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Professionalization of University Students of Pre-school Education (through the views of students on pre-school and the family in the Czech Republic)

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Abstract

Pre-school is a space which provides an environment for the cognitive, affective, social and physical development of children at pre-school ages as well as conditions for their preparation for life. Pre-school facilities and teachers play a key role in facilitating this development. There is, however, little scientific research on how university students become teachers. The aim of this project is to describe the process of the professionalization of pre-school university students – starting from their initial concepts of the child, childhood and pre-school and continuing on to the creation of their own conception of self as a teacher and teaching in the course of the university programme.

The study provides the partial results of research which is still currently being worked on with the support of an IGA grant project under the number FHS/2015/04. The project will be completed in 2017.

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1. Introduction

Motivation is what drives us to perform, to make a choice. Furthermore, motivation includes the energy and effort to learn to work effectively and achieve one's own objectives.

The analysis of the motivation to be a pre-school teacher and the search for the reasons and the relational context of this choice, are the variables that constitute the fundamental axis of the present text.

In the last twenty years, the profession of pre-school teacher has been associated with continuous development and new considerations about where it should be headed in terms of theory and application. It is particularly interesting to see the motives and the reasons why young people select this profession. Studies observing the motives of students to become pre-school teachers are rather rare. Over the last five years extremely rare. Major studies include the work of the American author Frances O'Connell Rust (1993). F. O. Rust carried out qualitative research conducted using in-depth interviews on a sample of 30 novice teachers in pre-schools. The subject of the research was to monitor what was important in deciding to become a teacher. The main conclusion of the research was that students decided on their profession because they liked children. However, after analyzing their own career paths to teaching they understood that love for children would not suffice for the full performance of the teaching profession. "... *the primary reason was the love of children. But now I know it is not enough ...*" This quote also shows that the professional path of the student is supported by their own need to learn more and understand what all the work in the pre-school is about.

The present study focuses on early decisions on the career path of young people and their vision of the chosen profession. Its aim is to expand the knowledge base of the professionalization of pre-school through the ideas of young people about the job requirements for pre-school teachers and the method of their fulfillment. It loosely follows up on a study which was compiled past year (Wiegerová, Gavora, 2014).

To understand the context it is important to clarify who can work as a *pre-school teacher*, and what the pre-school is for in the socio-educational system in the *Czech Republic*.

Those who have completed higher education or a secondary school with a pedagogical orientation may become pre-school teachers. The need for obtaining a university degree is not stipulated by law. This of course raises a lot of professional discourse that is significantly discussed in the *Czech Republic*.

The role of a pre-school teacher is to ensure the professional care of children, their upbringing and education. The basic document, which is approved in the *Czech Republic* in relation to pre-school education, is the so-called Framework educational program of preschool education, which enshrines that pre-school teachers must regularly monitor the progress of children's education and assess its condition and results. The Framework educational program is an essential curriculum document and pre-schools develop their own school educational programs according to the frameworks specified therein.

A pre-school is an institution attended by children from 3 years of age. Attending pre-school is voluntary, so children go to pre-school based on the decision of the parents. 80% of the children population in the *Czech Republic* attends pre-school. More recently in professional circles, two issues are being discussed: obligation of education in pre-schools for children from 5 years of age and accepting children younger than three years into pre-schools. In the *Czech Republic* there is pressure on the last year of preparatory pre-school education on the part of parents, as well as pressure for the acceptance of children younger than three at pre-school. This situation stems from the fact that mothers want to return to work earlier so that they can build their careers. As a rule, women may remain on maternity leave until the child is three years old.

On the other hand, the pressure for compulsory preparatory classes results from the desire of parents to enhance the education of their child, so the child would adapt to the conditions at the primary school more rapidly. However, a large proportion of parents use the option of deferring the compulsory education of the child until the child is 7 years old (in the *Czech Republic* a child who turns 6 may begin the first year of primary school) and thus they actually prolong the stay of children in pre-school. At the same time, however, this changes the focus of work in pre-schools as well as the professional training of pre-school teachers in secondary schools and universities.

2. Research methodology

The research was begun in the academic year 2012/2013. The sample was comprised of students from the field of pre-school education. At that time they were in the first year of full-time study. At that time the faculty did not have an approved accreditation for combined (external) study. Full-time study in the academic year 2012/2013 was the only choice of study in the university field of pre-school education at pre-schools in the *Zlín region*.

2.1. Characteristics of the research participants

30 female students took part in the study. Initially, 204 candidates applied to this field of study. From this group, 30 female students started the first year. They were women aged 18-22. Some of them have tried to study at university for the second or third time. Between studying at the university and graduating from secondary school, these candidates conducted practice in pre-schools or organizations that dealt with educational activities with children of pre-school age. Mostly it concerned dance groups, folk dance groups, ceramic workshops and singing groups. Most had experience with residence activities for children of a younger school age during the summer holidays. Either they worked in the position of the head of summer camps, or cooperated in organizing activities that were organized as so-called suburban summer camps. This implies that all had experience with children and more than half of them, apart from this experience and practice, also attended practice during their studies at the Pedagogical Academy (secondary school with a pedagogical orientation). 50% of them therefore had pedagogical education before their arrival at university, and thus were already qualified as pre-school teachers. Nevertheless, their interest in studying at the university meant they wanted to continue with their study and deepen their knowledge in the field of pre-primary education. Their idea of study is linked to their memories of secondary school and they also expected a predominance of praxeologically tuned disciplines from the university as well as the acquisition of methodological skills in working with children of pre-school age. The theoretical disciplines proved to be difficult for them and far from their ideas of practice.

Already during the first year it was proven that it is a relatively non-homogenous study group. In spite of the same sex and the same commitment to the region where they were born and where they live, the experience with children of pre-school age that they had gained in previous years, as well as their age, began to divide them. Age in this group of adolescents played an important role. It was shown that the notions of 18-year old and 22-year-old girls were different. None of the students at the time were married or had any children.

In terms of learning, the students had problems with theoretical analysis of their output in practice. It is also obvious that the model of learning by heart was dominant with them and they only sporadically had their own opinions and constructive attitude to the expert lectures. Therefore the subjects which forced them to analyze, argue and present their own views were considered by them to be challenging.

The group was divided into several small sub-groups, based on their age and experience with children, but also on their ability to handle the theoretical disciplines and examinations. As a group, right from the start they began to participate actively in all extracurricular activities, which were in some way linked with pre-school children. Even there, however, it was clear that the group had four leaders, who were the bearers of the opinions, attitudes and work style of the individual subgroups.

The university environment has a different climate than secondary school and the emphasis on theoretical knowledge as well as increasing demands for testing and daily training for study meant that in the academic year 2013/2014 7 students failed to meet the expectations of their teachers after two semesters. Therefore, 23 students continued with their study in the second year, and remaining in the presented research in the academic year 2014/2015.

2.2. Research design

In all three academic years the research participants performed so-called thematic writing. We addressed them after each winter semester in informal discussions with the supervisor of the department within the framework of the evaluation of the department and the evaluation of teaching quality.

The thematic writing was conceived as processing of unstructured written texts of unlimited length. Thematic writing was used e.g. by Spilková et al. (2004). The written statements were anonymous and processed with open coding and then thematic analysis tools (Braun, Clarke, 2006). Elements of the biographical method, thus recording significant life stages, involved in decision making, shaping of attitudes and the construction of implicit theories about teaching in pre-schools were used as an auxiliary means of description and analysis.

As is obvious from the research, we chose a qualitative approach that allows us greater flexibility and to illicit more intimate responses from the surveyed persons. In the Czech Republic, there are more works of a quantitative

nature and therefore we wanted to try to supplement the research studies with the view of a qualitative oriented research.

3. Research findings

In the Czech Republic support for the development of a child is usually carried out in two basic institutions. These are **a) family b) pre-school.**

Both institutions are changing due to societal and social changes. We will also attempt to explain that through the statements of the research participants.

3.1. Family of the child

Child evolves and develops in the **family**, which becomes an important, emotional and social focal point in child's life, since the birth. Family creates a strong emotional foundation for the further development of the child, but also the first social institution which the child encounters in his or her life. The research participants associated family with the concept of childhood.

Family is the most important thing that a person has in life. The family can influence everything. The family gives the child foundation and provides them with a beautiful childhood. (P7)

The family environment is the most important for a child during childhood. In the family, children learn the most, because they spend the most time there. (P9)

I would characterize the current childhood as modern childhood. Just as the family changes, childhood is also changing. For example, children have access to electronics from very young age and they know how to operate them. Already in the stroller we can see children holding the mobile phone or tablet in their hands. (P6)

In the testimonies of the participants, the pressure on the computerization of society was also significantly shown in other accounts, such as the transformation of games and the learning process of the child. In the perception of the research participants, however, despite the pressure of so-called modern influences which were evaluated particularly by the growing influence of modern technology in everyday life, the family is still associated with a lovely childhood. We can detect metaphors of family as the source of peace, joy, support, happiness and safety in the saying "a good family - a beautiful childhood."

What is going on in the child's family greatly affects their behavior, actions, attitudes, emotions, and at the same time the child also acts accordingly outside the family. (P4)

A child mainly needs trust and a feeling of safety and security, and that is best given to them by the family. (K5)

In the family the first relationships, opinions and later attitudes come into existence. This family forms the child's personality. (P12)

In the family the child has a chance to develop their character traits in a positive sense.

The positive qualities of a child can be developed and on the contrary the negative ones can be suppressed in the family based on positive examples, motivation and rewarding. (P13)

The family is the most important for the child, so the development of their characteristics is also linked to the up-bringing in the family. The family definitely has a big effect on the characteristics of the child. According to what the parents allow, how they behave to children and how they communicate is how the child behaves, and how their characteristics develop and they also adopt some principles. (P2)

The family or the parents transmit an important genetic basis to the child for the characteristics that the child has and which can develop. In the testimony, on the one hand the perception of the importance of the genetic make-up

which the child acquires from the parents can be seen, on the other hand, the belief (faith) of the participants in the importance of up-bringing also shows. This belief in the power of upbringing can also be evaluated as a prerequisite for their professional formation. Upbringing has a fundamental value for the participants and the belief in the power of a positive upbringing that can change a child into a good person is evident from their statements.

I think that a child can inherit some characteristics from their parents. I think that their upbringing also affects the development of the characteristics of the child in the family environment. According to me, the characteristics of a child are affected by temperament. (P3)

The family is the foundation for the upbringing of a child. If a child is in a family where there is daily shouting and quarreling, they'll think that it's natural. If the child is from a more restrained family where everything is solved with rational agreement, they will not have a tendency to quarrel. (11)

The research participants rated the family as the most important institution where the child lives.

3.2. Pre-school

However, next to the family (according to the statements of participants) the pre-school also has a great influence on the child.

In the school environment, the child learns to socialize, interact with other children and to respect adult authority. (P17)

Children are often spoiled in families. The family should lead the child to be independent instead of doing everything for them. (14)

While the family has a higher priority for children's emotional background, the pre-school has a dominant role in the social maturing of the child. This is understandable, because the child enters a larger group of their peers, with whom they get into direct contact. Pre-school is a voluntary institution in the Czech Republic, this means that attending pre-school is not mandatory for the child. The child may continue to be educated at home until the age which is considered the threshold for the start of compulsory education.

An important task of the pre-school is to supplement family education and create a multilaterally stimulating environment for the active development and learning of the child. The result of the efforts, which are concentrated in the conditions of the pre-school, is the preparation of the child for entry into primary school.

The research participants, in this wide range of opportunities the pre-school offers for child development, underline the importance of the cooperation between the family and the school. But even as students, they feel that this ideal model does not always work. In their statements there is stronger identification with the position of a teacher than with the position of a parent. This is partly understandable, because none of the research participants is a mother. The family is strong in their childhood memories, but when talking about how it is currently, the family was often criticized in the testimony of the participants. As if their professional orientation and effort to defend the importance of pre-school in raising the child has already prevailed.

It depends on how the family and the school work together so that they are not somehow contradicting each other in the child's upbringing. The family and the school environment should be full of stimuli for the child. (P14)

The school develops the value system for the child. How the school and the family affect the child may be different, and that is why it is good that the child attends school, because they can see that what takes place in the family is not normal. (P16)

The school environment can mitigate the negative effects of the family, but never change a child to such a degree as the family. (P11)

Interesting, however, is the claim that childhood ends with the starting of primary school. As if childhood was locked in the time period from 0 to 6/7 years in the sphere of the family and pre-school.

3.3. Pre-school teacher

Confidence in the role of the pre-school is transmitted by the pre-school teacher to the parents as well as to the child. The research participants have their vision of the mission of a pre-school teacher. It is not a naive idea. As we already wrote in the characteristics of the research participants, 50% of them completed secondary school education with a pedagogical orientation. Nevertheless, they perceive their mission in pre-school through three basic preferences. They are a) preparation for life, b) support of the child's personality, c) support of the pupil's role.

*... I only want to ease the **transition into life** for them. (P3)*

*....in pre-school they receive the very basic "**advice**" for life. (P10)*

*I have a good feeling that as a teacher I can help facilitate their **entry into a certain independence**. Children in pre-school must gradually get used to being **without mom and dad** for some time. And I'm glad that I can facilitate this transition with loving care. I am also glad that **I can give them something new and essential for life**. There is something to the saying "What I need most, I learned in pre-school." (P12)*

In these statements it takes place as the uncovering of the real world, which the pre-school can gradually mediate. The autonomy of the child is also disturbed by the increasing contact with peers and thus strengthening the social function of pre-school. The pre-school teacher is suddenly put into the role of intermediary of contacts but also the mediator of conflicts that arise among the children. The version of the perception of teachers in schools in the dichotomy of good (fair) and bad (unfair) teachers also falls into the structure of the vision of the profession of the teacher (for more information see Pupala, Branická, 2002). A good teacher is more associated with pre-school, where, in relation to the functions of the pre-schools, they come to the forefront in more of a partner position and in the relations with children, as well as with the parents. In the pre-school the relationship of the teacher to the child changes. The authoritative relationship (which can be observed in primary schools) is accompanied by affection, trust and partnership. Therefore, the position of the pre-school teacher in the relational framework child-school-family is special.

In their statements, the research participants also presented an idea about what the objectives of educational activities should be, which are not yet much supported by the didactic background. However, the name of the profession – teacher – contains within itself the efforts to promote the education of children, which was also observed in the reactions of the research participants.

I want to intervene in the growth and education of children. (P20)

I like the fact that pre-school children themselves have a lot of enthusiasm, and if one is able to adapt to their style they can manage almost anything. (P4)

So, finally, education is closely related to the aim to prepare children for the first grade of primary school. The research participants are fully aware of this objective. According to them it was one of the strongest and most meaningful missions, which the pre-school has in its educational framework.

I think that the teacher in the pre-school accepts the responsibility that a child leaving pre-school should survive the first grade, that he or she will be prepared for it not only mentally but also physically. (P10)

I have a positive relationship with small children and enjoy working with them. I enjoy helping them with learning and preparation for first grade. (P14)

From the testimony of the research participants which lead to the concept of the perception of the pre-school in

society, three basic lines can be established.

Pre-school is:

1. an institution which prepares the child for real life,
2. a space for educational opportunities that promote child development,
3. an institution that prepares children for the first grade of primary school.

4. Conclusion

In our research, we were able to determine the motives of female students from the field of pre-school education, for becoming a pre-school teacher.

We found that following issues influence the decision process significantly:

- **experience from practical work with children**, which they received from the family or au pair activities, or from various residential activities with children,
- **influential people**, who were from families, schools, and the local environment,
- **the depth of belief**, the autonomy of the decision to become a teacher.

In the process of selecting the profession, it was possible to follow the decision phases. These can be summarized as follows:

1. the stage of the preliminary verdict,
2. the stage of dealing with internal dilemmas
3. the stage of the second choice,
4. the stage of the conviction – I want to be a pre-school teacher.

The vision of the future profession, however, also had an influence on the future career choice. That has morphed into notions of professional orientation through the perception of:

- child and childhood
- target preferences of pre-school teachers,
- the role of the teacher in the pre-school

In the Czech Republic, there is also an intense debate about the concept of the teacher as a reflecting practitioner and the training of teachers through reflective practice, which sees the teacher as a professional. In order to become skilled professionals, the teachers do not need just reactive forms of knowledge that are typical for practice, but they also need systematic, theoretical knowledge focused on prototypes. The evaluation of the current state and perspectives of teacher training corresponds with the knowledge of current conditions. However, one can expect growing demands for the establishment of pre-schools (also for children younger than 3) as well as in terms of the concept of inclusive education in the country. Interest in the field of study is strong and a significant decline is not expected.

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