

BARRIERS TO PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PARENTS OF PRESCHOOL AGED CHILDREN IN ENVIRONMENTS AT RISK OF SOCIAL EXCLUSION¹

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Introduction

We touch upon a topic which is very often discussed, especially in the general public, where we meet with many stereotyped and simplistic ideas about the issues which almost always gives the subject population group a negative image.

We are aware that there are still barriers to education. Sometimes, these obstacles are objective, obvious, such that the state is more or less successfully trying to react to, at other (or simultaneous) times, these barriers are subjective which can include a wide range of possibilities, from buck-passing disregard to facts through ignorance down to the manifestations of personal prejudice and stereotypes.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the above barriers that have been identified in the framework of the project implemented in 2014 and 2015 by workers of the Institute of Pedagogical and Psychological Sciences of the Faculty of Public Policies, Silesian University in Opava, and that were perceived as barriers in preschool education by parents of preschool children from environments in danger of social exclusion.

1 Research Sample

Our contribution is conceived as a discussion, therefore we only present here selected outputs of the survey of our research, which are necessary to achieve the objectives of the paper. The comprehensive methodological anchorage is part of the research report. For the purposes of the contribution, the authors made use of secondary data analysis.

The research sample consisted of 105 parents (meaning that 105 non-standardized, semi-structured interviews were carried out), who were then divided into four groups:

- 13 parents of children from environments endangered by social exclusion whose children attend preschool,

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- 10 parents of children from environments endangered by social exclusion whose children attend preparatory pre-primary classes,
- 37 parents of children from environments endangered by social exclusion whose children do not attend any institution or organization supporting preschool education of children,
- 45 parents of children from environments endangered by social exclusion whose children attend low-threshold preschool education.

The data were collected in six regions of the Czech Republic (Karlovy Vary, Southern Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, Central Bohemia, Hradec Králové and Olomouc). The aim was not to build a hierarchical ranking of perceived barriers to preschool education according to the responses of parents of children living in areas at risk of social exclusion, e.g. using the method of simple enumeration, but to assemble a summary of such barriers.

1.1 Perceived external barriers which can be an obstacle to early childhood education according to the respondents' answers

One of the main external barriers identified was, as expected, insufficient capacity of preschool facilities, which was described in detail in the discussion paper in the previous issue (cf. Kolaříková, 2015). In this paper, we present a discussion of other barriers to entry of children from environments at risk of social exclusion to pre-school education, as identified based on the testimony of parents of these children.

Non-Inclusion in Preschool Because of the Preference of Employed Parents

The barrier we have identified is quite explicitly related to insufficient capacities. Parents of preschool children from the environment at risk of social exclusion thus come into situations which need to be viewed from two angles. On the one hand, preschools assume that if the mothers are unemployed, they have enough time to care for their children, on the other hand, these mothers cannot actively and systematically seek for a job. The responsibility for raising the child may "correctly" be in the hands of the parents and state institutions (here represented by a preschool) do not assume it, but we know clearly that the environmental risk of social exclusion in which the child grows up is unstimulating (not only in the material sense) and it is often not possible for the parents, the mothers, to manage preschool preparation.

Therefore, a barrier is set that in the context of the issues of unemployment of people in environments at risk of social exclusion and in context of the lack of places in preschool facilities creates a vicious circle.

Non-Acceptance to Preschool in Case of Undocumented Permanent Residence or Other Local District

For this perceived barrier, the authors decided to combine two very similar obstacles where especially the local district becomes most interesting. Parents of children realize that it is imperative that their children grow up in and are integrated into the mainstream society. Therefore, they do not look for a nursery school near their residence, but rather in another part of the city (municipality), if such

a possibility exists. Such an approach can be unambiguously described as positive but due to the fact that the selected nursery school is not their "district preschool", they are rejected. In its essence, this barrier is primarily external, but de facto, it arises due to the independent decision of the parents. We encountered testimonies of parents who have confirmed that if their children are not accepted into the preschools of their choice, they rather let them stay at home because, as a principle, they do not agree with the inclusion of their children to preschools near their dwelling places. They are greatly dissatisfied with the inability to place the child according to their own choice.

One of the criteria for the acceptance of a child into the nursery school is the permanent residence of the child's legal representatives in the given municipality. For many families, especially families of socially excluded localities, this criterion is discriminatory in its own way. Families migrate, for example, because of cheaper accommodation and do not have their official permanent residence in the place of their dwelling. The child is then denied the right to education.

If we consider the two barriers mentioned so far from a different point of view, we may even trace signs of so-called indirect discrimination. The authors are aware that this is a rather bold statement, but bearing in mind that the purpose of the existence of preschool and its primary function is education, this case actually prefers its social function of making life easier for the workers to its main function. We are aware that due to the insufficient capacity, there must be criteria to deciding on the acceptance or non-acceptance. However, if in the very beginning, the introduction of compulsory last preschool year was considered due to the benefits of such a step for children from socially disadvantaged environments, we need to realize that the current system itself is set up in a way that creates this barrier². The solution rather lies in systematic, long-term work with children of preschool age from unstimulating environments much earlier than the year before joining school.

The Financial Requirements on a Child Included in Preschool

Considering financial requirements as another identified (expected) barrier, the authors were surprised at the complexity of its perception by the respondents. Apart from payments for preschool, which are pardonable under certain state-set conditions, the respondents were aware of the overall financial demands of the participation of children in preschool. In addition to the charges for the stay and food, they pointed out particularly the expenses on clothing, clubs and occasional extra activities. These payments are pardonable, again under certain conditions, but finances spent on clothes, photo shoots, creating masks for masked balls, etc., are not. One of the respondents proposed the introduction of uniforms as a solution. The respondents quite properly considered the financial expenditure on the placement of children in preschool comprehensively, not just for the mere "stay". Well aware of the risk of possible exclusion from the children's peer group, if their children could not participate in these events due to their parents' financial inadequacy. The effort not to ostentatiously put forward the social situation of the family is very apparent here, so that their children do not become the subject of mockery.

The majority of respondents, however, recognize the importance of pre-school education, which is why some of them try to compensate for the financial demands of a nursery school by at least

²The authors note that they are not proponents of mandatory preschool attendance.

having their children participate in the preparatory classes (if they are established at their place of residence).

We certainly are not proponents of a state where everything must be free for all – after all, not even the English utopian socialist Robert Owen (1771–1858) was (cf. Janiš Jr., 2010). The economic requirements of the child's attendance at nursery school, which would have been paid for by the state (or regional, or municipal budgets), are inconceivable. For the success of the educational process, the relationships among children are also substantial, however, they can be undermined by what is described above. If it were possible to pay all the costs associated with the stay of children of a particular social group in nursery school, this approach would probably lead to an increase in social tension.

Poor Accessibility

Poor accessibility may be partly included in financial difficulty, provided that the parents let the child travel alone, for example by bus. Overall, however, this was mentioned by the responders as a marginal obstacle. Such a result can be recognized in the fact that poor availability of transport actually is non-existent for the majority of the respondents, or at least it did not pose a problem in the places of the realization of this research. We allow ourselves to assert that the issues of transportation accessibility can be more closely analysed based on the map of socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic. Objectively, the availability of transport will naturally only affect several areas. In this context, however, it can become one of the main obstacles.

The Feeling of Exclusion Because of Socio-Cultural Differences

In our view, this perceived barrier is relatively alarming. In its essence, it constitutes a discriminatory approach. Relatively because it would be naive to assume that this does not happen, and furthermore, it can constitute a substitute problem (see below). Above all, however, from the fact that all interviewees were to some extent reconciled with the fact that preschools do not accept them based on where they come from or what nationality they are. They do not seek a solution to it, they have accepted it. Based on this, our barrier implements the word "sense" in itself.

There were also responses that parents from socially excluded localities were told that the other parents do not wish that their child is admitted to preschools³, which is why they unfortunately have to be refused.

There is no doubt about the fact that respondents and the members of the observed target group in general can encounter similar or identical situations. On the other hand, it is necessary to ask the question what the atmosphere in nursery schools will be, if mandatory attendance in the last year of preschool does pass? That is a question to which there currently is no answer, we can only guess.

³ The article repeatedly shows that this is true predominantly among Roma.

Unpleasant Experience or Information About a Preschool

The respondents' statements which fall within this identified barrier are almost not publishable. In English we could do with three, four words, but respondents expressed themselves in great hyperbolic creativity of exercising the vulgar language. Bad experience applied particularly to prejudices publicly exhibited by many teachers of preschools, in particular against children from socially excluded localities (mostly Roma), their labelling, stricter attitude to them, and absolute intolerance of differences. We realize that situations and not very good experiences of the respondents as described to us could be portrayed very differently by the other party. Likewise, it may be the "stories" carrying the traits of hoax. However, we cannot deny that this is an existing barrier.

Removing this barrier, however, is much more complicated, as it relates to the preparation of the pedagogical staff in preschools, to increasing their direct experience with children with differences and the like. It is a condition that cannot be changed in a year or two (perhaps it can never be changed). Furthermore, it is connected with the purposeful cooperation between parents and preschools in the way the employees of preschools (not only pedagogical) and the parents communicate, encouraging mutual tolerance of diversity and mutual respect. Our goal should be to completely eliminate this barrier within the context of an inclusive society.

Unsatisfactory Solution to the Lack of Places

Parents often also expressed displeasure when looking for preschool education and their only option is a preparatory class at a practical elementary school. This option is either understood as a very brief transitional option, or they rather do not let their child go anywhere. The unifying argument was that the preparatory class has no positive benefit for the child, not only due to the content of the activities in it, but also due to the composition of the pupils alone. This is closely connected with the barrier, which connects to the district nature of preschool.

Thus, even if there is a realistic option for some form of preschool education available to them, they do not hold it for appropriate for their children. It can be appreciated that they think about and consider the possible impact on their child. However, we can further discuss where from and how much selective actually is the information parents have about the content of educational activities in preparatory classes of these schools.

1.2 Perceived Internal Barriers Which Can Be an Obstacle to Early Childhood Education According to the Answers of Respondents from Socially Excluded Localities

Respondents testified about their internal barriers that may form obstacles to the integration of their child into preschool.

Some of the reasons that the respondents mentioned were related to their parental educational style and general lifestyle. They admit that they are afraid for the children, they want to rather keep them at home; in many cases, they did let the children go to preschool, but when they saw how unhappy they were, they took them back home. The responses also betrayed the underestimation of

the importance of preschool education. There were also places where the respondents commented critically on the behaviour of some members of their community, which negatively affects the opinion of the majority on them and thus can negatively affect the attitudes of the majority to all others. Through the negative experience of the majority with several individuals from a particular environment, the education and education process can ultimately be adversely complicated. Eight respondents even answered that they have a great interest in their child being educated and having studied and found a good job in the future.

Concerns For the Children So No One Hurts Them

Responses included in this barrier we have codified could be interpreted as dealing with parents who carry out upbringing in an overprotective manner. They fear that the children will not be treated as they are accustomed to treat them, they will not like preschool, etc. At the same time, however, many of them are aware of the excessive dependence of children on their help. Some of the parents, at the same time, do not trust the pedagogical staff, especially since they cannot see individual approach, they presume inattentiveness and lack of concern for the health and happiness of precisely their child. This barrier would probably be identifiable even with the families of the majority society who do not entrust nursery schools with their children.

The Attitudes of the Child Affecting the Reactions of Parents

The attitude of a child influencing the response of the parents is closely related to the above mentioned. It is quite natural that some of the children find it difficult at first to get used to attending preschool and particularly to be separated from their family. Morning crying, "scenes", running away from the changing room, evening begging for not having to go anywhere. Some parents, especially the hypersensitive mothers, also cannot psychically manage these situations. Eventually, the children receive a new role, they are enthusiastic about the new environment, games, toys, friends, they learn to manage a part of the day without their parents and to respect other authorities. Among the respondents, there were a large part of parents who were very sensitive to the discomfort of their children and were not patient enough in the adaptation process. If children cried, begged, complained, or fretted that they did not want to go to the nursery school, they met their wishes so as not to torment them. They did not further ponder the impact of this "concession", the most important thing to them was not to knowingly expose the child to stressful situations. Precisely the attitude of such parents may be crucial to us. Introducing the obligation of preschool education certainly will not increase the value of education in the eyes of these parents. They may start viewing the very education system itself as "something" that could threaten their child. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the child's adaptation to the new environment will be successful in time.

Underestimating the Importance of Preschool

Almost in conclusion, we come to the barrier which can be considered as one of the key ones. The respondents' answers, which can be categorized under the above-mentioned barrier can be divided into two groups. Although we have not been quantifying our results, we make an exception here. Approximately one third of the respondents surveyed, a considerable part, fall under this barrier. The

first group consists of parents who on the one hand, underestimated the importance of preschool, but on the other hand claimed that they "work" with the children to some extent at home, trying to implement at least part of the activities which in their view, their child needs before going to school; most often, they learn colours, shapes and counting. Given the fact that the question was formulated in such a way that summoned socially desirable answers, it was not our intention to evaluate the responses according to whether we believe that the respondents did not respond truthfully. At the same time, we did not aim to assess the respondents' ideas about educational activities in preschool. The second group consisted of respondents who approached their family pre-school education at least intuitively, they considered their children as clever, went out to meet their requirements (drawing, building), and did not feel the need to do anything special with them. Both groups consider preschool as something superfluous and useless, something that is easily replaceable.

While it may be appreciated that according to their testimony, the parents do not give up their parental responsibilities, in connection with the unstimulating environment of the families and with the local environment, this cannot be seen as positive.

Perceived Problematic Behaviour of Some Families from Socially Excluded Localities

Some parents of children particularly from socially excluded localities do not want their children to attend only facilities intended for them, i.e. facilities attended by the majority of children from the socially excluded locality. They realize that it is necessary to learn to live together with the majority as soon as possible, not to first start seeing them in primary school. They responded to the fact that in these preschools or preschool clubs, there were the majority of children from these localities, mostly of the Roma ethnicity. Their attitude showed that they are interested in teaching their children to be with others, not to live in social isolation as they are.

However, this way, this barrier somewhat merges with the barrier caused by the preschool districts (see above), but it has a much wider overlap where we could use the cliché that "everybody is not the same". Indeed, they are not, but some parents perceived that a part of their social group did support the prejudices and stereotyping ingrained in the mainstream society.

At the same time, a number of respondents said that they are not happy when only children of their community or with similar problems are together in the facility, and many of them realize that, for instance, the immediacy in the behaviour of a particular ethnic group and the immediate emotional outbursts do not benefit the children who have to keep calm for their preparation for school. Most frequent in the testimonies was the appearance of discontent stemming from adult relationships to each other. It is also for this reason that the parents want to give their children a chance to grow up in an environment of cultural variety, especially including the majority.

Other respondents who live in socially excluded localities and are not of the Roma ethnic group, perceive it negatively if they are ranked in education together with the Roma based on the location of their residence.

Absence from the Enrolment to Preschool

One of the reasons why some children are not included in preschool is the failure to meet the preschool enrolment conditions with all the requisites and within the deadline. The question is

whether it is an internal or external barrier. If we only saw this as the parents' "fault", it definitely is an internal barrier. If the mistake was the lack of information, it would be an external barrier. The respondents indicated that they feel that they have little information about enrolment to preschool. They do not know that there is a fixed date for registration and when they decide they want to put a child in preschool, they are rejected due to the failure to meet the deadline. This in turn can be interpreted by them as a mere excuse, with the presumption that the real reasons for rejection are different.

A possible interpretation could be such that the lack of awareness is associated with lower interest in institutionalized preschool education of some of the parents (see above).

Conclusion

The barriers we have identified are consistent with another research implemented by Hülle et al. (2015); they can therefore be considered as actually existing and proven. Our contribution is intended to be a discussion, but we do not intend to discuss barriers as such, but their existence in the context of compulsory preschool education.

Although we have primarily divided barriers into internal and external ones, other possible divisions are visible, or other factors identifiable that influence or even create them. If we eliminate the barriers that may be considered as removable from the economic aspect⁴ (increasing capacity in nursery schools, increasing the number of pedagogical staff, etc.) only those barriers remain which are more difficult to overcome.

When we introduce a "duty", will the opinions on preschool education change in a positive way? When parents do not want their children to be together with other children of the same community in a preschool, where to place them? Who is to pay the children's clothing, meals, trips and performances? How do we prevent convincing the parents that the children in the nursery do not suffer, but develop and enjoy it, even if they do not want to leave their mommy in the morning? How to ensure the education of the pedagogical staff in this area and to promote acceptance of differences among them?

The above questions for discussion are based on the identified barriers. We can imagine answers to all of the above, however, all of them will be followed by a "but". The issues outlined here are also closely connected with the general approach to tackling social exclusion and promoting an inclusive society. This is, therefore, a complex issue that is not to be resolved by imposing from the state level the obligation to one-year preschool education.

⁴ We believe that the financial means spent in pursuit of this purpose are inefficient from the perspective of the whole of the issues in question.

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