

The Impacts of the Anti-COVID Measures Introduced in the Czech Republic and Spain in the Context of Preschool Education

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Abstract

The text presents a part of a broader research study carried out at the Faculty of Education, Palacký University Olomouc in cooperation with foreign partners. Its aim is to analyse and compare the impacts of the measures against the spread of COVID-19 on preschool education in selected European countries. This paper focuses on an initial comparative study involving the Czech Republic and Spain in order to analyse and compare how the anti-epidemic measures affect preschool education in the context of regional and social peculiarities in both countries. The research method is a qualitative text content analysis followed by open coding, formulation of analytical categories and their comparison according to the principles of comparative pedagogy. The data sources will be international and national documents relating to the research problem. Available data suggest that the impact of the anti-epidemic measures on preschool education differs both countries in the context of geographical locations and social differences. The benefit of this study is the body of data on addressing the impacts of the pandemic on preschool education in the Czech Republic and Spain including their comparison. Another benefit is a set of recommendations for the training of future teachers during the pandemic.

Keywords: Preschool Education, Anti-Epidemic Measures, Reactibility, Regional and Social Aspects

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Introduction

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is located in Central Europe and borders on four countries. The official language is Czech and the capital is Prague. For the purposes of state administration, the Czech Republic is divided into 14 regions (European Union, 2020; Act on the territorial administrative division of the state and on the amendment of related acts, No. 51/2020 Coll., 2020). As of September 2020, the total population was 10,707,839 inhabitants (Czech Statistical Office, 2020).

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary country with a democratic rule of law and a liberal state regime. It is a democratic parliamentary country; the executive power is in the hands of the President and Government (Filip, 2003).

The Czech Republic has a number of state administration bodies. The state administration bodies are established pursuant to the Constitution and Constitutional Laws. These rules regulate their position and define their powers, territorial competences as well as material competences. As a rule, each body has its own organizational structure and departments.

The most important state administration bodies include the central government institutions with national competences. These bodies include ministries and other authorities as defined by the Act No. 2/1969 Coll. on establishing ministries and other institutions of central government of the Czech Republic (State administration, 2020).

A typical feature in the history of the Czech nation was the dominance of other territories. The Czech territory had always been part of larger historical areas such as Austria-Hungary or the German Empire. As a result, it had always had less power and tried to hold together as a “small-big” nation (Nový, 2005, p. 197).

From this historical context, we can also derive some of the typical features of Czech people such as flexibility, diligence, orientation on people as well as inventiveness. As people, the inhabitants of the Czech Republic are more reserved and rather conservative because they do not like new and unexplored things. However, once they establish a relationship, it is very strong and authentic. They have a great sense of humour, especially sceptical or pessimistic humour. The Czechs tend to be negative or even critical about their country. Similarly, too many new things at once cause great mistrust (Šroněk, 2000, pp. 105–107).

The Czechs are neither strong individuals nor overly sociable. They try to fit into different social groups and once they do, they feel safer. They tend to blame authorities and institutions for all problems instead of assuming their own responsibility (Lingea, 2020, p. 26).

For most people the family is important but they do not cling to it as much as other nations. In old age parents usually move to social care establishments, for example to a retirement home. Intergenerational coexistence is quite uncommon in the Czech Republic (Lingea, 2020, p. 55).

Spain

The Kingdom of Spain (Reino de España in Spanish) is located in South-West Europe on the Iberian Peninsula. It borders on Portugal in the west, France and Andorra in the north and Gibraltar in the south. Spain includes the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands. There are 17 autonomous communities and 2 autonomous cities. These areas are further divided into 50 provinces. In 1978, the Spanish Constitution was issued that guarantees their right to autonomy. This autonomy also means their own government which controls life in the area and regions. There are differences in geography, climate and culture. The current population of Spain is 47,100,396 inhabitants (Banco mundial, 2021). The capital of Spain is Madrid with a population of 3.2 million. Spain has been a member of the EU since 1986 and is also a member of NATO, UN, OECD and other international organizations (Hlavičková, Macíková, 2010, p. 98).

Spain is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The King represents the Monarchy, has the right to convene and dissolve the parliament and approve and declare laws. The Spanish state apparatus has three parts: legislative, executive and judicial. The legislature is in the hands of the Spanish Parliament, which has two chambers—the Senate (259 members) and the Congress of Deputies (350 members) who are elected every four years. The executive power is in the hands of the Government and State Council (advisory council). The Government consists of the Prime Minister, Vice Prime Minister and other ministers. The current Prime Minister is Pedro Sánchez. Pursuant to the Constitution, the last part is the judicial power which consists of judges (Eurydice, 2021).

Spain has several different cultural features that together form a single Spanish unity. Each autonomous community and region of Spain has slightly different cultural features, traditions and habits. Spain is a country where European and Arabic history crossed (Rusnoková, 2015).

People in Spain are very open, temperamental, communicative and energetic. They are also said to be long-lived. They like to go out for entertainment and culinary experience. Their temperament and communicativeness are manifested not only verbally but also non-verbally. They often use strong gestures, communicate loudly, use mimics and are emotional.

Their temperament and way of life is also reflected in mutual relationships, in the family as well as attitudes to friends and foreigners. They like to pass on their energy to other people and try to make everyone around happy. Their generosity can sometimes be incomprehensible to other people. They appreciate their own families, which are usually large and multi-generational (Beneš, 2002, pp. 59–60).

People in Spain tend to keep their optimistic humour in all situations, even in situations when not everything is all right. They are able to live in the present and look optimistically to the future (Rusnoková, 2015).

Preschool Education in the Czech Republic and Spain

Education in the Czech Republic is governed by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (Structure of organization and Code of organization, MEYS) which is a central state administration body. Education is legally defined by the Education Act No. 561/2004 Coll. Education in Spain is governed by Ministerio de educación y formación profesional = Ministry

of Education and Professional Training (Eurydice, 2021). Education is legally defined by the Royal Decree on Preschool Education No. 1630/2006.

	CZECH REPUBLIC	SPAIN
CHILDREN'S AGE	Older than 2, usually until 6 years of age	Cycle 1: 0–3 Cycle 2: 3–6
MANDATORY PE	Last year of PE	Optional PE
NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN CLASS	24 + 4 (exceptions)	3 years: 16–20 children 4, 5, 6 years: 25 children
ADMISSION OF CHILDREN	by age and catchment area	national and complementary criteria
EATING	in the classroom provided jointly	dining room, classroom, some children individually
CLASSES	heterogeneous and homogeneous	homogeneous
SCHOOL AUTHORITY	state → regions, municipalities, unions	state → autonomous communities
MANAGEMENT OF PE	centralized	decentralized
TEACHER QUALIFICATION	minimum secondary education with graduation certificate	minimum bachelor's degree

Table 1: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2020a, Act No. 561/2004 Coll., Act No. 563/2004 Coll., FEP PE, p. 6, 2018, Decree No. 107/2005 Coll., Eurydice, 2021, Methodological Portal FEP, 2005, Education Act No. 2/2006, Royal Decree on Preschool Education No. 1630/2006.

COVID-19 in the Czech Republic and Spain

Covid-19 is an infectious viral disease caused by coronavirus also referred to as SARS-CoV-2. Coronaviruses are viruses that first occur in animals and can then infect humans. The first known case appeared in December 2019 in Wuhan, China and probably came from an open market. The virus was believed to come from the bodies of bats but this assumption has not been confirmed so far. Gradually, SARS-CoV-2 spread into the whole world (Government of the Czech Republic, 2020b).

The first signs of Covid-19 in the Czech Republic date back to 1 March 2020. This was followed by the declaration of the state of emergency from 12 March 2020 to 17 May 2020. The next state of emergency was declared on 5 October 2020 and finished on 14 February 2021, lasted 132 days and was the longest state of emergency during the pandemic. The last state of emergency in the Czech Republic was declared on 27 February 2021 and finished at midnight on Sunday 11 April 2021. The Government approved a series of emergency measures outside the state of emergency through which the Ministry of Health introduced anti-epidemic measures pursuant to the Pandemic Act (Covid Portal, 2021). From 23 April 2020 the free movement of persons was restricted, school attendance was prohibited in elementary and secondary schools as well as universities and educational and leisure activities in education were suspended. Nursery schools remained in normal operation during the first and second waves (Government of the Czech Republic, 2020a). From 27 February 2021 the presence of children in nursery schools and other schools was prohibited. Children in the last mandatory year of preschool education were involved in distance education. Full-

time education was first reopened for children in the last year of preschool education and on 26 April for all children. A precondition for reopening was strict compliance with hygiene measures (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2021a).

In Spain, the first case of infection occurred on 3 March 2020 and the state of emergency was declared. The management of the measures was the responsibility of the autonomous communities. The first wave including high numbers of infected people took place already in March 2020. The second wave took place in September and October 2020 while the third wave lasted from December to January. In the first wave, all educational institutions had been closed until June. After that, nursery schools reopened and remained open the entire school year. However, in order to prevent the spread of the disease, all nursery schools had to observe strict hygiene rules (Autonomous community Madrid, 2021).

Objective of the Research Study

Subject of the research study:

Analysis and comparison of the measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and their impacts on preschool education in the selected European countries in the context of time, regional and social specificities.

Main objective:

Analyse and compare the reactivity in the countries selected as well as to analyse and compare the impact of the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on the functioning of preschool education in the context of regional and social specificities.

Partial objectives:

- Identify the reactivity in the selected countries to the measures introduced in preschool education.
- On the basis of a document analysis compare and evaluate the extent to which the specificities of the country's regions affected the impact of the measures on the functioning of preschool education.
- On the basis of a document analysis compare and evaluate the extent to which the common aspects of either country affected the impact of the measures on the functioning of preschool education.

Research problem:

The reactions of the selected European countries to the measures introduced against the spread of Covid-19 in the area of preschool education in the context of regional and social specificities.

Research questions:

- Are the measures introduced in the selected countries in the area of preschools education similar in terms of content and timing?
- Do the measures introduced in the area of preschool education differ by regions?
- Do the measures introduced in the area of preschool education differ by social aspects?

Data sources:

- Anti-epidemic measures;
- Emergency decrees and regulations governing the operation of preschool establishments;
- Legislation and education policy relating to pandemic measures;
- Curricular documents, educational objectives.

Methodology

The data from the content analysis was further compared in accordance with the principles and procedures of comparative pedagogy. Concerning the predetermined criteria, the country selected for comparison was Spain. The country selection method was criterion-based. One of the criteria was regional – location in Europe. Spain is a country in the south of Europe, specifically in South-West Europe. The Czech Republic is located in Central Europe. The other criterion was the governance of the school education system. While Spain is decentralized including its education system, the Czech Republic has a centralized system of education. The final criterion was social – different culture and personality characteristics of the population.

Data analysis method:

Content analysis of texts with a focus on the following aspects:

- Subject: which part of reality became the source for the documents;
- Content of the document: main message, problem;
- Form of text (Miovský, 2006).

Data analysis:

Open coding was used to identify and analyse the specific phenomena. Subsequently, the formulation of analytical categories was performed.

On the basis of the agreed criteria, Spain was selected for comparison with the Czech Republic. The countries are on the European continent and both are members of the EU. Since March 2020, both countries were confronted with the covid pandemic and tried to respond accordingly. COVID-19 also affected educational institutions. Preschool education had to adjust its conditions in order to respond to the spreading pandemic. In both countries, nursery schools were closed. The analysis and comparison were based on up-to-date information provided by the government and state administration, information from the ministries of education and health in both countries as well as applicable legal documents.

The categories for comparison were defined on the basis of a possible effect on preschool education. They were open and at the same time took into account the specifics of both countries. The categories were as follows:

- Response to COVID-19;
- Regional aspects and their impact on the measures introduced;
- Social aspects and their impact on the measures introduced.

Results

Both countries were affected by three waves during which the numbers of infected people increased dramatically. In both countries the waves came at different times. While the Czech Republic fought the first wave in October and November, it was the second wave for Spain.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Czech Republic did not have as many infected people as Spain. In Spain, the numbers of infected people grew much faster. This may have been caused by the different characteristics of the inhabitants of Spain who are more temperamental and extrovert, like to hug and are very sociable. Intergenerational families are a priority for people in Spain. This may have caused greater spread of coronavirus in this country. The third wave in Spain coincided with the second wave in the Czech Republic at the end of December and in January. The Czech Republic faced the third wave in March 2021. In both countries, the worst outbreak of the pandemic came in January. The measures in both countries were similar but differed in intensity. The restrictions responded to the numbers of people infected. During the first wave, both countries completely shut down all services and educational institutions, except nursery schools in the Czech Republic. During the following school year, nursery schools in both countries were open under strict hygiene rules. In Spain, nursery schools were open throughout the whole school year, while in the Czech Republic they were closed from February to April. However, preschool children in the last mandatory year continued to be educated.

As far as regional specifics are concerned, the Czech Republic is divided into regions, cities and municipalities. All of the measures were controlled by the state in cooperation with the Ministry of Education. During the pandemic, nursery schools were regulated centrally by the state administration. Spain is decentralized and is divided into autonomous communities with their own competences. The state of emergency and some restrictions were governed centrally by the state but many competences were in the hands of the autonomous communities. They regulated their educational institutions according to the actual situation and the number of people infected. For this reason, all nursery schools in the Czech Republic were closed although in some regions the situation was not so bad. In Spain, the autonomous communities were able to react more flexibly to the situation and regulate the closure of educational institutions.

The social aspects did not have a major effect on the impact of COVID-19 on preschool education. Despite the fact that people in the Czech Republic are very cautious, during the first wave all educational institutions were closed except nursery schools. The reason was the diligence of the Czech population thus allowing the parents of preschool children to work. The closure of nursery schools in the following school year was due to the third wave of coronavirus which was very strong and hospitals were full. The spread of the disease had to be stopped immediately. For this reason, all services closed down. In Spain, nursery schools were closed only during the first wave at the beginning of the epidemic. The reason was the new disease and the effort to prevent it from spreading. After the first wave had subsided, all educational institutions reopened at the end of June. The social aspects had a little effect on the functioning of preschool education. The major indicator was the number of people infected, hospitalized and the basic reproduction number in both countries.

Conclusion

The research study revealed that both countries had responded very flexibly to the actual pandemic situation. Both the Czech Republic and Spain faced three waves of COVID-19 during which the disease spread quickly across the population. The state of emergency was declared in both countries and restrictions were imposed. At the beginning of the pandemic in Spain, all educational institutions were closed. The same applied in the Czech Republic except nursery schools which remained open. In the following school year, preschool education was in full operation except two months in the Czech Republic when nursery

schools were completely closed. As far as compulsory preschool education is concerned, children had to be taught by means of distance education. After two months, nursery schools reopened and remained open until the end of the school year. The difference between the two countries is in the governance of the restrictions. In Spain, the autonomous communities are fully competent and decide on the restrictions according to the current situation in the region. The Czech Republic is governed centrally and the measures apply to the whole country irrespective of the situation in the different regions.

A benefit of this comparison could be the information about the reactivity of either country which should be used to get the best of the previous steps and measures in order to be able to respond flexibly in the following months with a positive back evaluation of the action taken. We should still achieve the objectives of preschool education and develop children within the entire scope of their personalities despite the difficult conditions caused by the new pandemic. We can learn from the previous measures and try to update preschool education so that the achievement of the objectives is affected by the restrictions as little as possible. A benefit for future teachers could be the ability to better respond to the measures implemented and the actual events. Similarly, the training of future teachers should focus more on other forms of education that may be used.

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