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UNIVERSITY KINDERGARTEN-A SPECIFIC PLATFORM FOR
EDUCATION AND COLLABORATION OF ALL ITS AGENTS

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Abstract

Since 2011, nine kindergartens have been founded by universities in the Czech Republic with financial support from the EU. These kindergartens were set up as private schools to help reconcile professional and parental roles of mostly university staff. A research was conducted in one of these schools in order to describe it and to reveal the context in which it operates. The research also had an ambition to understand how the kindergarten works and to characterize the subjects and circumstances which affect it most. The strategy of the research was to make a case study including interviews with school stakeholders - teachers, parents, teaching staff in pedagogy apprenticeship and with members of the school board representing the founding institution as well. In addition, there was a questionnaire survey for parents, observation of school events, and a content analysis of the school documents. The obtained data showed that the examined kindergarten is working under specific conditions of high contextual conditionality and mutual sharing with the university environment. The functioning of the school is conditioned by an intensive interaction with parents from the university, teachers in training, the school board and the faculty that is part of the founding university and which prepares students.

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Keywords: Agents of university, case study, collaboration, kindergarten.



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1. Introduction

One of the tools for state family support is assistance in daycare of pre-school children. In this family policy agenda, proper kindergartens have their irreplaceable role. It opens up one of the tasks of their work - aimed at parents and fulfilment of their job responsibilities and professional ambitions. Kindergarten is an important tool for providing a broad, physically and financially accessible professional daycare service for pre-school children and it also represents a guarantee of their harmonious development through purposeful education.

The emergence of university kindergartens in the Czech Republic was a response to the lack of places for pre-school children in regional kindergartens. Since 2010, 9 out of 16 Czech universities established a university kindergarten with financial support from the EU Social Funds. Another important motive for their establishment was to contribute to the reconciliation of the parental and professional roles of their employees. The purpose of the university kindergartens was to meet the demands of university staff and students and to accelerate their return to work or study. These kindergartens have become an effective tool applied to young families with pre-school children, i.e. in the early stages of their parenthood. It should be noted that the possibility of placing a child in this type of school was an employee bonus that increased the credibility of the workplace itself.

A report of research from 2015-16 carried out at one of the university kindergartens was published in the form of a monograph (Majerčíková & Rebendová, 2016). For the purposes of this study, we analysed one of the aspects of life at one of the studied schools, namely the functioning of the school reflected in the mutual interactions of its agents.

2. Problem Statement

University kindergartens are pre-school facilities where certain specifics can be expected. The main feature that distinguishes them from other institutions, such as public nursery schools, is the fact that their founder is a university. The university, as a legal person, co-finances and governs the school. The management of the school takes place in cooperation with the school director and the Board of school legal entity, which constitutes an administrative body representing the founder. The Board of school legal entity includes parents and other university staff.

Another aspect determining the character of the university kindergarten is the fact that it fulfils the criteria for the status of a corporate school, i.e. schools designed to educate the children of the employees of the founder or other employers. The corporate school has a legally authorized right to accept children to the kindergarten preferentially by a decision of the founder, without this procedure being considered discriminatory. The kindergarten therefore primarily concentrates children of academics and students of the given university, which already establishes prerequisites for creation of a relatively specific educational environment.

Parents in university kindergartens are characterized by a common level of education. These parents have college education, in many cases they have a doctoral degree. Some of the parents also have other academic degrees, acting as university educators. It determines their actions, behaviour, attitudes, opinions, attitudes towards institutional pre-school education and specific school. There is no doubt that attitudes of

parents towards school and education can be differentiated according to the social class they belong to or the type of education they have. We include university parents in the so-called new middle class, whose main focus is education and professional qualification that allows them the same social advance as the one achieved by old middle classes through acquired financial capital (Keller, 2012). This predicts the quality of their collaboration with their children's school. Today, we know that middle-class families are the best at understanding the school's "language" and that they cooperate well with the schools, and also middle-class children are more successful at school, have better grades, and their parents have a closer relationship with the school (Šed'ová, 2009).

Even pedagogical sciences reflect sociological explanation theory, especially education reproduction theory, in their justification and explanation of parental influence on education of their offspring, which they consider important. However, the most frequently concept for explanation of children's school performance is the cultural capital by P. Bourdieu. It appears that even in pre-school facilities, influence of parents with a high level of cultural capital can be apparent. Researches with pre-school children indicate that parents declare different educational aspirations for their children even before their school results can be influenced (Reed, 2012).

Some university kindergartens also fulfil the function of a training workplace and provide room for realization of pedagogical apprenticeships of students of pedagogical fields at given university, if such fields are accredited there. In terminology of university education of teacher adepts - these are the faculty kindergartens. They create space for development of professional teacher skills, they are able to engage in research activities and university projects and can represent a target group for various courses and other forms of lifelong education of teachers (Průcha & Veteška, 2012). This fact certainly affects the functioning and development of the kindergarten itself.

University kindergarten therefore represents a distinct platform for education of pre-school children. In social system, it functions as a social unit which, by its nature, fulfils the character of a social institution and social organization. These terms are distinguished mainly in sociological discourse. Social institutions, such as school, family, church or army for example, are an important feature of every culture. If we are confronted with the institutions of a given culture, we have the opportunity to get to learn and understand it. Social institutions, representing the basic elements of each society, present the predominant way of transmitted ideas and behaviours, offer behavioural patterns and represent a guide to how to meet society's needs. The institutional form of the kindergarten has its rules and legislative anchoring, which must be respected. If an institution means a way of doing something, a social organization is made up of people who carry out this institutionalized activity (Collective of authors, 2006) and who are involved in endowing it with a unique character. It is the people, the agents and the relationships created in the organization that determine its character. The kindergarten is therefore a coin with two sides - one as a social institution, the other one as a social organization. University kindergarten provides room for co-existence and mutual sharing not only of teachers and children, but also of students in apprenticeship and to a great extent also of their parents.

3. Research Questions

In the research, we had the ambition to reveal the specific nature of the university kindergarten through a case study. We chose a single-case study to capture the complexity of the case and holistically describe the relevant relationships (Hendl, 2005). In the relevant context and in connection to the research objectives, we formulated a key research question:

What are the characteristics of a university kindergarten and in which ways is it specific?

The main question was further specified into the following partial research questions:

- What are the subjects and circumstances with which the kindergarten interacts the most and which enter its life.
- How the kindergarten works in mutual interaction of all school agents.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research in the study was to describe the case of a kindergarten that lives, works and develops in an academic environment with regard to the people who meet there. For the description and understanding of the activity at the kindergarten we used the concept of a case study which integrates qualitative and quantitative research orientation. It is known that this strategy offers the opportunity to learn and understand one or a few cases in detail.

The aim of this research was:

- Examine the kindergarten and the context in which it operates.
- To characterize the subjects and the circumstances with which the kindergarten interacts most and which influence its functioning.
- Understand how the kindergarten works in mutual interactions of its agents.

5. Research Methods

In the present research, the case study was perceived as a research strategy, a research approach. It is intended to use different sources of data obtained through several purposefully combined research methods. As already mentioned, this strategy has also been applied in the presented research. The data was therefore collected through several research methods, both qualitative and quantitative ones. The following research methods were used

- Content analysis of school documents. We analysed pedagogical and other documents related to the functioning of the kindergarten, for example the statutes of the school; inspection report; school education program; records from parents' meetings; records from pedagogical boards; the concept of school development, etc.
- Interview with 14 persons from the kindergarten - with the headmaster of the school, teachers and parents, students in apprenticeship and with members of the Board of school legal entity.

- Observation during 12 school days. This was an open and unstructured observation with the aim of minimizing interactions with children, teachers and other school staff.
- Questionnaire administered to parents of children.

Considering its methods of data collection and analysis, the study inclined to rather qualitative research design. In line with Hendl (2005), we tried to give meaning to the collected data, while we wanted to proceed more holistically, that is by examining these data as a whole. Yin (2014) distinguishes two general data analysis strategies: a strategy based on certain theoretical assertions and the procedure which is more about case description. In case description, the researcher looks for a set of topics and fields that are primarily related to the research question and which should appropriately cover the whole examined case. Our procedures have been tied to this approach; in our research we mostly remained at the descriptive level.

6. Findings

As a part of the analysis of the acquired empirical data and in combination with field remarks, three functional dimensions of the examined school emerged to form its image. These identified dimensions offered a kind of sketch of the examined school. These were evident in the data obtained from the sources cited above and in certain connotations and through various prisms they resonated in the testimonies of all participants and respondents.

6.1. School management dimension

This dimension develops in the school co-operation agenda, in the person of the director and the Board of school legal entity (hereinafter Board) representing the founder. The school is established by a university, which means that the university contributes to the school finances and it is responsible for the operation of the kindergarten (it reports to the Rector, Quaestor and parents - colleagues). The University is significantly involved in the school, in terms of control and administration, especially through the Board, and it is an important partner of the school director. As a private corporate school, it works in the legal form of a school legal entity.

At the examined kindergarten, there is a relationship based on mutual acceptance between the Director and the Board, yet some imbalances are still present. The Director is responsible to the Board and is obliged to share decision making in all essential affairs of the kindergarten, which often presents dilemmas for her position. The Board is in a similar position as its primary concern is the stability of the kindergarten, which is sometimes difficult to maintain in cooperation with the director, conditions in the school and the institutional framework. The research has shown that, through the Board, the founder is extremely involved in the life of the kindergarten. This is happening not only at the level of its formal obligations. The leadership of the Board is active as a stabilizing element, both in the context of cooperation between the two schools' bodies, but also towards other authorities in the university, where the kindergarten also needs to maintain favourable positions supporting it. For example, on an informal level of interrelation, the board leadership initiates such activities that ensure gradual "tuning" of its quality towards complete

understanding. And that is with the ultimate goal of finally achieving the highly valued stability of a kindergarten that is important to all concerned.

So, I think that all of us who are in that board can see that it is something completely different, working with people who are in charge of sixty more children than what we are accustomed to, we normally do research, etc., and when something changes or gets messed-up somewhere, it does not matter much. And in the kindergarten, nothing can be messed-up because our kids are there. So I still take it as the most important thing, because one has a great responsibility, that nothing must happen, and nothing must go wrong in the education because it is the most important thing for the little ones (member of the Board).

6.2. Relationship dimension

It is also the dimension emerging from relationships between the kindergarten and a family, developing in the co-operation agenda of the kindergarten with the parents of children - mostly academics and students of the founding university, which also offers certain specifics. The kindergarten is private by its nature, which means that the parents are involved in its financing, so they "contribute" to the tuition fee. They then require "better than standard" and good, optimally the best conditions. The kindergarten also has characteristics of a corporate school, it can preferably receive the children of staff and university students. This follows - in the words of a parent - the nature of the kindergarten according to their parents, when they say: It's our kindergarten and our university kids. Everyone in the kindergarten wants the best for them, the kindergarten is here for children and their parents.

The parents from the examined kindergarten are ready to recognize the demands of the teaching profession at this level of education. They are able to identify the difficult tasks of the teacher's profession in the view of the age specifics of children and the tasks associated with entering elementary school and they express confidence in the examined school as an expert system. We attribute this to their education, socio-economic status, and similarities between the type of profession and recognized values, including the very value of education.

Parents are extremely interested in what is being done in the kindergarten, what they are planning, which future events, I think also in the sense of what can be helped with, what they can support, so it can be clearly said that there is an interest in the child and therefore interest in the environment in which the child is anchored. So, that is it, a lot of interest in the child, so that it is content and develops properly. (director).

The declared parental trust in school is a positive signal for mutual co-operation. Parents expressed their satisfaction with the activities of the kindergarten aimed at mutual effective co-operation. Most of them reported sufficient information about the kindergarten and also agreed that the kindergarten communicates well with them. The mothers and fathers of the surveyed children also perceive that they are considered partners of the kindergarten, and on the part of the kindergarten they see an interest in developing the relationships. The data also revealed that the parents are able to communicate with the kindergarten and require fulfilment of their requests, but in some situations the parental influence have been colliding with the important pedagogical autonomy of the teachers. This is also explained by the education and professional status of the parents, which helps them in their activities towards the kindergarten.

6.3. Educational dimension

In the expected co-operation of the kindergarten and one of the faculties of the founding university which trains pedagogy students, other dimensions are being developed. The cooperation occurs mainly through the pedagogical apprenticeship of pedagogy students in the examined school. Future teachers practice teaching there, education should be at an appropriate professional level, teachers of the surveyed kindergarten should be qualified and capable of supervision and professional help and support.

Pedagogy students who realized their pedagogical apprenticeships in the examined kindergarten were, in the view of the kindergarten, its staff and in the interpretation of their parents, perceived as an element quite strongly influencing the functioning of the school, at least during the apprenticeship itself. They carried both positive and negative messages.

The positive attitudes of students at the kindergarten concerned their theoretical and professional contribution to education, they were perceived as a source of energy, enthusiasm, physical help with children, and the prevention of the professional burnout of school teachers.

... we still have young and enthusiastic people who have some new ideas, or just that they have inspiration and will, I would say that there is a prevention against burnout because we are still receiving some new energy. (director).

Even though the participation of students was considered to be beneficial to the kindergarten, even they did not avoid the negative perceptions of people from within the kindergarten and from its close proximity, that is the management and staff of the school and some of the parents. These limitations mainly concerned organizational burdens and changes in the kindergarten's operation in connection with student apprenticeships, and the demand for mentor support needed for students from teachers, with diversified attitudes towards co-operation.

Even those apprenticeships carry some extra tasks and responsibility, the teacher is not just a teacher, but they must also work with adult students, this isn't easy either, because everyone has a different character and everybody needs a different approach. (teacher 1)

This ambivalence can be perceived as a natural phenomenon that necessarily accompanies all interventions into the standard functioning of the organization, especially when it comes to new people coming up with their opinions, ideas, expectations and actions.

7. Conclusion

Discussions about any school and its nature point to a dual basic institutional, organizational relationship framework (Pol, 2007). The examined kindergarten also functions as an institution that must respect all the requirements of a private, corporate and faculty school. As shown in the research data, it also develops from the inside, living its story of a school as an organization, profiling its unique character in the dimension of school management, the educational dimension, and the dimension of collaboration with parents. In the case of the institutional and organizational framework of the kindergarten, however, these are not two completely separate assignments and above all - it is not a trivial and potentially problem-free relationship.

The studied kindergarten works under specific conditions of a high contextual conditionality and mutual sharing in connection with the university environment. Due to external conditions and

circumstances, a community of people emerged, who have made a joint effort to achieve common goals. It turns out that these people are coaching each other and they grow professionally. Collaboration of all people at the kindergarten appears to be a challenge. It assumes that everyone understands where and why the kindergarten is headed, how their cooperation supports this direction and what strategies are to be used in this collaboration. It is not an easy process, but rather a complicated way of constantly communicating, fine-tuning, discussing, modifying the goals and procedures to achieve them. Words from the school director: The point is to simply find a way in which we will all be able to communicate together ... to cooperate and to form a certain unit together. The success or failure of a school often depends on how to connect personal visions of people - especially the school employees, but also those around the school (Kaldestad, 2009). That is what the studied university kindergarten is always trying to do.

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