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## **Extracurricular Education Diversity in Czech Nursery Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This empirical study contributes towards a better understanding of the educational reality in kindergartens. It explores the after-school activities and interests of Czech nursery schools (NS) children. The topic focuses on the disharmony and subsequent fine-tuning of interests of both the family and the kindergarten, set against the background of parents' requirements and the kindergarten's reaction to them. The goal is to shed light on how kindergartens reflect parents' requirements pertaining to their children's extracurricular activities, the kindergarten's perception and interpretation of this situation, and what sort of approach is used for implementation. The research and survey method used is content analysis. Fifteen kindergarten teacher thematic reports, 3,000-5,000 words each, and forty inspection reports, the results of Czech kindergarten inspections, were analyzed. The analytical techniques of Grounded Theory - open and axial coding - were used in the processing of the source materials. The results of the analysis set in a paradigm model depict the state of administration and relationships between variables, which determine after-school activities in kindergartens. It was demonstrated that kindergartens select various approaches when negotiating a solution to extracurricular activities. The educational reality then includes kindergartens that do organize after-school activities as well as those that do not. Kindergartens which do offer after-school activities, however, differ in the degree of acceptance of such programs in terms of need for child development and how they perceive the benefits of such an above-standard approach towards their customers.

**Key words:** after-school activities, pre-school child, parents, interest activities, research, problem, kindergarten

### **Introduction**

Organized extracurricular activities for preschoolers are currently an integral part of the daily program at many kindergartens. The organizational framework of extracurricular activities eventually settled on a format of periodic activities used

and tested at lower grades of grammar schools.<sup>1</sup> Kindergartens also organize occasional extracurricular activities, educational or recreational.

Extracurricular activities as part of preschool education are often a controversial topic, among specialists as well as parents. The issue generally stems from excessive demands in terms of extracurricular activities on the side of parents of preschoolers and awkward reactions of kindergarten administrators, trying to solve this issue. After-school programs, as part of the framework “educational program for preschool education” (RVP PV, 2018), are defined as above-standard kindergarten activities and should be considered as a service to children and their parents. On the one hand, this definition sets clear parameters for extracurricular activities within the educational school program.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, it creates a disbalance among kindergarten administrators and parents’ expectations, resulting in a divergent approach taken by each individual Czech nursery schools (NS) in dealing with the opinions and demands of parents as subscribers to this service, as they see fit.

This study presents research results with the intent of providing insight into the issues of extracurricular activities organized by nursery schools, using the opinions and experiences of NS teachers as sources. Further data sources, aside from the thematic writings of NS teachers, included NS inspection reports published on the Czech school inspection website (CSI). As CSI is an authority on observations, assessment and also control of the conditions, processes and results of pre-school education, it is logical that during the implementation of these processes this authority must also express its opinions on extracurricular activities in kindergartens. In doing so, CSI is providing public feedback on NS operations within this context, which is why these reports were used as support materials for this study.<sup>3</sup>

### **Nursery schools extracurricular activities – background**

Extracurricular activities may be defined as a part of after-school education. This type of education is also supported by the Czech School Act (§111), and though it does not have the parameters of compulsory education, its potential to fulfill educational goals, i.e., to develop and cultivate the personality of the pupil, is indisputable. Its concept is appealing mainly because it is built on the principle of voluntarism and based on the interests, needs, preferences and personality of each

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<sup>1</sup> According to Decree 74/2005 Coll., on extracurricular education, it is defined as an organized, periodic after-school activity as part of a group, club, course or team.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the term school and nursery schools (NS) are used in the text as synonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Czech School Inspection (CSI) performs evaluations in schools that are included in the school register. Only the situation in these kindergartens has been the subject of our research.

individual. Most often it takes place during the pupil's free time and is focused on various areas of interest.

The interest intensity and focus in a child, which could lead to maximizing the effects of extracurricular activities in NS, is debatable, rather illusory and often stemming from the ambitions of the child's parents. Preschoolers' interests are, at this developmental stage, rather short-term, lacking form and precise definition (Pávková, 2008; Hofbauer, 2004). Koťátková (2014) discusses the spontaneous formation of interest just before the start of elementary education, and of certain differences among children, which, as can be derived from her subsequent description, can be perceived as an inclination, a thematic preference within a child's activities formed during play or as part of the daily NS curriculum. Moreover, she notes that this specialization starts the "ordeal" of various after-school activities (Koťátková, 2014), which is a process that can carry a negative connotation. As will be demonstrated in the research part of this study, a response to this statement was even reflected in the activities and operations of surveyed kindergartens.

According to the Czech Education Act (§111) and Decree 74/2005., Coll. extracurricular education is provided in school facilities for after-school education, especially in school clubs and after-school care facilities. It therefore focuses mainly on primary education, although even preschool children may attend activities at these facilities. Apparently, kindergartens are not considered in this legislation framework. However, the RVP PV (2018) does reflect the potential demands of parties interested in pre-school education. Nursery schools offer the option for above-standard services to parents as part of the institutionalized preschool education, within its standard operations.

In the context of subsequent educational levels, the terms extra-class or out-of-school activities are used. These concern any school activities taking place outside of mandatory lessons, in other words, outside of the obligatory curriculum. Even NSs organize activities, which fall within the scope of this concept, by selecting extra-curricular activities outside of the SEP framework and mandatory preschool education. They may have a spontaneous, occasional or regular character (Hofbauer, 2004). It is a child's free play, based on individual interests; in case of occasional activities, it is most often sporting events, theater performances, excursions and trips organized according to the possibilities, within the interest and focus of the kindergarten. In case of activities organized regularly, after-school programs can accommodate various interest groups year-round.

As part of its daily activities, the kindergarten curriculum cultivates not only the personality of a child, but also various newfound interests in children. However, certain interests should be strengthened and developed in the form of after-school programs, managed directly by the kindergarten teacher or, depending on the interest of the parents and the means of the school, by an

external instructor or other school staff. Such activities are usually subject to an extra charge and are not included in the monthly tuition fee. As mentioned, according to the basic curriculum document for pre-school education (RVP PV, 2018), extracurricular activities are of an above-standard nature.<sup>4</sup>

There are few empirical data from realistic situations on the number and focus of extracurricular activities in Czech kindergartens. Key findings were provided by the CLoSE research survey (Greger et al., 2016), in which a representative sample of nursery schools was analyzed and the following was found:

- three-fourths of nursery schools offer parents extracurricular activities or other developmental activities for their children just before joining elementary school (group with focus on stimulating education, the “dobrý start” method, etc.), 20% of schools offer these activities free of charge;
- nursery schools offers 3.5 activities on average, while some nursery schools offer up to 12 various extracurricular activities
- the occurrence of extracurricular activities is more likely in a larger nursery school;
- the most common extracurricular activities are English, flute lessons, sports, dance, music or motion activities, while less often are ceramics, swimming, painting or crafts, singing, speech therapy and other developmental activities intended for preschoolers.

Extracurricular activities are presently a commodity that is largely complementary to compulsory education and therefore have potential for further development beyond the classroom. Children’s parents are well aware of this fact. For example, Simonová’s research (2017) confirms this notion and reveals that when parents are choosing a school for their children, they clearly favor those providing extracurricular activities and other after-school programs. Further evidence comes from the degree of parents’ expectations related to a child’s school performance, applying the following formula - the more extracurricular activities, the higher the expectations of better results (Zpráva, 2013). Extracurricular activities and after-school programs, being the result of the school and teachers’ offers as a reaction to the natural demand of parents, are an integral part of the work of elementary schools, as documented by a multi-case study on the changes in five primary schools in the Czech Republic (Dvořák, Starý, & Urbánek, 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> RVP PV (2018, s. 42) states: “In case a kindergarten is offering to children or their parents further services, which take place outside of the regular hours of facility operation, outside of the teacher’s working hours and which are *subject to extra charge* (for ex. extracurricular activities for children, occasional evening or weekend child care, occasional older children care – i.e. siblings, separate programs for parents, etc.), these activities (services) are *‘above-standard’*, and are not part of the School educational program (SEP) and cannot be organized at the expense of its quality and extent.”

Hands-on experience from pre-school education has shown that parents of children in kindergartens are thinking in a similar way. Their behavior signals that they too are subjected to the social pressures to individualize their children and that they are using socialization based on personalization (Lipovetsky, 2008), transferring this pressure to the kindergarten itself. We perceive this as an effort by parents to extend to their children a rich spectrum of stimuli for their personal development in order to best start their educational careers. As noted by Kašparová (2014), some young mothers work on their children's institutionalized education:

*"I think that especially English is really important. Ríša has been taking lessons of English since he was six months old, and when he starts school, he will be fluent. We would like to send him to an English school. That way he will have a bigger chance of studying abroad."*<sup>5</sup>

It also shows that parents have different educational aspirations in relation to their children before they can be influenced by their learning outcomes (Reed, 2012), i.e., prior to entering primary education. Today's parents often rate a kindergarten according to just how many extracurricular activities they offer (Ľethalová, 2010). We know, however, that the real interests of parents are usually diverse, because they are purposeful and utilitarian in nature. Further, they are also uneducated and therefore often non-constructive and counterproductive to the school's progress (Dvořák, Starý, & Urbánek, 2010).

The establishment of extracurricular activities has its roots at a time when there was a shortage of children in kindergarten, and the supply of such activities was meant to attract potential clients of pre-school education. Nursery schools responded according to their means and opinions, and the situation became unbearable in some cases, since extracurricular activities started to significantly interfere with the obligatory educational activities of the schools. In 2016, the CSI, apparently also due to experiences from kindergarten inspections, issued a "Statement on providing or organizing paid extracurricular activities in kindergartens," which unambiguously established the basic organizational framework for these operations, referring to the relevant legislation. As a result, after-school activities cannot be part of a school's SEP, and they also cannot interfere with obligatory education, especially not at the expense of the extent, quality or ratio of the structured versus unstructured activities of a child, and they cannot be obligatory for parents, because the nursery school provides each child with a well-rounded and broad educational program (Stanovisko, 2016). Also, these kindergarten services are currently dealing with some regulations, and

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<sup>5</sup> From the author's field notes (Kašparová, 2014) – the mother is talking about her 16-month-old son.

according to Opravilová (2016), this direction towards a reduction of extracurricular activities in the nursery school is a consequence of its increasing financial demands. It is indeed realistic, because according to Gregera et al. (2016), the cheapest activities are arts and crafts (294 CZK on average) and speech therapy (312 CZK on average), while the most expensive are swimming (1,037 CZK on average), ceramics (1,113 CZK on average) and of course the much-favored English (1,415 CZK on average). The financial aspect of these extracurricular activities can actually become a source of disadvantage for children, as parents who have insufficient financial means are unable to meet the financial criteria. Thus, the roots of inequalities in education are formed, evolving at a later educational stage into an important variable correlating with a child's success at school (e.g., Matějů, Straková et al., 2006).

In order to gain more insight into the issue of extracurricular pre-school education, we researched how the teachers themselves perceive this situation and how CSI comments on it.

### **Research - objectives, methods, samples and limits**

This study's ambition is to scientifically support the understanding of extracurricular activities of children in nursery schools, which are organized as part of after-school programs. The objective of the research was to explore and uncover the educational reality in preschool education with an emphasis on the implementation of extracurricular activities and to offer empirical data for further discussion on this issue. As means, the statements and experiences of kindergarten teachers were to be used, as well as the outcomes of NS inspections carried out by CSI, documented in their inspection reports. In both groups of source documents, but mainly in the CSI reports, passages, which in any context commented on the operations of the above-standard and extracurricular activities in NS, were analyzed. Thus, a basic question arose during the research: *How are extracurricular activities in a kindergarten reflected in the educational reality of pre-school education?*

This generally formulated intention was divided into specific research problems within the survey:

*What approach and strategy are selected by the NS for extracurricular activities and why? How does the NS organize extracurricular activities? What are, according to the teachers, the interests of the school, parents and children, in terms of extracurricular activities?*

The data from the teachers was gathered by a method of thematic writing (according to Wiegerová & Gavora, 2014). In the survey, we capitalized on the potential of free writing on an assigned topic, when the given "testimony" originates in time according to the tempo, interest, opportunities and other dispositions of the author, while also offering the option to reflect and fine-tune

already stated ideas. For research, free writing is advantageous because it provides an opportunity to gain insights into the discourses and the perspectives of the participants, giving them a chance to think about their subjective approach without fear of someone else's reactions, and also without external interruptions to the data collection process in an attempt to verify their understanding (Elizabeth, 2008).

For the assigned topic, "extracurricular activities in nursery schools - my experiences and opinions," there were only two writing conditions. The intent was to reveal not only the experiences of the teachers with extracurricular activities as a reflection of the educational reality, but also their opinions on this subject. Aside from the assignment of the topic, the participants were not instructed in any way on the extent, format and content of the writing. Based on our experience, it was assumed that the topic of extracurricular activities in nursery schools is sufficiently "strong" to ensure adequately extensive and spontaneous testimonies from the teachers, without further external support. Participating teachers were selected for their daily professional experience with a given topic, but also for their willingness to share the reality on a given issue. This task yielded 15 texts, spanning 3,000 to 5,000 words, received in printed or electronic formats (email).

As noted, another research method used was a content analysis of documents - CSI reports. These inspection reports are accessible to the public in a CSI database posted on their webpage. 40 NS reports were selected, dated sometime during 2017 (and possibly the last 2 months of 2016) and which represented NSs that organized their activities as standalone subjects, i.e., not connected with an elementary school (ES). The reason for the first criteria was that the CSI statement on extracurricular activities in NS was issued in 2016, and our research was interested in official statements issued later. The decision to select only standalone NSs was made due to the fact that the organizational, operational and staff requirements in connection with extracurricular activities are greater than for NSs connected with an elementary school.

Content analysis was applied to the presented research. It can be used as a tool or process and also as a technique or a method (Dvořáková, 2010), and such similar diversification took place during this research as well. Content analysis was conducted as a research method and as a technique of data processing.

To process the data, analytical techniques of anchored theory - open and axial coding - were used. The paradigm model has proven to be the most appropriate tool for sorting and arranging the obtained data. As is well known, the paradigm model is a result of axial coding and identifies a phenomenon, its causal conditions, the context and intervening variables, strategies of action and consequences (Švaříček & Šed'ová, 2007).

The **research sample** was made up of teachers presently working for a NS. Intentional selection was used. We searched our neighborhood, looking for

teachers willing to convey their approaches and reflections of their own experiences, without reservations towards writing.

We approached 17 teachers with whom we had a professional connection – they acted as faculty teachers, previously collaborated with us on projects, or were faculty students in a part-time study program – 15 of which shared with us their statements. The length of pedagogical practice of the teachers ranged from 2 to 20 years. The teachers represented both smaller and larger NSs (from single class to six classroom NSs), and all NSs were located in Moravia. All but one of the teachers were from public NSs.

There are also **limits** in our research, pertaining mainly to the research sample size and its selection. Qualitative design allows a selection of a few cases, as was the case in this study, but its relatively narrow and local focus offered a depiction of the situation in the selected national region especially. That said, there was an effort to compensate for this deficit by analyzing inspection reports also covering NSs from most regions of the Czech Republic. In this context, there are also disadvantages to free writing as a research method. On the one hand, participants are experiencing relative comfort, but on the other hand there is little space to fine-tune our understanding of the presented ideas and their opinions.

## Results

The research survey offered an insight into what phenomena illustrate the educational reality of kindergartens in relation to the extracurricular activities they organize. The strongest connection in this part of the NS agenda was clearly shown in relation to the parents of children currently attending NS, and also those applying for NS.

### *Interpretation framework of the research*

In the first phase, the product of the open encoding was the processing of the key phase data. These were embedded into the paradigm model. Subsequently, the following scheme was created:

Phenomena	Causal conditions	Context	Intervening conditions	Strategies of conduct, interactions	Consequences
Extracurricular activities in NS	Ambitions and expectations of parents	Specifics of NS (staff, its opinions, conditions of NS)	Statements and inspections of CSI	approach selection as a reaction to "extracurricular" demands of parents	Extracurricular activities as burden for NS

Tab. 1. Extracurricular activities in NS – paradigm model



Table 1 shows the basic interpretative framework of the research survey. It centers on the extracurricular phenomena as identified in today's kindergartens. It has shown that extracurricular activities are organized as a result of a pressure or, at a minimum, an intense parental demand. For parents, extracurricular activities are an important parameter for assessing the quality of the school, and they demonstrate the customer service approach of the school. According to teachers, many parents clearly select a school based on the availability of extracurricular activities, with English lessons being in the highest demand.

*"Parents often feel that if a kindergarten does not offer sufficient extracurricular activities and after-school programs outside of the SEP framework, they deem it inadequate and continue searching for a different school. Parents are mostly interested in languages, mainly English and then PE." U8*

How teachers deal with parents' expectations and what approaches they adopt depend on their views on how to develop interests in pre-school children. A determining factor is their ability to communicate these views to parents and to effectively negotiate conclusions on extracurricular activities. Other determiners of this process are operational or organizational conditions at the school. Lastly, one important factor contributing to the solution regarding extracurricular activities is the CSI statement on the given issue from 2016. According to our analysis, extracurricular activities in NS, in general, are rather a strategically accepted but often also tolerated activity. The careful response of schools is mainly a result of unclear benefits in relation to the development of the interests or overall prosperity of a pre-school child. This approach is illustrated by the questioning of the character and quality of parenthood and the attitude of today's parents towards their children. In this respect, one of the teachers came to an extremely critical position in her statement, saying,

*"It is a service to parents. I was forced to think about the word 'service'. Providing a service to someone is respectable and, to some degree, uplifting. The teaching profession is certainly a service in the best sense of the word. Service to the country, to the generations, to the world. As an extracurricular activity lecturer, I am very happy to provide a child with a service, which enriches them, contributes to their development, entertains and delights them. I am very happy to provide a service to a parent who believes in my abilities and allows me to pass on my knowledge and skills to their child. But I do not want to confuse the word service with serfdom. It is not service when it is for parents, who are too lazy to take their child out of kindergarten earlier and teach them how to swim, who would rather pay for the ski course and are happy to get rid of them for a while." U2*

### **Status of extracurricular activities in kindergartens**

A key research category is that of extracurricular activities in kindergartens. Through coding, we identified three ways in which schools dealt with

extracurricular activities, and we refer to them as the status of extracurricular activities in kindergartens. For the characterization, explanation and declaration of the relationships between categories, we extended the key category to causal conditions stemming from parental influences on extracurricular activities in kindergartens and the contexts in which kindergartens work. These contexts are diversified mainly through the approach of kindergartens to extracurricular activities and with respect to the other conditions in kindergartens (table 2).

Tab. 2. Three approaches of NSs towards extracurricular activities

<b>Status of extracurricular activities (EA) in NS</b>	<b>„We have them and want them ...”</b>	<b>“We have them, but do not want them ...”</b>	<b>“We do not have them and do not want them ...”</b>
Teachers' opinions on EA	<i>positive, accepting EA</i>	<i>negative, rejecting EA</i>	<i>negative, rejecting EA</i>
Reactions to the parental demands for EA	<i>accommodated</i>	<i>accommodated</i>	<i>not accommodated</i>
Parental expectations regarding EA	<i>heard and fulfilled</i>	<i>heard and fulfilled</i>	<i>heard and fulfilled except for EA (in SEP)</i>
Whose interest is a priority?	<i>parent's interest and NS's interest</i>	<i>parent's interest</i>	<i>parent's interest and NS's interest</i>
EA availability	<i>EA are for all children at NS</i>	<i>if at all – EA should be for all children at NS, not just according to NS possibilities and the abilities of children</i>	<i>EA is a tool for the financial bullying of parents – not all parents can afford them</i>
EA in relation to SEP	<i>effective “above-standard”, addition to SEP</i>	<i>addition to SEP</i>	<i>Interest in EA “dissolved” in SEP</i>
Unstructured, spontaneous child play as a counterweight to EA	<i>offered according to the options of the day</i>	<i>offered according to the options of the day</i>	<i>offered at the expense of activities of the day</i>
Child in EA	<i>develops better</i>	<i>some children in EA may benefit</i>	<i>is overworked</i>
EA as an indicator of NS quality as perceived by parents	<i>NS is competitive thanks to them</i>	<i>NS is competitive thanks to them</i>	<i>NS is competitive even without them</i>
EA are ...	<i>the opportunity for children to develop</i>	<i>a parental requirement that</i>	<i>an expression of parents' mistrust</i>

	<i>acts as a means of maintaining good relations with parents</i>	<i>needs to be fulfilled in order to maintain an optimal relationship with them</i>	<i>towards NS, a manifestation of parents' ignorance of NS operations</i>
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Let us now examine in more detail the character and the three positions of NSs, which they adopt and which then set the status of extracurricular activities in the NSs.

#### *An extracurricular activity as a positive educational element of a kindergarten*

The first approach of the schools represents those who organize and accept extracurricular activities or declare faith in their benefits to children and the school; we call it "we have them and we want them." This is common ground for kindergartens, which positively fulfill the expectations of parents, where their voice is of value to them, and where extracurricular activities pose a surmountable challenge. Parents' demands are an important element in the mosaic of school operations, the results of which are to be judged as successful and competitive, providing above-standard services to parents and their children.

*"I cannot imagine that we would work entirely without extracurricular activities. Parents select a school based on these. And they can be beneficial to the child. And when the teachers do what they enjoy doing, like dancing or arts, it is very useful." U1*

Representatives of these schools present the opinion and conviction that extracurricular activities have the potential to support the well-rounded development of preschoolers regardless of age, if these activities are well prepared and professionally managed.

*"Thanks to extracurricular activities, children have a chance to fully immerse themselves into an activity, which makes them happy, fulfills them and not only that. If a child attends a club or an activity regularly, by doing so, they build a positive approach towards spending their free time in an active and meaningful way." U5*

These schools are especially trying to manage these activities in a professional way, usually using their own staff and teachers. Though they do admit it is not always successful. According to the participants, the problem is that the hired and paid specialists do not always reflect the psycho-social characteristics of a preschooler in their approach, and they lack an understanding of the nature and rules of the life and operations in kindergarten.

#### *Extracurricular activities as a strategic activity in kindergarten*

The most powerful data, according to the teachers, is the kindergarten approach, in which schools reflect the demand of parents for extracurricular activities somewhat positively, but at the same time perceive them as a burden

they need to cope with in order to maintain stability and good relations with parents. We called it "we have them, but we do not want them." These kindergartens, to a certain extent, tolerate parents' demands, while cautiously "fine-tuning" their mutual differences regarding extracurricular activities in NS.

These schools either share with parents their negative opinions (rejections), often without prior agreement, or ignore them altogether, because they perceive it as a starting point for a potential conflict or a discussion, which might commence as a result and which they do not consider effective or useful.

*"Teachers should work with the natural curiosities of children and create a sufficiently stimulating environment, so that they are naturally eager to learn and to discover on their own. This is, I believe, successfully happening in most schools. The problem is, that this activity is often invisible. Parents frequently do not see what activities take place at school during the day. When a parent does not pay attention, does not read and does not comply with the rule that a child should be present at school by 8AM, then it is really difficult to explain that it interferes with the schedule and that the child does not have enough play time. How is it possible that my child does not have enough time to play, they ask? And then we schedule extra activities instead of nap time. It is exhausting and impossible. It is difficult to reason with a parent." U9*

According to the participants, these schools work under the premise that extracurricular activities are suitable for a few advanced children with specific interests, however the competitiveness and good reputation of the school is the key aspect.

*"Which headmaster wants their school to be trashed by parents on social media? To be competitive means to be able to respond to the demands of parents and accommodate them." U8*

This is why they offer extracurricular activities, especially to older children, who are easier to handle, even though it would be proper to offer it to all children. They do this for the children as well as for the parents who demand it.

After its "intervention" in 2016, when the CSI, as an authority for external evaluation of school activities, quite unequivocally declared its stance and the necessity to organize extracurricular activities according to the recommended format, the inspection only exceptionally reproaches schools for incorrectly scheduling extracurricular activities in the most productive school time. It also states that extracurricular activities are offered to parents and should cultivate and further develop a child's potential, which is a criterion being evaluated in monitored NSs.

#### *Educational reality in kindergartens without extracurricular activities*

The data uncovered another, least popular group of NSs (in this area) with a specific approach towards extracurricular activities, and we named it "we do not

have them and do not want them.” As can be assumed from the title, these NSs neither organize extracurricular activities nor have the intent to do so. That said, these schools do attempt to listen to the demands of parents on this topic.

*“In kindergarten, a child receives everything necessary for healthy and well-rounded personal development, which is what we communicate to the parents. If parents feel that more should be done, they can do more in extracurricular activities outside of the school. A child will be happier on a playground with a parent than doing an after-school activity which does not interest them.” U7*

According to this teacher's report, it is a matter of an argumentative discussion based on explaining to and persuading parents that extracurricular activities are useless in a normal kindergarten setting, and all parental incentives can be incorporated into the School Education Program (SEP). These NSs perceive extracurricular activities in preschool education as an ambition of parents, resulting in overloading the child and restricting their unstructured play time.

*“Children want to have fun, play freely, spend time on what they like, what makes them happy, without interruptions, for extended periods of time. They want to choose themselves what they are going to do and for how long. They also want other children to do what they like. From a grownup, they want to be either “left alone,” to play with them, to watch them play or possibly to help resolve a potential issue. Without even knowing this, children learn so much in an unstructured, spontaneous play. That said, I am convinced that without leadership, without an example, and without overcoming challenges (with a teacher's help), a child will not develop properly, will not reach their potential and become a person who is fun to be with... But there is no way to ensure spontaneity (you can paint always on Wednesdays from three to four) and a length of time that will suffice. There is no flexibility in extracurricular activities.” U2*

Further, according to the participants, extracurricular activities seem to be the “cause of economic bullying” of some parents. Not all of them can afford to pay for extracurricular activities, yet they are forced, if it is at all possible, to pay and together with the child to conform to the norm.

As a solution to alleviating the pressures of parental demands on organizing extracurricular activities, the teachers suggest that parents' trust is strengthened by open communication, by increasing the parents' awareness and informing them about NS events, for example explaining the basics of SEP.

*“It seems that the parents do not know much about the school educational program (SEP). It is unintelligible to them or, according to their opinions, does not seem to be sufficient for the wellbeing of a child. It is also possible that parents consider it rather a formality or an administrative document, like the*

*school or dining room rules of conduct, which no one reads as long as they do not need to resolve a specific issue or a problem with the school.” U2*

*“Of big help is open communication with the parent, a meeting with parents to properly introduce and explain it (SEP). Many parents do not even know that there is an educational program that governs all activities at school, and that children are actually being educated. That might be the reason why such a high percentage of parents find extracurricular activities so important, and why they think it is the only place for them to learn something.” U4*

According to the inspection reports from CSI, there are, indeed, kindergartens, which do not offer any extracurricular activities, as there is no mention of them in the reports. One possible explanation of this could lie in the above-mentioned approaches of schools.

## **Discussion**

Beck (2004) stated that childhood is perceived as a project for adults, who are responsible for its proper development and for whom children gain importance only as a “remainder.” Children then become subjects of parental efforts to not neglect anything in supporting them and to direct them towards success. Even as part of research results, parents are depicted as vigorously enforcing their own ideas on paths leading to the dynamic development of their children.

Research data provides an image of how schools deal with parental demands in relation to extracurricular activities. It has been shown, that the strategies used by schools reflect mainly the demands of parents rather than their children, even though parents are using the interests and the wellbeing of their children as leverage. In this context, Opravilová (2016) states that the time and space allotted for child’s play are being used mainly by parents to tend to their noble intentions, often subjective aspirations, presentations and self-presentations. According to the participating teachers, extracurricular activities satisfy mainly parental ambitions, and their fulfillment occurs at the expense of opportunities for the child to get to know the world in their own way. The opinion that NS teachers consider this situation as a problem leading to limitations in children’s lives is also noted in a representative survey among NS directors in the Czech Republic. They also consider kindergarten children overloaded, thanks to school or after school extracurricular activities. (Simonová, Potužníková and Straková, 2017).

According to repeated surveys among preschool educators (Opravilová, 2013), an activity, as a natural need of a child, has, under the influence of permanent, externally stimulated pressure, changed from a spontaneous activity to a mandatory action, with all educational space being controlled by a carefully crafted offer, approaching individual and social manipulation. The research participants also perceive the expanding, above-standard NS activities as the cause for the decrease of time and space for spontaneous free play.

A strong voice, frequently resonating through today's media, for example in parental discussions over social media,<sup>6</sup> which is useful to listen to, are especially opinions approving of and demanding above-standard activities in kindergartens. This research has confirmed that extracurricular activities in NSs are one of the criteria recommended to examine prior to attending a school. Aside from this, there other parameters as well, for example the type of NS, distance from home or work, opening hours, etc. (*Jak správně vybrat*, 2014). For example, England seems to have a more sophisticated approach focused on specialized areas of education, and where authors talk about the so-called "parental philosophy." It is being recommended to parents to find out whether the school provides a space for individualized education and uses an individual approach, whether it accommodates parents as volunteers, builds on rigorous assessments and results in children, or uses integration for topics and strategies in class with the objective of the holistic development of the child's nature. (Pena, 2015). The selection of a school that matches the desires and demands of parents echoes not only in the above-mentioned research (Simonová, 2017). Even Picková (2017) notably confirmed in her research a clear parental emphasis towards the rigorous fulfillment of the personal and educational needs of their children, bordering on overly protective procedures, with the goal of ensuring the best possible future for their children, thanks to a good kindergarten or grammar school.

According to the study participants, there are also parents who do not initiate extracurricular activities at school, most likely due to financial reasons. This is also confirmed by the inspection results in NS (Těthalová, 2010). An interesting comparison might be with a study by Lareau (2003), which revealed that American blue-collar parents, who could struggle with payments for above-standard activities at school, follow a parenting style enabling children to grow up in a less organized way, more often relying on school. To the contrary, middle-class parents apply the so-called "concentrated cultivation," based on organizing school and after-school programs for their children, in particular, initiating their presence in organized leisure activities, engaging parents in the life of the school and in communication with the school as well as with the children (Lareau, 2003).

Research has confirmed that the life and the atmosphere in NS reflects not only personal attitudes, but also public opinions, interpreted from the point of view of various priorities (needs and abilities of a child, success, prestige, market demands, etc.) and communicated through the opinions of parents, teachers or representatives from the educational administration. (Opravilová, 2013). The leitmotif of educational politics, when looking at the issue of after-school education in NS as an above-standard service, is the equality and diversity of the educational

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<sup>6</sup> For example, [www.rodina.cz](http://www.rodina.cz), [www.modrykonik.cz](http://www.modrykonik.cz), <https://zpravy.idnes.cz/diskuse>, [www.emimino.cz](http://www.emimino.cz), etc.



programs without the need for extracurricular activities. The recently noted diversity of an average NS program should ensure accessibility for all children (Ľethalová, 2010) and reduce their overload. Research has shown that in the educational reality of today's kindergartens, this requirement is hardly fulfilled. It is assumed that argumentative discussions with parents and the safeguarding of their pedagogical autonomy must be the most demanding tasks of NS teachers. Again, this corresponds with the results of the already mentioned research study involving NS directors (Simonová, Potužníková and Straková, 2017), who consider working with parents as the fourth most frequent source of issues in their workload. The teachers' constant maneuverings between various demands of parents as preschool clients and their own pedagogical stance, which does not favor extracurricular activities, fairly sums up the situation in which today's parents may find themselves. The fact that, in the end, parental demands are met, as signaled by the acceptance of their role as client, is clearly considered by the schools. This is not only a Czech issue, as kindergartens in the USA, Finland and Russia are confronted with this as one of the characteristic changes of their educational systems (Vlasov & Hujala, 2016).

The participation of parents in the development of a sound educational career for their offspring begins, without a doubt, with a preschool education. We can see a strong interest of parents in ensuring the best possible support for their children, starting from the lowest level of institutionalized education. Its result should be an education, which can be exchanged in a labor market for a profession or a vocation, which will become the source of an adequate quality of life.

## **Conclusion**

This study concluded that extracurricular activities in NS do not serve, according to participating teachers, as a primary platform for developing a child's interest or as a meaningful pastime, during which a child would have the choice to select their own activity, and this despite the fact that teachers, when engaged in organizing these activities, try to fulfill their purpose and meaningfulness. The lack of free choice and voluntariness of the child therefore contradict one the main principles of leisure activities. Further, it was revealed that parents are the instigators, who push for extracurricular activities in NS to be organized. Kindergartens perceive this as an issue as well as a challenge, and they try to address it. Data from three different approaches were analyzed, showing how NSs reflect the demands of parents in relation to their extracurricular activities. All results are generated with respect to the CSI statement, because they meet the conditions required by the state, that is, extracurricular activities are being offered in an appropriate time and with correct focus, or they do not have these activities in their programs at all. The first two NS approaches are built on a positive response to the parental demands for extracurricular activities, although they



differ mainly in the way schools believe in the merit and effectiveness of these activities in pre-school education. The last group of schools is trying to dissipate parents' demands through their daily educational program, by negotiating with them and by reasonably explaining to them their arguments and intentions.

A school's success or failure is often decided by the ability to effectively interconnect personal visions – mainly among school staff, but also those of other involved parties (Kaldestad, 2009). It turns out that in kindergarten, it is difficult for teachers to work with parents, who are generally quite involved but whose interests are often highly individual and, in relation to the school's operation, even counterproductive. When pondering the reasons for these approaches, we are currently considering mainly the economic and cultural interests of parents, who are pursuing their children's successful development and futures.

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