

Difficulties in adjusting the forms of child care and education in Poland to fulfil the EU requirements

Trudności dostosowania form opieki i edukacji dzieci w Polsce do wymagań Unii Europejskiej

Słowa kluczowe: opieka nad małymi dziećmi, żłobki, wychowanie przedszkolne, opiekunki do dzieci, normy UE.

Streszczenie: Z chwilą wstąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej przystąpiono do dostosowania instytucjonalnych form opieki nad małymi dziećmi i dziećmi w wieku przedszkolnym do standardów obowiązujących w krajach już należących do Unii Europejskiej. Było to konieczne, gdyż – po zawirowaniach społeczno-ekonomicznych przejściem na gospodarkę rynkową – Polska zajmowała ostatnie miejsce w krajach Unii Europejskiej pod względem liczby instytucjonalnych form opieki nad dziećmi poniżej trzeciego roku życia oraz dziećmi w młodszym wieku przedszkolnym. Jedynie dzieciom, które niebawem miały rozpocząć naukę w szkole, zapewniano roczne przygotowanie do szkoły w funkcjonujących formach wychowania przedszkolnego.

Celem artykułu jest omówienie sposobów, organizacji i funkcjonowania żłobków i klubów dziecięcych oraz zatrudniania opiekunów dziennych i niań do sprawowania opieki nad dziećmi do lat 3, jak również placówek wychowania przedszkolnego, do których uczęszczają dzieci od trzeciego roku życia do czasu rozpoczęcia nauki szkolnej.

Stan wiedzy: W artykule zostały omówione działania naprawcze oraz ich efekty uzyskane w ciągu 10 lat, licząc od pierwszego roku wstąpienia Polski do Unii Europejskiej. W tym czasie Polska zajmowała ostatnie miejsce w krajach Unii Europejskiej pod względem liczby instytucjonalnych form opieki nad dziećmi poniżej trzeciego roku życia. Podobnie było w wychowaniu przedszkolnym – upowszechnienie wychowania przedszkolnego dzieci w wieku 3–5 lat należało wówczas do najniższych w Unii Europejskiej. W pierwszej części artykułu przedstawiono trudy tworzenia systemu form opieki nad małymi dziećmi, w drugiej komplikacje dotyczące reorganizacji wychowania przedszkolnego. Przegląd ten umożliwi Czytelnikom wgląd w obszary trudności, które trzeba pokonać, dążąc do lepszej opieki i wychowania małych oraz przedszkolnych dzieci.

Key words: young child care, crèches, preschool education, childcare workers, EU standards.

Abstract: Since Poland became a member of the European Union, the institutional forms of care of young and preschool children were aligned with the standards applied in the EU countries. This was necessary during the transition to a market economy as the number of young child care institutions was the smallest among the other EU states. Only children who were about to start school education were provided with one-year preparatory course in the existing preschool framework.

Research Aim: The aim of the article is to discuss the methods of organization and management of nurseries and children's clubs, as well as the employment of daycare workers and nannies to care for children up to 3 years of age, as well as pre-school education facilities attended by children from the age of three until the beginning of school.

Evidence-based Facts: The article discusses the corrective actions and their effects obtained within 10 years, since the first year of Poland's membership in the European Union. At that time, Poland was ranked last in the European Union in terms of the number of institutional forms of care for children under the age of three. It was similar in pre-school education – the promotion of pre-school education for children aged 3–5 was one of the lowest in the European Union at that time. In the first part of the article, presents the challenges of creating a system of forms of care for young children, in the second – complications related to the reorganization of preschool education. This review will provide readers with an insight into the areas of difficulty that must be overcome in the pursuit of better care and education for young and pre-school children.

Summary: The paper provides justification and analysis of the pedagogical outcomes of implemented changes, as well as complete research documentation which includes data reflecting their effectiveness (evaluation). The article serves as source of reliable information to those who deal with educational policy issues, especially in the area of upbringing and educating young and preschool children.

Introduction

The leaders of the EU Member States agreed that by 2010 there should be enough places in crèches and kindergartens for 33% of children under three years old and 90% for children from the age of three to start of school. The Member States were required to accelerate the process of creating new places for children in both care and preschool institutions in compliance with EU standards.

At that time, Poland ranked last in the EU in respect of the number of institutional forms of care for children younger than three. The situation at the preschool level was similar: preschool attendance among children aged 3–5 in Poland was one of the lowest in the EU at that time (Klinger, 2013).

In this article discuss the implementation of corrective measures and their effects for the first decade of Poland's membership in the EU. In the first part of the article presents the difficulties inherent in the creation of a system involving various forms of young child care, while in the second part presents the problems associated with the reorganization of preschool education. The reader will gain an insight into the areas of difficulty that need to be dealt for better care and education of young and preschool children.

Research aim

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Evidence-based review part one

Creating a care and education system for young children

In 2011, the Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age was passed to regulate the establishment and functioning of various forms of institutional care for young children (Dz. U. [Polish Journal of Laws] of 2011, No. 45, item 235). Under this document, crèches were no longer part of the health care system. The administration of institutional care institutions for young children was entrusted to the Minister of Labour and Social Policy (currently the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy).

Crèches and kids clubs

The Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age provides that crèches are institutions taking care of young children starting at twenty weeks old until they become eligible for preschool education at the age of three. If this is not possible or significantly impeded, the child can stay in *crèche* at the age of four.

Children stay in crèche for up to ten hours a day in conditions similar to their home environment. In justified cases, their time in crèche may be extended at the request of their parents and for an extra fee. One childminder can take care of up to eight children. If in a group there is a child requiring special care, either disabled or younger than one year old, the child minder can be in charge of a maximum of five children.

The main tasks fulfilled by crèche are provision of appropriate care and education to young children in the form of play including elements of education adapted to their age and level of psychomotor development. The internal organization of a crèche is determined by the rules prepared by the person in its charge.

Crèches are organized by local government units, public institutions, natural persons, legal entities and organizational units without legal personality. The requirements are set out in detail in the Regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 10 July 2014 on housing and sanitary requirements to be met by premises where a crèche or kids club is to be run (Dz. U. of 2014, item 925), including the amendments specified in the Regulation of the Minister of Family, Labour and Social Policy of 8 December 2017 (Dz. U. of 2017, item 379).

The Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age also stipulates that the forms of institutional care for children up to the age of three are also kids clubs. They can be organised by local government units, public institutions, natural persons, legal entities and organizational units without legal personality.

In these establishments – in conditions similar to the home environment – children are provided with care and education from the first year of life until the end of the school year in which they turn three and are covered by preschool education. If this is not possible, the child attends a kids club until the age of four.

There, a single child minder looks after and educates a maximum of eight children. If a group in a kids club includes a child with a disability or requiring special care – similarly to a crèche – the group entrusted to the child minder can consist of a maximum of five children.

One of the tasks of a kids club is ensure proper care of young children and educational play adapted to their individual developmental needs. Article 21 of the above-mentioned Act provides that the internal organization of kids clubs is determined by means of rules established by persons in charge of these facilities. This means that the formal aspect of the operation of kids clubs is parallel to that of crèches.

Employing child minders and nannies to look after young children

Employing a child minder or a nanny to take care of young children constitute forms of institutional care adapted to rural areas, where there is no need to open a crèche or a kids club because there are few children at the crèche age. In addition, these forms do not require much funding.

The Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age (4 February 2011) also provides for the employment of day carers to take care of young children. Detailed arrangements concerning the qualifications of childminders, their type of their employment, and contracts governing the provision of services can be found in Chapter 4 of the act as well as in the Act amending the act on family benefits and certain other acts (24 July 2015).

A child minder takes care of up to five children. If a group includes a child who is under the age of one, disabled or in need of special care, the group entrusted to the child minder can have up to three children. A child minder can also, with the consent of all the parents concerned, take care of eight children. If a group includes who is younger than one year old, disabled or in need of special care, the child minder can be in charge of a maximum of five children but has to be assisted by one of the parents.

The child minder's tasks include making sure that children receive appropriate nursing and educational care in a home-like setting, taking into account their individual needs. In this area of activity, a child minder may be assisted by volunteer workers.

The Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age provides for the employment of a nanny for individual care of children before they are twenty weeks old by the end of the school year in which they turn three. Just like in a crèche and kids club, a child can be looked after by a nanny also at the age of four years old when they cannot attend a preschool education institution.

This benefit is available if both parents of the child or the single parent are employed, and it is necessary to ensure the care of the child. A nanny is employed by the child's parents under a contract that is drawn in compliance with the rules specified

in detail in the Act of 4 February 2011 (Dz. U. of 2011, No. 45, item 235). This law specifies the parties to the contract, its purpose and subject matter, the time and place of childcare, the number of children entrusted to the care, the nanny's duties, the amount of remuneration, the manner and date of its payment, and the duration of the contract.

Figures showing the results of implementing the Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age

It is 9 years since the Act on the care of children up to 3 years of age was enacted. The effects of building an early childcare system in Poland can be inferred from the data provided by the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) for the years 2016, 2017, and 2018.

By the end of December 2017, there were a total of 3,120 crèches, crèche groups (in kindergartens) and kids clubs in Poland. Care and education were provided to 99,409 young children. In relation to 2016, the number of such establishments increased by about 15%, and the number of children taking advantage of the care and education provided by these institutions increased by 13.9%.

In 2018, there was a further significant increase in the number of organized educational childcare facilities. Compared to the previous year, the total number of crèches, nursery classes in kindergartens and kids clubs increased by 21%, and the number of places available to young children in these facilities grew by 29.2%.

These data indicate a systematic growth of institutions providing care and education of children up to three years of age. The problem is that the parents' demand for such facilities is growing rapidly. This is why Poland is still far behind the EU standards.

The increased number of parents willing to place their children in a crèche or a kids club is affected by the improving image of these educational care facilities. The main reason for this is observance of European standards in these institutions and the improvement of the pedagogical qualifications of child minders, for example by means of various training courses. The image of these institutions has also been enhanced by books addressed to parents, crèche child minders and preschool teachers, offering reliable knowledge about psychomotor development and education of small children, including descriptions of games and model activities supporting child development (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, Zielińska, 2000, 2012; Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, 2019).

Evidence-based review part two

Changes in preschool education: On the traditional and alternative organizational forms of preschool education facilities

To see the social background of these changes, we need to go back to the late 1980s. At that time, there was a properly equipped kindergarten in every village and little town in Poland. The teaching staff was required to have a semi-higher

education (currently referred to as bachelor's degree), higher or master's degree. Kindergartens were attended by children from the age of three up to the start of school (at the age of seven). The preschool educational activities were conducted according to uniform educational programs recommended by central educational authorities (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, 2005).

The political turmoil accompanying the transition to a market economy in the 1990s caused that the administration of kindergartens was handed down to *gmina* [unit of local government in Poland – Translator's note] authorities as part of state decentralisation. The problem is that *gmina* authorities were not prepared for that, either in terms of know-how or funding (they were not granted suitable subsidies). As the maintenance of preschool education facilities proved to be costly, payments were required in the form of tuition fees for children's stay in kindergartens. Since many parents – on account of the high unemployment rate – could not afford that, they would not send their children to kindergarten. The small number of children enrolled a kindergarten justified the *gmina*'s decision to close it down.

There were also other reasons for that. In the times of so-called real socialism children's time in kindergarten was part of the social security package. That is why kindergartens were often set up with larger state-owned workplaces and also on collective farms. As the transition to a market economy was causing their economic situation to deteriorate, social benefits were reduced drastically, including mass closures of kindergartens (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, 2008).

The dramatic condition of preschool education in the first decade of the 21st century

The fact that preschool education was in a poor state was demonstrated by the data from the school year 1999/2000. In that period, preschool attendance in the countryside was as follows: 8% of three-year-olds, 13% of four-year-olds, and 22% of five-year-olds went to kindergartens. In towns the rates were 23%, 33% and 41%, respectively (Kamińska, 2003). In the years to come, more kindergartens were dissolved. From the data held by the Educational Information System it followed that in the school year 2007/2008 as many as 537 *gminas* (of the total of 2478 *gminas* in Poland) did not have any kindergarten. At that time, nationwide preschool education covered on average only about 44% of children aged between three and six. Preschool attendance rates were among the lowest in the EU.

Efforts to create a preschool education system in Poland

As part of Poland's preparation for accession to the European Union, it was decided to put an end to the liquidation of preschool education institutions and adjust the forms of preschool education to the current social demands. It became necessary to factor in the complications caused by the demographic decline. In the years 1997–2007, the Polish population decreased by 179 thousand. The direct cause was a significant drop in the birth rate in the period 1984–2003. Many small localities had only a handful of preschool children. With a view to including them

in the system of preschool education, it was decided that the forms of preschool education would be extended.

This necessity was accounted for by the Act on the Education System, passed in 2007 (Dz. U. of 2007, No. 181, item 1292), and the school year 2008/2009 was declared the Year of the Preschooler by the Ministry of National Education (in 2008). In the same year, the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 10 January 2008 on types of other forms of preschool education, conditions for creating and organizing these forms and the way they operate became effective (Dz. U. of 2008, No. 7, item 38).

Also in 2008, a regulation was adopted by the Minister of National Education (Dz. U. of 2009, No. 4, item 17) with the Appendix "The core curriculum for preschool education in kindergartens, preschool classes in primary schools and other forms of preschool education" (the appendices that follow contain the core curricula applicable to the consecutive stages of school education). This document ensures continuity of care and education between preschool and school education. It specifies the competences children are expected to develop at the end of their preschool education. Based on that, educational aims for the first year of school education were determined. Thanks to this, a smooth transition between preschool education and the first stage of school education was ensured.

In February 2009, the Sejm decided to lower the school starting age. It was agreed that as of September 2012, six-year-olds would start school. Until then schools were obliged to create suitable conditions for the schooling obligation to cover children who were one year younger. A major dispute broke out over the status of preschool education in the context of overall child education and the school starting time. No week passed without critical articles in the press and TV debates on the so-called "defense of childhood" and politicians pointing out the insufficient preparation of schools to admit six-year-olds to grade one. Under such pressure, the implementation of this regulation was delayed by two years. At the same time, parents' rights regarding their children's compulsory schooling were extended.

Regulations concerning the organization of preschool education contained in the Law on School Education

In 2017, the Law on School Education was enacted (Dz. U. of 2017, item 59). A year later, the Notice of the Marshal of the Polish Sejm on the uniform text of the Law on School Education act was announced (Dz. U. of 2018, item 996). Below we present its essential regulations.

(a) Preschool education is provided to children who turn 3 years old in a given school year. In justified cases, preschool education may also cover children who are 2.5 years old. They are covered by preschool education until they start school at the age of 7. If a child holds a certificate demonstrating their need of special education, they may be covered by preschool education above the age of 7, but no longer than until the end of the school year in which the child turns 9.

(b) Six-year-olds are required to attend a year's preparatory class in a kindergarten, a preschool class in primary school or another form of preschool education.

(c) Gmina authorities are obliged to ensure that children aged 3–6 years exercise their right to preschool education. This applies to public kindergartens, preschool classes in public primary schools or other forms of preschool education (maintained by the gmina), as well as non-public kindergartens, according to the rules of financing educational tasks carried out in a form of preschool education.

d) The journey of a five-year-old child from home to a preschool education institution should not exceed 3 km. If it is longer, it is the responsibility of the gmina authorities to provide free transport and care while the child is transported. Gmina authorities will provide to five – and six-year-old children with disabilities free transport and care during transport to the nearest kindergarten, preschool class at the primary school, other form of preschool education or a rehabilitation-educational center.

The Law on School Education also provides that it is the responsibility of gmina authorities to organize a network of public kindergartens and preschool classes in primary schools. Where justified by demographic and geographical conditions, the gmina may also include non-public forms of preschool education into this network in accordance with the act on the funding of educational tasks.

Regulations concerning the operation of preschool education facilities

Article 102 of the uniform text of the Law on School Education stipulates that the basic document regulating the operation of a preschool education facility is its kindergarten charter. In addition to the name and registered office of the kindergarten and the name of its governing authority, this document specifies:

- objectives and tasks of kindergarten and how to achieve them; they include support for the child's individual development and ways to support the family in their education and preparation for school learning, including children with disabilities;
- the working hours of the kindergarten and ways of taking care of children during classes in it and outside of it, rules of bringing and collecting children by their parents (or persons authorized by them), and regulations concerning payments for children's stay in the facility and board;
- rights and duties of children, including cases where the kindergarten director may remove a child from the list of pupils;
- the scope of duties to be delivered by teachers and other staff; these include:
 - a) ensuring safety of children during classes organized in the kindergarten,
 - b) cooperation with parents in respect of children's education,
 - c) planning and conducting children's education and responsibility for its quality,
 - d) conducting pedagogical observations aimed at learning and securing children's developmental needs and ways of documenting these observations,

e) cooperation with specialists providing psychological and pedagogical, health and other kinds of assistance.

Guidelines for kindergarten educational activity

The uniform text of the Law on School Education (Article 13(1)) provides that a public kindergarten is an establishment that implements preschool educational programs based on the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education. While planning the educational framework, the traditional transition from the general to the specific and detailed is assumed. The premises shown below are accepted (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, Zielińska 2014).

- The Core Curriculum is a document of higher order. It guarantees the coherence of the principal aims and educational content in all educational establishments, from kindergarten to secondary school. This document is accompanied by appendices specifying objectives and recommendations for the selection of educational content for the successive stages of education. The first appendix concerns preschool education.
- The Core Curriculum and the documents appended to it form the basis for the construction of original educational programs in which the aims and content are specified and further elaborated. The appendix containing the Core Curriculum for Preschool Education contains aims and content tailored to the needs and developmental capabilities of children. When included in original teaching programs, they are broken down for the successive age groups, from 3-year-olds to children starting school.
- For their implementation, the educational aims and content must be specified. That is why they are broken down for monthly or weekly educational work plans. Such plans are prepared by the teacher, who adapts the manner in which educational aims and content are implemented to the actual mental capabilities, the scope and level of skills possessed by pupils, as well as to the conditions in which educational work in a given kindergarten is pursued.

The current interpretation of the presented rules of planning pedagogical activities in educational institutions – including kindergartens – is regulated by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education on the core curriculum, commonly referred to as the New Core Curriculum (see (Dz. U. of 2017, item 356). The first appendix to this regulation contains the applicable Core Curriculum for preschool education in kindergartens, preschool classes in primary schools and other forms of preschool education.

This document establishes that the goal of preschool education is to support the overall development of the child. This support is realized through care, upbringing and teaching–learning, all enabling the child to discover their own abilities and the sense of their activities, and gather experience on their path to truth, good and beauty. As a result of such support, the child reaches maturity at the first stage of education. Such goals are set out as 17 provisions, in the form of preschool

education tasks regulating the organization and pedagogical activities in each preschool education facility in Poland.

The document also specifies achievements that children are to have at the end of preschool. They are captured in four areas of development (physical, cognitive, social and emotional), taking into account the competences of children who are about to start school.

The curriculum also formulates the conditions and the way of achieving the goals and tasks of preschool education in the form of 15 recommendations concerning the pedagogical activities of a preschool education institution, with particular emphasis on classes with older preschoolers.

It must be added at this point that Article 47 of the Law on School Education act (10 May 2018) provides an assurance that "... the Minister of National Education, by way of ordinance, shall determine the core curriculum for preschool education and all stages of school education." This assurance proves that work on a new document with the status of a core curriculum has already started. This is a consequence of the recent reform of the education system and the transition to an eight-year primary school system. This implies that new core curricula will be announced soon.

This is not the case with the textbooks that are currently used for educating preschool teachers and improving their pedagogical qualifications. In recent years, textbooks have been published containing the latest knowledge regarding the development and education of children and the commonly accepted mission of contemporary preschool education. The major publications are: *Starsze przedszkolaki. Jak skutecznie wychowywać i kształcić w przedszkolu i w szkole* [Older preschoolers. How to educate effectively in preschool and school] (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, 2014) and *Wspomaganie rozwoju i wychowanie małych dzieci. Podręcznik dla rodziców, opiekunów w żłobkach i nauczycieli w przedszkolach* [Supporting the development and education of young children. A handbook for parents, crèche childminders and preschool teachers] (Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska, 2019).

Summary

In recent years, the tendency to close preschool facilities on a massive scale has been stopped. The data available in the Educational Information System shows that this trend was stopped in the school year 2009/2010. At that time, there were 18.3 thousand registered institutions of preschool education, including: 8.4 thousand kindergartens, 9 thousand preschool classes in primary schools, and 0.8 thousand preschool education units and preschool education centers.

Five years later, in the school year 2015/2016, there were already 21.1 thousand registered facilities offering preschool education, including 11.3 thousand such facilities, 7.8 thousand preschool classes in schools, 0.1 thousand preschool education units, and 1.9 thousand preschool education centers. The upward trend continues as illustrated by the school year 2018/19 (two years later), in which

there were already 22.2 thousand registered preschool education institutions: 12.5 thousand kindergartens, 7.9 thousand preschool classes in primary schools, 0.1 thousand preschool education units, and 1.6 thousand preschool education centers. In relation to the previous school year (2017/2018), the number of kindergartens increased by 389 (3.2%), including 112 (2.8%) establishments in the countryside.

Despite the efforts made to keep up the 10-year upward trend of creating preschool facilities and adapting their forms to social needs, it is difficult for Poland to attain European standards in term of availability of preschool education. However, there are many indications that Poland will succeed in this goal in the next few years.

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