

The phenomenon of institutional preschool education from the parents' perspective

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Abstract

In Slovak kindergartens, teachers are increasingly encountering increased diversity from both children and parents. This is due to the introduction of compulsory preschool education from 2021 for all 5-year-old children and the gradual implementation of the vision of inclusive education, which increases the demands on teachers' approach to children and the search for more effective strategies in mutual communication and cooperation with parents. This has received minimal consideration in the research field, despite the fact that it is the parents who can serve as important allies for teachers in the development and progress of children. The purpose of the present study was to explore parents' experiences with institutional preschool education and to discover what kindergarten teachers and directors should know about parents with preschooler. Qualitative research was conducted with 7 parents whose experiences were explored using the methods of constellation with figures, semi-structured interview and researcher's diary. The data collected were analysed and interpreted through an interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results of the research showed that parents' subjective experience of their children's preschool education in kindergarten is linked by 5 common themes, which include (1) selection of kindergarten, (2) the adaptation process, (3) teacher's personality, (4) cooperation with kindergarten, (5) the importance of preschool education, while each theme includes subthemes and quotations that further specify parents' experiences. At the same time, the research results revealed that institutional preschool education has significant relevance not only in the lives of children, but also for the parents.

Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, kindergarten, preschool education, parenting with a preschooler, subjective experience

Visions and limits of preschool education

Quality preschool education is a benefit not only for children but also for the whole society. It creates a prerequisite for higher education, better opportunities for employment, promotion of tolerance, acceptance of difference and less need for the state to invest funding in intervention programmes (Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019).

Preschool education in Slovakia is mainly provided by kindergartens and special kindergartens. In a figurative sense, kindergarten can be viewed as maternity care in combination with guided upbringing and education in an institutionalized form (Lipnická, 2016). According to the type of establishment, kindergartens in Slovakia are classified as state, church and private. These usually educate children from 3 to 6 years of age, exceptionally also children aged 2 and above. Younger children can be educated in facilities that are not governed by the Ministry of Education.

Parents' interest in institutional preschool education in Slovakia is higher than the available capacity of kindergartens. Slovakia has long been one of the European Union countries with the lowest number of children pre-trained prior to entering primary school. The introduction of compulsory pre-school education for all 5-year-olds from 2021 has improved the situation, but it is far from ideal. Compulsory pre-school education can also be completed in an individual form at the request of parents or for health reasons

(Act No. 245/2008 Coll.). In 2020, the education of children in kindergartens was limited by the pandemic caused by the coronavirus COVID-19. Kindergartens were closed at that time and later only available to parents of children working in critical infrastructure. During this period, for the first time, children were educated from home in online form. One in seven preschool children in Slovakia is not sufficiently prepared to enter primary school, mainly because they have not attended kindergarten (Hall et al., 2019), which is not only a matter of the availability of kindergartens, but also a lack of parental awareness of the importance of preschool education.

The overarching vision in the field of education is to ensure accessible, high quality and inclusive education for all children by 2030 (Eurofound, 2020). The risk factors to achieving the expected vision include 7 areas, namely child development, staff performance, quality of provided services, compliance with legal standards, curriculum implementation, workforce provision, working conditions and parental satisfaction (European commission, 2020). Parents in particular are now more difficult to reach due to changes in family structures and increasing social heterogeneity (Brühlmann & Staehelin, 2017; Vasarik Staub et al., 2018). But at the same time, according to Deslandes et al. (2015), teachers are underprepared to engage with parents, due to the increasing complexity of school-family relationships that has occurred in recent decades.

Parenting with a preschooler

The relationship between parent and child is rightly considered one of the most enduring and significant relationships in a person's life. It is shaped by the ways in which parents and children interact and engage with each other, whether on a physical, emotional, social or other level (Dance-Schissel, 2021). We can distinguish parenting from different perspectives. Legal parenthood is determined by law and in Slovakia it is a recognised role of both a woman and a man (Act No. 36/2005 Coll.). In biological parenting, the mother forms the act of giving birth and the father is constructed on the basis of the mother-child relationship (Cannell, 1990, p. 672). Social parenting is tied to the social relationships between parents and children and occurs when biological parents are unable, incapable or unwilling to fulfil their parental rights and responsibilities (Pagáčová, 2017).

Due to a change in the family situation, whether by separation, death or other reasons, the family may have a female composition if the daughter lives with the mother and grandmother in the same household, or a male composition if the son lives with the father and grandfather. A child may also grow up in a family with half-siblings and a stepfather. Thus, a surrogate family may replace the original or dysfunctional family (Tragelová, 2020, p. 74). Cohabitation can also be a form of living arrangement of the parents. This form of living arrangement involves two partners of the opposite sex living together without marriage; the children of one or both partners, or joint children, can also live with them (Mendelová, 2014a).

In a single-parent family, only one parent is involved in the upbringing of the children and it is necessary to distinguish under what conditions the family has become incomplete (Mendelová, 2014b). When a child with a disability is born into an intact family, the parent goes through certain stages of acceptance. According to Šuhajdová (2018), the first of these is the shock phase, followed by the denial phase and grief. A balance then occurs, which ends the anger phase and a partial reconciliation with the diagnosis follows. The last phase involves coming to terms with the diagnosis and seeking available forms of help. After a divorce or separation of partners, children may be in the sole or alternate custody of their parents. According to Tragelová (2020), it is more challenging for

mothers if they find themselves in the position of single parent. Fathers are often happier with sole custody because they have fewer financial worries and can more easily manage their children's behaviour. The conditions for approval of alternating custody are that the parents live close to each other, believe that the other parent is equally important to the child, and are able to work flexibly with each other (Tragelová, 2020). According to Hellinger & Neuhauser (2005), after a divorce, children should go to the parent who respects the other partner more, which is considered a beautiful principle where the situation is calmed down.

The preschool child is not immune to the influences of the physical and social environment (Woodhouse, 2006), and his or her development depends on a complex variety of external influences that can be categorized according to their intensity and degree of immediacy (Bronfenbrenner & Moris, 1998). Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that the world of both children and each of us consists of systems that interact with each other and with each individual who is part of them. He breaks down systems into the microsystem, which is comprised of the child and his or her relationship with the other people with whom he or she interacts (Millová, 2009, p. 49). It classifies social groups into choice groups, which the child had the opportunity to choose, and non-choice groups, which were assigned to the child, an example being the family (Sobotková, 2001). In a microsystem, two siblings attending the same kindergarten may function quite differently, as each interacts with the environment in a different way. Another is the mesosystem, which forms a whole unit over all the relationships of which the child is a part (Shelton, 2018, p. 22). The family-school relationship can be included here, with children's experiences in the family being different from those in kindergarten. The exosystem influences the child indirectly through individuals or groups that the child may not know. This may be the parents' employment, their workload and the family's economic situation. The macrosystem includes the social system of the country in which the child lives. This includes the history, culture, values, and norms that shape the child's social context and experience (Millová, 2009). The chronosystem represents the temporal dimension according to which society changes over time. This can be the influence of the media on the child (Sobotková, 2001) and various milestones, which include, for example, the transition from kindergarten to primary school. Influenced by chronological changes and events, children develop not only physically but also emotionally (MacBlain & Gray, 2017).

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research was to learn about parents' experiences with preschool children in kindergarten and to discover what kindergarten teachers and directors should know about parents with preschool children.

Research methods

Parents' subjective experiences of their children's pre-school education were explored by applying figure constellation methods, through which parents visually interpreted their family and kindergarten system. In the second phase, a semi-structured interview was conducted with the parents and the researcher's diary was also used as part of the research. The collected data were transcribed into a text format after each individual meeting with the participant and their analysis contributed to a more thoughtful formulation of the questions in each subsequent meeting (Mišovič, 2019).

Research sample selection

The research was conducted on a sample of 7 parents (Smith et al., 2009). The criterion for the first selection was a homogeneous sample of parents (Gavora, 2006) who had experience of preschool education of children in kindergarten. The shortlisting criteria were deliberate and sequential to reflect the diversity of contemporary parents.

Analysis of research findings (P – participant)

P	Participant/age	Education	Financial income	Forms of living/care	Number of kids	Kinder-garten
P1	mother/32	higher education	low	single parent/sole custody	1	public
P2	mother/29	further education	standard	twice married	2	special private
P3	mother/36	further education	above standard	married	1	private
P4	mother/39	further education	low	husband and wife	4	public
P5	father/44	higher education	above standard			
P6	father/ 42	higher education	standard	married	2	public
P7	mother/34	higher education	standard	cohabitation/alternating care	1	public

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

The data collected were analysed by applying an interpretative phenomenological analysis, which was carried out in the 8 steps outlined below (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

1. The transcribed interviews from audio to text format were checked to verify that the audio format matched the text.
2. The interview in text format was read repeatedly. In the text, annotations were assigned in order to relate to parents' experiences.
3. Themes were identified in the read text, and subtopics were assigned to them and modified by repeated readings.
4. The interrelationships between the individual parts and the whole unit were recognized in parallel and continuously modified as necessary.
5. The selected themes and their associated subthemes with quotations were arranged in a tabular format and interpreted in the form of narrative notation.
6. By processing the data of a particular participant, further questions emerged that formed part of the design of the next semi-structured interview with other participants.
7. Collaboration with participants and the audit was used in data processing to make and develop coherence and acceptability of interpretation.
8. After analysing the interviews of all participants included in the research, common themes were sought across all cases. The criterion for repetition of each themes was defined at half of the cases (Smith et al., 2009).

Research results

Analysis of the data revealed 5 common themes that linked parents' subjective experiences with preschool children's education in kindergarten.

Theme no. 1: Selection of kindergarten

Parents' selection of a kindergarten was influenced by three main criteria (1) accessibility (2) public opinion (3) parents' own experience. The criterion of kindergarten accessibility resulted from the parents' desire to reconcile work and family life with the organizational conditions of the kindergarten.

"It just annoyed me, you know, that I had to rush all the time. I was in a hurry to get to kindergarten and then to work and then from work to pick them up. I was under such stress somehow. I think of the whole kindergarten period as a big, negative and burdensome experience." (P6)

In addition to the above-mentioned time accessibility, parents took into account the financial affordability of kindergartens, accessibility with regard to the individual specifics of children, and the applicable legal norms to ensure that children meet the conditions for admission to kindergarten when making their choice. The main selection criterion was „just so they accept him or her“ due to the poor availability of kindergartens, which limited parents' ability to take their own preferences into account when choosing a kindergarten.

"I was worried about the kindergarten, but in the end they accepted our children, since Miška was already a preschooler they automatically accepted my younger daughter because she met the criteria for priority sibling admission." (P3)

Parents compensated for limited kindergarten options by seeking positive references and taking public opinion into account in an effort to confirm that the available choice of kindergarten was the best possible solution. In the case of their own positive experience with the kindergarten, other, younger children of the parents also attended the same kindergarten.

"I have to say, though, that really this kindergarten has been great, and other moms say it's one of the best in the city. Normally I would maybe put my little one in it, it's just a bit far away from us." (P1)

Theme no. 2 Adaptation process

The adaptation process was interpreted by parents in four basic phases (1) pre-adaptation period (2) adaptation (3) post-adaptation and (4) repetitive adaptation. Adaptation to kindergarten was a similarly challenging period for both parents and for the children, as it fundamentally affected the previously established system in the functioning of the family. Parents associated the pre-adaptation period with preparation for coping with kindergarten. During the adaptation period, parents were challenged by the change in family functioning, unpredictability in children's behaviour, time stress and questioning the quality of their own parenting if their children's adaptation was unsuccessful. Parents found many of the teachers' procedures during the adaptation period incomprehensible, especially if it was the parents' first experience of kindergarten.

"Tommy was supposed to go for two days as a sort of trial adaptation and on the very first day they returned him after forty minutes, so it was terrible for us, I didn't understand it, I didn't understand why they returned him, after all he would have stopped crying eventually." (P3)

During the adaptation period, some parents had difficulty distinguishing between the teaching staff and the other kindergarten staff, which caused them some discomfort when

making their first contacts with the teachers. During this period, parents appreciated the proven advice from the teaching staff on how to manage the adaptation more successfully. The greatest reassurance for parents was when they came to pick up their child from kindergarten in the afternoon and the child was happy.

"In the morning when the little one was crying the headmistress wanted to take her away from me but in the end she said you know what, I can't take her out of your arms, you have to give her to me, I can't be the bad one, you have to give her to me." (P1)

The next phase was the post-adaptation period, when the child was accustomed to the kindergarten and only occasionally some problems occurred due to the fact that in the meantime another new child entered the kindergarten, or due to a prolonged absence, the child has become weaned off the kindergarten environment.

"In the beginning, he got sick and was home for almost three weeks and then he was adjusting to kindergarten again. The parting was difficult at the time. When we were in the changing room alone it was still okay, but when a child came in there crying then Pet'ko always started crying as well." (P2)

Parents also experienced repetitive adaptation, especially during the period when the child was transitioning from the original kindergarten to another new kindergarten.

"When my younger son changed kindergartens, I just didn't know anything about the teachers and didn't even care for that year. It must be something awful for those kids to have their community developed and for them to go into a completely different environment." (P6)

Theme no. 3 Teacher's personality

The teacher's personality was perceived by the parents from three aspects (1) professionalism (2) approach to children (3) approach to parents. Parents perceived the teachers as professionals who know exactly what needs to be done with the children in order for them to make the desired progress and be ready to enter primary school. The problem was if the child fell short of the expected standard in some area of development, when, according to the parents, the teacher began to fall short communicatively.

"I didn't like, for example, being told in front of my son that he didn't know something, that he was the worst at doing his homework, once again Janko was not able to connect, Janko was behind, Janko wasn't paying attention, Janko was absent-minded, Janko doesn't listen when I say something and Janko was crying." (P7)

More important than the teacher's education for the parents was her attitude towards the children. They appreciated the warm kind approach with natural authority. It was helpful for them if the teachers were able to resolve the children's minor conflicts at the kindergarten level, did not give unnecessary unwanted advice to the parents and did not interfere with their children's upbringing.

"Someone who has not had the education, but with proper effort and attitude he or she can give so much to the child that the child has a memory of it for the rest of his or her life. And then of course the human side of it, such goodness must be coming out of them in that kindergarten." (P6)

Teachers were differentiated by parents according to whether those who taught their children were "ours" or "the others", with one of the teachers generally being the preferred teacher for both child and parent. They appreciated if staff were able to take into account a parent's individual situation in certain situations and provide them with benefits to the extent available.

"I know I put her in kindergarten even though I shouldn't have, she had those sniffles and stuff, but they never told me keep her home for a week, I couldn't even afford it at the time, even though I saw recommending it to other kids and I appreciated that a lot." (P1)

It was helpful for the parents when the teachers had experience of the problem they were currently dealing with, for example, in determining alternate custody, in writing reports for the courts, and when they were able to guide, support or give professional advice to the parents. Parents were not directly involved in the kindergarten unless they were initiated by the teachers.

"The children were bringing something from kindergarten every now and then, they were reciting poems, singing at home, they had their work displayed at the display, and many times the parent doesn't even have that much time to devote to them because the mother has to cook lunch, go to work, go to the store. The parent is always doing something." (P5)

Theme no. 4 Cooperation with kindergarten

The cooperation between parents and the kindergarten can be differentiated into (1) direct (2) indirect and (3) mediated according to the degree of their involvement. Direct cooperation was related to the active participation of parents in pre-school education, especially at the time of remote education, when parents were direct participants and actors in pre-school education.

"We had remote learning. It was something new, it's demanding on the technical equipment let's say, but those teachers tried to do some 30-minute inputs at least once or twice a week, so that four, five kids met there together." (P5)

Indirect cooperation was carried out through the involvement of parents in volunteering, in landscaping the grounds or in dealing with some additional equipment for the kindergarten. With participation in programs and events organized by the kindergarten, in the provision of material equipment for children in the implementation of trips, excursions and events in kindergarten. Sharing information about children in relation to their pre-school education with teaching staff, in the wider community of parents and in contact with other people familiar with the children.

"The teacher was able to tell us what they were discussing or show us the notebooks of how the children were writing, how Hanka was doing, she would regularly report back to us, document what they had done when they were drawing, writing, creating something. I had the information and I was always in the loop. I didn't even have to ask questions." (P4)

A new trend in parent-to-parent communication following the pandemic response has been a preference for easily accessible electronic communication by sharing videos, photos, and information about children's progress. Not all parents were in favour of cooperating with the kindergarten and considered it an advantage if they did not have to deal with anything except their child in cooperation with the kindergarten.

"After such a long day, to still have to deal with the problems of the kindergarten is something I wouldn't even have the nerve to do. I'm happy as it is that I don't have to deal with anything." (P3)

The mediated cooperation was carried out by the parents themselves, but also by obtaining communicated information from the life of the kindergarten, which had either a positive or negative impact on the parents' attitudes towards the kindergarten and the preschool education of their children.

Theme no. 5 The importance of preschool education

Parents rated the importance of preschool education on two levels, (1) in relation to their children and (2) in relation to parenting. Parents evaluated the importance of

preschool education in relation to children, especially with the socialization of children, in their opportunity for daily contact with peers who helped them to overcome the transition from the intimate environment of the family to the unfamiliar environment of the kindergarten. They also associated preschool education with the formation of the first lasting friendships in children's lives, which they saw as an important milestone in their future social functioning.

"Each of them found a friend in kindergarten, Miška still meets with Natálka, she is her best friend from kindergarten." (P4)

They linked the importance of pre-school education with learning through play, with respect for authority, in the refinement of self-care skills and in the gradual preparation for coping with school responsibilities. Parents did not address the formal content of preschool education because they perceived its benefits in the children's visible progress.

"My daughter has learned independence, basic things like dressing, she has learned to eat with cutlery and especially in the last school year I have seen her progress the most, she has learned different things, shapes, colours and different other basic things. They were actually getting ready for school by that point." (P1)

The kindergarten supported the children in solving their eating problems and overcoming other obstacles, especially in the context of their social-emotional development. For parents, the factors of well-being, developing children's potential and taking into account children's individual specificities were key in their approach to their children. The period when the child did not enter primary school and continued preschool education was perceived quite critically by the parents on the grounds that it was no longer of any benefit to the children.

"I hated that kindergarten with all my heart. I was sick of it when I saw it wasn't giving them anything anymore, it was just about killing time." (P6)

Parents agreed that the impact of remote education on their children was mainly visible in their decreased readiness to cope with school duties and in their lower independence.

"Hanka had these notebooks and they practiced the lines and everything, and then she had a better start in the school, whereas now with Lucy I didn't see anything like that, they were just drawing and making things. Her writing is just ugly now and she doesn't even want to do her homework, like she's not as ready for that school it seems to me." (P4)

Parents also visited other professionals with their children in order to achieve their optimal progress before starting primary school. In relation to parents, the kindergarten often fulfilled the function of an institutional partner, as many parents, due to mobility for work, separation, moving, were not in contact with the immediate family or did not have a partner if they were in the position of a single parent or had a child in alternating care.

"We don't have parents here because we don't come from here. We don't have anybody here. That means that even when the children went to kindergarten and got sick, we had no one to help us." (P5)

The kindergarten was at the same time a guide for parents in the progress of their children, an advisor in the field of approach to children and the first professional critic in the upbringing and education of children.

"And thanks to the fact that the headmistress admitted Linduška to the kindergarten, I was able to start work and get into a normal life. I met a new partner and started to live a normal life, so I owe the headmistress a lot." (P1)

Parents were hindered by the excessive transparency of their private life for the kindergarten teaching staff, which limited their further interest in cooperating with the kindergarten.

"They constantly wanted to talk and I was nervous about it. You see, I didn't want to talk to them. I just don't care. If somebody wants something, let them do it I don't want to be a part of it, I just don't care about their PTAs either." (P6)

Discussion

The aim of the conducted research was to reveal parents' experiences with preschool education of children in kindergarten. Data in the qualitative oriented research were collected on a sample of 7 parents by applying the method of figure constellation, semi-structured interview and researcher's diary. The collected data were analyzed through interpretative phenomenological analysis. The results of the research showed that parents' experiences of their children's preschool education in kindergarten, despite their individual differences, were united by five common themes.

The first theme was the selection of kindergarten, which was conditioned by accessibility, public opinion and, in the case of parents with several children, their own experience. For parents in Daharia & Ya's (2011) research, safety and security, quality of teaching, hygiene, cleanliness, and preferred religious values were critical in choosing a kindergarten. The criteria set were conditional on ethnicity, religion, occupation and parental income. Obviously, the criteria for selecting a kindergarten are not only based on parents' preferences, but are also influenced by the opportunities, values and culture of the environment in which the parent and the child live.

The second common theme among parents was the adaptation process, which parents differentiated into four periods, pre-adaptation, adaptation, post-adaptation, and a period of repetitive adaptation. According to the research findings of Hejzlarová et al. (2021), abandonment of a parent can be just as challenging as abandonment of a child, which was confirmed by the research findings.

The third common theme of the parents was the personality of the teacher. Parents classified the teachers as "the other ones" and "our ones" who provided education and training for the children, with one of the teachers being preferred by both the child and the parent. Parents expected the teachers to be professional, kind to the children and accepting of them as parents. In research by Gol-Guven (2014), according to parents, teachers should be patient, empathetic and respect individual differences between children, which confirms that parents value above all the social-emotional aspect in teachers' approach to children.

The fourth common theme of the parents was cooperation with kindergarten. In the context of preschool education, parental cooperation was differentiated into direct, indirect and mediated. Paccaud et al. (2021) found that some parents trust the school and for this reason do not need to be involved in the school as long as all is well with their children. What is needed, they say, is to find a compromise between parents who want, don't want or can't cooperate. In practice, however, it is often the case that those parents who fundamentally refuse to cooperate need cooperation the most.

Under the fifth theme, parents evaluated the importance of preschool education, which in their opinion was mainly in the socialization of children, in the children's daily contact with peers, in learning through play, and with the gradual preparation of children to cope with school duties. Similar findings were reached by Metaferia et al. (2020) identifying that for parents in their research, children's social development was more important than their academic achievement. At the same time, the experience of parents confirmed that kindergarten is not only an educational institution for children, but also for parents themselves. In spite of the research conducted, the question remains to what extent

teachers and parents know their mutual possibilities and expectations from preschool education of children in kindergarten, and what would change if they knew them.

A limitation of the research conducted was the first experience with interpretive phenomenological analysis, and due to the small sample of participants, it is not possible to generalize the results of the research to all parents with children in preschool.

Conclusion

The results of the qualitatively oriented research showed that parents' experience of their children's preschool education is linked by 5 common themes, which include (1) kindergarten selection, (2) the adaptation process, (3) teacher's personality, (4) cooperation with kindergarten, and (5) the importance of preschool education. The research showed that preschool education was an important milestone not only in the lives of the children but also in the lives of the parents. For parents, the kindergarten was an institutional partner, advisor, guide and often in the position of the first professional critic in the upbringing and education of children. The research conducted confirmed that knowledge of parents' experiences can be an effective tool to better understand current parents' parenting, which appears to be readily available mean for finding strategies to better collaboration, communication, and parental involvement in their children's preschool education. At the same time, getting to know parents' individual experiences makes it easier to overcome barriers and differences on the part of the family and the kindergarten and thus eliminate limits in children's preschool education.

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