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Education of a Child up to Seven Years Old in the Polish Care and Education System in the Opinions of Practitioners – Experts from Greater Poland

Edukacja dziecka do siódmego roku życia w polskim systemie opiekuńczo-wychowawczym w opiniach praktyków – ekspertów z Wielkopolski

Abstract: Since kindergartens and nurseries in Poland, despite the achievements of modern pedagogy, psychology and related sciences, still prefer the model of the directive, or even behavioral, education, the subject of the research presented in this study is the opinion of practitioners – experts regarding selected problems of educating a child up to seven years old in the Polish care system and education. The research aimed to identify the opinions of practitioners – experts regarding selected problems of education of children up to seven years of age in the Polish care and education system. The research problem is as follows: What are the selected problems of educating a child up to seven years old in the Polish care and education system? In connection with the above, many detailed problems were identified and described in the study. The research was carried out using the diagnostic survey method using the interview technique (with eight experts – practitioners with various seniority and professional experience from Greater Poland in the period from June to October 2023). The greatest shortcomings of educating a child up to the age of seven included the following: lack of child orientation, insufficiently qualified and reluctant staff towards children, lack of understanding of the determinants of educating a child up to the age of three, pursuit of directive education and education not adapted to the needs and capabilities of the child, and to the visual expectations parents and "expectations" related to documenting work, lack of "permission" for children's play due to the instrumentalization of education and the commercialization of educational services.

Keywords: child; education; nursery; kindergarten; teacher

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Abstrakt: Ponieważ przedszkola i żłobki w Polsce, pomimo osiągnięć współczesnej pedagogiki, psychologii i nauk pokrewnych, w dalszym ciągu preferują model edukacji dyrektywnej, a nawet behawioralnej, przedmiotem badań prezentowanych w niniejszym opracowaniu są opinie praktyków – ekspertów ds. wychowania dziecka do lat siedmiu w polskim systemie opieki i edukacji. Celem badania było poznanie opinii praktyków – ekspertów na temat wybranych problemów edukacji dzieci do siódmego roku życia w polskim systemie opiekuńczo-wychowawczym. Problem badawczy jest następujący: Jakie są wybrane problemy edukacji dziecka do siódmego roku życia w polskim systemie opiekuńczo-wychowawczym? W związku z powyższym w opracowaniu zidentyfikowano i opisano wiele szczegółowych problemów. Badanie przeprowadzono metodą sondażu diagnostycznego techniką wywiadu (z udziałem ośmiu ekspertów – praktyków o różnym stażu pracy i doświadczeniu zawodowym z Wielkopolski w okresie od czerwca do października 2023 r.). Do największych mankamentów wychowania dziecka do siódmego roku życia można zaliczyć: brak orientacji na dziecko, niedostatecznie wykwalifikowaną i niechętną wobec dzieci kadrę, brak zrozumienia uwarunkowań wychowania dziecka do lat trzech, dążenie do dyrektywności edukacji i wychowanie niedostosowane do potrzeb i możliwości dziecka oraz do wizualnych oczekiwań rodziców i „oczekiwań" związanych z dokumentowaniem pracy, brak „pozwolenia" na zabawę dzieci ze względu na instrumentalizację edukacji i komercjalizację usług edukacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: dziecko; edukacja; żłobek; przedszkole; nauczyciele

INTRODUCTION

As Maciąg says, "the significant tasks of education include equipping the child with the ability to learn by preparing them to independently and consciously use the diverse possibilities of cognitively experiencing the surrounding reality and improving the ability to systematise, verify and evaluate the acquired knowledge obtained in the process" (Maciąg, 2018, p. 25).

This postulate, according to the above-mentioned author, is met by an educational strategy based on the constructivist learning theory, in which the centre is the child dynamically creating his or her knowledge by exploring and processing information (Maciąg, 2018, p. 25). This belief is led by the considerations of contemporary researchers (Klus-Stańska, 2020; 2009; Lubomirska, 2005), including, among others, Murzyn, because in his opinion, acquiring new knowledge is effective when it can be linked to existing experiences (2013, p. 30). In contemporary child pedagogy, the preferred learning theoryis constructivism, which, according to Klus-Stańska (2009), can appear in two varieties: as a constructivist-developmental discourse or as a constructivist-social discourse.

Both the constructivist-social and the constructivist-developmental discourse will be crucial for determining the theoretical framework of early childhood and preschool education, because among the most important developmental tasks up to the age of three is building attachment relationships, and in middle childhood – taking independent initiative with subtle support from an adult. When a child gains its first experiences up to the age of three in a social space that is safe and sensitive to its needs, when entering middle childhood it will develop competencies in taking independent initiatives (Nowicka, 2021).

It seems that this assumption fits into the considerations, among others: Kram and Mielcarek, who argue that early education (i.e. education up to the age of three) should be described in terms of taking the child from the zone of current to the zone of immediate development by using initial competences, teaching new skills, improving acquired skills, putting the child in new situations (Kram & Mielcarek, 2014). In turn, as Molińska and Ratajczyk write about education in the preschool period: "In a properly functioning developmental environment, everything happens under the supervision of adults who, although they increasingly allow the child to act independently, still arrange situations conducive to play, entertainment and education, as well as the first forms of work" (Molińska & Ratajczyk, 2014, p. 7). Therefore, the preschooler will strive to take more and more personal initiatives, and the role of adults is to accompany the development and organize the learning environment (Mielcarek & Ratajczyk, 2014; Kolasa-Skiba & Skiba, 2021). The learning environment – the physical and social space surrounding the child – will become, next to parents and educators, the third "teacher".

The pedagogical practice of early childhood education in Poland is still dominated by the model of directive teaching embedded in the functional-behavioral discourse and expressed by the idea: "to educate is to guide". Children are obliged, regardless of their resources and capabilities, to adapt to the group, they learn the rules of its functioning, and the work of people employed in the facilities is supervised by the relevant authorities. Although the child acquires certain knowledge and some skills, he or she is often deprived of the opportunity to demonstrate his or her creativity, and "becomes an obedient, humble recipient of tasks, which deprives him or her of the desire to independently explore the surrounding world, develop interests and passions" (Sikora, 2016, p. 68).

Among the examples of "dehumanization" of a child's educational space, the so-called deficiencies can be distinguished, among others:

– forced participation of the child in various educational "activities" accompanied by a talk or the so-called conversation guided and carried out according to a rigid script containing predetermined learning outcomes for the child;

– excessive use of textbooks, exercise books or worksheets reminiscent of school didactics, performing exercises "by trace" for credit;

– mandatory preparation of children for special occasions (conducting tedious and monotonous rehearsals to consolidate the so-called "material" that must be performed in front of the audience);

– obligatory and repeated many times a year exposure of children to the audience, usually to parents, grandparents, i.e. people with whom the child is in a direct "physical" relationship at home, and not in an adversarial relationship, as is the case during performances;

– compulsory sleeping or collective "pottying" or performing physiological activities under the facility's daily work plan, and not with the needs and capabilities of the child;

– constantly accelerating the pace of the child's work due to the need to implement all the planned points of the facility's daily organization plan instead of flexible time management of the child's activity depending on his or her needs and capabilities;

– often explained by the need for developmental progress, it is forbidden for a child to have his or her own "home" cuddly toy or personal blanket in the institution's space, which is an attribute of childhood and provides the child with a sense of security, being a "substitute for home" in the institution's conditions;

– constant, persistent silencing of children, thus, inhibiting the development of communicative and socio-cultural competences;

– the constant need to photograph children (but only children who are happy and in a "learning" situation, not those feeling various emotions, including negative ones, or during free play, and also photographing clean children, not those dirty with art materials or food). Photos of children, published by the teaching staff on social networking sites, are intended to prove the increase in competencies and the child's joy of being at the facility;

– persistent prohibition of expressing emotions, especially sadness expressed by crying;

– lack of acceptance for the child's free play, the use of the so-called top-down games.

Therefore, it seems that despite the significant development of pedagogy, psychology and other related sciences, the postulates for pedagogical practice put forward since the times of pedagogical congresses and meetings at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries (Jamrożek, 2015; Marynowicz-Hetka, 2005) remain only in the sphere of postulates.

METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Because, as Klus-Stańska points out, in Poland,

> there are only good examples of the in-depth application of Vygotsky's theory in early childhood education pedagogy, but unfortunately it has not penetrated teachers' thinking (just like Piagetian thought, because both, being non-behavioristic, are unable to break through the petrified model of the Polish teaching methodology based on the teacher's domination and imposing thinking and action strategies). (Klus-Stańska, 2019, p. 19)

The subject of the research presented in this study was the opinion of practitioners – experts regarding selected problems of education of children up to seven

years old in the Polish care and education system. The research aimed was to identify the opinions of practitioners – experts on the above-mentioned issue. The research problem included the question: What are the selected problems of educating a child up to seven years old in the Polish care and education system? The detailed research problems were as follows:

1. What educational needs of a child are becoming a priority nowadays and should be of particular interest to teachers of the 21st century?

2. What perspective – "child-centric" or "program-centric" – should determine the concept of the work of nurseries and kindergartens in Poland?

3. Do modern nurseries and kindergartens meet the developmental needs of children?

4. How should contemporary children's teachers be educated?

5. Which of the current system solutions in nurseries and kindergartens require additional consideration and possible correction?

6. What child construct (in the context of the dilemma: a child as a competent person vs. a child as a person who will only become competent under the influence of adults) dominates the consciousness of Polish teachers and child caretakers?

The research was carried out using a diagnostic survey method and an interview technique. The interview questionnaire was received by 8 experts[1] – practitioners with various experiences in working with children and teachers, and people with professional experience in working with children in both public, non-public, artistic and private institutions.

The expert practitioners included: a care and educational educator with 20 years' work experience; educational director in one of Poznań's private school complexes with kindergarten classes; an academic teacher educating preschool and early school educators and caregivers of children up to three years of age, employed at one of the leading state universities; an experienced academic teacher and at the same time a child's teacher in a private school and kindergarten complex with over 20 years' work experience; a retired teacher with a lifetime of work with children of preschool and early school age in a rural, public school; a graduate of a pedagogical high school and pedagogical studies, and at the same time an early school education teacher; special educator with 20 years' experience in working with children with diverse developmental needs; a pedagogue with 20 years' work experience (both a child's teacher and an academic professor); a young student of the fifth year of studies in the field of preschool and early school pedagogy, who stands out among her peers for her commitment and who has been working with children in kindergarten since the beginning of her studies.

The experts were selected due to their diverse experience in teaching work, because, in the author's opinion, such a selection allows for capturing the examined fragment of social reality from various perspectives. According to the author, all practitioners

[1] The experts live in various towns in Greater Poland.

participating in the study are distinguished by their high professional commitment, high social competencies and knowledge of European concepts of child education.

The interviews were conducted in an atmosphere of openness and kindness, and the questions were formulated in such a way as to allow the interlocutors to justify their opinions. A structured interview was used – each study participant received the same questions and had the opportunity to prepare for the interview. The study was conducted in Poznań in the physical space indicated by the interlocutors, from September to October 2023.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

When describing the contemporary, priority educational needs of a child in the 21st century, all interlocutors drew attention to the rapid development of technologies that significantly change the face of the needs of a modern child. Experts emphasized the risk of social isolation in "live" contacts resulting from progress in the field of ICT, therefore, they postulated the need to shape the child's communication, emotional and social competencies. They also drew attention to the need to verify the assumptions of developmental psychology due to the acceleration of development caused by technologies.

The following categories of children's needs in the modern world emerge from the statements:

– the need to communicate with other people and build interpersonal relationships, along with supporting the development of children's competencies in this area;

– the need to understand your own and other people's emotions;

– the need to support the development of creative and responsible construction of children's social and physical reality, also through natural play (and therefore the need to support social competencies as well as critical thinking, responsible construction and use of material and non-material space – the Internet);

– the need to support physical development, including the development of health-promoting competencies drawing attention to the potential of nature and developing the ability to actively use its space;

– the need to support competencies in the field of waiting and patience, which, according to interlocutors, are disappearing nowadays due to the culture of immediacy;

– the need for reliable intercultural and sexual education;

– the need to recognize the individual needs and capabilities of the child, the need to respect and develop this respect for every person.

In the context of the categories selected above, it is worth quoting the following opinions:

> Taking into account the contemporary challenges of a world filled with new technologies, the development of artificial intelligence, algorithmization of life, isolation of individuals even

> in families, the necessary educational needs are communication, building interpersonal relationships, cooperation, building awareness of the threats of new technologies, developing a sense of aesthetics through classes artistic values, ethical values, building a sense of agency, not disturbing children's natural creativity.
>
> It is also important to develop the ability to select content from the Internet, independence and take responsibility for one's life, including taking care of one's physical and mental health, the need to develop a sense of respect for diversity, self-respect, the need to support the development of broadly understood empathy, skills adapting to sudden changes.

Interlocutors also emphasize children's need for natural play, which is often limited not only by access to technology but also by the instrumental perception of a child's education or the overprotection of adults:

> Today children are afraid to scrape their knees and get dirty.
>
> Children play with toys, applications dictate to children what to do, the child has no opportunity to check what he can do, how he can modify this action, he has no opportunity to create his scenarios. It's either too cold, too warm, too wet, too smog outside, or there's bird flu or something else that prevents outdoor creativity. There are classes with an instructor in the afternoon or it's so late that you have to go to bed because the child was picked up just before the facility closed.

It is also worth quoting the opinion of one of the interlocutors, who rightly notes:

> It seems crucial in the approach to education to develop competencies according to the 4K model – Critical Thinking, Communication, Cooperation and Creativity. However, looking at the needs of the child in general, education in coping with change, with stress – with emotions in general, including with particular emphasis on difficult emotions: anger, sadness, and fear – is a clear priority. It becomes important to equip the child with skills related to understanding themselves, their needs and states, as well as the competencies to consciously deal with them, as well as building relationships based on respect, understanding differences and cooperation, which seems to be the most important challenge.

All interlocutors think that the concept of work of institutions responsible for care and broadly understood education should be based on child orientation. One of the respondents draws attention to the need to integrate the education of a child from the age of one to seven. The interlocutor argues:

> in Europe, there are integrated systems, then a certain continuity of influence is achieved, and guardians of children under three years of age have a different status, they are teachers, so they

> also have greater motivation to work, earn more, and pursue career advancement. Parents have been in contact with the facilities for many years – they build authentic relationships and for almost 6 years they identify with the mission and concept of the facility's work.

Practitioners notice that the child is very often "burdened" by adults with the need to acquire competencies that go beyond his or her developmental tasks, he or she is "gifted" with tasks that he or she is unable to accomplish on his or her own, so development is artificially accelerated by providing the child with the knowledge that he or she is not functional enough. One of the interlocutors recommends paying attention to the so-called "measure of children's developmental age. Especially at this educational stage, work with children should be as individualized as possible". Interlocutors recommend that "the teacher follows the child, not the recipe". It is also worth quoting the opinion that "the child and his needs should be the starting point for creating the concept of work of every institution dealing with the broadly understood education of children".

Attention should also be paid to the statement of the youngest interlocutor, who emphasizes that "children's artworks are often corrected so that their parents like them at exhibitions", which proves that the real beneficiaries of education are not children, but their parents. This commercialization of a child's education leads, according to the respondent, to:

> We are constantly told to photograph children, but we are not allowed to photograph them when there is plasticine or mess on the tables when the child is crying or dirty. The principal tells us to take photos during classes on the carpet in a circle, and we are not allowed to take photos of children while playing, because parents need to see that their child is learning.

The respondents expressed concern that there is ubiquitous standardization in Poland and that children are "adapted" to the requirements set in advance by adults. Interlocutors also point out that it is disturbing to have to constantly document "what the teacher does", instead of "how the child develops", "what resources the child has", and "how you can work with the child".

According to the respondents, the needs related to the reliable extraction and consolidation of children's resources fade into the background, because the teacher's working time is filled with tasks that need to be written down in specific tables or rubrics. The child, as the interviewees say, is not meant to develop, but to achieve the intended result. Interlocutors unanimously express the belief that facilities established to work with children do not fully meet their needs and capabilities. Experts point out the need to use a "child-centric" perspective because it happens that nurseries are "more of a »storage room« than a facility that follows the contemporary needs of children and the challenges of the future" or more of a "school" where children are offered education "because the child's mind will absorb everything", "to learn faster and more".

Among the statements, one can also see the opinion that kindergartens and nurseries are often organized to enable parents to engage in non-parental activities and that the beneficiaries of these facilities are not children, but their parents, who "should" regularly "post photos of smiling, clean, non-crying and busy children". In this context, it is also worth paying attention to the statement of the youngest interlocutor, who notes that "being with 26 children with diverse developmental and cultural needs" she has to "set them up to pose for photos, instead of taking care of them".

One of the interlocutors also draws attention to the need for greater selection in the teaching profession and calls for greater care in the field of "professional ethics". According to this respondent, nowadays there is a lack of verification in the aspect of the broadly understood "calling" to a profession. He emphasizes that the first criterion should be a sincere "willingness to work with a child".

It is also worth referring to the experts' views on: "low commitment to children on the part of teachers" and "directive approach to education", which result from the "random choice" of the field of education in teacher studies. One of the respondents argues that it happens that "the choice of field of study is dictated by »lack of other professional prospects«, and recruitment to work in institutions for children results from the need to choose the so-called »lesser evil«". The surveyed practitioners point out that in the process of educating children teachers lacks concern for:

– reflection on the recruitment criteria for the profession;
– education in the field of aesthetic education;
– education taking into account the need to treat the child and his/her parents/legal guardians subjectively;
– education in the area of non-directive work methods;
– education in the area of recognizing the needs and capabilities of the child.

In the context of recruitment to the profession, the respondents recommend introducing selection during recruitment for pedagogical studies:

> Having worked in the field of education for over a dozen years, recruiting, training and supervising the work of teachers, the first reflection that comes to my mind in response to this question is the introduction of strict "selection" into pedagogical studies. Unfortunately, we forget that a teacher, pedagogue, or psychologist, works primarily with himself and his personality is his main working tool! (…) Horror of horrors, I have often met teachers who do not like children!

The interlocutor quoted above draws attention to the fact that "it is necessary to increase the awareness and understanding, first of all, of the child, secondly of the group, and only thirdly of the taught content". Another expert argues for the need to return to pedagogical high schools where, years ago, reflective practitioners were educated in Poland, and who, already during adolescence, "soaked in" empathy, ideas, and methodology of working with children, to "fully develop these dispositions in adulthood".

Concerning the education of children's teachers, one of the respondents claims "that there is a lack of teachers with artistic education in preschool institutions". According to this practitioner: "the natural need for singing, dancing, and artistic activities of children at this age is greatly neglected, and contact with digitally played music impoverishes its perception". The youngest interlocutor points out that "in kindergarten, a disorder caused by children's artistic activities is often considered problematic; janitors complain about plasticine and do not want to model on their tables".

In the context of the need to treat the child and its parents/legal guardians subjectively, interlocutors claim that it is necessary to develop "teachers' competencies in the area of contact and dialogue with parents", "understanding the child's psychophysical development", "sensitizing the child's personal and intimate sphere", "recognizing the child's environment". Interlocutors mention "convey or changing", "collective potty training", "quick, insensitive changing", "ridiculing a child who couldn't handle self-service".

Practitioners – experts also emphasize the need for education in the ethics of the teaching profession, they recognize the need for broader preparation of educators in the area of education for safety, along with paying attention to the need to improve teaching staff in the context of emergency medical services. Among the solutions that require special consideration today, practitioners highlight:

– the need to abandon program orientation;

– the need to halve the size of groups in kindergartens and nurseries;

– the need to move away from "training" education in kindergartens and "pre-schooling" nurseries, i.e. from instrumentalising the child's education;

– the need for greater availability of nurseries and kindergartens;

– the need for effective training of teachers in the areas of sensitivity to the child and its needs and cooperation with the child's educational environment (both with parents/guardians and specialists supporting the child's development, e.g. psychologist, pedagogue, speech therapist);

– selection of candidates for the teaching profession;

– moving away from directive work methods towards development accompaniment.

Among the statements worth mentioning are, among others: the one that draws attention to the need to move away from directiveness in a child's education and calls for reflection on the excessive instrumentalization of education and depriving the child of the right to natural development. The interlocutor notes: "I have the impression that there has been some kind of confusion. Kindergarten has become a kind of »playing school«, which means that most children at the beginning of the first grade of primary school can read and write", but have huge motor and graphomotor problems, practically 100% of children have articulation defects, cannot hold a writing tool correctly, has difficulties in motor coordination and, above all, has deficits in emotional and social development. However, he knows English and often another foreign language. Instead

of hiking, walking, exploring the world – worksheets. Instead of games, experiments, fooling around and rolling on the carpet – worksheets.

A similar opinion is expressed by another respondent who claims that:

> Nowadays, in the nursery, they are forced to create schedules of classes, and instead of playing, children in the second year of life are offered chemical experiments to make it interesting, they are also forced to sit on the carpet for half an hour because, for example, their aunt has come to study Chinese or robotics.

The same person notes that there is a lack of care staff in nurseries and there are no replacements, which means that when one of the caregivers is ill, the other one is left with two groups of children. The interlocutor expresses his opinion: "Although the groups are combined, so we are two – we take care of, for example, two- and three-year-olds, but in total there can be up to 30 children with cultural barriers, developmentally neglected, diverse in terms of age and competencies".

Experts also call for building interpersonal relationships in teams of people employed in institutions, for reliable, supportive supervision of teachers' work, for abandoning the rush to accelerate child development, and for "the possibility of professional advancement for caregivers of children under three years of age". An interlocutor with long work experience, an academic teacher, notes:

> a lady with a high school leaving exam after taking a course at an office can work in a nursery, as well as a person who has completed pedagogical studies or a psychologist, which is completely inappropriate because highly qualified specialists should work with such children, not people who have completed 280-hour courses and who previously worked in a completely different sector.

All experts expressed the belief that in Poland the dominant model is that of a "weak, non-active" child, a "human being – a »semi-finished product«" who will become fully valuable when certain knowledge and principles are "instilled" into him or he is "formed" appropriately. This position of the interlocutors is confirmed by, among others, these statements:

> I am afraid that the prevailing position is that it is only thanks to the actions of an adult that a child will become competent or otherwise accepted by that adult. This concept is intended to maintain power, wisdom and decision-making on the part of the adult. Otherwise, this adult does not know how to work. To make matters worse, he feels that he is breaking tradition and contradicting what has been true for generations. For completeness, I am also not a supporter of the idea from the opposite end of the continuum, that a child should be left alone to grow, because, as the Nike advertising slogan once said: "You already have everything you need" in itself. However, I look at the child with care, understanding, and listening to his

needs and desires. Trust that he can know better than me, need differently than me, express differently than me, and be different than me, and at the same time need me – the adult. We may need each other to grow together.

Children are treated as helpless people who need to be shown, taught and manipulated.

Even in the nursery, in the lesson plans for children in the second and third year of life, we deal with "talks", and the guardian anticipates what the children will do... the guardian or teacher demonstrates in writing that they carry out "directed conversations and games" and the child must do what the script predicts at a given moment.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Two years after the announcement of the Act on care for children up to three years of age, Brzezińska and Czub noticed that the situation in the area of early education in Poland requires intensive and long-term changes (Brzezińska & Czub, 2012, p. 18). The author notices that the first problem that needs to be eliminated is low social awareness of the importance of the first years of life for human functioning in later periods. The second problem, as the psychologist points out, "largely resulting from the first one, concerns the functioning of the system which, not supported by a common vision of supporting development and education, works insufficiently well, and often even defectively" (Brzezińska & Czub, 2012, p. 18).

We come to similar conclusions by following the statements of the surveyed experts ten years after the statement by Brzezińska and Czub quoted above. The biggest problems in educating a child up to seven years of age, based on the opinions of interlocutors, include lack of child orientation, insufficiently qualified and unfriendly staff towards children, lack of "permission" to play, lack of understanding of the determinants of educating a child up to three years of age, the pursuit of directive education and education not adapted to the needs and capabilities of the child, and the expectations of parents and the "expectations" of documents. Meanwhile, as Telka postulates, a child's exploration of the world should take place in a relationship with adults who are sensitive, attentive and oriented to the child's needs (Telka, 2009, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021).

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