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## **Parents' attitudes to compulsory preschool education in the Czech Republic and Slovakia**

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### **Abstract**

The issue of compulsory preschool education in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is a topical one as a result of the obligation to educate children prior to the start of basic school (primary education) being introduced over the past five years. The objective of the research whose results are presented in this study is to ascertain what attitude parents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia have in regard to the compulsory education of their children in the year prior to joining basic school. The research was based on two key concepts, specifically the obligation of educating children prior to joining basic school, and attitude as a relatively enduring evaluation of the object to which it relates. We used a scaled questionnaire of our own construction for data collection, administered via a web interface. In applying a Likert scale, a five-point scale was used, with statements separated into five dimensions. After validation, the research tool comprised 36 items. Convenience sampling was used to set up the research sample. Data collection was implemented in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with the sample incorporating 337 respondents, each of whom had to have at least one child of preschool age. In processing the research data, both core statistical characteristics and a non-parametric Friedman Test were made use of. Calculations were made using the STATISTICA and SPSS programs. The surveyed parents assessed compulsory education a year prior to joining basic school as important, they did not see any exceptional change in the life of the family in the implementation of compulsory preschool education, and they appreciated its benefits for the future educational journey of their children. No fundamental differences were recorded between the attitudes of parents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The research also showed that it would be useful to look at parents who are not in the mainstream and their children who appear disadvantaged upon joining basic school through the approach of their parents for further research on this issue.

**Keywords:** compulsory education, preschool, parents, attitude to education

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the issue of preschool education has resonated in two historically and culturally similar countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as it has elsewhere in the world. In both countries, legislators have accepted the idea that measures taken in regard to the education of pre-school age children have the potential to support children in their future education and personal development, as well as helping others. Preschool education should also be a platform for government economic and social policy, where it is assuming an increasingly formative role in the way we today conceptualise the child and family (Farquhar & White, 2014).

Specifically, this study looks at compulsory preschool education, with the focus of interest in this issue the perspective of parents, preschool education customers. In so doing, it makes use of a questionnaire which was administered to parents in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the same format. The data was collected at a time when compulsory school education in the Czech Republic had already been established, and the legislation had been approved in Slovakia, and so parents there knew that they would have to take their children to preschool in the following school year.

In the Czech Republic ("CR"), the final year of preschool education prior to joining basic school has been compulsory since September 2017 (In this study, we use the terms "pre-primary education", used in the CR and Slovakia, and "early childhood education and care" – ECEC - characteristic for the European context and beyond.) In Slovakia, the legislative measure codifying compulsory preschool education applies from September 2021. In both countries (from 1918 until 1992, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were parts of a single common state entity, and as such they have a rich shared past, including in regard to education policy), compulsory preschool education can be provided in two ways: either through attendance at a preschool facility, usually a preschool ("*materšská škola*", meaning a nursery school/kindergarten) or through home schooling, referred to in Czech law as "individual education". Thus, both countries have adopted the institute of compulsory education, but not compulsory attendance at a preschool facility. However, in both countries the most common form of institutional preschool education is education at preschools which have a public (state) or private character. The codification of compulsory preschool education is further evidence of how education prior to joining basic school is becoming increasingly important at both a society-wide and personal level having regard to each child. The reason for doing so is today clearly promulgated, and this is that it is advantageous to support high quality preschool programmes and secure their availability to all children of preschool age.

The introduction of compulsory education prior to joining basic school was affected by many factors, and it also affects other elements or aspects of educating children of preschool age. One significant variable is parents, whose position and co-operation with the preschool is more pronounced and intensive compared to subsequent levels of education. As such, we were interested to know how they perceive and evaluate the introduction of compulsory preschool education and its anticipated impact on their children. To do so, we made use of attitude as a psychological category reflecting the evaluation opinion of these parents.

### **Theoretical background of research**

As in other countries, in the CR and Slovakia there has been increasing attention paid to preschool education in recent years. Both countries reflect the generally declared conclusion that preschool education is incredibly important, and they tend to support the idea that it is not just the first phase of education, but also a critical one with regard to children's development and life-long learning (Ugaste et al., 2013). This has led to activities to support it. This reflection has found practical application in terms of the education policy of both states, and specifically in the codification of children's compulsory participation in education in senior years, and the opportunity to apply legal entitlement to a place in preschool education for increasingly younger children.

#### *Contexts for compulsory preschool education in the CR and Slovakia*

Measures supporting the early education of children are based on relevant arguments, in which social, economic and personal aspects relating to the child and his or her family resonate. From an economic perspective, it is believed that investments in preschool education yield large returns, and stressing this is one of the bases for a coherent strategy of support for economic growth, since society's economic future depends on building up an educated and qualified workforce (Heckman, 2011). In this context, the dimension of protection and care for the child in regard to the sustainability of parents' employability or their early return to the workforce is also valued. These economic and social parameters are naturally linked to every child of pre-school age, to their personal

development and support for their educational prospects. In this regard, what most resonates is the fact that preschool education has the strong potential to level out the chances for children who come from a less stimulating family background, with the impact on their school success a condition for their subsequent work and living opportunities (e.g. Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Würtz Rasmussen, 2014). Most evidence has been found for the positive impact of preschool education on the academic results of children from socially disadvantaged families (in more detail, e.g. Burger, 2010), although we can also say more generally that children's participation in preschool education correlates with their later results (e.g. Cebolla-Boado, Radl & Salazar, 2017).

There have been no more detailed research findings on the reality of preschool education in the CR to the present time. One of the few research surveys undertaken (Majerčíková & Navrátilová, 2018) investigated how parents and preschool teachers perceive the implementation of compulsory preschool education considering the interests of adults and children. Their research findings show that according to their responses, parents ascribe great importance to preschool education, and this opinion relates to their interest that their children should be well prepared for starting basic school (Majerčíková & Navrátilová, 2018). Thus, the aspect of the child's educational prospects dominates here. As such, the child's development at preschool is not limited merely to cultivating their current opportunities, but has broader significance.

Despite this position in regard to preschool education, however, there are some dissenting approaches in regard to the compulsory nature of education based on attending a preschool facility. Home education is meant to be an alternative to this institutional education, but as yet this has been little used by parents (Picková, 2017). Some parents instead welcome this compulsory nature, seeing it as an opportunity for transferring responsibility for preparing children for starting basic school to the state. The research also suggested that the legislative change leading to the compulsory final year of preschool education was relatively positively accepted not just by parents, but also by teachers. Changing relations between parents, teachers and children, however, may act as variables (Majerčíková & Navrátilová, 2018).

Compulsory preschool education is an opportunity to support children and improve their personal qualities. Nevertheless, these attempts may come at the expense of an individualist approach to children with the use of educational strategies characteristic for basic schools (Majerčíková, & Navrátilová, 2018), which is not optimal for preschool education. According to Starting Strong (2012), the predominant strategy for basic school preparation is an academic approach. This is another reason why some parents in the CR perceive compulsory preschool education as the unnecessarily premature scholarisation of children (Picková, 2017).

Compared to the CR, there was a time difference in the approval of compulsory preschool education in Slovakia, although the decision to codify it was preceded in both countries by the conviction that it was important. The legislative amendment came in Slovakia at a time when the state was still not fully able to meet parental demand and the right of children of preschool age to education or institutional care at an early age. Neither was it able to cover the requirements arising from both the demands of parents and also in terms of criticism from the EU over the low level of school attendance of children of preschool age.

As in other countries, in Slovakia's approval of the legislative amendment, the authors were mainly thinking of children who needed to be educated for various reasons, most commonly due to poor or failing care from the family. There were also problems in intercultural differences within family environments where children arrived unprepared

for basic school, putting them at a disadvantage at the start of their education. Almost since the time it joined the EU, Slovakia has heard from the European Commission (2006) that preschool education shows the highest returns across the entire continuum of lifelong education, in particular for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that the outcome of these investments even appreciate over time. There are regular calls to improve the availability of preschool education from the EU in Slovakia, but in terms of the education of children of preschool age, Slovakia remains at a very low level compared to other OECD countries (Vančíková in Hall et al., 2019).

Most European countries recognise the importance of preschool education, and are particularly interested in expanding it, notwithstanding the existence of multiple institutions providing preschool education in each country (Leseman, 2009; Kyprianos, 2007). It is evident that the decision of all countries in regard to monitoring, providing and expanding preschool education, and its compulsory aspect, does not just take account of educational opinions, but also opinions regarding education policy, political and economic conditions and the specific conditions of each country (Oikonomidis, 2014).

#### *Parental attitudes and their application in the research*

The care and development of children of preschool age is undoubtedly guaranteed by their parents. All the measures, decisions and interventions they make in order to support their children are determined by their values, convictions, available information and knowledge of quality child care and education. Parents' approach to child care and education correlates with variables such as the age of the child, the mother's education and the period of their employment, ethnic origin and family income, and last but not least the government's family policy including child care (Gable & Cole, 2010).

The submitted research was focused on parents and their attitudes towards the obligation to educate their children a year prior to joining basic school. Attitudes were here conceived as psychological categories representing a relatively enduring organisation of beliefs, feelings and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols (Hogg & Vaughan, 2005, s. 105). Considering the fact that most definitions of attitude accentuate its evaluative character and crossover, parents were asked about preschool education. We began by defining attitude as a certain evaluating opinion which parents had regarding a particular object, event, idea, item, other person (Nakonečný, 2009). The attitude of the parents investigated was operationalised as a person of his or her own tendencies, expressed in assessing a particular entity (Eagle & Chaiken, 1993) - in our case, compulsory preschool education in selected contexts. It was perceived as the approach of the parent involving a particular degree of agreement or disagreement.

A special research tool was created for the research presented in this study. In this process, the following important aspects of attitude were taken account of (Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014):

- attitude is made up of a cognitive component incorporating opinions and thoughts of the subject of the attitude, an affective component incorporating feelings and emotional response in regard to the subject of the attitude, and a conative component representing a tendency towards particular behaviour and acts in regard to the subject of the attitude;
- attitudes are in part inherited, and are also the result of one's direct and indirect experiences with the subject, object of the attitude;
- although we anticipate agreement between attitude and behaviour and we discuss the internal consistency of an attitude, e.g. cognitive and conative components, in some

situations consistency can be stronger than in other situations, and this also applies in relation to the protagonists of the attitude – for some consistency is higher; for some weaker;

- you can use consistency of attitude to anticipate the behaviour of the bearer of the attitude;
- some attitudes are more important to people than others because they have a greater impact on their daily life, with the importance of the attitude assessed according to how fast one's mind works with it;
- some attitudes are based on belief (meaning to believe in something, or to consider it to be true), while others are based on feelings or behaviour;
- one doesn't often change strong attitudes; one trusts them and they more often guide one's actions.

In formulating the questionnaire's statements, we reflected the fact that a parent's opinion can be perceived as a particular type of attitude, or rather that it is a part of its cognitive component. We also took account of the fact that an emotionally affecting relationship to a particular object or situation separates an attitude from opinions. We accepted the risk that parents' attitudes may not be in accordance with their declared opinions, and we endeavoured to reflect this in assessing the data we obtained and analysing the results. The emotions which go strongly hand in hand with parents' relationship to their children may have been an aspect which entered into parents' responses within the questionnaire.

### **Parental attitude research**

#### *Research objectives and questions*

The main objective of the research was to ascertain and compare the attitudes of Czech and Slovak parents to compulsory preschool education in a preschool, which should take place in the year prior to the child beginning basic school ("BS"). Initially, we developed a questionnaire which would be an appropriate tool for measuring these attitudes, something we consider to be one of the partial research objectives. The target focus of the research was subsequently specified into two main research questions:

1. What are Czech and Slovak parents' attitudes:
  - to the obligation to secure the education of their child prior to beginning BS?
  - to the declared significance of compulsory education in preschool?
  - to compulsory education in preschools considering children's educational perspectives?
  - to the intended focus of compulsory education in preschool?
  - to compulsory education in preschool in regard to its personnel and organisation?
2. What is the relationship between parents' attitude in the chosen areas (above in objective 1) and the fact that they currently have a child who is shortly to begin compulsory preschool education?

#### *Data collection and analysis method*

A questionnaire of our own construction was chosen to ascertain parents' attitudes. Attitudes are most often measured using scales (e.g. the Thurstone scale of equal-appearing intervals, Guttman scaling and Likert scaling). In this research, Likert scaling was used, where respondents expressed the degree of their agreement or disagreement



with a posited statement. This approach, which is one kind of unidimensional scaling, represents one of the most reliable techniques for measuring attitudes (Rod, 2012). As such, respondents were given a five-point scale reflecting their level of agreement (including stating that they could not decide), and they expressed themselves by marking just one of the options. The questionnaire was developed in order to ensure the highest possible level of validity, i.e. accuracy in characteristics of the measured phenomenon and maintaining consistency in the process of operationalising the particular phenomenon. The final version of the questionnaire comprised 36 statements alongside extra factual data (respondents' sex, age, educational attainment, marital status and information on whether they have a child in the year prior to compulsory preschool education).

The creation of this questionnaire was preceded by a study of relevant and up-to-date academic publications. This led to the production of an initial set of 117 statements. These statements were formed with the ambition of representing equally all three attitude dimensions, specifically the cognitive aspect focused on opinions and ideas, the emotional aspect relating to feelings about the subject of the attitude, and the conative aspect, representing a tendency towards particular behaviour or acts in relation to the subject of the attitude (Hayes, 2013). Discussions were held about this version of the questionnaire with parents and experts, and their proposals contributed towards the subsequent revision by the research team.

Following the modifications, a second questionnaire version was produced comprising 63 statements which was then further administered to 15 Czech and 10 Slovak parents in order to check its intelligibility, relevancy and whether the items were appropriately formulated. Subsequent discussion with parents and within the research team led to another version of the questionnaire comprising 61 items. This was administered to 133 Slovak and Czech parents. The data thus acquired was subjected to factor analysis in order to ascertain the factor structure of the research tool and reduce the number of items it contained. The outcome was a further version of the questionnaire, which was again evaluated by parents and experts, leading to the creation of the final research tool, comprising 36 statements. These statements were divided into 5 dimensions covering the investigated phenomenon of compulsory preschool attendance. Here, we give the titles of the dimensions with examples of two items for each of them:

#### **I. The child and his or her educational prospects**

14. Compulsory preschool attendance means my child will have better results at BS.  
1. Compulsory preschool attendance supports the child in adapting well to the regime at BS.

#### **II. The nature of compulsory preschool education**

2. During compulsory preschool attendance, children should learn to read and write.  
13. I wouldn't mind if children received homework from preschool.

#### **III. The importance of compulsory preschool education**

18. The introduction of compulsory preschool education led me to realise the importance of preschool for my child.  
7. I cannot imagine my child not going to preschool in the year prior to beginning BS.

#### **IV. Limitations in regard to compulsory preschool education**

4. It is important that there is an alternative to compulsory preschool attendance in the form of home education.  
10. I do not need compulsory preschool attendance in order to send my child to preschool.

**V. Organisational and personnel conditions for compulsory preschool education**

- 5. Compulsory preschool attendance should be provided only by teachers with a higher education qualification.
- 22. Excusing a child from involvement in compulsory preschool education can be burdensome for parents.

In processing the data obtained, basic statistical characteristics were made use of (arithmetic mean, mode, median, statistical deviation, variance). Because the normal data distribution we had expected was not seen, non-parametric tests were applied, in particular the Friedman test, which is a generalisation of the one-sample Wilcoxon test, and is analogous to a two-way analysis of variance with a single observation in each subclass. To compare the differences between individual sets, we applied the Nemenyi multiple comparison method in the Friedman test. Calculations were made using the STATISTICA and SPSS programs.

*Selection and characteristics of research sample*

Data was collected at the turn of 2020 and 2021, i.e. during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is one reason why the questionnaire was distributed to respondents exclusively within an online environment. The questionnaire was published through accessible electronic channels and networks, and researchers' personal and working connections were made use of. As such, we consider the selection of the research sample to represent convenience sampling, with limited options for generalising the results. In total, 337 respondents took part in the research, 162 of whom were from Slovakia, and 175 of whom were from the Czech Republic. Tables 1 and 2 provide more detailed characteristics of the different groups of respondents.

<b>Respondents</b>			
<i>sex</i>	90.3 % women	9.7 % men	
<i>age</i>	42.3 % - 25-30 y.o.	24 % - 37-42 y.o.	23.4 % - 19-24 y.o.
<i>education</i>	57.1 % - higher	33.1 % - secondary	9.1 % - college
<i>marital status</i>	54.3 % - married	40 % - single	5.1 % - divorced
<i>have a child year prior to starting BS (child's age)</i>	69.1 % - no	30.9 % - yes	

Table 1: Characteristics of respondents from the CR

<b>Respondents</b>			
<i>sex</i>	65.4 % women	34.6 % men	
<i>age</i>	46.3 % - 31-36 y.o.	24.1 % - 37-42 y.o.	19.8 % - 25-30 y.o.
<i>education</i>	48.8 % - higher	44.4 % - secondary	6.2 % - college
<i>marital status</i>	61.1 % - married	24.1 % - single	14.8 % - divorced
<i>have a child year prior to starting BS (child's age)</i>	58.6 % - no	41.4 % - yes	

Table 2: Characteristics of respondents from Slovakia

It was most commonly married women aged 31 – 36 years old with a higher education who answered of respondents from Slovakia, and they most often did not yet have a child in the year prior to beginning BS. Of respondents from the Czech Republic, it was also most commonly married women, this time aged 25 – 30 years old who had attained a higher education, and they also most commonly did not yet have a child in the year prior to beginning BS.

## Results

The results of our research sketch an image of the attitudes of Czech and Slovak parents towards preschool education which are of particular interest considering the compulsory nature of its legal fulfilment. In the CR, parents' attitudes may be connected to their experience of compulsory preschool education already in place (at least in terms of society-wide debate), while in Slovakia they will only be based on their expectations and opinions, without actual lived experience of it, or contact with it.

Average values and standard deviations were calculated for each dimension on the basis of the responses received. Table 3 below shows the basic results for each of the dimensions for the Czech Republic (CZ) and Slovakia (SK). The table clearly shows that the average responses in each of the dimensions do not show fundamental differences, differing in just some dimensions. These differences will subsequently be interpreted and put into relations across dimensions and parent groups.

	<i>Dimension I. The child and his or her educational prospects</i>	<i>Dimension II. The nature of compulsory preschool education</i>	<i>Dimension III. The importance of compulsory preschool education</i>	<i>Dimension IV. Limitations in regard to compulsory preschool education</i>	<i>Dimension V. Organisational and personnel conditions for compulsory preschool education</i>
<b>AM CZ</b>	2.62	2.18	2.72	3.35	3.12
<b>AM SK</b>	2.24	2.15	2.24	3.50	3.15
<b>SD CZ</b>	0.400	0.360	0.687	0.590	0.386
<b>SD SK</b>	0.650	0.470	0.800	0.620	0.580

\*AM – arithmetic mean, SD – standard deviation

Table 3: Average values for dimensions for parents in CZ and SK

In analysing data from parents, we checked the statistical significance of the differences between Czech and Slovak parents in the average values of their responses in individual dimensions. For this, we again made use of the Wilcoxon two-sample test. The results of these calculations are given in Table 4.

<b>dimension</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>I.</b>	-3,78	0,00*
<b>II.</b>	0,33	0,74
<b>III.</b>	-3,84	0,00*
<b>IV.</b>	-1,58	0,11
<b>V.</b>	-1,33	0,18

\* statistically significant values

Table 4: Results of the Wilcoxon two-sample test – CZ and SK differences

Statistically significant differences were found in only two dimensions, specifically the first and third ones. In comparing the values in the first dimension, average AM values of 2.6 points were found for Czech parents, and 2.3 points for Slovak parents. As we show



below, the values found suggest that Slovak parents perceive compulsory preschool attendance as more important considering their children's further school career and prospects compared to Czech parents.

Regarding the third dimension, we can identify average AP values of 2.3 for Slovak parents, while for Czech parents this average value is of the order of 2.7 points. These results suggest that Slovak parents assign compulsory preschool attendance slightly greater importance than Czech parents do at a general level and in relation to the previous years the child spent at preschool.

In the subsequent section, we shall share the results of our measurements of Czech and Slovak parents' attitudes within each of the dimensions.

**The first dimension** looking at parents' attitude to the educational prospects of their child was full of statements regarding the importance of completing compulsory preschool attendance. These were in regard to success in applying for basic school, the influence of compulsory preschool attendance on better results for the child at basic school, reducing the risk of deferring the start of basic school, and supporting adaptation at basic school. We were also interested to know whether compulsory preschool attendance is mainly designed to benefit children from disadvantaged backgrounds and if compulsory preschool attendance is suitable for all children and the attendance of unvaccinated children, which is a contentious issue (in the Czech Republic, the obligation to vaccinate children under five years old is given in accordance with Section 50 of *Act no. 258/2000 Coll. on Protection of Public Health and amending some related Acts*, but this law does not apply to children attending compulsory preschool education. In regard to Slovakia, the matter is governed by the amendment to *Act no. 355/2007 on the Protection, Encouragement and Development of Public Health*, but in regard to compulsory preschool attendance, like in the CR, it is possible to place unvaccinated children in preschool facilities. "According to the decree on vaccination against infectious disease, regular child vaccinations include vaccinations against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, invasive disease caused by the agent haemophilus influenzae type b, transmissible polio and viral hepatitis B, against measles, mumps and rubella, and for at-risk children, tuberculosis" (VZP CR, 2021).

Comparing Czech and Slovak parents, differences can be seen mainly in statements regarding better results at BS due to compulsory preschool attendance: *Thanks to compulsory attendance at preschool, children will have better results at BS* (AM CZ 2.9, AM SK 2.5), reduced risk of deferring the start of BS: *Compulsory attendance at preschool reduces the risk of deferring the child starting BS* (AM CZ 2.7, AM SK 2.3) and compulsory attendance as favoured support for disadvantaged children: *Compulsory attendance at preschool only supports children from disadvantaged backgrounds* (AM CZ 3.3, AM SK 3.7). Our findings suggest that Slovak parents see the point of compulsory preschool attendance in regard to basic school more than Czech parents do. The Slovak parents studied also perceive compulsory attendance as a matter which is not just designed to support disadvantaged children, which is how Czech parents see it. It appears that Slovak parents tend to take more positive attitudes towards compulsory preschool attendance compared to Czech parents. The obligation makes education at preschool more important for Slovak parents, which may be a result of their expectations and inexperience of educating their children in the year prior to beginning BS.

In contrast, the smallest difference was found in the statement regarding the suitability for attendance for all children: *For some children, compulsory attendance at preschool is not appropriate, for various reasons.* (AM CZ 2.7, AM SK 2.5). Both Slovak and Czech

parents tend to take an undecided stance. The statement regarding vaccinating children: *I think it is right that unvaccinated children, who have previously been prevented from attending, can attend the compulsory year at preschool*, mainly evoked disagreement amongst Czech parents (AM CZ 3.1). The reason for this may be the compulsory nature of vaccination in previous years, and thus the apparent illogical nature of this step in regard to compulsory attendance from the parents' perspective. ("According to Section 50 of the Act on Protection of Public Health, in order to be accepted at preschool there is an obligation to have undertaken the designated regular vaccinations, or to have a document demonstrating the child is immune against infection or cannot undertake vaccination due to permanent contraindication. This obligation does not apply to children who fulfil the conditions for compulsory preschool education", MEYS, 2021. At the current time, this obligation does not apply to vaccination against COVID-19.)

On the other hand, not requiring vaccination is meant to accommodate as many children as possible who are unvaccinated for whatever reason and have been denied the opportunity to take part in preschool education. We also see here a motivation to fulfil EU requirements and OECD recommendations in terms of ensuring as many children as possible attend preschool.

**The second dimension** ascertained parents' attitude through statements focused on the nature of compulsory preschool education, in particular compulsory attendance at preschool and the content focus of this education. Parents commented on support for the cognitive component of the child's personality – the matters of reading and writing, learning through play, developing learning skills and also on support for the emotional side of their personality – the child's emotional development, developing creativity, social development. Also included here were statements regarding foreign language training and homework within compulsory preschool education.

Comparing Czech and Slovak parents within the five dimensions demonstrates that it is this second dimension which shows the most balanced results between individual statements. We identified the greatest disharmony in the statement that children should learn to read and write as part of compulsory attendance (AM CZ 3.5, AM SK 3.2). It is evident from these values that Czech parents expressed a greater degree of disagreement with this statement compared to Slovak parents. Thus, Slovak parents suggested they expected compulsory attendance to be more focused on preparation for basic school than Czech parents did. Other notable statements were those on foreign language training and the emerging obligation of doing homeworks. Within these items, parents tended towards middle values on the scale. In general, we can say for both sets of Czech and Slovak parents that parents expressed more agreement with learning through play (AM CZ 1.7, AM SK 1.6), and least agreement with foreign language preparation (AM CZ 2.9, AM SK 2.7), learning to read and write (AM CZ 3.5, AM SK 3.2) and homework (AM CZ 3.5, AM SK 3.4). Within both samples, we can say in general that these latter two statements show parents' opposition to the premature scholarisation of children, and this can be perceived as a good signal for the concept of the principal tasks of preschool education, in regard to children's balanced development and preparation for the next level of education.

**The third dimension** focuses in terms of content on the importance of compulsory preschool education. Statements focused on issues regarding the importance of preschool education and the potential expansion of the obligation to include children under five years of age too. Also ascertained were attitudes on the importance of the last year of compulsory attendance compared to the importance of attending preschool in the previous years.

Comparing both sets of Czech and Slovak parents, we find the greatest difference in the statement *I am glad that my child has to visit preschool at least for the year prior to beginning BS*. (AM CZ 2.4, AM SK 1.7). These values make it clear that Czech parents express a lesser degree of agreement with this statement than Slovak parents do. This may relate to the accessibility of preschool education in Slovakia and the newly established guarantee of placing children in preschool even in problematic cases or regions of Slovakia. Another statement demonstrating a difference between Czech and Slovak parents was this one: *Compulsory attendance at preschool in the year prior to beginning BS is more important for the child than attendance at preschool in the years prior* (AM CZ 3.1, AM SK 2.5). Czech parents expressed a clear level of disagreement with this statement, while Slovak parents were more focused on middle values on the scale. Thus, Czech parents are more strongly of the opinion that attending preschool in the compulsory year is just as important as in the prior years. In the statement which focused on the importance of preschool education which lent its name to this entire dimension, we can again see a certain level of specificity in the agreement of Czech and Slovak parents. While Slovak parents expressed a greater level of agreement with the idea that introducing compulsory preschool education increases its importance, Czech parents were more focused on middle values on the scale (AM CZ 2.7, AM SK 2.2). Across the dimensions, this is the greatest difference in the statements of Czech and Slovak parents. One possible explanation is the fact that Czech parents do not perceive that the importance of preschool education has increased over the course of the past 4 years (i.e. since the time of the codification of compulsory preschool attendance), which corresponds to previous statements within this dimension in which they deemed attendance at preschool facilities as also important in prior years. The opinions of Slovak parents may reflect a level of expectation in regard to the final compulsory year of preschool attendance and expectation linked more to a theoretical idea of the consequences of making this education obligatory.

**The fourth dimension** ascertained using various reverse statements the level of agreement with limitations in regard to introducing compulsory preschool education. This dimension included statements ascertaining, e.g., whether it is important for parents that there is also an alternative to compulsory attendance at preschool in the form of home education, and also whether compulsory preschool attendance represents an unnecessary rushing of children's school duties, whether it is justified considering the child's age and whether parents should register their children for preschool even if not compelled to by legal requirement.

Comparing the results of individual statements, we can see different values mainly in the statement: *I do not need preschool attendance to be compulsory in order to send my child to preschool*. (AM CZ 2.2, AM SK 2.6). Czech parents thus express a greater degree of agreement with this statement in their responses compared to Slovak parents. They appear to trust and see the benefits of preschool education more, even if they are around the middle of the scale. Differences were also found in the statement *Compulsory attendance at preschool is not justified considering the age of the children* (AM CZ 3.2, AM SK 3.6). These values show that Slovak parents see a greater point in compulsory preschool attendance than Czech parents do, because they more frequently disagree with the statement. The following statement corresponds with this statement and its values: *I've got no objection to attendance at preschool being compulsory in the year prior to beginning BS*. (AM CZ 2.1, AM SK 1.8). It is evident from these values that Czech parents, who are already subject to this obligation, and Slovak parents for whom the introduction

of compulsory attendance is still ahead of them, do not have objections to this obligation. This finding can be added to by comparing the values for the statement *If there was no compulsory attendance at preschool, I would not register my child for preschool.* (AM CZ 3.7, AM SK 4.0). It is again clear from the fairly high level of disagreement with this statement that Czech and Slovak parents do not have any major problem with registering their child for preschool. Observable is a slightly larger inclination towards institutional preschool education in Slovakia than in the CR. The fairly high values of agreement with compulsory preschool attendance in both states across the statements is indicative of continuing favour as a result of the strong foundations of preschool education during the Czechoslovak era (when Slovakia and the CR were one state), a time when around 90 % of children between three and five years old attended preschool (Education Encyclopedia, 2021).

**The fifth dimension** was meant to capture parents' attitudes to the organisational and personnel conditions for preschool education. Statements referred to the qualification and credentials of preschool teachers providing education in the compulsory year of preschool education. They also referred to co-operation with appropriate experts (speech therapist, psychologist, paediatrist, BS teacher). Statements focused on organisation looked, for example, at the obligation of afternoon bed nap and the optimal number of children in a class.

Within both studied sets – Czech and Slovak parents – we find the greatest level of disagreement with the statement *Compulsory preschool attendance should be provided by teachers with the longest possible teaching experience* (AM CZ 3.5, AM SK 3.4). These AMs demonstrate that both Slovak and Czech parents express their disagreement to the idea that compulsory education prior to starting BS should be provided by the most experienced teachers possible. One reason for this attitude might be a conviction that length of teaching experience is not a guarantee of a better prepared and professional erudite teacher. This might be linked to an opinion that methods of working with children may not be up-to-date and in line with current standards or trends considered most suitable within preschool education for professionally older teachers. Comparing this with the statement *Compulsory preschool attendance should be provided only by teachers with a higher education qualification* (AM CZ 3.2, AM SK 3.0), we may come to the conclusion that neither is level of qualification a criterion for implementing compulsory preschool attendance for Czech and Slovak parents. The greatest level of agreement within this dimension was found in the statements: *Within compulsory preschool attendance, more intensive co-operation should be secured with relevant experts (speech therapist, psychologist, paediatrist, BS teacher ...).* (AM CZ 2.1, AM SK 1.8). It is evident from these values that parents require and also expect that the compulsory final year of preschool attendance should involve more intensive co-operation with experts in order to benefit child development. Agreement was also expressed with the statement: *There should be fewer children than has been the case before now in classes for compulsory preschool attendance.* (AM CZ 2.3, AM SK 2.1). From these findings, we can say that Czech and Slovak parents declare attitudes according to which a reduced number of children in a class can potentially contribute towards a more individualist approach, and so towards a higher quality education during compulsory preschool attendance.

#### *Parents' attitudes depending on age of child*

The following interpretation operates on the premise that parents' attitudes can depend on whether they are currently looking after and bringing up a child of an age one year prior to beginning basic school. This information was acquired from parents during

the initial factual questionnaire items. Using descriptive statistics and a Wilcoxon two-sample test, we looked for statistically significant differences within individual dimensions. Tables 5 and 6 below present our findings for the set of Czech parents, and Tables 7 and 8 do so for the set of Slovak parents.

	<b>Dimension I. The child and his or her educational prospects</b>	<b>Dimension II. The nature of compulsory preschool education</b>	<b>Dimension III. The importance of compulsory preschool education</b>	<b>Dimension IV. Limitations in regard to compulsory preschool education</b>	<b>Dimension V. Organisational and personnel conditions for compulsory preschool education</b>
<b>AM – parent has a child in the year prior to beginning BS</b>	2.67	2.27	2.84	3.15	3.07
<b>AM - parent does not have a child in the year prior to beginning BS</b>	2.47	2.14	2.67	3.44	3.14

Table 5: Arithmetic means in dimensions according to age of child, CZ

Table 5 makes it clear that there are small differences between dimensions. Greater differences are seen in dimensions I and IV. Their significance was tested using a Wilcoxon two-sample test. The results of this are given in Table 6, which shows the values of testing criterion *Z* and *p* values, which represents the likelihood of an error as a result of rejecting the test hypothesis,  $H_0$ . Both sample subsets come from the same basic sample, i.e. there is not a statistically significant difference between the average values. The alternative hypothesis to hypothesis  $H_0$  was  $H_1$ , which assumed that the sample sets do not come from the same basic sample, which is seen in that there is a statistically significant difference between the average values.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>I.</b>	2.84	0.00*
<b>II.</b>	1.46	0.15
<b>III.</b>	1.29	0.20
<b>IV.</b>	-3.13	0.00*
<b>V.</b>	-0.97	0.33

\* statistically significant values

Table 6: Results of a Wilcoxon two-sample test, CZ



On the basis of the results given in Table 6, we rejected the null hypothesis in two cases, specifically in the first and fourth dimensions. Other differences within the dimensions are not statistically significant, which means that the fact that parents have or have not got a child in the year prior to beginning BS does not play a major role in forming their attitudes. This is the case in the dimensions other than the first and fourth dimensions mentioned above. It would appear that within the first dimension, Czech parents with a preschool child believe that because their child shall complete compulsory attendance at preschool, they will be more successful when applying for basic school, and also that this attendance will support their child in adapting well to the regime at basic school. They even tend to agree slightly more that compulsory attendance leads to better results at basic school. Within the fourth dimension, these parents are of the opinion that the introduction of compulsory preschool attention represents a particular change, although they have no objections to its introduction, just as they do not need the compulsory nature to be put into law in order to make a decision on the education of their child in preschool.

	<b>Dimension I. The child and his or her educational prospects</b>	<b>Dimension II. The nature of compulsory preschool education</b>	<b>Dimension III. The importance of compulsory preschool education</b>	<b>Dimension IV. Limitations in regard to compulsory preschool education</b>	<b>Dimension V. Organisational and personnel conditions for compulsory preschool education</b>
<b>AM – parent has a child in the year prior to beginning BS</b>	2.31	2.12	2.16	3.71	3.15
<b>AM - parent does not have a child in the year prior to beginning BS</b>	2.19	2.17	2.30	3.35	3.08

Table 7: Arithmetic means in dimensions according to age of child, SK

Table 7 shows that the average values of responses in each dimension are again not fundamentally different. The identified difference, however, is only statistically significant in the case of Dimension IV. This is again confirmed in a Wilcoxon two-sample test, whose results are given in Table 8.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>P</b>
<b>I.</b>	1.18	0.24
<b>II.</b>	-0.34	0.74
<b>III.</b>	-0.90	0.37
<b>IV.</b>	3.91	0.00*
<b>V.</b>	1.66	0.10

\* statistically significant values

Table 8: Results of a Wilcoxon two-sample test, SK

On the basis of these results, we can state that parents who have a child for whom compulsory preschool attendance is a current issue are of the opinion that the codification of compulsory attendance does not necessarily represent premature scholarisation. Furthermore, these parents do not perceive this attendance as unjustified considering the age of the child. At the same time, however, parents are inclined to disagree that the obligation of preschool attendance leads to any changes.

### Discussion and conclusions

Parents' attitudes to the education of their children can be positive or negative. A negative attitude of parents may result in a low level of motivation and low self-esteem amongst their children, while a positive attitude can be beneficial in many cases, manifesting itself in children having an interest in learning and achieving better results (Samal, 2012). In regard to our research results, the good news is that the Czech and Slovak parents studied are generally positive and their attitudes are receptive in nature.

The importance of preschool education is often highlighted by claiming that the family and child's parents are not always able to provide the conditions for the child's balanced personal development, and from this perspective, institutional education is exceptionally beneficial at preschool age. Although considering the profile of the research sample for the submitted research we can expect that this is not the case for the parents studied, their positive attitudes affirm its importance for the mainstream group of parents too.

The objective of the research was to ascertain what attitudes parents took to the compulsory education of their children in the year prior to starting BS in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and subsequently to compare these attitudes. Our findings show different attitudes mainly in the dimensions *The child and his or her educational prospects* and *The importance of compulsory preschool education*. While Slovak parents believe that because of compulsory attendance, their child will have better study results at basic school, Czech parents are more ambiguous towards this statement, thus having less chance of unrealistic expectations. Similarly, Slovak parents expect that compulsory preschool attendance will have an impact on reducing deferrals of starting basic school.

The issue of deferring compulsory school attendance remains a contemporary one in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia, figures of deferrals of compulsory school attendance are of the order of around 15 % (Čabalová, 2018), while the figure in the Czech Republic is around 20 % (ČSÚ, 2019). Some of the most common reasons for deferral include child immaturity, speech defects and disorders, social immaturity of the child and graphomotor problems. According to the Czech School Inspectorate (ČŠI) (2019), however, only 74.6 % of preschools focus on preparing children for school attendance. One obstacle in reducing deferrals may also be that preparation for school attendance may not always be viewed as a main objective of preschool attendance, as a survey of Czech preschool principals demonstrated (Simonová et al., 2017). The dimension of the importance of compulsory preschool attendance revealed differences between Czech and Slovak parents in particular in the affective attitude component in regard to agreeing that their child must visit preschool for at least the final year prior to starting basic school. Slovak parents perceive this obligation more positively than Czech parents do. However, Czech parents are more strongly of the opinion that attending preschool is just as important in prior years, which can be perceived positively because these parents realise that the well-rounded development of their child is also a priority in prior years. The data also appears to suggest that the imposition of compulsory preschool education increased its importance more for Slovak parents than for Czech parents.

The research here presented adds to and expands findings from a research survey undertaken just a year after the codification of compulsory preschool attendance which revealed the attitudes not just of parents, but also of teachers, to compulsory preschool attendance in the Czech Republic (Majerčíková & Navrátilová, 2018). Even three years after this research was undertaken, the findings here submitted demonstrate that parents continue to attribute great importance to preschool education. Further consensus was found in the perception of compulsory preschool education as important preparation for the next stage of education at basic school.

Looking at other countries in Europe confirms the relevance of parental attitudes found. Within the European Union, preschool attendance is compulsory in 17 countries, with five countries introducing compulsory preschool education during the past five years, specifically the Czech Republic, Croatia, Lithuania, Finland and Sweden for a period of one year prior to the start of primary education (European Commission, 2019). Since September 2020, Belgium has been added to this list of countries. The period of compulsory attendance was extended from one to two years in Greece, and from one to three years in Hungary (European Commission, 2019).

Greece is an interesting example of the generally complicated development of preschool education. Preschool education is compulsory in Greece for all children from the age of five. The first proposal for preschool education was made in 1913, but it was not positively received by the then government. Compulsory preschool attendance was introduced in 2006. Nevertheless, compulsory attendance was not thoroughly planned out by the government, and it faced criticism, included from many parents. The opinions of parents and teachers on important aspects of compulsory attendance (e.g. on the length of compulsory daily attendance) were not investigated, and so are not taken account of. As such, the determined period of attendance was not suitable for working parents, and complications arose when children left the preschool and in securing supervision of children following the end of preschool. Alongside a limited number of day-long preschools and unsuitable opening hours, parents were forced to make use of private preschools, which have longer opening hours (Oikonomidis, 2014).

Findings from a questionnaire survey in Greece (Kelesidou et al., 2017) regarding parents' satisfaction with preschool education demonstrate that parents perceive education provided by the private sector as of better quality, and they also assess it better in regard to communication. Another finding was more critical assessments from parents with higher education compared to parents with lower education, who tended to give more positive evaluations. These findings line up with the claim that parents with higher education have greater expectations regarding the education of their children, and are more demanding and more critical in regard to the services provided (Cryer, & Burchinal, 1997), although according to other research findings in the CR, they are more likely to appreciate the approach and effective education from preschools (Majerčíková & Rebendová, 2016). There is an evident European context for supporting parental attitudes, such as in documents and recommendations produced by the OECD and EU, in which German parents demand a more intensive connection with preschool institutions and a smooth transition to primary education (Kaščák, 2020).

In Poland, for example, preschool education is compulsory for all 6-year olds, and places in preschool are guaranteed to children once they reach three years of age. Of nearby states, the leader in terms of accessibility of preschool education is Hungary, where preschools are compulsory for children from 3 years of age, and there is high participation in preschool education.

## Conclusion

Over recent decades, debate on the importance of education has increasingly frequently included children of preschool age. The discourse which has been generated within individual countries in the OECD and the EU, and so also in the CR and Slovakia, has undoubtedly also impacted parents. Our conclusion that parents in both countries have a fundamentally positive perception of the introduction of compulsory preschool attendance can be perceived as one of the impacts of this. In this context, Kaščák (2020) writes of socio-compensatory discourse in which preschool education becomes a working component of the economy, in which a growing link to primary education resonates. The compulsory nature of preschool education and its potential scholarisation is perceived as a measure which should support existing and emerging child capacities in order to develop them and their prospects on the labour market and to the benefit of the new knowledge-based economy. We can thus increasingly see that specific issues of preschool education, which were traditionally linked to the character and culture of the country, its history and culture, are fading away. Less account is even taken of the concept of children's rights and children's quality of life, which were focused on as recently 2013 at the OECD (Kaščák, 2020) closer to pedagogical science. While it may sound clichéd, national education systems could be given the challenge of holding on to their "own face", and in future this could almost represent an alternative.

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