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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 141 (2014) 697 – 701

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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WCLTA 2013

## Early Educational Activities in the Czech Republic

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### Abstract

This paper presents a summary of the results of the quality analysis of data that is obtained from what is currently offered in early educational activities in the Czech Republic. The phenomenon of early education became a Czech policy priority and there is a curriculum reform in progress. We focused on one part of preschool education: early education and care for children 0-3 years of age. The results of the analysis are to describe the current situation and also to clarify activities for these children, processes and outcomes.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

*Keywords:* Pre-primary education, curriculum reform, early educational activities for children zero-to-three, pedagogical quality;

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### 1. Introduction

Investment in early childhood development is one of the most effective instruments used to accelerate and achieve the sustainable and secure future that we want for all the children (ISTANBUL DECLARATION, OMEP, 2013). The question of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Europe is becoming a growing policy priority. This period of life is considered to be important for successful life long learning, social integration, personal development and future employability. (COM, 2011, p. 66) Increased policy interest is given to ECEC in the Czech Republic.

The educational policy of the Czech Republic considers improving its value through curriculum reform. This will open other purposes such as increasing professionalism of preschool teachers, policy for coherence of mother's employment and family life. Most OECD countries take into consideration the growing importance of an explicit curriculum with clear purpose, goals and approaches for zero-to-school-age children. Some structuring and orientation of child's experience towards educational intentions is generally accepted. (Bernard, 2007; OECD, 2006)

The definition of early education speaks about a model of education and care with a main aim of physical and psychological development and cognitive and social development. (Eurydice, 2000) There are two approaches in public education in Europe (OECD, 2012):

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- The integrated model – one structure for every child *in pre-school age (0-5/6)*?
- Age divided model.

The Czech pre-primary system is age divided. Parents can take care of their children zero-to-three years of age or they have the opportunity to work while public nurseries or private facilities watch their children. Children three-to-six years old have a state guaranteed placement in a kindergarten. The net of kindergartens is formed mainly by public kindergartens under ministry, regions and municipality.

The curriculum reform of preschool education started after the year 1989. White paper, published in 2000, was a very important point that clarified the main purposes of the curriculum reform.

The national curriculum document (2005) is focused on kindergartens, formulating the frame purposes, intents and supposed results of education (capabilities: **capability for learning, problem solving ability, communication skills, social and personal skills, working and public proficiency**).

If we compare family policy in Europe, Czech Republic belongs to relatively family supporting countries (social assurance for families with small children, guarantee of place in public preschools). The big gap is in the systematic solution for children under three. Before the year 1989 the number of children in nurseries was about 20 percent. The curriculum program (1983) for nurseries was focused on five ranges: physical education, art education, musical education, moral education and intellectual education.

After the Velvet Revolution, the number of nurseries was dropped to 1 %; these facilities were almost all closed. The reason could be that Czech society accepted the paradigm of Czech psychologists Matějček and Příhoda, who said that families should take care and educate their child at home till three years of age.

The Czech Republic has 28 weeks paid maternity leave, receiving 70 % of a mother's salary. Parental support is proportionate to the length of leave the mother decides on. On the two-year plan you can expect 11,400 CZK/month. On the three-year plan you get 7,600 CZK/month. On a four-year option, 7,600 CZK is received for the first nine months, after which payments drop to 3,800 CZK. Parents of children with disabilities can take 7,600 CZK/month leave for seven years.

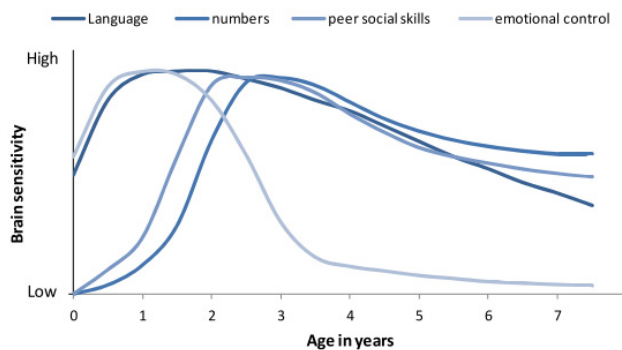
### Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of early education and care is based on the interactionist theory, where the learning environment is seen as a complex system of interplay in which individuals and the environment influence and are influenced by one another in a continuous interaction (Sheridan, in Pramling, N.; Pramling Samuelsson, I., 2011). Children were born with an inclination to learn. They communicate and interact with the environment or surrounding world. The theories of children's learning and development are that the development of cognitive, social and emotional aspects constitute together an integrated whole where learning is seen as a change of perspectives that takes place via experiencing, acting and communicating (Sommer et al, 2010; Pramling, 1994).

The psychological view of children's development is offered by Piaget. This theory names the stages through motor and cognitive development. Children experience the world through movement and senses, using five senses to explore the world. Reconstruction of before development is on qualitative higher level (Piaget, Inhelderová, 1997).

Another psychological theory, offered by Vygotsky, focuses on the social development. If we put the outcomes together, we receive brain development.

Table 1: Sensitive periods in early brain development (OECD, 2010).



## Research methodology

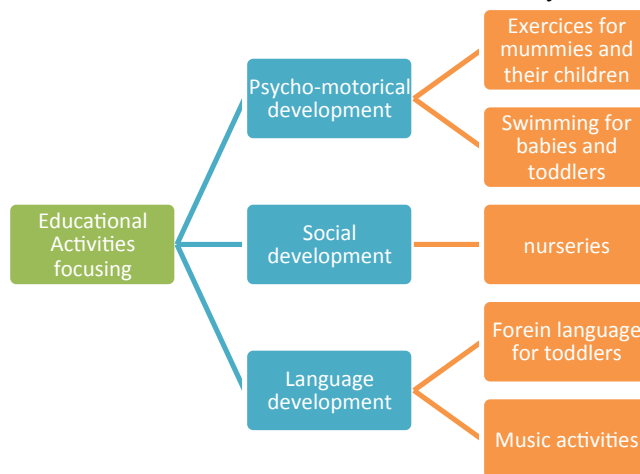
The empirical research is focused on educational activities for children before the age of three. There is no state regulated program nor counselling for children under three years of age and their parents. Research targets the quality of facilities that offer educational activities for children before the age of three, mostly for parents and their children. Sheridan (in Pramling, N.; Pramling Samuelsson, I., 2011) researched the Pedagogical quality in kindergartens from the age of one. We will use these categories as primary categories for this research. This research discovered 3 important indicators of how to see the pedagogical quality:

- Interaction: communication, child play.
- Environment: challenges for experience.
- Child's initiative: child's will motivation.

There was a qualitative methodology used in the research. Qualitative methodology helps us to investigate the new phenomenon deeper and in a wider range. Facts were collected by recording videos of different activities. These videos were then analysed and speeches were written down and analysed by coding the grounded theory (Strauss, Corbin, 1999).

Video-interaction was watched, counted and coded (Najvar, 2011). Facts were collected by video study of different activities. The choice of recording classes was defined by first analysing the Czech market and what it has to offer. Dates were divided into three categories according to the main purpose of the activity (see Table 2).

Table 2: What Czech activities can be offered for children zero-to-three years of age



The selection of recording classes was intentional. We focused in each category on the practical experience of the teacher, which needed to be at least 2 years. After the first analysis we set the main goals: for the future analysis we agreed to use previous categories and define other basic characteristics of early educational activities.

Current research includes 5 classes: one class of Baby Signs activity (45 min.) with 2 parents, 1 teacher and 4 toddlers; one class of Go Kids English for toddlers (45 min.) with 3 parents, 1 teacher and 4 toddlers; one class of swimming lessons (30 min.) with 6 parents, one teacher and 6 toddlers; one lesson of Yamaha class (45 min.) with 10 parents, 10 toddlers and one teacher; one class in private nurseries (90 min.) with no parents, 6 toddlers and two teachers.

## Findings

Early education has a wide field of aspects. After analysing, we divided the results into three points of view: teacher's view, parent's view and the child's view. The main approach of these remains is to see the children develop.

In every part we will use the definition of previous categories.

## The Parent in early childhood activity

Findings about communication between parents and children say that the parent is in contact with his/her child for

the whole lasting activity; the parent is a connection and conveyor of games and the main subject for the child. Nonverbal communication is the most represented (eye to eye contact, close position to child, hap tile contact, parent–child emotional well disposed).

The parent is the initiator of most of the games (80 % are prepared by teacher, 20 % are his own initiatives). There is a respect of the child's will and needs while learning to resolve problems of conflict and how to connect it with the running of the class.

Parents have strong reactions to initiatives of the child. Parent's motivation is happiness for their children and shared experiences.

### **Teacher in early childhood activity**

The teacher determines the main theme and concept of communication and games.

The teacher is limited by using teaching methods – mostly using frontal teaching 2-4 times in class. This is divided between individual teaching and 0-1 times of spontaneous play. One exception is in the nursery class where spontaneous plays are mostly used.

Teacher's communication is full of respect to the child, "yes" initiative – The adult receives an initiative from the child (Teacher in swimming class: "Yes, Peter, you do it well. Ok. You want this material?") Child receives a reaction (advise) from adult. (Boy smiles and shakes his head to say yes.)

### **Child in early childhood activity**

Children are not the initiators in games (except for the nurseries. There the children are the creators of their games). They absorb adult's actions and repeat them. But games and activities change so quickly that a child still has to pay attention.

Every class has its own order; games are going in the same order, which children know. Nela, a little girl said in the English class for toddlers, "Now it is time for choo-choo train."

Every child wants to (at least one time per class) explore some toy or materials for the lesson. And it depends on every parent how to work with this initiative. (Yes series: Mother in swimming lesson: "Yea, those beautiful dinosaurs. You can borrow them and swim ahead."; No series: "Mother in Baby signs class: "Ah, that is an plastic apple. Sorry, now is not the time for that.")

These verbal series open another category: emotion. Children's emotions were strong parts of the classes. The main emotions were: fear (new visitors, new games), anger (no series in communication), regret and happiness (after a well-done activity, after repetition).

Nursery rhymes were a background for each class. The Yamaha class and swimming class had almost 13 nursery rhymes.

Another category is independent exploring; it was mostly in nurseries (Girl Anne: "Look at me, I made it!" Boy Phillip comes into class and goes to shelves and chooses one toy.) In other classes the opportunities to explore depended on the teacher's will. (Teacher baby signs: "Of course, you can play with it." Yamaha teacher: "Sorry, it is no time for this.")

### **Conclusion**

The main goal of this research is to describe a situation and find out the processes in educational activities. The conclusion is that all the different classes (focused on language, motor, and social development) uses all the instruments to develop well rounded individuals (cognitive, language, motor coordination, etc.). A child develops the motor skills by coordination and concentration in every surveyed class. A child develops the language skills in every surveyed class by saying or signing the nursery rhymes. A child develops cognitive skills in every surveyed class by resolving conflicts and problems and managing games and tasks.

An interactionist perspective on pedagogical quality in preschool also means that the level of quality depends not only on how the environment and program are constituted to meet, extend and challenge the experience and intention of children, but also on how the child can influence and form both the overall environment and his or her own learning process (Sheridan in Pramling, N.; Pramling Samuelsson, I., 2011). The importance of being active and having the opportunity to change is really small in surveyed classes.

Early education activities of this research are well considered (program, accept child developmental aspects, ect). However, there is no place for developing independence and self-regulation (except nurseries). These skills can be developed by parents after class by using class experience.

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