

Key Factors Influencing Compulsory Preschool Education Based on Approaches and Views of Interviewed Teachers

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to showcase the first results of an ongoing qualitative research that focuses on the course of compulsory preschool education in Czech Republic. This case study describes approaches to compulsory preschool education and tries to contribute to the development of a typology of these approaches. In this article, the results from interviews with 11 teachers from 3 different types of kindergartens and from 2 preparatory classes at primary schools are presented. Two research questions are answered: how education takes place in the last year of pre-school education according to the teachers. And what are the important factors that relate to compulsory preschool education. The following approaches emerged from the research: full day school preparation, afternoon school preparation, British approach and morning school preparation. The important factors related to pre-school education according to the interviewed teachers are: areas of development, problem areas, children, improvement needed, parents, teaching assistant, education and planning.

keywords: compulsory preschool education, Czech Republic, interviews, kindergarten, preparatory class

1. Introduction

Early childhood education, especially at preschool level, is crucial for a child's development, personal, emotional and social growth and further education. Preschool education does not only provide the emotional stability and social growth of children but also the experiences and interactions that children have in the early years of life significantly influence brain development and help lay the foundation for future learning (Centre on the Developing Child, 2007; Rahman, 2021). It has been confirmed by many researches, that children, who have had a quality preschool education have better social-emotional development (Doliopoulou, 2008; Leseman, 2009; Weikar, 2000; Melhuish et al., 2006; Burchinal & Cryer, 2006). Quality early childhood education also strengthens children's cognitive abilities (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Bernal & Keane, 2006; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Pholpirul, 2017). And children who attended preschool education are more prepared for elementary school and adapt better in elementary school (Sammons, Elliot, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004; Taylor, Gibbs, & Slate, 2000).

Preschool education is constantly changing, as the environment around us changes, and accordingly to this, the factors that influence it and the views and approaches to preschool education, change as well. The dynamic nature of changing demographics, whether related to race, immigration status, family structure, community composition, parental income or the quality and nature of early childhood education, combine to reinforce the need for greater social

integration and a more equitable use of resources (Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Because of the changing world, international events (currently, for example, the war in Ukraine) and changing society, the challenges of pre-school education are changing, and it is important to monitor how approaches and views on compulsory (preschool) education are evolving.

According to the Education Act (561/2004 Coll., § 34a), pre-school education is generally intended for children from 3 to 6 years of age, but not before the age of 2. With effect from 1.1. 2017, pre-school education is compulsory for children, who reach the age of five before the start of the school year. The compulsory education is usually fulfilled in kindergartens, but the requirement of completing the compulsory year of preschool education can also be met in other ways. These include individual education, education in a preparatory class at primary school, education at the preparatory level in a special primary school and education at an international school located within the Czech Republic (National Institute of Education, 2021). The preparatory classes at primary schools are for children, whose inclusion in a preparatory class is expected to balance their development, preferably children who have been given a postponement of compulsory school attendance. (561/2004 Coll., § 34a). Czech Republic has a quite large number of postponements of compulsory school attendance – 23, 3 % according to Czech Statistical Office (2021).

The Czech School Inspectorate describes (2018), that the aim of introducing compulsory preschool education was, according to the Government of the Czech Republic, to ensure adequate preparation of children for primary school and to reduce inequalities among pupils.

We are currently at a time when compulsory preschool education has been in force for five years, yet there is hardly any professional research that would address its impact or the course of compulsory preschool education in Czech Republic. From the report of the Czech School Inspectorate (2018, p.17), we found out, that in the first year after the introduction of compulsory preschool education “there was no significant increase in the participation of five-year-old children in pre-school education, so the expectations that the legislative change was aimed at were not met. Also, the introduction of compulsory preschool education has not brought about any significant changes in staffing, organization, or educational activities.”

Kindergartens and preparatory classes approach compulsory preschool education very differently, as no legislative document obliges them to meet new targets and goals, than they have done so far. The information materials prepared by the Ministry of Education in connection with the new legislative change explain rather the legal and organizational aspects of compulsory preschool education, but do not provide methodical support for the actual pedagogical work, for example with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have not attended kindergarten before. If kindergartens are to play a more significant role in balancing the chances of children with different family backgrounds and in preparing children for school education, this requirement needs to be explicit and teachers must be prepared for it (Simonová, Potužníková & Straková, 2017).

Teachers in kindergartens and preparatory classes face this lack of support head-on. Some continue their education as they did before the amendment, some focus more on preparing the children for the school, than they did before. In Hejlová and Tomková's (2021) research, it was found that teachers try to compensate for unevenness in development by focusing on practicing those areas in which the child is weaker in terms of the expected requirements for the child's readiness for primary school. This situation accentuates in the work of the kindergarten with five-year-olds teachers are more focused on catching up on cognitive and psychomotor skills, which leads to more frequent separation of five-year-olds from the heterogeneous group. Kindergartens either create homogeneous classes only for children in the last year of preschool education (that was already the case before the introduction of compulsory preschool

education) or they have heterogenous classes in which they either differentiate all activities, or a group of children in the last year of pre-school education is separated for part of the day and targeted, mainly cognitive, and psychomotor activities are prepared for them. This is also confirmed by the National Institute of Education report (2020); in many kindergartens preparing the children for primary school means leveling out performance inequalities in those areas in which the child is weaker. In this research we are trying find out, what approaches to the last year of preschool education are the teachers taking.

It is very important to mention, what the goals of preschool education are in Czech Republic. According to Framework Education Programme for Preschool Education (2004): The aim of preschool education is to develop physical, mental and social abilities of the child and guide them in such a way that at the end of their preschool age they turn into unique and relatively independent personalities, able to manage (possibly actively and with personal satisfaction) common challenges faced in children's usual environments, such as family and school, as well as challenges they will face in the future. Institutions providing preschool education, or their teachers, should therefore focus on the following framework objectives (goals):

1. Develop the child, his/her learning ability, and knowledge.
2. Transmit basic values of our society.
3. Help children achieve personal independence and ability to act as an independent personality with an impact on society.

In the Czech Republic, each school has its own curriculum, which is created in accordance with the National Curriculum and each class has (but it is not compulsory) their class curriculum, which is created in accordance with both of previously mentioned curriculums. However, there are no specific requirements in the National Curriculum for how a preschool classroom (and preparatory class) should look like.

This study was conducted to determine the preschool teacher's approaches to compulsory preschool education and the factors they believe influence compulsory preschool education. We are in agreement with Hammer & He (2014, p.452), that "pedagogical practice has a strong impact on children's learning opportunities in kindergartens." Recent research, such as the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) projects, highlights the important role of the teacher in early years education (Sylva et al. 2010). The pedagogical approach of the teacher should therefore be examined closely.

2. Materials and Methods

Because the last year of preschool education doesn't have any anchoring in the Czech National Curriculum and every school approaches the compulsory preschool education differently, I found it important to firstly map the different approaches to the compulsory preschool education, in order to improve the quality of preschool education.

As mentioned above, the preschool education, world, society, and children are constantly changing, and new challenges are emerging in preschool education. One such challenge for the Czech Republic is the compulsory preschool education. Approaches to preschool education (and mainly to the last year of preschool education) have always differed, but there has been no research on approaches to preschool education in the Czech Republic for many years, and research on approaches to compulsory preschool education has not been conducted in Czech Republic at all. In addition to examining how different institutions approach compulsory preschool education, this research also focuses on what factors influence compulsory preschool education, according to the interviewed teachers.

The research has a qualitative research design and the main method used in the research is semi-structured interview. The research answers two main research questions:

1. How does education take place in the last year of preschool according to teachers?
2. What are the important factors that relate to compulsory preschool education?

The interviews were semi-structured with a pre-determined set of open questions, that were asked in no particular order, but served as a topic, that should be included in the interviews. The questions were formulated after a comprehensive analysis of theoretical background and previous pre-test interviews on factors and approaches to compulsory preschool education. In the pre-test five teachers were interviewed, the interviews lasted approximately 25 minutes and were used to form the questions for this research.

Participants of this research were 11 teachers, all female (in Czech Republic 97% of preschool teachers are female). Their years of practice ranged from 1 to 30 years. The schools which were selected represented small & large schools; homogeneous & heterogeneous classes; state & private schools; alternative & traditional education. All of the schools were located in Prague. The participants were picked with the use of the snowball method. We contacted schools with different types of curriculums and after some of the interviews and initial analyses we contacted more schools, which had a different approach from those we already had in this research. The criterion for this research was to have a type of curriculum and school system that is not yet engaged in the research (alternative school, homogenous or heterogenous class, international preschool). Another criterion was the willingness to participate. With each headmaster of each school was at least an hour-long meeting held to explain the research and to get to know the school. Each participant signed an informed consent.

Table 1.
Participants

Participants			
	Years of practise	Role	Type of school/class
T1	17	Teacher	Traditional preschool- Homogenous
T2	12	Teacher	Traditional preschool - Homogenous
T3	16	Headmaster	Traditional preschool - Homogenous
T4	30	Teacher	Preparatory class
T5	5	Teacher	Traditional preschool - Heterogeneous
T6	8	Assistant teacher	Traditional preschool- Heterogeneous
T7	20	Teacher	Traditional preschool - Heterogeneous
T8	1	Teacher	International preschool - private
T9	7	Teacher	International preschool - private
T10	22	Teacher	Preparatory class
T11	4	Assistant teacher	Traditional preschool - Homogenous

Each of the interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded, rewritten and analysed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The data were analysed using the **inductive analysis method**. According to Thomas (2006): “Inductive coding begins with close readings of text and consideration of the multiple meanings that are inherent in the text. The evaluator then identifies text segments that contain meaningful units and creates a label for a new category to which the text segment is assigned. Additional text segments are added to the categories to which they are relevant. At some stage, the evaluator may develop an initial description of the meaning of a category and write a memo about the category (e.g., associations, links, and implications).”

In the first cycle of coding, the method of **open coding** was used as the main coding method. I also used the elemental coding approaches described by (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013),

such as **descriptive coding**, to summarize the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data; **in vivo coding**; **values coding**, particularly belief coding, which reflects the values, attitudes plus personal knowledge, experience and opinions of the participants and **simultaneous coding**, when two or more codes apply for the data section. The first cycle of coding consisted of multiple and careful readings, and over 590 initial code fragments were created.

In the second cycle of coding, the codes were condensed, reconstructed and grouped into themes, which were then summarised into eight categories. The code map created in the second cycle can be seen in Figure 5. In order to answer the first research question, the part of the interviews that described the activities was thoroughly revisited to construct the course of the day in preschool. At the end of the analyses, the codes were revisited once again, all of the excerpts included in the themes, sub-themes and codes were re-read to check the conformity of each interview excerpt with the relevant code, sub-theme, theme and category (Karademir, Cingi, Dereci & Akhman, 2017).

To ensure trustworthiness of the research, respondents were allowed to correct the summarized data and challenge any interpretations. The respondents were asked to verify the interpretations and the data gathered (Thomas, 2006).

This research was conducted during February – June 2022.

3. Results

3.1. Research Question 1: How Education Takes Place in the Last Year of Pre-School Education According to the Teachers?

We present a first version of the typology, which will be subjected to further research. The typology describes how learning takes place in the last year of preschool education based on interviews with teachers. We present an in depth description of activities of each school to explain the differences and commonalities between the approaches.

3.1.1. Kindergarten A: “Whole Day School Preparation”

- Homogenous class, 25 children in class
- The kindergarten is, more than the others, focused on preschool preparation, they do extensive pedagogical diagnoses, and they often separate children into groups based on what the children need to improve.
- Children are usually divided into two groups:
 - o One group has individual work (mostly worksheets), with assistant teacher.
 - o One group has activity with the teacher.
 - o They switch after approximately 10 minutes.
- Activities are the same for the whole group, but everybody works on their own.
- Preparation for school is based on pedagogical diagnostic, everyone has their own notepad and pencil case.
- Afternoon club for preschoolers: preparation for school, based on what they need to improve.

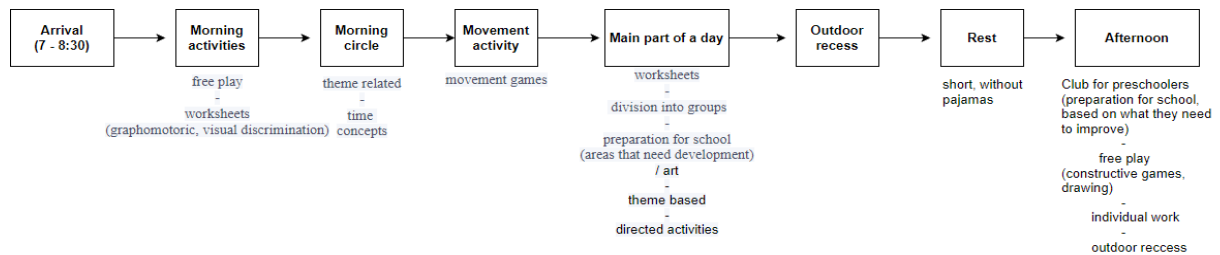


Figure 1. Kindergarten A, course of a day

3.1.2. Kindergarten B: “Afternoon School Preparation”

- Heterogeneous class, 22 children in class
- Educational program is composed of
 - o Directed activities (with introduction and motivation, theme related).
 - o Centers of activities - children are divided into groups according to skill/age - teachers differentiate the activities, they have easier and harder options.
- Detailed plan of school preparation.

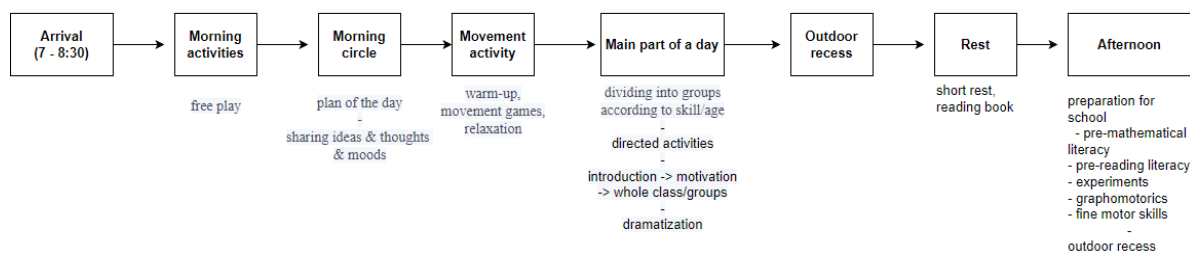


Figure 2. Kindergarten B, course of a day

3.1.3. Kindergarten C: “British Approach”

- Small kindergarten, everyone knows everyone, 15 children in class.
- They are very focused on academic skills. They have a clear checklist of what the children have to know and be able to do before they enter primary school.
- Time is very organized, they have a clear schedule of each day.
- No rest after lunch.
- Climate and relationships are very important to teachers.
- Main part of education is swaps (centers of activities) - there are usually three activity centers, two with teachers and one without. The assignment is the same for everybody, every kid works their own product/worksheet/task. Teachers oversee activities, help and correct the children.

T9: “Swaps, which are short activities where we have maybe three swaps, so we split the children into smaller groups and we do something related to the theme, so, I’ve split it up so that we have focused days as well. On Monday we focus on literature, Tuesday we focus on math, Wednesday we focus on science, in the sense that we cook or bake or do an experiment, Thursday we have art, and Friday we have a kind of “catching up” on what we missed or we read a book. We’re focusing a lot on the reading right now because we don’t have many children, we basically have half of them on Fridays.”

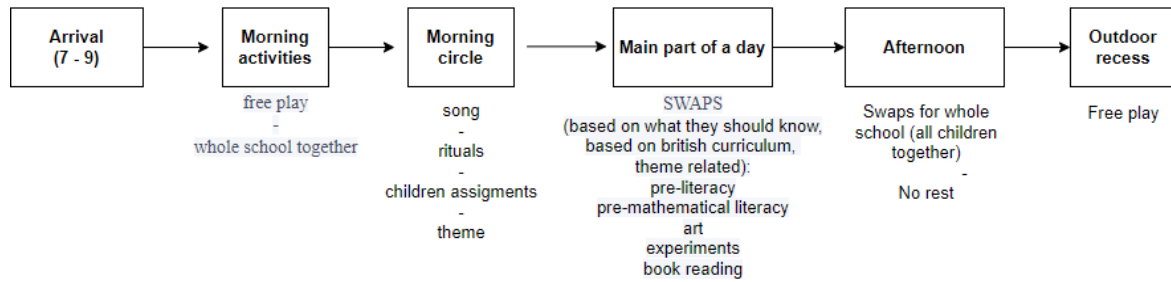


Figure 3. Kindergarten C, course of a day

3.1.4. Preparatory Class D+E: “Morning School Preparation”

Maximum 15 pupils

- Preparatory classes are a bridge between kindergarten and primary school, they are located in primary school and they educate according to the National Curriculum for preschool education.
- Great emphasis is placed on independence.
- The lessons remind of school lessons, but they are shorter.
- Every morning starts in a morning circle.
- Third or fourth class is always outdoors PE (games, practicing gross motor skills, free play).
- During breaks they have the opportunity to play.
- Two classes are usually focused more on academic skills and two are more relaxing (art, music, PE).

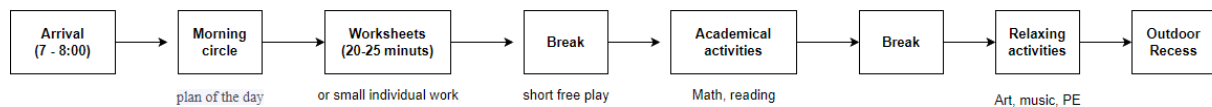


Figure 4. Preparatory class D, course of a day

- Homework 2 times a week.
- Educational content is based on diagnoses from pedagogical-psychological center, and teacher’s pedagogical diagnoses -> individual work with child or group work.
- Self-assessment or group assessment at the end of the day.
- Children have their own notebooks, and they get stickers, when they complete a task exceptionally. They also work with workbooks and children must take them to class.

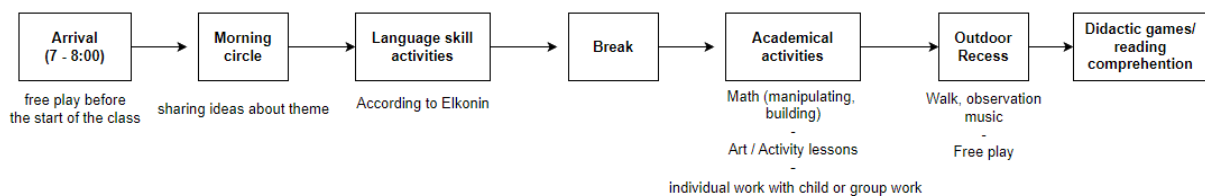


Figure 5. Preparatory class E, course of a day

One important factor in the typology is how much time is spent on primary school preparation. Kindergartens in example A & C spends their whole day on primary school preparation. The

different thing is, that in Kindergarten C (British approach) the children from whole school are doing the swaps together (so the younger and older children mix), while in kindergarten A (Whole day school preparation) the afternoon school preparation is mainly in form of clubs (or it takes place in classroom), where only the children, who are in the last year of preschool education, attend. In Kindergarten B (afternoon school preparation) they have a somewhat similar approach, but they focus on preparation for primary school mainly in the afternoon, and they have an addition to their school curriculum which is composed of educational content of these afternoons. They have five main areas (each for one afternoon), which they focus on, and their goals are listed in the addition to the school curriculum.

A very interesting finding is that the majority of teachers identified only those activities in which children work on a worksheet (each child works on the same worksheet independently) as actively preparing children for primary school.

Preparatory classes (D+E) provide only morning preparation for primary school, as they have only four lessons per day. Their school day ends with lunch and children can spend their afternoon in after-school care, where they usually play inside or outside, but they are not with their class teachers. Because the preparatory classes are part of the primary schools and their educational content is a mix of kindergarten activities and first year classes, the classes are short, the activities often change and they spend (at least) one hour outside and they play a lot in between classes. But as opposed to kindergartens they have more time for educational activities and there are fewer children in class. From the interviews with the teachers, we didn't find much of a difference between the two preparatory classes.

In each kindergarten, the “centers of activities” are the main part of the educational activities. Children are divided into two or three groups and after finishing the activity (or after given time), they swap. At every “center” there is a teacher who oversees the activity. Each kid individually works on the task and the task is the same for everyone. Everyone has the same time for the activity, after the time is up, or after everyone is more or less done, the groups change. Usually, one group works on the carpet and one at the tables. The activities are very short, they take about 10 minutes.

The kindergartens differed in their directedness and in the differentiation of tasks - only the kindergarten B (Afternoon school preparation) differentiated tasks according to the child's skill and age. They also cared deeply about children's opinion about activities, and they were improvising more when it comes to educational activities.

Another interesting finding is that the school, that had the most academic approach to teaching (Kindergarten C), which was the only kindergarten that actively teaches children to read and write, focused a lot on school climate. In no other conversation was the classroom climate (or anything similar) mentioned. But it was also the only kindergarten, where the children do not rest after lunch.

3.2. Research Question 2: What Are the Important Factors that Relate to Compulsory Preschool Education?

From the interviews with teachers, important factors which teachers mentioned in relation to compulsory preschool education were extracted. Those factors are not to be generalized, they can only be used for further exploring and seeking a deeper understanding of what teachers perceive as important in relation to compulsory preschool education.

The main eight categories that were identified were: Areas of development, Problematic areas, Children, Needed improvement, Parents, Assistant teacher, Education and Planning.

teachers said that the children do not have many problems in math or reading literacy, but they often need to practice their social skills more.

“These children learn everything, they know many things, they have encyclopedic knowledge, but they can't wipe their noses or tie their shoes.” (T7)

There is also sub-category “postponements of school attendance”, which is a significant phenomenon in Czech Republic, because in Czech Republic more than 20% of children have their school attendance postponed (so they start primary school at age seven, not six as is common). The mentioned reasons for school postponement were inattention, language barrier (mentioned in relation to children with different mother language), immaturity and late date of birth (July/August).

The teachers mostly mentioned that the areas that are problematic are also the ones that they try to support the most: *„or we repeat what they may not be good at, some orientation in space, imagination is a problem, time orientation is a problem, so it just goes on all year.” (T2)*

3.2.3. Children

The next category is dedicated to children, the teachers felt that nowadays the children are more inattentive, too fast and more tired and they understand technologies very well. They also have to deal with more pressure being put on them, they have to meet many requirements and the work with them is more intensive. This is an interesting finding because teachers think that there are too many demands and too much pressure on children, but they thought it is mainly from parents, first grade teachers and the public in general.

T8: “I don't remember much, from when I was this young, but there's a lot of pressure put on them, they start earlier, the academic pressure is put on them earlier, like with the admissions and stuff.”

Also, as one of the teachers (T11) mentioned, *“Should we assess them according to old rules and lists when the time has changed?”* We shouldn't. That's why it is important to look into teachers' views and think about how we can help them to shift their perspective. Because if the children are too fast and inattentive maybe it's not a bad thing and we just need to adapt to their new needs. We can't demand the same things of them that we used to demand of our children when times have changed.

There was also the sub-category of self-assessment. Some teachers mentioned that children can be very critical of others and/or themselves; other teachers mention that they don't do self-assessments enough (or never).

T10: “So then somebody can sort of prove it by telling you, I didn't get this right, but then somebody is very critical and tells you that he didn't get anything right, even though you praise him. “

3.2.4. Needed Improvement

This category shows what in compulsory preschool education needs improvement according to interviewed teachers.

The teachers would like more methodical support about what to do, what should preschool compulsory education look like; they would like more support from special pedagogues, because more and more children in preschool have special needs, and teachers would like to be able to talk about the children with experts.

They would also appreciate written outputs of preschool education, to have something to fall back on. They would appreciate fewer children in classes (not more than 20), more preparatory

classes and for the children in the last year of preschool education to have the same holidays as they have in primary school.

Also, what they thought needed improvement was the actual preparation of children for primary school. They thought that other schools/teachers don't do enough. This corresponds with the previous statement, that there is too much pressure put on children.

3.2.5. Parents

This category conducts the thoughts of the teachers about the parents, which were connected to the last year of preschool education. They mentioned that the parents are nowadays over-nurturing, more benevolent, do not lead children to independence enough, they are overly ambitious, spend less time outdoors and they shift some of the parents responsibilities to teachers.

T5: *“A lot of children are terribly dependent, parents do it for them, don't let them do things thinking that, it's just unnecessary for them to do it. But they could do it, they could do it and they would enjoy it terribly and I can see them enjoying it afterwards when they are allowed to do it.”*

The teachers also mentioned the different approach of parents and teachers, and this quote shows how important cooperation between parents and teachers is. But during the interview the cooperation between the two parties wasn't mentioned. Even though, if the teachers and parents are on the same page, the quality of education improves (Hafizi & Papa, 2012).

T2: *“Well, which ones, it's very individual, like we don't complain, we don't complain here at all, but you just see that you can try somewhere and still, even though the children have been here for a long time, you can't teach them because they do it differently at home.”*

Teachers also stated that they have rather short consultations with the parents. Some of the kindergartens also provide advice (and “home works”) to parents, mostly about the primary school preparation - what they should focus on at home. T1: *“If the child has problems with graphomotor skills, we talk to them, we give them worksheets so they can practice with the children at home.”*

3.2.6. Assistant Teacher

This category summarizes the findings about assistant teachers. The assistant teacher in preschools and preparatory classes mostly helps children with special needs and in some cases with gifted children, children with different mother language and with younger children. Assistant teachers help those children and assist them, but they also try to integrate them with other children.

T1: *“And some of them have a bit of a problem with attention, so we try, we have an assistant who works with them more intensively, we try to make it easier for them, to help them with their worksheets, so that they don't get tired of it, so that they don't get tired of it.”*

They usually do short individual activities throughout the day with selected children, and they spend most of their time intensively working with a few (sometimes only one) children. They work with this kid(s) usually only for a year. One of the assistant teachers mentioned that it takes a long time getting to know the child and when they get to know them, the kid goes to the next class/new school. Also, because they spend most of their time with a few children, they don't have enough time for other children.

However, sometimes teachers use the help of an assistant teacher in activity centers, where an assistant teacher supervises one of the centers. And also, the assistant teachers can be the children's communication partners during the day because there are usually few adults and lots of children, so the children can have more people to talk to.

3.2.7. Education

The biggest category is about education, which is divided into many sub-categories. The first sub-categories are organizational forms: individual work, group work, activity centers, and educational methods: dramatization, inquiry-based learning, action learning, and excursions. However, the organizational forms and methods mentioned were very directive. Alarmingly, only one teacher mentioned the differentiation of tasks and activities according to children's abilities, needs, wishes and desires.

T11: *“When they're 16, 18 or so, so I sort of divide them into groups, the assistant or me, one's at the worksheet, the other, is doing things in the playroom.”*

Teachers mostly base their educational content on areas according to educational frameworks, but surprisingly often were worksheets mentioned as a part of educational content.

Another sub-category that emerged from the interviews was pedagogical diagnosis. Each school uses its own diagnostic tools, with some teachers using standardized tools, others using tools they have made themselves and adding verbal assessments. Teachers also mentioned that conducting extensive diagnostics is very time consuming.

T3: *“It's terribly time-consuming, it's beyond the scope of the teacher's duties, we have to do it in our free time, or we have to...we want to, at least I do it like that myself. Because it seems to me, that it is meaningful to do the diagnoses.”*

And this extensive written pedagogical diagnosis is usually carried out two to three times a year, sometimes in consultation with parents or at least providing them with feedback. Teachers reported that the biggest advantage of standardized diagnostics is that they can monitor the child's progress.

T11: *“So you do the diagnostics 2 or 3 times a year and you see the progress, then I print out the papers I had, the graph motor ones, and I see, yes, there is a beautiful progress, look parents, there it is, don't stress, it's not all perfect yet, but we see the progress, there is progress.”*

Another sub-category concerned portfolios. When teachers talked about portfolios, they were not referring to portfolios per se, but rather to folders that have a particular focus (alphabet, numbers, art).

T7: *“We've considered it, but we're not doing it. But the children actually have a workbook here, I have a workbook for the letters, my colleague has one too, they're doing it continuously, it's not like a traditional portfolio. This is just for the letters, my colleague has a wider one, they put all kinds of things in there, different worksheets, and even a picture will do, so they put that in there.”*

Another sub-category, that affects the education in the last year of preschool are events, which are either external or internal. The teachers mentioned that they like the events and think they are beneficial for the children, but they thought that sometimes they are really time consuming, and they sometimes have events twice a week and they don't have enough time for their own programs.

T11: *“Look, we always have marked whole calendar, we always have some events, the Olympics, we have theatre, we always have something for Christmas, for Easter...sometimes I think it's too much, the programs are nice, but sometimes you want your own.”*

3.2.8. Planning

This category shortly summarizes how the interviewed teachers approach planning in the compulsory preschool education.

The core of the educational plans are themes, schools usually have a thematic plan for the whole year in their school curriculum, and those themes are usually more general and broader. When the teachers are planning the educational programs, they either choose the themes from the school curriculum, or create their own themes, that still have to be related to the themes in the school curriculum. The themes often relate to nature, holidays, festivals, cultural events and so on. The themes usually take about a week or two, but they can even last for a month, it depends on the teacher.

T1: *“We have it written out for each month, we stick to it, but we don't have to be strict about it, we can put in some topics that will be interesting in that month, like something in nature, so we can put it in, so we go by that.”*

There are many approaches to planning, some teachers plan the whole year beforehand and change it only slightly during the year. Somebody has it written, somebody does the visual mind maps with children.

T10: *“After all, I have some experience and my themes are usually based on the season. That's kind of the main one and I usually make these mental maps, but not always.”*

Besides the themes, teachers planning is based on what the children should know and what needs to be improved. They also plan according to weather, number of children or children's interest and change the plan accordingly. As the teachers said, the improvisation also takes an important place in the educational process.

T11: *“And of course, we have it divided, but again, it's a little bit about the improvisation, when a lot of children were sick and we didn't get to do much, or it's an interesting topic. Sometimes we move on from that topic, but sometimes we'll come back to it.”*

4. Conclusion

This article presents the first results of ongoing research on compulsory preschool education in the Czech Republic. The first results were obtained through qualitative research using interviews as the main research method. The participants of this research were eleven teachers from five schools. The next steps of the research are classroom observations, content analysis of classroom curricula and follow-up interviews with teachers. The next step is also to expand the research sample to include other types of schools to ensure that nothing is missing in the typology.

The first research question was: “How education takes place in the last year of pre-school education according to the teachers?”

From the interviews a first draft of a typology of the process of education in the last year of preschool education was created, and is presented here in a form of flowchart. The types of education were divided into four groups: Whole day school preparation, Afternoon school preparation, British approach, Morning school preparation.

The names of the groups describe how much time in schools is spent on preparing children for primary school. The previously presented diagrams show the course of a day at each school. The course of a day at each school is slightly different, but the base remains the same. Very interesting finding is, that most of the teachers described as an actively preparing for primary school only those activities where the children work on some tasks, most often on worksheets (every child works on the same type of worksheet, individually).

Although the national curriculum is based on personality-oriented pedagogy and focuses on learning through play, that is not the case in many preschool classrooms. As in different countries (Banu, 2014; Yamamoto & Li, 2012) teacher's beliefs and perceptions of quality preschool education differ. In Bangladesh they found out that preschool teachers still believe in textbook-based techniques and rote learning methods. That is similar to what was found in this research: many teachers still think, that the real preparation for primary school happens only when they use worksheets. And also, when they have many children in classes, they tend to slip into frontal learning.

The second research question was: "What are the important factors that relate to compulsory preschool education?"

From the interview with the teachers, eight categories were formed, which are: areas of development, problematic areas, children, needed improvement, parents, assistant teacher, education, and planning.

In those categories we are missing a category focusing on relationships – between teachers and children, teachers and parents, and kindergartens and primary schools. But during those interviews the theme of relationships wasn't evident.

The important findings from those categories are, that the areas that teachers consider important are the areas, which are mostly represented in the national curriculum and in standardized diagnostic materials. However, of the areas that teachers consider important to develop, only a few areas of concern were mentioned. And those problematic skills were mostly related to social skills – and it was these skills that few teachers mentioned as the ones they were trying to improve.

According to the teachers interviewed, children are more inattentive, too fast and more tired, too much pressure or demands are placed on them and the work with them is more intense. Parents, according to the teachers interviewed, are too nurturing, more benevolent and ambitious and do not lead children to sufficient independence. They also mentioned short consultations with parents as a negative.

The assistant teachers are an important addition to preschool class, and they assist the children and teachers with almost everything. The assistant teachers are important in relation to children with special needs, gifted children, children with different mother language and younger children. They are there to assist, to help, to communicate and to include children especially from previously mentioned group. They also help when the teachers need to divide the children into groups.

The largest category was education, which is composed of many sub-categories, which are: educational methods, organizational forms, events, educational content, diagnoses, and portfolios.

The last category is planning. Planning in preschool education is usually thematically oriented, and those themes are affected by events in nature and culture, weather, what children should know and what can be improved.

According to teachers, the following improvements are needed in the last year of pre-school education: smaller class sizes, more methodological support, accurate pre-school results, more preparatory classes and the same length of holidays as in primary school.

The factors that influence preschool education have been examined in previous research. According research Xu & Zhang's (2019) research the factors are: Environment (Infrastructure, Security measures, Food safety, Self-management, Quality of teachers, Teacher-child ratio, Entry rules of preschool education, Governmental investment, Public administration); Teachers (Morality of teachers, Personalized guidance according to children's characteristics, Income); Supervision (government, public, self-supervision) and Results. The factors that influence early childhood education are transnational and are brought about by research, national development, globalization and technological developments. Furthermore, early childhood education is influenced by professional beliefs about instruction (developmentally appropriate practice; child-centred curriculum; learning through play) and traditional cultural beliefs (beliefs about early development and learning; role of teachers; instructional scripts (Rao & Li, 2009).

The results cannot be generalized but may be useful for finding connections between the factors, identifying what types of approaches to preschool education exist, highlighting problems in the last year of preschool, and identifying what could be done to improve preschool education.

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