

ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AS A CRITERION IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN POLAND

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Abstract

Investing in human capital, in knowledge and skills, impacts the economy's development - similarly as investing in new technology. A good and effective employee, who as an adult will be capable of adjusting his or her qualifications to changes in technology, should as a child have access to pre-school education.

It should be emphasized that the period of early education is very rarely linked to human capital development. Research has shown that the childhood period is crucial to the subsequent development of intellectual potential and social skills. Preschools and schools, where children are taught social skills, determine – in a broad perspective – how a person's life chances will be utilized. Early care and education should, thus, be the main target of investments in the field of education and innovations. Poland has the lowest indicator of access to pre-school education (38.2% for children between 3-5 years of age). As it is necessary for more children to access pre-school education, alternative forms of pre-school education should be taken under consideration. The article outlines chosen forms of alternative pre-school education developing in Poland.

Key words: *quality of education, human capital, equalization of educational opportunities, preschool education, alternative forms of preschool education.*

Introduction

In addition to well-developed infrastructure human capital becomes an important contributor to economic development. It is therefore necessary to look at knowledge and skills of people in terms of investments. Not since today it is known that well-educated society creates more opportunities for sustainable and balanced economic growth. To meet the demands of the market economy one should strive to create a new model worker, combining general education with continuing education and acquiring new skills throughout life. This implies important conclusions for education, which should not only correspond to actual social needs, but anticipate the present times, in order to prepare a person to knowingly and responsibly shape his own future and future generations. Accomplishment of this observation is largely dependent on the proper conduction of the state educational policy, raising the quality of education by providing conditions for the development of

human capital and equalizing educational inequalities. It should be noted that in Poland linking the quality of human capital with the earliest educational experiences of man – his upbringing in the family or stay in the nursery is extremely rare. As evidenced by the economic Nobel laureate James Heckmann (2006) “investment in human capital of the youngest gives the best return – they are the most cost-effective not only for children but also for society”.

The purpose of this text is to identify the links between early education and the quality of future human capital. In these considerations it is assumed that preschool education, including children from 3 years of age should not be merely the first stage of compulsory basic education, giving the foundation for further learning, but also parity in the country’s economic development.

Preschool Education as a Factor Conditioning the Quality of Education

Poland’s accession to the European Union and, previously, the pre-access period affected the fulfilment of certain obligations resulting from the principles of the Lisbon Strategy. They were elaborated in 2002 in Barcelona in the form of three strategic objectives and thirteen operational ones. The “Barcelonian” programme obliged the member countries to raise the standard of education with the emphasis on the need of constant increase of the level of education of the society (Education in Europe... 2003).

One of the factors conditioning the increase of the level of education is care of human capital. It can be noticed that, as far as there is a common agreement that education in secondary and higher schools decides the development of human capital and the level of society’s education, it is really rarely associated with the preschool education (Blumsztajn, Szlendak, 2006). Early education is becoming the key to achieve success in adult life. This is according to the conclusion drawn by Robert Fulghum (1996) which says: “Everything I should really know about it how to live, what to do and how to act I learned in nursery school. Wisdom was not on top of the knowledge acquired in secondary school but in the sandpit”.

The time of the stay in nursery school is a very important stage in the education of a child. This is not only because of the fact that the mind of a child aged between 3 and 6 works very intensively, improves itself and acquires information, but also because the child learns much easier and more preferably among peers. A child develops and enriches his vocabulary, learns how to express his opinion in various situations, acquires new knowledge about the world, finds out what “how”, “where”, “when” and “why” mean, recognises similarities and differences, gets to know the causes of various behaviours and emotions, learns how to concentrate, works focused among others and follows somebody’s orders. Entertainment, which is not only the dominant form of activity but, above all, the most important line of child’s development, contributes to achieving these aims (Wygotski, 2004). Entertainment is an area in which a child may freely express his emotions, which sometimes are deeply hidden, establish social contacts and improve them in various circumstances. Adults as “entertained children” will be up to new tasks in individual and social situations. On the other hand, not entertained child will experience a constant lack of satisfactory and effective work. If in play they do not experience the feeling of being important, clever or organised they may have problems with self-esteem. Childhood is “a matter of life, which can be used to build up subsequent, strong and functional constructions” and this is what determines the strength and power of adolescence (Waloszek, 2009).

It should be noticed that contemporary education has no internal territory. It extends and takes place everywhere human being notices, understands, improves, organises and experiences something new. Many factors are the source of knowledge, e.g. media, school, new needs or phenomena. At present, it is difficult to decide what actually is the result of educating within an institution and what is the result of self-education, autosocialisation. It can only be supposed that certain abilities and knowledge are gained selectively and chaotically (Waloszek, 2009). In this case, a child needs education that would give them the chance to choose the activity which allows to test themselves

in various possible roles and positions. This context supports the need to reach with an educational offer every human being from his earliest years of lives.

Preschool education is not only the key factor affecting the quality of human capital, but also the most effective way of giving equal educational opportunities. The equality in education can be examined in terms of the access to education, course of education and school achievements. All these areas imply each other, however, the reason for the all appearing inequalities is the disproportion in access to education, which begins at the preschool stage. *The report on social development Poland 1998 – access to education* elaborated by UNDP demonstrates indicators and diversifies chances in access to education, i.e. place of living, parents' education, sex, disability, belonging to a national minority (www.unic.un.org.pl) and economic factors (Czapiński, Panek, 2009).

Any external barriers, particularly the background ones, which make it hard to use education and have the possibility to develop one's personality, are especially perceptible by people. One of the barriers which diversifies the access to preschool education most is the place of living. Children who live in the country or in a small town have statistically smaller chances to stay in nursery school than their peers who live in a big city. It is caused by such factors as e.g. smaller number of nursery schools in rural areas. Statistical data shows that in the school year 2008/2009 only every third nursery school was located in the countryside. At the same time, according to the data from Educational Information System, in 2007 there was not a single nursery school in more than 500 communes. The index related to children aged 3–5 with preschool education amounted to 15% and in some provinces below 5%.

Another barrier in achieving life success according to M. Karwowska-Sturczyk is the background of dysfunctional and poor families with low cultural capital and low educational aspirations. Educational aspirations that, to a large extent, can be acquired (children follow their parents' steps) carry helplessness, poverty and unemployment (Ogrodzińska, 2004). Therefore, it is so important for children that they have the feeling of school success. Earlier preparations for school give bigger chances to experience it. In the preschool age it is easier to shape new abilities, make up for appearing educational and social shortages and eliminate unfavourable influence of the family background.

Evening out of the educational chances has not only moral, but also practical dimension. Scientific research's results indicate the need for common preschool education. In the 60s in the USA, there was conducted the educational project High/Scope for children aged 3–4 from poor families. It concerned teaching of children e.g. solving problems on their own, planning and doing tasks under professional staff. Moreover, within the project teachers met with children parents once in a week at home in order to help them in the process of upbringing. When the participants of the project were 19, 30 and 40 years old, their educational and life careers were thoroughly analysed and then compared with careers of those who did not participate in the project. The results showed that people who were provided early education were better educated, earned more, achieved higher standard of living, more rarely used the aid system and more rarely came into conflict with the law (Zahorska, 2003; Ogrodzińska, 2004).

The studies by Barbara Murawska are the example of another research. In 2003 she compared the skills of reading with the skills of understanding and doing mathematical operations by pupils of lower classes in primary schools who come from big cities and the countries and from families with high and low social and economic status. The empirical analysis proved that children from families with low economic status manage with problems at school in a better way provided that they participated in the preschool education at the age of 3. The research emphasises the meaning of beneficial effects resulting from the preschool education, mainly for children from socially excluded backgrounds. The children, due to their worse initial position are exposed to educational difficulties to a great extent (Murawska, 2004; Ogrodzińska, 2004).

In England, the longitudinal research conducted among 8400 children born in 1970 showed that there is an essential relationship between school achievements and engagement in preschool education. Children attending nursery schools managed with problems better as far as reading with

understanding and doing mathematical operations are concerned. They also demonstrated better social abilities (Zahorska, 2003).

In many countries investing in the development of the preschool education is one of the activities improving the quality of the education of the society. Preschool care is treated as an integral part of the education system. For instance, In Denmark and Sweden, programmes aimed at working parents of children aged 1-3 are proposed by the social welfare sector; in France and Italy preschool educational programmes for children aged 2-3 are offered by the education system; in England and Ireland these programmes come from the integration of parallel systems of care and education. Many of the offered programmes are directed to young children from educationally neglected backgrounds threatened with social exclusion due to unfavourable situation of their families or to children with special educational needs. The programmes used in England can be the example of such solutions (*The Sure Start Programme* and *The Early Excellence Centres Programme* and in Ireland *Early Start Programme* (Kamerman 2001).

Two streams in the approach to early education may be distinguished out of the programmes in preschool institutions. The first one treats nursery schools as a stage which provides preparation to school education and the effects are measured with school maturity (France, England, Ireland) whereas the second one assumes that child's stay at nursery school is supposed to prepare him to life and this is the first stage of learning (Scandinavian countries) (Blumsztajn, 2007).

Children Early Education – Intentions and Reality

Preschool education is currently a neglected area of the social and educational policy in Poland. Also the state of social awareness of the situation of young children is insignificant. It is worth reminding that nursery school is a care and education institution for children of 3 until the beginning of the schooling duty. In exceptionally justified cases also children aged 2.5 to 10 may be provided preschool care – when there is a decision on the need of special education. In Poland, according to regulations included in the Act on Education System (Journal of Laws, 2004, No. 256) attending nursery school is not obligatory. Only a reception class, which is the last year of the nursery school preparing to school education, is mandatory. In 2008/2009 17280 nursery institutions functioned in Poland. They consisted of 8038 nursery schools, 9033 preschool institutions at primary schools and 209 preschool education facilities and nursery centres. 919,100 children aged 3–6 attended these institutions, which was 63.1% of the whole of the children at the preschool age. Analysing the issues of locating preschool institutions, it should be noticed that in the countryside there are 33.3% nursery schools, 78.4% preschool institutions and 88,4% alternative nursery schools (Oświata i wychowanie [Education system and upbringing]..., 2009).

78.4% children in cities and 42.7% children in the countryside were provided preschool care. This percentage constituted also 6 year-old children for whom preschool education is mandatory. It may be therefore noticed that there is an unfavourable phenomenon, i.e. low level of participation of children aged 3-5 in preschool education (around 52.7%, but there was seen an increase by 5.4 percentage points in relation to the previous year). The nursery schools were attended by children at the age of 3 – 58.5% in cities and 17.1% in the countryside; at the age of 4 – 72.7% in cities and 26.8% in the countryside; at the age of 5 – 81% in cities and 41.8% in the countryside. The presented data show significant disproportions in promoting preschool education in the city and the countryside (Oświata i wychowanie [Education system and upbringing]..., 2009).

Poland takes one of the last places in the countries of the UE ranking in terms of universality of preschool education. In more than 2/3 of the EU countries over 60% children at the age of 4 attended nursery classes whereas in Poland the proportion of nursery school pupils among 4-year-old children was only 41% (Oświata i wychowanie [Education system and upbringing], 2009). In Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and France almost every 4-year-old child attends nursery school.

Table 1. A percentage of 4-year-old children attending nursery schools in selected countries of the Europe in 2007.

Year		Country	Year		Country
2000	2007 p		2000	2007 p	
82.8	89	EU-27	60.3	76.8	Romania
100	100	France	99.5	98.2	Netherlands
100	99	Italy	60.6	76.5	Latvia
99.2	100	Belgium	-	75.1	Slovakia
99	97.1	Spain	55.7	70.4*	Cyprus
100	97.5	Malta	67	71.4	Bulgaria
94.9	93	Luxemburg	51	61.7	Lithuania
90.6	95.4	Denmark	53.9	56.1	Greece
89.5	94.1	Germany	41.9	50	Finland
89.4	92.8	Hungary	-	48.2*	Croatia
100	91.3	United Kingdom	51.1	45.9	Ireland
81	87.5	Czech Republic	33	44	Poland
72.8	100	Sweden	12.4	15.9*	Macedonia
78.2	88.1	Estonia	-	7*	Turkey
79.5	84.2	Austria	90.9	95.8	Iceland
72.3	81.6	Portugal	-	52.7	Liechtenstein
67.7	81.3	Slovenia	78.1	94.8	Norway

(-) Lack of data or data unavailable, (p) Estimated data, (*) Data of 2006

Source: Oświata i wychowanie w roku szkolnym 2007/2008. (2008). Warszawa: GUS.

[Education system and upbringing in the 2007/2008 school year. (2008). Warsaw: Central Statistical Office]

The Development of Alternative Forms of Early Education

Until 2008 state nursery schools were the only educational form for the youngest children in Poland. Meanwhile, other countries do not restrict themselves to the only one form of early education but they offer various forms which meet the needs and opportunities of parents and demographic conditions. A good example can be England, which in its act on the care for children, “The Children Act” includes the following: day childcare centres, state and public nursery schools, playgroups, integration playgroups, centres for children, family centres and day rooms, nursery schools and reception classes at primary schools, recreational centres, babysitters’ activity for children, playbuses, toys rental shops.

In Portugal the preschool system consists of three organisational models: full-time nursery schools, itinerant nursery schools (in rural areas where there are few children, e.g. only one child and a teacher regularly come so as to conduct classes) and nursery common rooms (institutions that are established in cities in which there is a shortage of places in nursery schools; the classes are conducted around 4–5 hours a day). These examples show how great stress is put on preschool education in the EU countries and how it is possible to match it up organisationally to local needs.

The system of preschool education in Poland, which in recent years has been a matter of concern of many teachers is gradually improving. Alternative forms of education became a way out of stagnation. The need for their creation, especially in rural areas was noticed by the European Union. In 2005 there was implemented a pilot programme under the name “Alternative forms of preschool education” within the Sectoral Operational Programme – Human Resources Development. In 2005–2008 19 projects was implemented. Thanks to them there were established 802 centres of alternative preschool education for 10,500 children in rural areas across Poland. This programme brought effects, therefore the next stage was to promote and extend them. The 2008/2009 school year was named Year of Nursery School Pupil by the Ministry of National Education. Self-govern-

ments were given a guide in which alternative forms of preschool education were promoted. The amount of over €243 million of support from the EU was allocated for the development of preschool education in 2007–2013. The regulation of the MNE of 10 January 2008 was also issued and concerned types of other forms of preschool education, conditions of creating and organising these forms and the way they work (Journal of Laws No. 7, item 38 with amendments). It stressed that although traditional nursery schools realize the rule of common accessibility best and provide the fulfilment of the preschool education curriculum, their chain may be supplemented with alternative forms of preschool education.

This regulation sanctioned the appointment of other preschool institutions in rural areas. Within the alternative forms preschool education facilities or preschool centres for children are created. There are performed educational and pedagogical tasks in accordance with the preschool education curriculum. In both forms qualified teachers has to be employed. Preschool centres conduct classes on all working days of a week through the whole school year, except for breaks established by the governing body. By contrast, preschool complexes organise classes only on certain days of a week for minimum 3 hours in a day and 12 hours in a week (The regulation of MNE, 2008, §3). The curriculum can be conducted in the whole or in a selected part. The time of the work of the facility or centre should be flexible and adjusted to the group numbers and parents' needs and expectations. At the same time, the number of hours of classes should depend on the size of the group. If there are 3 to 5 children (this is the minimum number of a group specified in the regulation) 3 hours a day should be enough to fulfil the curriculum. In the event of more numerous group the time of conducting classes is around 5 hours a day. According to the regulation, a group can count from 3 to 25 children. In fact, the number of children in a group depends on local environment's needs and standards of the premises (minimum 2–2, 5 square metres per every child is required).

Communes, legal entities (e.g. non-governmental organisations, associations, foundations, religious communities) and individuals can organize preschool complexes and centres. Classes can be conducted in the building of the educational institutions, public institutions, religious institutions and private houses or flats. However, these places must meet sanitation and premises requirements. For instance, it is allowed to conduct classes in premises located on the ground-floor with at least two exits while one of them is to enable direct exit into the open space. The minimum space for the group consisting of 3-5 children should amount to at least 16 square metres. For every next child the required surface increases by 2 square metres if child's stay does not exceed 5 hours a day and 2,5 square metres if it exceeds 5 hours (Regulation of MNE, 2008, §4).

It should be mentioned that the chain of state nursery schools is established by the commune council, which decides whether to create alternative forms of preschool education or not.

The data from the Ministry of Education shows that until 2009 over 636 state and public alternative forms of preschool education were established (497 preschool centres and 139 preschool education complexes). The greatest number of alternative nursery schools was established in the following provinces: the Podkarpace province – 114, the West Pomerania province – 93, and the Świętokrzyskie province – 65. There were also 335 state nursery schools opened.

The awareness of the need for education in early childhood is constantly growing. Many non-governmental organisations try to introduce many solutions on the local scale and create innovative development and education programmes for children and parents, as well as promote preschool education. For that purpose 21 September 2007 the Alliance on Early Childhood Development and Education (PREMD in Polish) was established. Until October 2009 it joined together 45 non-governmental organisations. The task of this Alliance is to accelerate the process of creating best conditions to promote and develop various forms of educational support for young children by the combination of forces.

On the initiative of various foundations gathered in the Alliance on Early Childhood Development and Education there were created many projects and programmes developing alternative forms of education. The activity of foundations such as: Jan Komeński Foundation of Children's Development, John Paul II Youth's Aid Foundation "Wzrastanie", Alternative Education Workshop, Association "Dorośli-Dzieciom", Association "Soma".

Jan Komeński Foundation of Children's Development established in 2003 is the first one that introduced alternative forms of preschool education into Poland and in collaboration with other non-governmental organisations led to their legislation. Over several years of activity it has organised and created over 300 preschool centres. Within the implemented programmes it also organises preschool clubs and playgroups.

The Foundation organises Preschooler's Clubs in collaboration with Rural Development Foundation. These clubs are for children aged 3–5. Classes are conducted 3 days in a week and minimum 15 hours a week. On coming into force of the regulation, some of them were transformed into preschool centres.

Playgroups are a proposal for children at the age of 6 months to 3 years or for two age groups: 0–2 and 2–5 and their parents. The meetings take place e.g. at home, in a common room, at a library or in community centres at least once in a week for minimum 2 hours. They are conducted by an appropriately prepared animator. Playgroups Pilot Programme was carried out in 2006–2007. It proved that this form meets parents' needs both in the cities and in the countryside. Participation in the Playgroup gives children the possibility of learning new words. What is more, it develops self-reliance, teaches how to establish contacts with others and lets children find out the rules of functioning in a group (Grupy Zabawowe..., 2007; Ogrodzieńska, 2009).

Another form of education for young children as a way of equalizing life chances is offered by the Alternative Education Workshop, which has been active since 1991 in Łódź. It offers care for children at the preschool age 3–5. This is aimed at those children who come from poor, dysfunctional and pathological families and their parents use the services of Local Social Welfare Centre. The classes are conducted from Monday to Friday at 8:00 to 14:00 (Polish time). Their aim is to equalize educational opportunities and support social, emotional and moral development, as well as prepare to school. Children attends language, mathematics, natural science, theatre, music, pro-health and sports classes, moral science, as well as art and construction classes. Particular attention is paid to social and emotional development. Children attend socio-therapeutic classes, as well. It is due to the fact that people at this age are very susceptible to the influence of the background. As a result, on the one hand they are more exposed to situations causing emotional traumas, but on the other hand, it is easier to eliminate these traumas. The dominant form of activity is entertainment. For every participant there is an individual plan of development created and there is an emphasis on the spheres having biggest deficits. Every year 10-day camps for young participant of the classes are organized. All these activities are organised within the project *Nasze przedszkole* [Our nursery school] (Ogrodzieńska, 2009).

Also John Paul II Youth's Aid Foundation "Wzrastanie" pays particular attention to education of young children. This foundation has run a charitable activity in favour of children and young people from poor disadvantageous and orphaned families, as well as for the homeless on the area of the Podkarpacie province since 1991. It provides care for over 400 people under somebody's charge in 14 special education centres and social service centres, as well as in 81 preschool centres for children aged 3–5. These preschool centres run by the Foundation are co-financed from the means of the European Social Fund and the project "New quality of education". In the teaching and educational work great significance is attached to stimulating comprehensive development of children, as well as stirring and developing children's hobbies and talents.

Also the Association "Soma", which has functioned since 2003, proposed classes for young children. It directs its activity to families from the Somianka commune. It acts with the use of the method of projects and public tasks. It works with children aged 3–5 in accordance with the project *Academy for the youngest* that envisages to hold cyclical classes conducted twice a week in three modules: art, theatre, play. During the three-hour meeting there are organised various creative plays, art activities and sports and music classes. Their task is not only to shape significant abilities but also to broaden knowledge about the world and express one's attitude towards the surrounding reality (Ogrodzieńska, 2009).

The presented forms of alternative education are not only an effective and economical proposal of promoting preschool education, but also flexible enough to be adjusted to specific needs of the local environment.

Conclusions

Education is one of the most important factors which favour shaping of the socio-professional advance. It often determines the socio-economic status of both individuals and social groups. The school system can, at the same time, stimulate and support raising of social advance as well as consolidate social inequalities and contribute to be present in the social structure with low status without causing any important life change. Therefore, for those children the most important are activities that aim to equalize education opportunities. The alternative forms of preschool education which support development of young children are very helpful. When creating institutions of this type, particular emphasis should be put on their universality, quality and the time of child's stay. Only the combination of these three factors may begin the real process of equalizing education and life opportunities of children from backgrounds being culturally and economically neglected. The currently functioning preschool centres have showed that participants of the classes do better at school, have higher social and emotional qualifications and develop better verbal and intellectual abilities (Ogrodzieńska, 2004).

Propagating early education of young children gives also the opportunity of the development of social capital in the countryside, improves the attractiveness of the commune and becomes one of the ways of stopping migration of active and young people. Moreover, by introducing various classes for children there are created workplaces for unemployed women (Rościszewska-Woźniak, 2008). Providing healthy development for children is therefore an investment in human capital and improvement in society's education. "Young people will soon become the big ones and they will take decisions concerning our lives, our children and grandchildren. Remember that good education of our children today – increases the chances of all of us for better life in the future" (Suchodolski, 1979).

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