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Developing Social Skills of Preschool Children in Preparatory Classes of Elementary Schools

Abstract

The text deals with the current issues of educating preschool children in preparatory classes of elementary schools in the Czech Republic. These classes provide education for children for whom a one-year deferment of starting compulsory school attendance in the first grade of elementary school was recommended. It also pays attention to certain research conducted in the Czech Republic over the last twenty years and focused on the education of preschool children from a socio-culturally disadvantaged environment in preparatory classes. The text also specifies the most frequent reasons for school attendance deferment for these children and the ways in which teachers of these preparatory classes of elementary schools develop these problematic areas in children.

Keywords: preschool education, preschool child, compulsory school attendance deferment, preparatory class of elementary school

Preschool education in the Czech Republic is organized pursuant to Act No. 561/2004 Coll. as amended (hereinafter as the Education Act), usually for children of 3 to 6 years of age, at the earliest from the age of 2. Preschool education in the Czech Republic is, pursuant to Section 34 of the Education Act, provided in nursery schools, in preparatory classes of elementary schools, preparatory classes of special schools, and now also in forest nursery schools.¹ Pursuant to the aforementioned act, preschool education is mandatory for such children from the beginning of the school year which starts following the day when said child reaches the age of five till the beginning of the child's compul-

¹ Art. 34, par. 9 of the Education Act: "A forest nursery school is deemed to be a nursery school where education mostly takes place outdoors away from the base facility of the forest nursery school, which is used only occasionally. The base facility of a forest nursery school must not be a building".

sory school attendance. We see the main objectives of preschool education in the Czech Republic as support for the complex development of the preschool children's personality on all levels as well as in the creation of the basic conditions for further education. Another objective of preschool education is to assist in compensating the irregularities in children's development prior to entering elementary education and to provide professional special pedagogical care to children with specific educational needs.

Based on data published in the annual reports of the Czech School Inspectorate (hereinafter CSI) and the performance indicators of statistical yearbooks of the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports of the Czech Republic (hereinafter MEYS), the number of preschool children has recently been around 365,000 children a year. There has been a slight increase in the number of preschool children who started attending nursery schools in the 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 school years, when the average number of preschool children attending these schools reached 367,000. At the same time, the number of children with a school attendance deferment attending preparatory classes slightly increases every year. Development in this area is specified in detail in table 1.

Table 1. Number of children attending preschool education in the Czech Republic

Preschool education in the Czech Republic, 2013–2017	Total number of children in preschool education	Number of children with deferred school attendance		Number of children in preparatory classes	
2013/2014	363,568	72,713	20%	3520	0.97%
2014/2015	367,603	70,597	19.2%	3819	1.04%
2015/2016	367,361	55,104	15%	4514	1.23%
2016/2017	362,653	59,475	16.4%	4569	1.26%

Source: own (compiled based on own statistics from annual reports of CSI and statistic yeabooks of MEYS)

The deferment of compulsory school attendance applies annually to quite a numerous children. Although there has been a decreasing trend observed in the number of children with deferred school attendance recently, last year there was a 1.4% increase over the previous year. A one-year deferment of school attendance may be a solution suitable especially for children appearing physically or mentally immature or insufficiently or inadequately stimulated. School attendance deferment is suitable especially when a preschool child is not sufficiently mature or prepared and it is thus reasonable to expect that the child would not be successful in the first grade of elementary school (Vágnerová, 2001, p. 124). The conditions for school attendance deferment are defined by

the provisions of Section 37 of the Education Act. In the Czech Republic, the decision on school attendance deferment is made by the headmaster of the respective school upon a written application of the parents, a recommendation from the competent educational counselling centre, and the opinion of an expert consultant or a clinical psychologist.

Based on an analysis of the data from the CSI annual reports, it is obvious that the structure of reasons of school attendance deferments has not changed for several years. As table 2 below implies, the most frequently stated reasons are general immaturity and speech impediments and disorders, closely followed by social immaturity and immaturity in the area of psychological development.

Table 2

Most frequent reasons for school attendance deferment in the Czech Republic	School year			
	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017
	[%]	[%]	[%]	[%]
General immaturity	35	35.7	36.8	36
Speech impairments and disorders	32	28	26.9	27.9
Psychology — adaptation, concentration	16.9	13.5	11.3	10.8
Social immaturity	14.7	16.1	12	11.6
Graphomotor difficulties	14.4	12	11.9	14.5

Source: own (compiled based on own analysis of CSI annual reports)

The development of preschool education in preparatory classes of elementary schools

Preparatory classes first appeared in the Czech Republic in 1993 as part of an experiment and were meant to remove the language barrier. Following long-term pilot verification, preparatory classes for children from socio-culturally disadvantaged environments have been organized since the 1997/98 school year as a specific compensatory procedure (Kropáčková, in: Opravilová (ed.), 2016, p. 165).

In the Czech Republic, preparatory classes of elementary schools are presently organized pursuant to the Education Act. The amendment of the Education Act has changed the rules for the placement of children in preparatory classes. Pursuant to Section 47 of the Education Act, preparatory classes of elementary schools may as of September 1, 2017, be “organized during the last year before the beginning of compulsory school attendance for children for

whom there is an assumption that placement in a preparatory class will compensate their development and who were granted a deferment on their compulsory school attendance” (Education Act).

Preparatory classes should not replace the work of nursery schools, but rather help compensate the development of children whose compulsory school education has been deferred for whatever reason. Preparatory classes thus focus on compensating children’s development with regard to their immaturity for school at the time they are supposed to start their school attendance. Teachers in preparatory classes should therefore work solely with children whose compulsory school attendance has been deferred and who require assistance in compensating their development for some objective reasons (Klimešová, 2017). The usual number of children attending one preparatory class is roughly 13–15; however, the classes are usually filled to the maximum of fifteen pupils. Preparatory classes are usually open in older urban areas with the prevalence of the Romany population, i.e. in localities where schools are attended by 70–90% of Romany pupils. The decision on the placement of pupils in a preparatory class is made by the headmaster of the respective school upon a written application from the legal guardian and a written recommendation of the competent educational counselling centre enclosed to the application by the legal guardian (Průcha, 2015, p. 426).

In preparatory classes of elementary schools, children learn simple basic rules easy and thus create the foundation for forming higher-level rules, i.e. moral rules. In order to create the awareness of rules and order, it is necessary for children to experience the feeling of success and the feeling of the meaningfulness of a given activity. The children gradually develop the necessary self-confidence in connection with fulfilling simple tasks appropriate for their age and abilities. Through these activities, the complexity of which gradually increases, the children gain more self-confidence and become capable of working independently. The play activities of these children are (not only in preparatory classes) considered natural behaviour they are free to demonstrate; moreover, the rules of their play help them acquire certain principles of moral behaviour and encounter simple rules they learn to follow. The teacher has the unique opportunity to take a look into the life of individual families through simple topical games and learn about the family environment, values, and mutual communication within the family of these children, etc. Games are considered a suitable means for developing social relationships among the children, as through games children learn how to act in various roles and thus they indirectly develop social relationships with their classmates (Gulová, Němec, Štěpařová, 2007, p. 133–134).

The number of preparatory classes in the Czech Republic has been gradually increasing in recent years. Based on an analysis of the statistical data pub-

lished in the CSI annual reports over the past five years, I compared the number of elementary schools with preparatory classes while focusing on the specific number of preparatory classes in the Czech Republic and also on the number of children educated in preparatory classes during the given period. I have charted the results as follows (see table 3).

Table 3. The development of preschool education in preparatory classes of elementary schools

Preparatory classes of elementary school	School year				
	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018
Number of elementary schools with preparatory classes	235	246	286	295	260
Number of preparatory classes	277	300	344	345	286
Number of children in preparatory classes	3520	3819	4514	4569	3407

Source: own (compiled based on own analysis of the CSI annual reports)

Table 3 shows that although the number of preparatory classes of elementary schools has been growing in the Czech Republic, the number of preparatory classes of elementary schools slightly decreased along with the number of children attending these classes in the 2017/2018 school year.

Research survey

The presented research focused on how the socio-cultural readiness of preschool children attending preparatory classes of elementary schools in selected regions was ensured. The area of social skills is one of the five educational spheres of the Framework Educational Programme for Preschool Education and, as implied by the aforementioned results, it is the third most frequent reason for the deferment of compulsory school attendance of preschool children attending preparatory classes.

The research survey was performed in two phases in the territories of the Moravian-Silesian and South Moravian regions. The first phase focused on assessing the achieved level of selected social skills of children at the end of their attendance of their elementary school preparatory class. The second phase focused on mapping cooperation between the teachers of the preparatory classes and the families of the children.

The respondents were the teachers of preparatory classes of elementary schools in the Moravian-Silesian and South Moravian regions. The teachers were selected based on a pre-set criterion — that they had to teach children in

an elementary school preparatory class in the given year. Within the research, 40 schools with one or more preparatory classes were addressed. In total, 27 teachers of preparatory classes of elementary schools from both selected regions participated in the research.

The objective of the research was to find out what, according to the teachers of preparatory classes of elementary schools, the level of social skills of pre-school children was when they finished their attendance of preparatory classes.

The conclusions of the research survey

Based on the results of the first phase of the research survey, I arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Establishing social contacts in children attending preparatory classes of elementary schools

In the area of establishing social contacts, I focused on whether the children were capable of establishing social relationships with the teacher or another adult person in the preparatory class and with their peers.

Table 4

Establishing contacts	With peers [%]	With the teacher [%]
Children generally do not establish contacts	4.60	1.30
Children establish contacts occasionally	18.60	15.40
Children establish contacts easily	76.80	83.30

The results show that 76.8% of children in preparatory classes of elementary schools are capable of easily establishing social contacts with their peers in the class and 83.3% of children easily establish social relationships with the teacher or another adult person in preparatory classes of elementary schools. A total of 4.6% of children do not establish social contacts with peers in the observed preparatory classes of elementary schools, and 1.3% of the children do not establish social contacts with the teacher or another adult person in preparatory classes of elementary schools.

2. Selected social skills of children in the observed preparatory classes of elementary schools

Table 5

Selected social skills	Yes, always [%]	Yes, only occasionally [%]	Never [%]
Accepting jointly agreed rules	63	37	0
Suitable assertion of their wishes and needs	37	63	0
Selecting the appropriate way of addressing	67	25	8

I focused on three areas in the section of selected social skills which the teacher develops in children in the preparatory class. The first area was defined by the question “How capable are the children in your preparatory class of accepting the jointly agreed rules of the class?” The results presented in table 5 show that 63% of children finishing their attendance of the preparatory class are capable of respecting mutually agreed rules of the class while the remaining 37% of the children accept the agreed rules only occasionally. The second area was defined as the capability of preparatory class pupils of justifying their needs or asserting their wishes appropriate. The results relating to the second observed area show that only 37% of children finishing their preparatory class attendance are able to justify their needs and assert their wishes appropriately; the remaining 63% of children are capable of appropriate justification of their needs and assertion of their wishes only occasionally. Within the third area, I focused on the skill of children to identify the suitability of various ways of addressing people and the ability of telling the difference between formal and informal ways of addressing. The presented results show that 67% of children are always capable of selecting the appropriate way of address, 25% of children make occasional mistakes, and a total of 8% of preschool children cannot distinguish between formal and informal addressing and select the appropriate address at the end of their attendance of preparatory classes of elementary schools.

3. Most frequent activities used to develop social skills of pupils of preparatory classes of elementary schools

As a part of the research, I focused on the activities the teachers of preparatory classes consider the most efficient. Table 6 below shows the most frequently-

used activities through which teachers of preparatory classes develop the elementary social skills in children. When asked about the most frequently used activities that develop social skills, 100% of teachers of preparatory classes named activities focusing on creating and respecting mutually agreed rules, 98% of teachers named applying the principles and rules of decent conduct and 78% of teachers named conversations with children within the communication circle and group games and activities of the children.

Table 6

Activities developing social skills of children	[%]
Joint creation and respecting previously agreed rules	100
Applying principles and rules of decent conduct	98
Group games of children (puppet games, social games, didactic games)	78
Conversations in the morning “communication circle”	74
Games focusing on the development of pro-social behaviours	67
Group activities, joint walks and trips	63
Work with stories (finishing, looking for suitable solutions)	56
Acting out fairy-tales or real-life situations	37
Sports with rules	26
Training sharing and listening	19
Activities focusing on the elimination of aggression	19
Relaxation activities with children	19
Using the Persona Dolls method	7

Table 6 above further shows that 67% of teachers use activities developing pro-social behaviour of children, such as games focusing on enhancing friendly relationships, activities focusing on developing appropriate types of communication with adults and other children, and those focusing on the children’s skills of appropriate self-assertion within peer groups, respecting friends within their class or the skills of admitting a mistake and seeking a remedy. A total of 56% of teachers further stated that they developed the social skills of children through work with stories (finishing, looking for suitable solutions), through acting out real-life situations, e.g. using games with puppets, and acting out selected fairy-tales or real-life situations. A total of 19% of teachers of preparatory classes stated that they developed the social skills of children using activities focusing on the elimination of aggression, relaxation techniques during the course of education and training sharing and listening. A total of 7% of teachers of preparatory class teachers stated that they used the Persona Dolls Method for the development of children’s social skills.

The second phase was focused on assessing the efficiency of cooperation between the teachers of preparatory classes of elementary schools and the families of the children.

4. The efficiency of cooperation between the teachers of preparatory classes of elementary schools and the families of the children

Table 7.

Cooperation between teachers and parents	[%]
Cooperation with parents is regular	52
Cooperation with parents is only occasional	48
Parents do not cooperate	0

The results of the research show that a total of 52% of the observed teachers of preparatory classes stated that their cooperation with the parents of the children was regular and efficient, while 48% of teachers stated that their cooperation with parents was only occasional and that the parents cooperated only in certain areas. None of the addressed teachers stated that there was no cooperation with the children's parents.

5. Ways of cooperation of the teachers with the parents of children in preparatory classes of elementary schools

Table 8

The most common ways of cooperation between teachers and parents	[%]
Joint school and extra-curricular events	100
Class meetings, regular consultations with parents	88.8
Sample lessons	25.9
PC contact (via e-mail, photos in an internet storage)	11.1
Open house days	14.8
Starting together programme	3.7

The research results show that regarding the method of cooperation of the teachers of preparatory classes with the children's parents, all the teachers claimed that the most frequently used activities were school and

extra-curricular events (such as Easter fairs, school balls, socials, school parties, musical evenings, gatherings with parents, Christmas celebration parties, creative workshops). The second most frequent opportunity, stated by 88.8% of teachers, was class meetings, one-on-one conversations, regular consultations with parents, and consultations before classes. A total of 25.9% of teachers stated that they organized sample lessons for parents during the school years and that they regularly inform parents of the situation in the preparatory class. A total of 14.8% of teachers identified open house days organized at their schools as an effective form of cooperation, and 11% of teachers claimed to use computer communication as an effective method of cooperating with parents (e-mail, sharing photos on an internet site, etc.).

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