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CURRENT INNOVATIONS IN THE CZECH PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

1. Introduction

Experts in all the work fields continuously focus on innovations. The topic of innovative concepts cannot be viewed in isolation, but in the current wider context of work, theory, and research (Průcha, 2001, p. 12). The social and pedagogical changes respond to the dissatisfaction of parents, teachers, politicians, and children at schools.

The term innovation comes from the Latin word *innovare*, which means to renew in the Czech language. The term innovation was first used in the economic sphere, primarily thanks to the Czech native of Třešť u Jihlavy, American economist, Josef Alois Schumpeter. The term gradually reached all the areas of life and became an integral part of our society. It represents imagination, creativity (Rýdl, 2003, p. 10), responsibility for recreation when obsolescence is identified, so the new product or process matches its area's stage of development associated with the current innovations. However, innovations may not always be only beneficial. Some innovations may have negative, sometimes even destructive, impacts on the society, e.g. military inventions in general.

There are multiple definitions of the term 'innovation'. Some are focused on the economy, e.g. the National Innovation Strategy deriving from the specification of the European Commission (Viturka, 2010, p. 138). Other innovations are focused on the general meaning of the word when they express the fact that innovations are associated with the creation of some value and positive contributions (Drucker, 1993, p. 45). From the sociological perspective, innovation

may be perceived as a specific type of non-conforming behaviour supported by a great cultural emphasis on success (Merton, 2000). The innovation principle rests in the search for a more perfect model, a path through a specific area of human activities. The measuring of innovation effects is complicated because innovation implementation is a continuous process joined and affected by various factors. In the education system, the result should be an increasingly better school (improving school), based, among others, on the research of school effectiveness and improvement (Hopkins, Reynolds & Gray 1999).

The Czech pre-school education is currently going through multiple innovations. A lot of attention is being paid to the placing of two-year-old children in pre-school education facilities and mandatory pre-school education for children one year before their expected mandatory education begins. While providing pre-school education to every accepted child, the kindergarten personnel follow the school legal regulations, especially the last amendment of the Education Act, Regulation No. 14/2005 Coll., on pre-school education, as amended, and Regulation No. 107/2005 Coll., on school dining, as amended.

2. Conditions for educating two-year-old children in kindergarten

Two-year-old children in kindergarten are not anything new. However, not all the kindergartens have been accepting two-year-old children so far. From 1 September 2017, the kindergarten management will have to accept two-year-old children, providing there are available capacities. To educate two-year-old children, it is necessary to take certain measures concerning safety, hygienic, spatial and material conditions, including adjusted education organizations. These measures then affect internal regulations, school's educational program, specific kindergarten's school rules, etc.

Regarding the factual (material) conditions, it is necessary to consider the suitability of some commonly used toys and didactical aids in kindergartens. A kindergarten classroom for two-year-old children must be equipped with furniture adequate for their smaller height. For example, this applies to seating furniture, which takes into account and supports the two-year-old's proper posture while sitting. The classroom environment must provide enough room for the children's free movement and games. It is necessary to secure room for the two-year-old's calm and rest during the whole day. It is also necessary to make sure that only adequate school garden equipment is used, i.e. ladders, slides, and other components relative to the children's age

and height. Regarding their daily regime, it is advisable to consider its modification, especially in connection with the children's individual needs for activities, rest, or sleep. Due to the two-year-old's higher hygienic needs, the lavatory should feature basins at lower heights. The same applies to toilettes, which should also match the children's heights and weights.

It is currently considered that more teachers should work together in kindergarten classes during the peak times of the day. It is possible to hire additional personnel like a school assistant, school psychologist, special teacher, social teacher, possibly kindergarten nannies. The school director may select the type of employment for the school's needs. The school director is to specify the employment contract or contract on work, specific job description, including the scope and lists of the individual activities for the children's actual needs.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports states that all the categories of teachers should individually gain necessary education concerning teaching two-year-old children as a part of the teachers' continuous education program. This applies either to the topic of mental or physical specifics of the development of two-year-olds, legal aspects of their acceptance to kindergartens, or their stay in kindergartens.

3. The two-year-old children's process of education in kindergartens

The general goals and plans set for education, which are contained in the national curriculum document titled *General Education Program for Pre-School Education*, are suitable for educating children aged two or three as well. However, during their education process, it is necessary to realize the specific aspects of their development and the potential levels in all the areas of the child's development. Two-year-old children express their strong desire to learn. They experiment, discover, and learn through all of their senses. The children are usually very egocentric. They do not have space and time orientation, living in the presence and the situations that fulfil the presence. The children are less skilled during physical activities. Of course, compared to older children, they have much more limited experiences. They learn through imitating, situational learning, their own experiences, and mainly games.

They often require repeated activities since they need regular rituals. The children usually stay focused for a very short time. Successful pedagogical work requires the organization's sensitive adjustment based on alternating activity offers, habit and practical skill training, leaving the biggest possible room for free

games and physical activities. However, the individual differences in particular areas of development of children of this age may be quite significant.

When two-year-old children join a kindergarten, it is often their first social experience outside of their wider family. The children learn the new behavioural patterns of adults and their peers and generate their own space. On the other hand, they receive set borders and new roles. They define themselves towards others and become independent. The children usually show their stronger need for relationships with an adult. That is why the teacher holds a very important position. He or she represents the parent and provides the child with security and support during daily activities and development of relationships with the child's peers.

The teachers had accepted children to kindergartens even before this amendment of the Education Act became effective out of their good will and beyond their duties. At those locations where no nurseries were available, multi-class kindergartens would establish the so-called nursery classes, which were only for two-year-old children. Their classroom equipment, daily regimes, and teachers' work times were adjusted to them. Other kindergartens would add their two-year-old children to their younger children, i.e. to classes with children aged up to four. However, parents were not automatically entitled to have their two-year-old children accepted.

3. Methodology

In connection with the parents' current enforceable possibility to place their two-year-old children in a kindergarten, one question seems timely: What is the kindergarten teachers' attitude to accepting two-year-old children? Their positive attitude affects the success and speed of the child's adaptation process and also their parents' relationship to the kindergarten personnel and pre-school education. A child is vulnerable and completely depends on a still completely unfamiliar person who spends with him/her the bigger part of the day. The child needs a lot of help, care, encouragement, and support.

The teachers have their clean-cut opinion of accepting two-year-old children to kindergartens. We estimate that they will not be positive about accepting two-year-old children to kindergartens. The child is very young, needs a lot of individual care and bound relationship with an adult, which is quite exhausting both physically and mentally in a group of up to twenty eight preschool children requiring from six to six and a half hours of daily teaching work.

It is assumed that those teachers who currently have no two-year-old children in their classes will reject their acceptance less than those teachers who already have them in their classes. The rejection of two-year-old children is directly proportional to the age range in an age-heterogeneous class. A big age range of children's ages in an age-heterogeneous class brings more frequent rejections of two-year-old children acceptance. It is also necessary to find the teachers' reasons for rejecting the acceptance of two-year-old children.

4. Results

Out of the 175 kindergarten teachers who answered our survey question 85 teachers, i.e. 48.6%, already had at least one two-year-old child in their classes. Out of the surveyed group, 34 teachers, i.e. 19.4% of them, had a two-year-old child in their classes sometime in the past, and the rest, i.e. 56 teachers, which is 32% of the surveyed teachers, did not have any two-year-old child in their classes so far; however, some of their kindergarten colleagues had or had had a two-year-old child in their class; therefore, these teachers have some information on two-year-old children or episodic experiences.

Out of the 85 teachers who currently have a two-year-old child in their classes, 54 teachers, i.e. 63,5%, clearly disagree with their acceptance, 24 teachers, i.e. 28,2%, agree with it under specific circumstances, and only 7 teachers, i.e. 8,2%, definitely agree with their acceptance. Out of the 34 teachers who had a two-year-old child in their class sometime in the past, only 2 teachers, i.e. 5,9%, definitely agree with their acceptance, while 12 teachers, i.e. 35,3%, agree with it under specific circumstances, and the rest, 20 teachers, i.e. 58,8%, definitely disagree. Out of the 56 teachers who have no direct experience with educating a two-year-old child, 22 teachers, i.e. 39,3%, strongly rejected the acceptance of two-year-old children to the kindergarten; while 34 teachers, i.e. 60,7%, agreed with it under specific circumstances, and no teacher agreed with the acceptance.

Our assumption was not confirmed. The reality is much worse. The teachers with direct experience of educating two-year-old children clearly indicate that two-year-old children are not to be accepted to kindergartens, and this position also prevails among those teachers whose classes have never involved two-year-old children yet.

Out of the 54 teachers who definitely disagree with accepting a two-year-old child to a group of kindergarten children, 34 teachers, i.e. 63%, stated that

their class age range was 2–5 years, 4 teachers, i.e. 7,4%, stated that a class for children aged 2 to 4 was created, and the rest, 16 teachers, i.e. 29,6%, stated that a two-year-old child was accepted to their mixed age class. Interestingly, only two teachers of this last group stated that those were single-class kindergartens. In this case our dismal assumption was not confirmed either. The results are even worse. The class age range may be a factor that significantly affects the rejection or acceptance of a two-year-old child for education. The 16 cases out of 54 represent a relatively big number of situations in which a two-year-old child joins a class of children aged up to six or even seven.

During the next phase, we searched for the teachers' reasons for rejecting the acceptance of two-year-old children.

The following information was obtained:

- The teachers would, in individual cases, consider the acceptance of two-year-old children, providing there are two teachers supporting their class for the majority of the day. Based on their statements, this does not happen so far due to the lack of funds for their salaries.
- We asked the teachers whether they wished to be helped by a nanny or assistant teacher, and 16 teachers said that she was a “disturbing element” in their classes. *A nanny or assistant teacher do not have the same education, do not use the same approach to children, the same view of work with the child as the teacher, and they must be explained a lot and persuaded. This costs time and energy...* which they could provide to the child. They prefer another teacher in their classes. The other group would welcome a nanny or assistant teacher; however, only in some cases when they could call them as needed. They reject a nanny's permanent presence in their classrooms as well.
- All the teachers who somehow agree with the acceptance of two-year-old children to kindergartens and those who disagree formulated the following position: *A two-year-old child is vulnerable and socially immature to be among the children in their kindergarten. Adults are insensitive when they bring such a child to the school. The country's social system should find another way of assisting parents who need to have their two-year-old child accepted to kindergarten.*

Other opinions:

- There is a difference between a two-year-old child and three-year-old child. The teachers decided to study pedagogy and joined their kindergartens with their understanding that the youngest child they would ever

teach is three years old. It is a critical change of their work conditions during their employment.

- A group of children aged from two to seven (some classes have children with postponed school education as well) shows extremely different needs of various age groups. It is quite problematic and very demanding to satisfy their needs.
- It is very complicated to provide education when one's class includes a two-year-old child and also children with their special education needs, and inclusion is to be applied.

5. Conclusion

The rejection or acceptance of a two-year-old child to education certainly depends on additional factors, which were not included in this work, e.g. one's length of teaching practice, the teacher's preferred class age composition, teachers' personal qualities, conditions in their kindergartens, or other factors. However, it will be also necessary to create conditions for teachers to accept two-year-old children. When allowed by the local conditions, classes should not show any significant age differences. Also, school leadership teams must secure supporting teaching teams in the form of a nanny, assistant teacher, special teacher, or other necessary experts. Most importantly, the teachers should work at their full-time positions, and their sufficient overlaps should be secured.

The teachers' attitude to the acceptance of two-year-old children to kindergartens may only change in connection with the change of factors they themselves identify as factors which negatively affect their attitude to the acceptance of two-year-old children to kindergartens.

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Summary: In connection with the innovation in the Czech pre-school education – placing two-year-old children in kindergarten, we identified the following: a) teachers' attitude to accepting two-year-old children; b) the teachers' reasons for rejecting two-year-old children. Our assumption was as follows: 1) teachers who currently do not have two-year-old children in their classes will reject two-year-old children less than others; 2) the rejection of two-year-old children is directly proportional to the heterogeneous class age range. Our assumptions were proven partially.

Keywords: two-year-old child, innovation, kindergarten teacher, rejecting, consent

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Streszczenie: W związku z innowacją w czeskim wychowaniu przedszkolnym – umieszczaniem dwuletnich dzieci w przedszkolach – niniejszy artykuł bada: a) jaka jest opinia nauczycielek na temat przyjmowania dwuletnich dzieci oraz b) jak nauczycielki uzasadniają odmowę ich przyjęcia. Założenia były następujące: 1) nauczycielki, które aktualnie nie mają w grupach, w jakich pracują, dwuletnich dzieci, będą rzadziej odmawiać ich przyjęcia; 2) odmowa przyjęcia dwuletnich dzieci jest wprost proporcjonalna do rozpiętości wiekowej dzieci w heterogenicznej grupie wiekowej. Założenia potwierdziły się częściowo.

Słowa kluczowe: dwuletnie dziecko, innowacja, nauczyciel przedszkolny, odmowa, zgoda