the obtained results with those of other countries would also be interesting.

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THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS AND DIGITAL TOYS IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The paper deals with the use of digital tools and digital toys in contemporary preschool education and the offer of training courses or seminars organised for kindergarten teachers, which focus on the acquisition of digital competencies. The aim of the research is to find out what types of digital aids and digital toys are used in the education of preschool children in current kindergartens. Attention is also paid to the views of kindergarten teachers on the advantages or disadvantages of including digital aids and digital toys in preschool education. The research is a quantitative research and the results include not only information on the use of digital aids in current education, but also teachers' views on the current situation regarding the possibilities for further training of kindergarten teachers in this area.

Keywords: digital tools and digital toys, preschool education, kindergarten, kindergarten teacher

INTRODUCTION

Today, digital technologies have become an integral part of our lives. Their influence is also very significant in contemporary education. The Czech Republic's Education Policy Strategy 2030+ states that *"the appropriate and age-appropriate use of digital technologies should be a matter of course in all areas of education. It should become a meaningful part of teaching and promote both computational thinking and digital literacy among pupils."* From 2020 to 2026, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports (MoEYS), through the National Renewal Plan under component 3.1 Innovations in education in the context of digitalisation, provides funding to schools to equip pupils with digital technologies to develop their computational thinking and digital competences as well as to develop teachers' digital competences. It has also published inspirational videos on its website at the end of 2023 with examples of good practice, introducing the purchase and use of advanced digital tools in kindergarten, primary and secondary schools.

In recent years, the concept of digital literacy has become a very important concept that is often mentioned not only in strategic educational documents, but also in various conceptual materials. It includes relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes and is understood as a concept that is also intertwined with digital skills and digital knowledge (Jeřábek, Rambousek, Vaňková, 2019). Kalaš (2013) defines digital literacy as a set of knowledge, skills and understanding required for the appropriate, safe and productive use of digital technologies for learning and cognition, not only in employment but also in everyday life. He states, *"digital literacy cannot be understood only as the mastery of computers and other digital technologies - this narrow concept is usually referred to as computer literacy. Beyond this narrow concept, digital literacy also includes the ability to understand the different structures and organisation of information and the ability to use this information strategically in everyday situations. Every teacher working competently with digital technologies should develop all levels of digital literacy - from the level of use, to the level of understanding, to the level of creative application"* (Kalaš, 2013, p. 107). The NPI CR authoring team defines digital literacy as *"a set of digital competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values) that an individual needs to use digital technologies safely, confidently, critically and creatively at work, in learning, in leisure and in their participation in social life"* (NPI CR, 2020, p. 4).

THEORY

Preschool children show a natural curiosity and a strong interest in new experiences and stimuli. Digital technologies offer pre-schoolers a range of opportunities and ways to use their own creativity and learn new skills (Dosedla, Picka, & Hodis, 2019). During this period, children become familiar with digital technologies not only in the family environment but also in kindergarten. Kindergarten can provide children with basic information about digital technologies and introduce them to their meaning and use. This approach can be used not only in the development of foundational key competences but also in the development of digital preliteracy (Šťastná, 2020).

Children gradually gain practical experience and skills by using digital tools and devices commonly found in everyday life (e.g., mobile phones, tablets, laptops) as well as special digital tools that develop key learning and problem-solving competences. In this context, the author further states that digital tools and technologies can be included in the education of children in kindergarten at any time throughout the day, but it is also necessary to reflect their practical experience (Šťastná, 2020).

As already mentioned, the current generation of preschool children is exposed to various digital technologies from a very early age and soon becomes able to use tablets, mobile phones, and other touchscreen devices. In this context, Szotkowski (in Šmelová, Prášilová, 2018, p. 151) cites the results of a study conducted in 2014 in the USA on the use of digital tools by children aged 6 months to 4 years. The results showed that "the majority of children aged two years use mobile technical devices daily and spend comparable time with them as they do in front of a television screen, and that most children aged three to four years use these devices without assistance." Helus (2009, p. 78) also cites the undeniable influence of multimedia on the composition of children's day, their interests or behaviours, opinions, and attitudes. Dobiáš (2019) states that nowadays there is a plethora of digital devices that can be used in the preschool education of children in kindergarten, and in this connection, he also mentions the WHO recommendations regarding safe work with digital technologies in kindergarten. Another research project focused on the use of digital tools in the education of preschool children was the project "Supporting the Development of Computational Thinking," implemented from 2017 to 2020. This project aimed to create a complex set of interrelated educational methodological materials for teachers educating all age groups of children. Within the framework of this project, the educational material "Digital Technologies in Pre-primary Education" by Dosedly, Pick and Hodis, focused on the use of digital technologies in pre-primary education. Another educational material created within the framework of the aforementioned project is "Digital Technologies in Kindergarten," authored by Dobiáš, which summarizes and describes digital tools used in preschool education.

METHODOLOGY

Technical teaching aids, especially didactic technology, play a very important role in contemporary preschool education. A variety of digital tools and digital toys are increasingly available in today's kindergarten classrooms and are used by teachers for educational activities. The aim of this research was to determine what kinds of digital aids and digital toys are used in the education of preschool children in contemporary kindergartens. In this context, there was also explored respondents' views on the positive or negative impact of the use of digital aids and digital toys in the education of preschool children, as well as their views on the availability of training courses for kindergarten teachers in the use of digital aids and digital toys in preschool education.

For this purpose, the quantitative research strategy was used. As a data collection method, a questionnaire was used for kindergarten directors and teachers. This questionnaire was addressed to kindergartens in the Moravian-Silesian, Zlín, and South Moravian regions during the months of March to May 2024, and I also chose an online form of distribution using social networks.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

The results of the questionnaire survey showed that the equipment of current kindergartens with digital tools and digital toys is very varied and diverse. In addition to traditional technical aids (audio player, TV), tablets are the most used in current kindergartens, as reported by 50% of the respondents, followed by 46% of the respondents using an Albi pencil. Other frequently used digital aids included digital microscopes and interactive whiteboards, which are used by almost half of the teachers interviewed. Among digital toys, the most frequently mentioned was the Beebot robotic bee, followed by the Mousebot CODE & CO programmable robotic mouse and the LEGO Education WeDo building set.

These digital tools and toys are used by teachers in kindergartens surveyed in the child's education occasionally or several times a week. The results also showed that the respondents most often incorporate a group organizational form of work when working with digital aids. When asked if there is a digital corner available to children in their classrooms, a total of 50% of the respondents indicated that they do not have a digital corner available to children in their kindergarten classrooms. If there is a digital corner in the classroom, digital corners where children have digital toys or a desktop computer are the most common. The respondents also gave their views on the advantages or disadvantages of including digital tools and digital toys in pre-school education. The development of digital skills in preschool children, which they will subsequently use in primary school, was most often identified as a positive. According to the respondents, education using digital aids is engaging and attractive for children, develops logical thinking, and makes digital aids and digital toys accessible even to children from socially disadvantaged or unstimulating backgrounds. On the negative side, respondents identified children's loss of interest in conventional toys and gadgets, the potential risk of digital addiction, the need for increased supervision of children when working with digital tools in the classroom, and minimising social contact with other children in the classroom. The results of the questionnaire survey also showed that almost 46% of the kindergarten teachers interviewed believe that the current offer of training courses and training for kindergarten teachers in the use of digital tools and toys in pre-school education is not quite sufficient and satisfactory.

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TRANSITION OF CHILDREN TO THE FIRST GRADE OF PRIMARY SCHOOL AND SCHOOL READINESS

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Abstract

The paper presents the topic of children's transition to the first grade of primary school and selected strategies for preventing adaptation difficulties through the development of two programs. One program focuses on optimization of the conditions at the beginning of education. The second program aims to strengthen children's school readiness in pre-primary and early primary education. Both programs were experimentally tested in the first grades of selected primary schools in Slovakia with the aim of verifying their impact on the level of starting schoolchildren's adaptation. The chosen research method was an experiment. The set of respondents consisted of starting schoolchildren. The results of the experiment confirmed the statistically significant influence of individual programs on the level of school readiness and adaptation of pupils. The research conclusions point to the benefits and the need for deliberate intervention for starting schoolchildren during the process of school adaptation.

Keywords: school readiness, beginning of schooling, adaptation difficulties, prevention

INTRODUCTION

The transition of children from kindergarten and home to the first grade of primary school is accompanied by numerous changes that can be a significant burden for many. Not all children manage to adapt smoothly and without major issues to the new educational conditions and be successful in school. One reason for this is their low or insufficient level of school readiness (Teleková et al., 2023; Marcineková et al., 2020).

In Slovakia, there has long been a lack of effective support system that would address the diverse individual needs of all children and create optimal educational conditions for them (Hapalová, 2019). In early care and education, the most at-risk groups identified are children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and children with disabilities, who have lower attendance in kindergartens and lack support in further education (Bednárík, 2020). Providing early care and education to children from birth until they start compulsory schooling is an important part of preventing developmental delays and school immaturity. The National Strategy for the Development of Coordinated Early Intervention and Care Services 2022-2030 aims to create a multi-level support system for children's optimal development and eliminate inequalities among them, in line with their current health, developmental, and social needs. The proposed system of interdepartmental cooperation should provide appropriate conditions to support complex development and social inclusion of children through so-called universal interventions that create an inclusive environment in healthcare, education, and social services.

These objectives also include the creation of conditions to promote school readiness and a smooth transition of children from kindergarten and home to primary school. As of 1 September 2023, the system of support measures contained in the Catalogue of Support Measures entered into force. One of the areas proposed is the design of activities that support children to achieve school readiness according to their individual needs. These are contained in the accompanying support measure material entitled: Activities to support the achievement of school readiness (Višňovská, Lipnická & Králiková, et al., 2023).

Current questions in educational theory, research, and practice include examining the specifics of the transition from pre-primary to primary education, determining criteria for successful school adaptation, identifying factors influencing its course, and developing effective strategies to prevent or eliminate

adaptation and learning difficulties at the start of schooling. Research also focuses on teachers' readiness to work with children in an inclusive environment.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The transition to the first grade represents a significant change in a child's life, impacting their academic and personal development (Bakopoulou, 2022; Tokic & Borovac, 2020; Viskovic & Višnjić-Jevtić, 2020). Preventing or eliminating difficulties for some children when starting primary school requires targeted and effective cooperation between family and school environments to meet children's individual needs (Tobin et al., 2022; Packer et al., 2021). Primarily, it involves the child's readiness for school tasks and the readiness of schools and teachers to support children from various groups in gradually adapting to new conditions (e.g., through tools for monitoring the class of beginners, forming optimal educational conditions, contact with peers and older "guides," and extracurricular activities). Research shows that early support in kindergarten is a determinant of successful transition to primary school and academic success (Quenzer-Alfred et al., 2020). Similarly, other studies (e.g., Gagay & Grineva, 2015; Lillejord et al., 2015; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Supporting successful transitions, 2020) accent the positive impact of stimulating cognitive, social, and psychomotor skills before entering primary school. In professional literature (Effective supports for transition to primary school, 2012), there is also an emphasis on increasing parents' awareness, knowledge, and skills to support effective child development at the start of schooling.

STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING ADAPTATION DIFFICULTIES

To mitigate or eliminate adaptation difficulties for beginning schoolchildren, an adaptation program (Borbélyová, 2018) was developed, focusing on optimization educational conditions at the start of schooling. A pedagogical experiment showed a long-term positive impact on the quality of adaptation.

Similarly, Teleková (2023) developed a transition program aimed at preventing adaptation difficulties by strengthening school readiness at the end of pre-primary education in kindergarten and at the beginning of primary education. The set of activities focuses on stimulating personal readiness, self-assessment, school motivation, and cognitive, socio-emotional, and learning prerequisites. The results of the pedagogical experiment show a significant impact on the level of school readiness in selected areas.

Both programs developed at the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, represent a comprehensive approach to school readiness requiring active participation from future/starting schoolchildren, parents, teachers, educators, and professionals. The teachers' work with the programs includes pedagogical diagnostics and intervention activities according to children's individual needs.

CONCLUSION

Supporting children's readiness for schooling is desirable to ensure a smooth transition to school and prevent or eliminate adaptation difficulties. Specific support measures and strategies include the intersection of pre-school and school environments. To maintain the benefits of pre-school education, we must focus on what happens after school starts. Teaching should strategically build on pre-school achievements and maintain continuity. A multi-level support model at the threshold of education is essential, acknowledging children's right to the support needed to overcome obstacles and potential adaptation difficulties, aiming for full engagement in education, and achieving appropriate educational outcomes. Prevention represents the first level of support to prevent the accumulation of difficulties later.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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IMELESS INNOVATION OF FROEBEL'S SPHERE PEDAGOGY AND ITS APPLICATION IN CONTEMPORARY PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article briefly describes the main principles of Friedrich Froebel's sphere pedagogy. It focuses on key issues such as the symbolism and significance of the most essential concepts, play, and gifts, which serve as very useful teaching tools applicable in preschool education. The simplicity of the approach to children and the reliance on nature make this pedagogy, despite the passage of time, innovative and highly effective in the education and upbringing of young children.

Keywords: Froebel, Froebel's gifts, play, kindergarten.

Friedrich Froebel

Play is the most important manifestation of a child's development (F. Froebel).

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the creator of the new kindergarten, a new concept of preschool education, and a system for training preschool teachers. He is currently referred to as the father and prophet of modern preschool education. He was recognized as the founder of educational institutions for children aged 3-6, called "kindergartens," and as the creator of an original methodical system based on play and activity-driven independence. His achievements represent a significant breakthrough in the approach to preschool education.

"Children's Garden" - Kindergarten

In 1837, Froebel opened the first institution for young children in Blankenburg, named "children's garden" (kindergarten), because the garden was intended to be an integral part of the institution – the preschool. The name "children's garden" was also a manifestation of the pedagogue's fundamental views, according to which a child's interaction with nature should be an essential element of upbringing, and children, like plants, require nurturing. The innovation of Froebel's idea lay in the fact that his "children's gardens," as means of educating children, were significantly different from contemporary preschool institutions, which were merely custodial establishments or places of formal instruction.

Sphere Pedagogy

Friedrich Froebel sought to develop educational processes based on play. Froebel's educational philosophy is based on three main ideas: the unity of the universe, respect for the child and their individuality, and the value of play in the course of a child's development. Froebel emphasized the integration of elementary forces in teaching and upbringing: the head (intellectual), the hands (physical-manual), and the heart (social-religious). He developed the concept – the spherical education model – known as the "law of spheres." This concept emphasizes the inseparable coexistence, mutual influence, and interdependence between nature, science, and upbringing. A constitutive principle of Froebel's educational philosophy is also the law of unity in diversity and diversity in unity. This is reflected in the structure of the gifts, including the shapes of the sphere, cylinder, and cube – recognized as Froebelian symbols.

The sphere, according to F. Froebel, is the basic solid, the ideal shape, and at the same time the most important. It represents movement and is referred to as the thesis. It embodies the universe, characterized by unity, multiplicity, rest, and motion. The opposite of the sphere is the cube, which is a kind of antithesis, a symbol of unity and rest. There is also an intermediate shape, created from the sphere and the cube, a solid combining the movement of the sphere and the stability of the cube – the

cylinder. The three solids: the sphere, cylinder, and cube, stacked on top of each other (the sphere on the cylinder, the cylinder on the base of the cube), form a column, recognized worldwide as a symbol of Froebelian education. This symbol is believed to represent knowledge, beauty, and life. The sphere is interpreted as a symbol of the heart and emotions, the cube as thought and intellect. People – children and adults – are guided by both intuitive and rational thinking depending on the situation. Awareness of this should accompany the teacher working even with the youngest children.

Play

Play is a free, unrestrained activity that belongs to the child and is their right. A teacher who respects the child should not disrupt, interfere with, or control the child's learning through play. Through play and working with gifts, the child becomes acquainted with the properties of solids, develops spatial imagination, mathematical thinking, and aesthetic sensitivity. The child can create imagined representations of known shapes from reality, such as a house, church, table, bench, stove, or castles. In the concept of F. Froebel's education and teaching system, he emphasized the visual and active nature of the child, based on the principle of freedom while adhering to the rules and didactic principles imposed by the teacher. He popularized mental exercises by stimulating the senses, learning about the characteristics of objects and phenomena, supporting the child's innate enthusiasm for action using gifts, developing social competencies, and awakening religious feelings. The educational content in Froebel's kindergartens was very ambitious and developmentally stimulating.

Gifts – Timeless Didactic Tools

F. Froebel based "garden education and teaching" on the methodology of children's games and activities using nature's gifts, purposefully selected blocks, and specially composed songs. According to F. Froebel, the best source of materials for play is nature. A child playing with stones, sticks, seeds, fruits, soil, sand, clay, and snow examines structures and shapes. However, if the child does not find suitable objects that fully serve their development, it is the adult's task to provide appropriate educational materials. These didactic tools, in the form of balls, blocks, and mosaics, were named gifts.

According to Małgorzata Makiewicz, didactic tools can perform the following functions:

- Informational and Source Function: Providing information in an orderly and clear manner.
- Illustrative Function: Enriching content and supplementing observations.
- Research Function: Formulating problems, posing hypotheses, drawing conclusions and creatively solving problems.
- Exercise Function: Developing skills in solving tasks, constructing, mastering abilities and forming habits.
- Motivational Function: Stimulating curiosity and interest, and engaging students with the subject.
- Control and Corrective Function: Checking and reinforcing students' knowledge, pointing out correct answers and errors, and assessing the level of knowledge mastery.
- Self-Education Function: Guiding independent work and individualization.
- Activating Function: Ensuring active participation of students in the lesson.

Froebel's gifts undoubtedly fulfill each of these functions. The most well-known gifts in preschool pedagogy include:

1. Multicolored Balls: Three primary colors and three secondary colors.
2. Box Containing Sphere, Cylinder, and Cube: Used for making comparisons and distinguishing forms.
3. Cube Divided into Eight Smaller Cubes: Creates the concept of whole and part (identical shape, different size).

4. Same Cube Divided into Eight Bricks: Differences in geometric form and size.
5. Larger Cube Divided to Maximize Variety of Solids: Allows the child to learn new geometric forms and names, and understand the internal structure of solids.
6. Box Containing Tablets Corresponding to Known Shapes (Triangles, Squares): The most famous and commonly used gift for independently creating colorful mosaics, fostering a sense of beauty, independence, creativity, and manual dexterity.

Playing with Froebel's gifts develops children's social competencies. It limits destructive impulses, fostering a natural inclination towards constructing and rebuilding. It also creates opportunities for developing symbolic play, thereby enhancing creativity. Moreover, it instills a sense of agency and responsibility, enhances concentration and patience, and develops language skills. It also advances mathematical competencies, and arouses interest in art and aesthetics.

CONCLUSION

Froebel died in Marienthal, and his grave is marked by a symbolic monument shaped like the basic Froebelian solids: the sphere, cylinder, and cube. Among his most significant achievements is the recognition of play as a natural and fundamental form of a child's activity. He significantly elevated the status of preschool education. He developed a system of preschool education based on scientific premises and the natural abilities and needs of the child, and he recognized the need for training educators (founding the first schools for children's play leaders).

Critics of Froebel argued that the activities and games were conducted in a schematic manner (strict instructions for activities with the gifts), following set patterns and using texts that did not foster the child's imagination. It was also pointed out that the commands directed at children limited their creativity. Additionally, Froebel was criticized for the symbolism of the gifts, which was incomprehensible not only to children but also to the educators.

Undoubtedly, the person and achievements of Friedrich Froebel continue to influence children's education. Regardless of the era and the influences of various educational trends, Froebel's idea remains timeless, continually relevant, and innovative. Over the years, it does not age at all. This is the phenomenon of the briefly described pedagogy.

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INNOVATIVE AMBIVALENCE IN THE WORK OF A TEACHER (FUTURE TEACHER)

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Abstract

The State University of Applied Sciences in Racibórz is a higher education institution with a rich history and tradition, where at the Institute of Educational Studies one of the majors is pedagogy with a specialization in preschool and early school pedagogy. It is worth knowing how students, and in a moment teachers, perceive themselves and what their attitude to pedagogical innovations is. For open and closed questions, obviously voluntary (101 people). The surveyed students indicated that most of them live in rural areas and come from natural families. They have siblings, and most often they are one-generation families. Respondents believe that their material status is good. When they work, it is to have their own financial resources and to gain experience in the labour market. The students have little time to get involved in the activities of associations, although this could be additional experience. At the university they feel comfortable, they get on well with the lecturers, but with the tutors themselves the relationship is a little weaker and this is due to the fact that they do not always have classes together. They feel comfortable in groups and relations are friendly and partnership. The students are able to point out their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Leisure time, unfortunately, is largely spent surfing the Internet, although they also like to meet with friends, as well as get involved in sports and tourism. In general, the surveyed students have an optimistic view of themselves and their future. They have a basic knowledge of pedagogical innovations and declaratively plan to use it in their future careers, both at school and in kindergarten.

Keywords: student, pedagogy, innovation.

INTRODUCTION

As in all times, we are now very much rooted in the reality around us. Of course, this applies to mature people, as well as young people such as students. It is worth looking, at least in part, at the image of a student of Preschool and Early School Pedagogy at the State University of Applied Sciences in Racibórz. How they perceive themselves and their immediate environment. They are future teachers in kindergarten or school, early school education, i. e. in grades one to three. It is also worth looking into what this reality of ours is like. It is often said that we are a risk society. It was in 1986 that Ulrich Beck introduced the term "a risk society". Risk is something we cannot predict or effectively counteract. It very often has a mass character. This phenomenon is inherently accompanied by a culture of fear. A modern man is afraid of something unspecified. Fears and a sense of danger arise and we are not able to determine their causes, we are worried about health or work, we are afraid of war. We should also agree that we are living in a time of constant change or transformations, e. g. related to the development of technology, digitization. Nowadays we attach great importance to our sensations and feelings. This was pointed out in 1992 by Gerhard Szulze, according to whom a great deal of importance is attached to sensations in today's society, certainly to a greater extent than in past societies. Therefore, our subjective sensations are often the determinant of many actions or opinions. Innovations, including pedagogical innovations, can help us in overcoming and keeping up with the inevitable changes, social or cultural trends that are all around us.

Pedagogical innovations are, first of all, changes in teaching methods and forms, educational programs, tools, teaching resources and the organization of the educational process, which are aimed at improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning or education. The purpose of pedagogical innovations is to adapt the educational process to the dynamically changing needs of students, society and, consequently, the labour market. It is worth recalling the types of pedagogical innovations:

- Curriculum innovations, changes in curriculum content, introduction of new subjects or thematic approaches. Educational programs that promote social skills or entrepreneurship are also worth mentioning here.

Here, for example, we can introduce classes on soft skills, such as communication, teamwork or time management into the curriculum.

- Organizational innovations, new forms of school organization, such as flexible school hours, cooperation between educational entities, or teacher training. For example, flexible schedules can be introduced that allow students to manage their own learning time.
- Technological innovations, the use of new technologies in education, such as online learning, hybrid learning, e-learning platforms, educational applications and even computer games.
- Methodological innovations, changes in teaching methods, such as the introduction of project-based learning, the flipped classroom or inclusive teaching. These methods allow for a better adaptation to individual students' needs.

METHODS

Project methods can be used here, where students work on real-world problems, developing critical thinking and collaboration skills. For the purpose of getting to know the opinions of students about themselves, a portrait of themselves, their reference to innovations, in the spring of 2024 the Institute of Educational Studies conducted a survey among students in all groups (5) of Pre-school and Early School Pedagogy (101 people). The research was in the form of a survey, 40 questions, including open and closed ones and a metric. The students filled out questionnaires during teaching classes in the presence of lecturers, which, of course, was voluntary.

Preschool and Early School Pedagogy is studied by female students and one male. Respondents declare that their place of residence is mostly (55%) rural, and 45% indicate that they live in the city. The vast majority (77%) say they come from a natural family, 18% say they come from a single-parent family, and 5% say they come from a broken family.

Often educational patterns are drawn from the home, so it is useful to know the education of parents. As you can see, it varies strongly, although mothers win in this competition. Professional education is dominated by fathers 43% and mothers 23%, while secondary education is dominated by mothers (45%) and (33%) by fathers. 27% of mothers and 19% of fathers have higher education. The smallest number of fathers and mothers (5% each) have primary education.

The number of siblings of the respondents is also important, 9% of them are single children, 45% with one sibling, 43% with two, and only 5% are multi – child families.

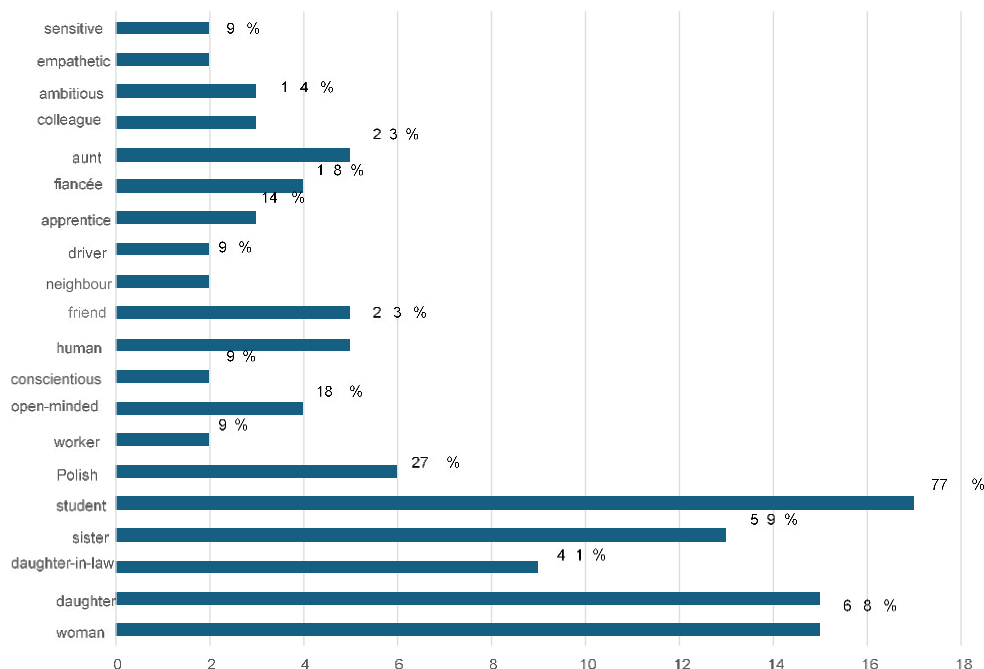
The students indicate that they live in two-generation families (73%), and only 23% in three-generation families, with parents and grandparents.

The family's standard of living is very important. As many as 73% of respondents describe it as good, 13.5% declare it is very good, the same number says it is average. The good thing is that respondents do not describe their standard of living as bad or very bad.

It is important for the students, future teachers, to function in a local social life. Hence the questions about membership in associations, which indicate that only 9% belong to selected organizations, and as many as 91% indicate that they do not belong to any association. Such a figure can be explained by the responsibilities of studying, or commuting to study or additional work.

RESULTS

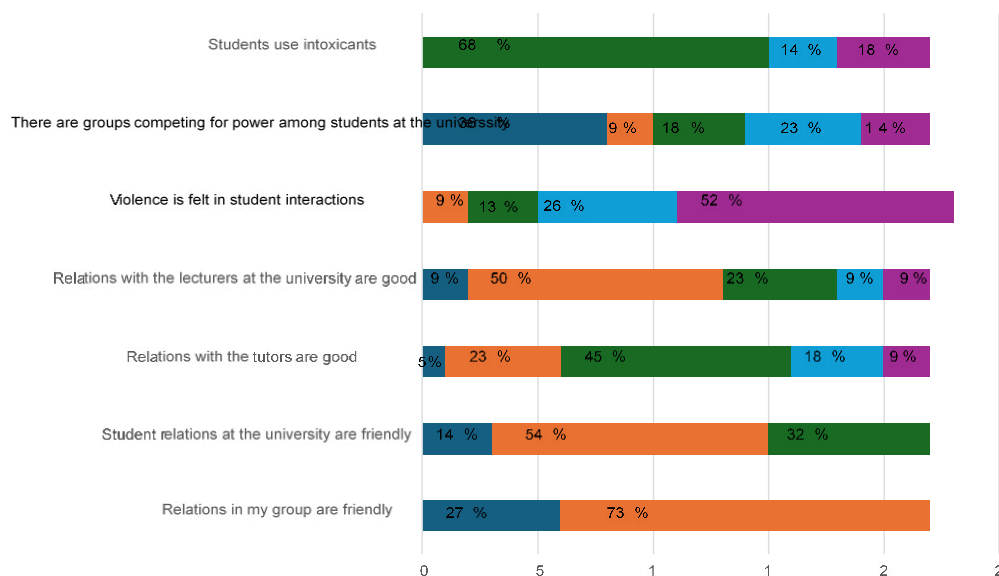
Chart 1. Student self-image



Source: own research. Empirical Pedagogy Study Circle.

When presenting their profile, respondents focus on indicating that they are students, women, daughters, sisters, that is, they show their social position and gender. Young people often look for role models among those closest to them, often they are classmates or colleagues, as half of the respondents indicate (50%). Only 23% of respondents build their behavioural role models themselves, and 27% have no opinion in this area. As in any environment and among students, there are sometimes conflicts. As many as 82% of respondents state that conflicts arise from the way they behave, 32% indicate that it is different views, 27% see the source of conflicts in a personal dislike of a person, 22% of respondents state that conflicts arise from belonging to different social groups.

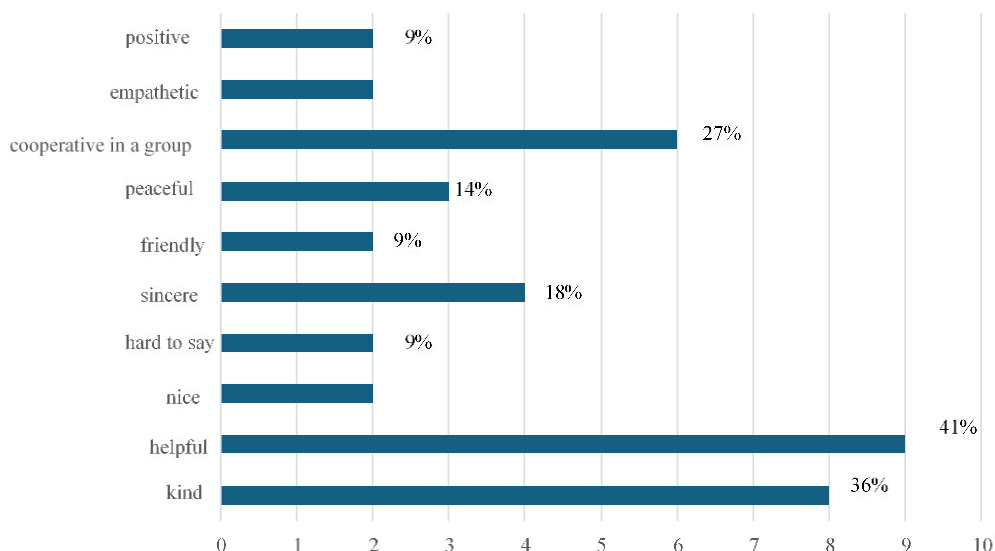
Chart 2. Relationships at the university



Source: own research. Empirical Pedagogy Study Circle.

According to the students, relations at the university are friendly, 68% of respondents believe so, group relations are very good. 100% of respondents say that relations in their group are friendly. Relations with lecturers are equally good, 99% of students surveyed believe they are good. No violence is felt in student interactions, 52% of students state so, however, there are groups competing for power among students, 45% of respondents declare so. Relationships with the year tutors are quite different from those in high school, and as many as 45% of respondents find it difficult to comment on this issue, although 28% of respondents view it positively. The students say it is difficult for them to say anything about intoxicants used by students.

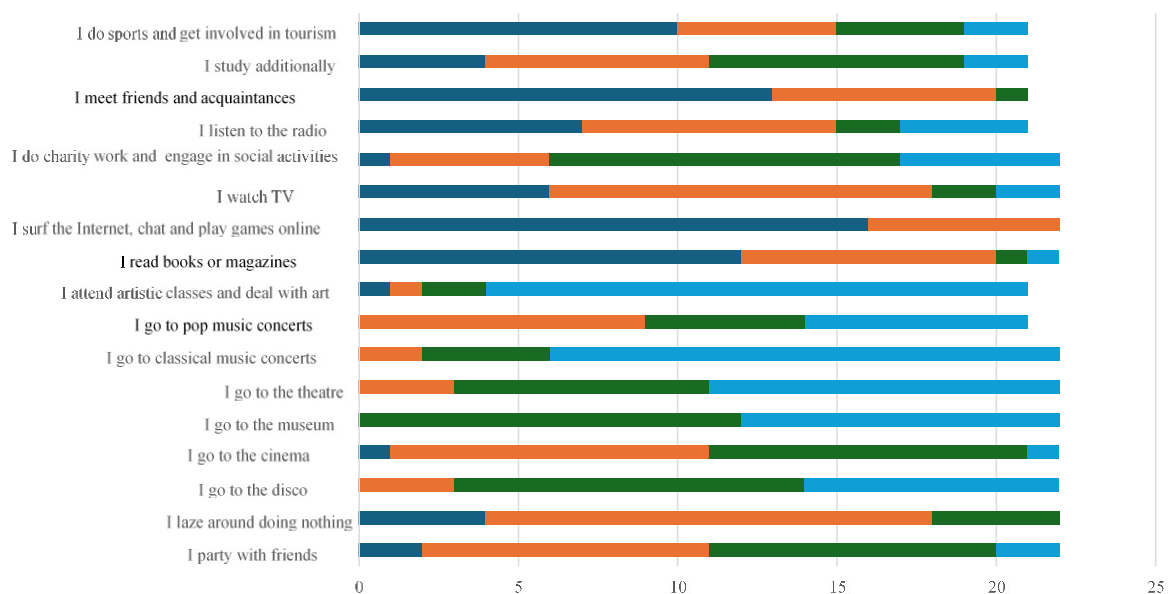
Chart 3. Traits rated highest in the group



Source: own research. Empirical Pedagogy Study Circle.

The students surveyed rated their colleagues highest when they were helpful (41%), kind (36%), cooperative in a group (27%) or sincere (18%).

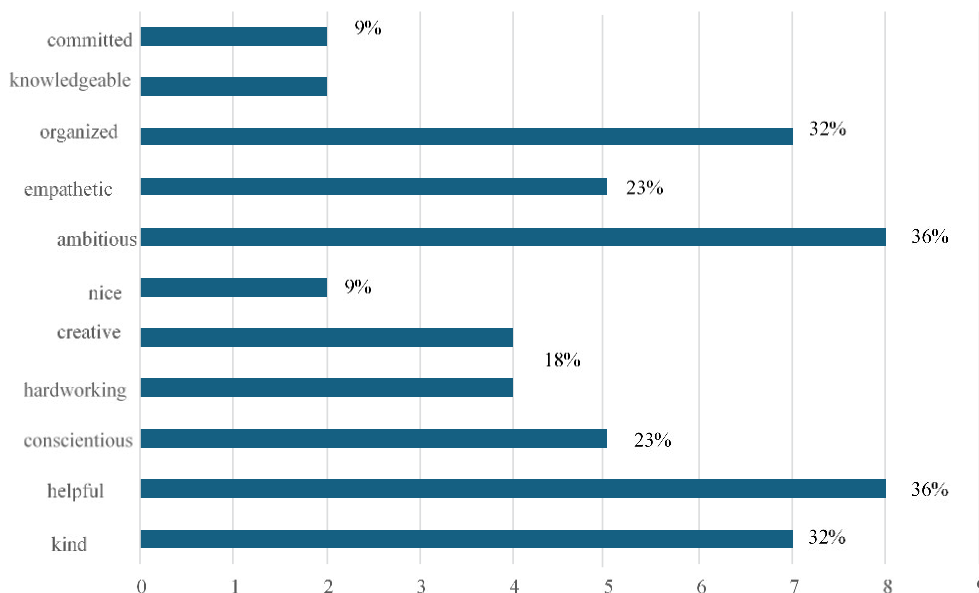
Chart 4. Spending leisure time by students, selected forms



Source: own research. Empirical Pedagogy Study Circle.

The students are most likely to spend their leisure time surfing the Internet, chatting and playing games online, meeting friends and acquaintances, reading books or magazines, actively doing sports or getting involved in tourism or watching TV, rarely visiting museums or the theatre, and even avoiding discos.

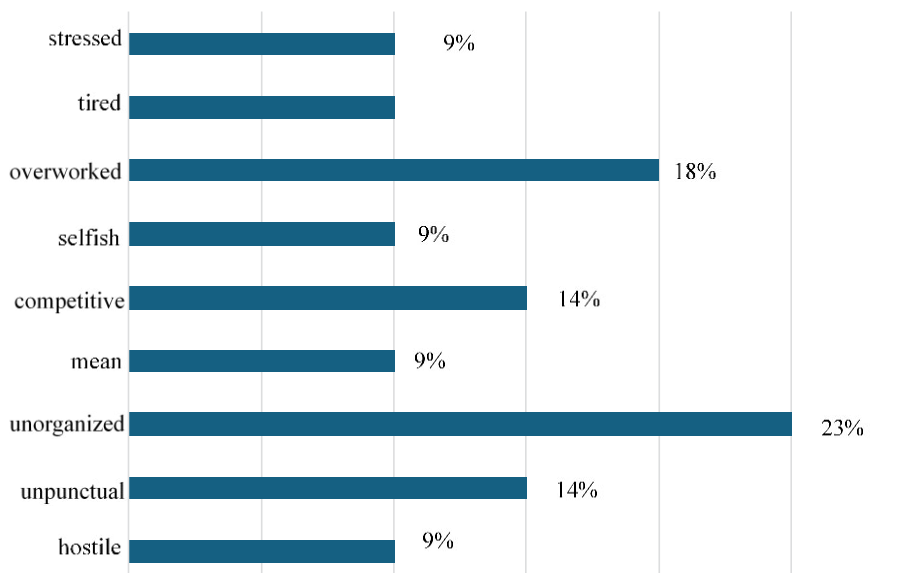
Chart 5. Positive qualities in the opinion of respondents of a typical student of pedagogy in Raciborz



Source: own research. Empirical Pedagogy Study Circle.

The surveyed students see their strengths in such qualities as ambitious, helpful, but also organized, kind or empathetic, conscientious, creative and hardworking.

Chart 6. Features of a typical student of pedagogy in Raciborz - negative - opinions of respondents



Source: own research. Empirical Pedagogy Study Circle.

Respondents are able to look at themselves critically, of the negative traits they attribute to themselves are: unorganized, overworked, unpunctual, unkind, mean, selfish, tired, stressed.

When asked if they are satisfied with their life so far, as many as 77.5% of the students answered yes, while only 18% had no opinion and one percent were dissatisfied.

The surveyed students look to the future with optimism (59%), 36% stated that it was difficult to say, and only 5% lacked life optimism.

The study program of Preschool and Early School Pedagogy includes lectures and classes on alternative pedagogy. These are the classes where students learn the most about pedagogical innovations, their use in their future careers. Of this group, 48% of respondents consider that they have learned about the concept of pedagogical innovations and the principles of their operation. 1/3 of the respondents plan to use them in their future professional work, 28% in school, 25% in kindergarten.

Pedagogical innovations in kindergarten are key to developing children's competencies and skills and adapting teaching methods, techniques or forms to their needs and interests.

In such an important process, special attention should be assigned to cooperation with the child's family and community, the formation of social and emotional competencies, the personalization of the learning process, and the development of play-based educational program.

Increasing the involvement of parents and the community in the educational process of the kindergarten can contribute to a better development of children. Organizing meetings, workshops, artistic events, as well as intercultural projects supports the integration and development of interpersonal skills.

Introducing innovative methods of working on social and emotional competencies is important for the versatile development of children. Classes using drama, art or group work develop cooperation skills and empathy.

Innovations in education also involve the individualization of the teaching process, which is possible through the introduction of diagnostic programs and various forms of work with children, e.g. inclusive teaching, interest groups. Adapting teaching methods to the individual needs of children increases their involvement and learning efficiency.

Technology, such as digitization, can support preschool teaching by offering interactive learning tools that engage children. Educational apps, interactive whiteboards and educational robots are worth using to teach basic skills or competencies and develop logical thinking.

CONCLUSION

Pedagogical innovations in kindergarten are essential for creating a dynamic and inspiring educational environment. By implementing a variety of methods, techniques, forms or programs, teachers can better adapt the teaching process to the needs of children and involve them in the active process of learning and education. Involvement of parents and the local community is also key and this will certainly benefit the further development of children. It is important that such knowledge is possessed by students, future teachers, so that they are able and willing to use such knowledge and skills in their future careers. And most importantly, so that they have the conviction that this is an indispensable and seemingly irreversible trend in education, which will ensure the complementary development of the child in today's so rapidly changing world. Pedagogy students at the State University of Applied Sciences in Racibórz are pleased with themselves and optimistic about the future. It seems that they will not lack enthusiasm when implementing pedagogical innovations. When they are aware of the fact that pedagogical innovations are already a kind of requirement of today's times.

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CONDITIONS OF UPBRINGING AND EDUCATION OF 2-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTENS. KEY FINDINGS IN THE PROJECT

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Abstract

The paper presents the main findings from the research in the KEGA project No. 001UMB-4 in conjunction with proposals to improve the conditions of upbringing and education of 2-year-old children in kindergartens. The mixed applied research combined quantitative and qualitative methods. The research shed light on the following research sets: the development of care and education of children up to three years of age in Slovakia, European priorities in the ECEC system, the abilities of 2-year-old children, the views of principals, teachers, and parents on the conditions of education of these children in kindergartens, and the perception of future teachers' readiness to work with them. Suggestions for solutions concern university teacher training, personnel, and methodological support for teachers.

Keywords: kindergarten, methodological material, early childhood, care and education.

INTRODUCTION

In the Slovak Republic, no information and methodological materials on the conditions of upbringing and education of 2-year-old children in kindergartens have been published at the state level. This gap is to be filled by the KEGA project No. 001UMB-4. Within the framework of its solution such materials are being developed. They will be published at the end of 2024. They are based on the results of mixed research. The current situation is that kindergarten teachers get information and inspiration for pedagogical work with 2-year-old children from the activities of commercial organisations and institutions, which do not have to rely on research findings in their production. The organisation and conditions of pre-primary education in the Slovak Republic are determined by Decree 541/2021.

THEORIES

The knowledge in this area is developed in recent research works by Kostrub et al., 2018; Loudová Stralczyńska et al., 2022; Lipnická, eds., 2023; Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2024; Lynch et al. 2024; Montgomery, McCormack, Muller et. al. et al. (2006) gathered teachers' experiences and practices in working with children under the age of three in kindergarten. Meland, Kaltvedt & Reikera's (2015) observed how two-year-old cope with different daily activities from a gender perspective. White, Ranger & Peter (2016), according to the views of the respondents, stated that the presence of two-year-old in kindergarten may cause higher financial expenses. This is mainly in terms of additional costs for supervision and child safety. The views of Czech teachers on two-year-old children in kindergartens were presented in studies by Fasnerová & Petrová (2018), Vasinová & Srbená (2019). In Slovak conditions, the issue of enrolment of two-year-old children and the conditions of their upbringing and education in kindergartens was described by Lipnická (2024). She surveyed them among kindergarten teachers using a questionnaire method. Lynch and Basarabová (2023) processed the results of observations of 2-year-old children in kindergartens. The needs of 2-year-old children in kindergartens were addressed by Fodorová (2023). She surveyed them through the views and experiences of kindergarten teachers. The abilities of 2-year-old children based on the opinions of parents and teachers

were described by Lipnická and Šebianová (2023). These may influence children's adaptation, socialization and activities in the educational process.

Curriculum, information and methodological documents for the education and training of 2-year-old children in kindergartens are not issued at the state level in the Slovak Republic. This is addressed by commercial publishers, e.g. Raabe, which regularly updates information and methodological materials in the publication *Care for children up to three years of age in 2022-2024*. Therefore, there was a need for a scientific project to address the need for materials to be produced based on research data.

METHODS

The mixed-methods applied research combined quantitative and qualitative procedures in collecting and analysing research data. The subject of the research was the conditions of upbringing and education of 2-year-old children in kindergartens. The research in the project answered the basic question: What are the appropriate conditions for the upbringing and education of 2-year-old children in kindergartens with regard to their developmental specifics and needs? The methods of collecting research data were questionnaires for parents, teachers, principals and future teachers, a survey with principals, observations of 2-year-old children in kindergarten classrooms and content analysis of documents to understand the current state, European priorities and historical development of institutional care and education of toddlers. The paper presents key findings from the four research designs conducted between 2022-2023.

RESULTS

Kindergarten principals and teachers (78.5%) request the provision of a teaching assistant if there are 2-year-old children in the class. They overwhelmingly agree that a secondary vocational education is sufficient for a teacher to work with these children (64.5%). They emphasize the provision of material and technical equipment (86.7%) for the development of these children. In the questionnaire they pointed out the lack of methodological support for teachers in this area at the state level (83.5%). There was a significant difference between the views of head teachers and female teachers in this area (**). Insufficient methodological support is perceived more by principals than by teachers. Respondents are also not satisfied with the adaptation of standards in the state curriculum (2016) for this level of development (78.7%). Similar opinions were also held by future kindergarten teachers - students of bachelor studies in Banská Bystrica. Head teachers, teachers and future teachers comparatively emphasized two aspects of a two-year-old child's admission to kindergarten - not wearing diapers and being able to separate from the mother. Observation of two-year-old in kindergartens revealed the main conditions - sufficient toys, teaching aids and materials for child hygiene, ergonomic furniture, increase in the number of teaching and medical staff and increased communication between teachers and parents.

CONCLUSIONS

Observation of 2-year-old children and the evaluative views of the respondents showed that they have developed abilities that give them the prerequisites to actively participate in the upbringing and education in kindergartens. The developmental level and needs of these children should be taken into account by quality conditions. They were rightly demanded by the respondents in the questionnaires and survey. They correspond with European priorities in early childhood care and education (Lynch et al., 2024). More state attention has been given to the issue in the history of Slovak education (Lipnická, 2023). The well-developed day nursery system "crashed" in the 1990s. Due to the increased interest of parents, facilities for children up to 3 years of age have boomed in the last 2 decades, but in the social sphere. Systemic - legislative, curricular and methodological solutions are needed in education, to provide support staff and to train teachers for this area of work as well.

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