

*The Prestigious of Nursery School Teachers in the Changes of Preschool Education  
During COVID-19 Pandemic in the Czechia and Slovakia*

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**Abstract**

The text is based on a project named Impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic on selected functions and conditions of pre-school education in the context of preparing children to start compulsory schooling in selected European countries, which is implemented at the Faculty of Education of Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic. This text presents a comparative study of the Czech Republic and Slovakia focusing on the changes in the prestige of nursery school teachers during the COVID 19 pandemic from the perspective of parents and teachers. For the needs of the text, a qualitative research design was chosen using a content text analysis and a semi-structured interview with parents of preschool children. The obtained data were then subjected to open coding and subsequent categorization. The results of the comparative study show a change in the perception of nursery school teachers and their professional competencies on the part of parents, as during the pandemic there was a shift of education to the home environment both in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia. In the context of preparing children for primary school, it can be stated that this new role was even more challenging for parents, as systematic preparation required their considerable involvement and efforts with the external support of nursery school teachers. We believe the benefit of this study is the support of professional discussion on teacher prestige in general and identification of the connection between teacher prestige and the COVID 19 pandemic.

Keywords: Preschool Education, Nursery School Teacher, Teaching Prestige, Comparison, Covid-19 Pandemic, Comparative Pedagogy

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## 1 Introduction

Education in the Czech Republic and Slovakia was affected by the COVID 19 pandemic (referred to as the pandemic). Preschool education in both countries was suspended for a certain period of time. Nursery schools had to cope with anti-epidemic measures gradually implemented by the governments of both countries. This led to changes in the fulfilment of the functions and conditions of preschool education. In practice, these changes were reflected in the usual operation of nursery schools, organization of preschool education, everyday work of nursery school teachers and naturally, the position of the family and cooperation with the family changed. The study of resources and research (Gajdová, Srbená 2021) suggested another category that was worth investigating – transformation of the prestige of the teaching profession from the perspective of society, namely children’s legal guardians (referred to as parents). During the partial closure of nursery schools, parents took over a part of the educational function of nursery schools. First, this paper presents the basic theoretical framework and then focuses on a comparative research study.

### 1.1 Preschool education in an emergency situation associated with the pandemic

For clarity purposes, the table below shows the anti-epidemic measures in both countries including a commentary.

ANTI-EPIDEMIC MEASURES	CZECH REPUBLIC	SLOVAKIA
Increased hygiene measures (disinfection, disposable wipes, soap...)	YES	YES
Distance according to applicable standard	YES	YES
Wearing masks/respirators (at least one month)	YES	YES
Mandatory testing of children for Covid-19 (at least once a week)	YES	NO
Mandatory testing of staff for Covid-19 (at least one month)	YES	YES
Change to the education programme	YES	YES
Change to the implementation of education	YES	YES
Distance education	YES	YES
Restricted contact with parents	YES	YES
School events, performances	NO	NO
Social events and trips	NO	NO
Closure of nursery schools due to the absence of children or staff	YES	YES
Closure of nursery schools by governmental regulation	YES (50 working days)	YES (55 working days)

**Table 1.** Measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in nursery schools in 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

Comment: The measures introduced in both countries were similar with some differences in the testing of children.

All nursery schools in the Czech Republic had to follow the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (referred to as the MEYS). The MEYS issued anti-epidemic measures and recommendations for distance education of children in the mandatory year of preschool education (MEYS, 2020). The only nursery schools exempt from closure were those that provided care for the children of parents in professions necessary for the operation of the state. Home education was also allowed to parents who wanted to leave their children at home (MEYS, 2021c). Nursery schools were closed from 27 February 2021. Gradual reopening started on 1 April 2021 for children in the mandatory year of preschool education. The maximum number of children per class was 15. Nursery schools were open for all children without testing from 10 May 2021 (MEYS, 2021b).

According to a decree of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, school authorities in cooperation with nursery school directors could decide on the reopening of nursery schools and their regime. According to the Ministry, parents were supposed to bring their children to nursery schools just before the start of their working hours and collect them immediately after their end. The working hours of nursery schools were decided by their school authorities. School authorities also had to respect the Ministry's decision concerning the maximum number of children per class (15 children) (ŠPÚ, 2020; (Učíme na diaľku, 2021).

## **1.2 Prestige of nursery school teachers**

### **Czech Republic**

Prestige is rated on a scale that reflects income, responsibility and educational attainment. Experience shows that the prestige of nursery school teachers is declining (Vujičić et al., 2015). The position of teachers in preschool institutions is not a widely debated topic; emphasis is rather on secondary and elementary school teachers (Havlík, Kořa, 2011). Research shows that more than 88% of female nursery school teachers feel that their profession is undervalued by society. According to most respondents, the prestige of nursery school teachers is evaluated through two activities: play and babysitting. The main actors who determine the prestige of nursery school teachers are parents who have high expectations and demands for nursery schools. The Covid pandemic changed the life of parents and children at the time of school closure. Parents had to get involved in the work assigned to children by nursery schools. In this way, they had a closer look at the activities of nursery schools and saw that children also learned and not just played (Majerčíková, Urbaniecová, 2020).

### **Slovakia**

Social prestige is an expression of respect enjoyed by a social group or individual in society. Persons with high prestige have a strong influence, are admired and imitated (Tuček, 2011). The prestige of the teaching profession is much discussed in Slovakia, suggesting a decrease in the importance and seriousness of the profession. According to a TALIS international research study, up to 65% of Slovak teachers believe that society does not respect the teaching profession. The teaching profession in Slovakia is going through a crisis due to the feminization of the profession, ageing of teachers, low pay, lack of qualified teachers,

unattractiveness of the profession due to the low prestige and the impossibility of career growth (Búgelová, Baňasová, 2003).

### **1.3 Compulsory distance preschool education**

#### **Czech Republic**

Since 2017, children in the Czech Republic who reach five years of age by 31 August of the respective school year are required to take free-of-charge compulsory preschool education. The scope of compulsory education is at least 4 hours per day from Monday to Friday (Act No. 561/2004 Coll.). For 50 working days, children in compulsory preschool education were taught by means of distance education. Distance education was based on the document *Recommendations for distance education in nursery schools (MEYS, 2021a)*. The Ministry also established the “*Distance Education*” website. The main responsibility for education was on parents who were supposed to educate their children at home according to the teacher’s instructions. The distance form of education took place by means of offline activities assigned by nursery school teachers, online via the Zoom platform or through the RVP.cz and EDU.ceskatelevize websites where parents were provided with educational ideas. Another aspect that changed in the course of distance education was educational diagnostics which focused especially on content analysis of children’s work (MEYS, 2021a).

#### **Slovakia**

In Slovakia, preschool education has been compulsory and free of charge since 2021 and applies to children aged five years and older (Eurydice, 2021). At the time of school closure, teachers had the opportunity to use the ucimenadialku.sk portal established by the National Institute for Education of the Slovak Republic. Teachers prepared methodological resources, worksheets, etc. They were in contact with parents and informed them on a regular basis according to the director’s instructions. The following are examples of the forms of distance education: Krátke metodické inšpirácie, Naše detičky, Hravo zdravo, Zavretá škola, Digiškola, Eurorozprávky, Delmat and others. Educational diagnostics was performed by teachers only on the basis of children’s work and consultations with parents concerning the way children performed their assignments (Učíme na diaľku, 2022).

As suggested by the theoretical part, the preparation of children for starting compulsory education was affected in both countries and partially had to take place home under parents’ supervision. This fact was taken into account in the present research and the research question and methodological procedures were formulated accordingly.

## **2 Research Design**

For the purposes of the comparative research study, the qualitative research approach was chosen.

**Research problem:** Did the COVID-19 pandemic transform the prestige of nursery school teachers and the attitude of parents to children’s preparation for starting compulsory education?

**Objective:** Compare how the anti-epidemic measures in the two countries influenced preschool education with an emphasis on teachers' prestige and parents' attitude to children's preparation for starting compulsory education in the course of the pandemic.

### **Research Questions:**

The research questions are based on the research problem and goal:

RQ 1 Did the prestige of nursery school teachers change during the pandemic?

RQ 2 Did the attitude of parents to children's preparation for starting compulsory education change during the pandemic?

### **Research methods**

The following two methods were used: content text analysis and semi-structured interviews with parents of preschool children and nursery school teachers. The content text analysis was based on current and older documents provided by the state administration and government, ministries of health and education in both countries as well as applicable legal documents and articles. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with two parents of preschool children and four nursery school teachers from both countries involved in the study. Slovakia was selected for this comparative study on the basis of the following criteria: similar anti-epidemic measures, similar country size, similar curricular documents, common past of both countries. Data analysis was performed according to Gavora (2014) as follows: semantic units were determined, analytical categories were quantified, analytical categories were determined and subsequently interpreted.

Data were analysed using the open coding technique, analytical categories were formulated and the results were compared using the principles of comparative pedagogy. The basic precondition in a comparison is comparability, systematization and searching for causalities (Vlček, 2015). In the present research, the comparison included data from the documents obtained and from interviews with participants from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The data obtained are based on a qualitative study and cannot be generalized.

### **Description of interview participants**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 6 participants. They included two parents of preschool children and four nursery school teachers from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The basic criterion for the selection of parents was attendance of their child in nursery school during the pandemic, while the basic criterion for the selection of teachers was inclusion of their nursery school in the register of schools. Participants were recruited by the snowball technique.

P1: Participant 1: parent from the Czech Republic, female, 40 years, university degree, two children.

P2: Participant 2: parent from Slovakia, female, 32 years, university degree, one child.

P3: Participant 3: teacher from the Czech Republic, 53 years, secondary teacher training education, 23 years of work experience, works in a state nursery school, 3 homogeneous

classes, the school authority is the local municipal government. The nursery school has 7 teachers and is attended by approximately 70 children.

P4: Participant 4: teacher from the Czech Republic, 64 years, secondary teacher training education, 28 years of work experience, works in a state nursery school, the school authority is the local municipal government. The school has 3 age-homogeneous classes and is attended by approximately 70 children. The nursery school has 7 teachers.

P5: Participant 5: teacher from Slovakia, 32 years, university degree in preschool education, 11 years of work experience, works in a private nursery school included in the register of schools. The school has 3 age-heterogeneous classes and is attended by approximately 50 children. The nursery school has 7 teachers and one teaching assistant.

P6: Participant 6: teacher from Slovakia, 31 years, secondary teacher training education, 10 years of work experience, works in a private nursery school included in the register of schools. The school has 2 heterogeneous classes and is attended by approximately 32 children. The nursery school has 5 teachers.

## 2.1 Data analysis and interpretation

In the context of comparative pedagogy, the procedure according to Bereday was applied (Bereday, 1966, as cited in Vlček, 2015). The research problem was formulated, data were collected, findings were described and interpreted, a juxtaposition framework was developed and a comparison and search for causalities was performed. As far as the two methods are concerned, data were analysed and interpreted separately. The text below presents the juxtaposition related to RQ1 followed by RQ2.

### 2.1.1 Juxtaposition based on content text analysis concerning the prestige of nursery school teachers

SELECTED CRITERIA	CZECH REPUBLIC	SLOVAKIA
Recognition of the position as seen by teachers	88% of teachers believe that the position of nursery school teachers is underappreciated	65% of teachers think that society does not respect nursery school teachers
Degree of prestige	Nursery school teachers have a lower prestige	The teaching profession has a low prestige

**Table 2.** Juxtaposition of nursery school teachers' prestige (Majerčíková, Urbaniecová, 2020; Ministerstvo školstva, vedy, výskumu a športu SR, 2012)

#### Recognition of the position as seen by teachers

A similar fact was observed in both countries: nursery school teachers feel that their profession is undervalued. There is a slightly higher percentage of teachers in the Czech Republic who think that their profession is insufficiently appreciated by society. In Slovakia, there is a lower percentage of teachers who consider their work to be insufficiently respected by society and believe that teachers' importance and respect should be addressed.

## Degree of prestige

In both countries, the prestige of nursery school teachers is low. In the Czech Republic, the teaching profession is not very attractive because of low pay, especially for men. Other aspects include educational attainment because unlike other teaching professions, the minimum requirement for nursery school teachers is secondary teacher training education. In Slovakia, the teaching profession in nursery schools is going through a crisis because of low prestige. However, other factors include low pay and lack of teachers whether due to retirement or insufficient qualification. Men in Slovakia do not show interest in the profession, mainly because of feminization and inadequate pay.

### 2.1.2 Juxtaposition based on semi-structured interviews concerning the prestige of nursery school teachers

SELECTED CRITERIA	CZECH REPUBLIC	SLOVAKIA
Changes in prestige after the pandemic	No change in the long term	No change in the long term
Communication and cooperation with the family	Dependent on parents, rather good	Dependent on parents, rather poor
Benefits of distance education	Greater involvement of parents	No real benefits
Higher number of children with postponement of school attendance	Same number of postponements irrespective of Covid-19	Similar, slightly increased as a result of Covid-19

**Table 3.** Juxtaposition of nursery school teachers' prestige

### Changes in prestige after the pandemic

In both countries, teachers received thanks and recognition for their work during the pandemic. In the long term, however, the approach to nursery school teachers has not changed significantly. According to participant P3, teachers' prestige in the Czech Republic has not increased, they only received recognition for "babysitting" rather than education of children. In Slovakia, similar to the Czech Republic, teachers received thanks for their care for children. According to participant P6, although parents had the opportunity to educate their children at home, they still do not appreciate teachers' work and consider them to be babysitters. In her opinion, this situation continues to deteriorate.

### Communication and cooperation with the family

In the Czech Republic, parents' communication was mostly adequate, they replied to emails and submitted assignments. However, there were also parents whose communication was limited or completely absent and had to be reminded by teachers. In Slovakia, communication with parents also ranged from excellent cooperation to indifference or ignorance of online meetings of children with their teachers.

Parents in both countries agree that the area of communication between the family and the teacher changed. During the closure, communication was conducted especially between

teachers and parents and was paradoxically more intensive than during the normal operation of schools, which at least partially continued after schools had been reopened.

### **Benefits of distance education**

Teachers in neither country identified a positive aspect of distance education. In the Czech Republic, only participant (P3) thought it was a benefit that parents had a closer look at the education of their children. In this way, they could realize the necessity and difficulty of the teaching profession. Participants from Slovakia did not find any positives associated with distance education; on the contrary, because of the closure, more children face postponement of school attendance, they are unable to concentrate and have problems with speech comprehension and development of imagination.

### **Higher number of children with postponement of school attendance**

According to participants, the number of children in the Czech Republic with postponement of school attendance has not increased and is similar to previous years. A real effect of the pandemic on postponement of school attendance will be identified in the future due to the current absence of statistical data. The situation in Slovakia is individual. According to one participant (P5), the number of children with postponement has not increased and her school only has one case not associated with the pandemic. Another participant (P6) says that postponement of school attendance in their school is related to the pandemic and she believes that one of the reasons was that parents did not have enough time to prepare with children due to their employment. According to participant P6, the higher number of children with postponement of school attendance made parents realize the importance of nursery school but not the importance of teachers themselves.

### **2.1.3 Juxtaposition based on content text analysis concerning the preparation of children for enrolment in primary school during school closure**

<b>SELECTED CRITERIA</b>	<b>CZECH REPUBLIC</b>	<b>SLOVAKIA</b>
Compulsory preschool education	For children who reach 5 years of age (since 2017)	For children who reach 5 years of age (since 2021)
Communication	Mostly online with parents	Mostly online with parents
Assessment of educational results	Based on assignments	Completed work, consultations with parents
Sources of distance education	Assignments, websites, worksheets	Assignments, websites, worksheets

**Table 4.** Juxtaposition of distance education and preparation of children by parents for enrolment in primary school

### **Compulsory preschool education**

In both countries, compulsory preschool education applies to children who reach five years of age as of 31 August of the respective year. In the Czech Republic, this obligation was enacted in 2017, while in Slovakia, compulsory preschool education was enacted after the first Covid wave in 2021. In both cases, distance education became mandatory for children with compulsory preschool education.

## Communication

Due to the closure of nursery schools in both countries, communication between teachers and parents was conducted exclusively online or when children's assignments were submitted. Direct contact between teachers and children was not allowed and only took place if nursery schools introduced online meetings with children through various applications. Direct contact between children was not allowed either.

## Assessment of educational results

Due to the lack of contact between children and teachers, education in the Czech Republic and Slovakia was the primary responsibility of parents. Teachers gave assignments and recommended websites where parents could take inspiration. Educational diagnostics was performed by teachers exclusively on the basis of assignments and their analysis.

## Sources of distance education

Education in both countries was performed especially through assignments based on worksheets, videos or written instructions. During the pandemic, countless websites emerged with suggestions for teachers, parents and children.

### 2.1.4 Juxtaposition based on semi-structured interviews concerning the preparation of children for enrolment in primary school during school closure

SELECTED CRITERIA	CZECH REPUBLIC	SLOVAKIA
Home education	Completion of assignments, parents' activity, educational videos	Completion of assignments, parents' activity, online education via Zoom
Cooperation between parents and teachers	Dependent on parents' attitudes	Dependent on parents' attitudes
Deterioration of children's development	Social area, communication	Social area, communication
Distance education leads to a higher level of school readiness	Definitely not	No

**Table 5.** Juxtaposition of distance education and preparation of children by parents for enrolment in primary school

## Home education

Due to the closure of nursery schools in both countries, children were taught by means of distance education, where the responsibility was mainly on parents. In the Czech Republic, mother P1 admits greater care for her child compared with normal school operation. She also says that parents did not know how to work with children and it was difficult for them to understand the activities they needed to perform. Mother P2 from Slovakia who is at the same time a nursery school teacher knew how to ensure education of her child during school closure. Parents from both countries helped children perform their assignments and searched for inspiration.

## Cooperation between parents and teachers

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, participants agreed that cooperation with parents differed depending on parents' approaches. According to participant P3 in the Czech Republic, there are parents who support their child even outside the pandemic period. In Slovakia, opinions differed. Participant P5 says that their nursery school has long-term cooperation with parents and therefore, communication and completion of assignments was not problematic. According to participant P6, parents were insufficiently involved, often failed to complete assignments and after return to nursery school, their children had problems with communication and attention.

## Deterioration of children's development

In both countries, the interviews suggest that children are most threatened in the social area and in the development of communication as they were isolated from friends and spent most of their time with their family. Families were unable to fully compensate for the frequency and variety of social contacts, which could have affected their re-socialization and future enrolment in primary school. One of the interviews suggested that children had spent more time watching TV and playing digital games, which may have negatively affected the development of children's communication and speech.

## Distance education leads to a higher level of school readiness

The interviews in both countries suggested the same result. Teachers do not think that distance education would increase the degree of school readiness. On the contrary, they believe that children are at risk as a result of distance education and generally the pandemic as they did not have access to high-quality education and high-quality preparation in nursery school.

## 2.2 Analytical categories

CATEGORIES	Restrictions caused by measures	Home preparation with the child	Changes to communication and cooperation	Limitation of the educational environment	Increased prestige of teachers during the pandemic
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**Table 6.** Analytical categories based on the interviews

*Note:* The juxtapositions mentioned above and the comparisons were used to define the categories that answer the research questions.

### Restrictions caused by measures

Nursery schools in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic recommended outdoor education, social events were not allowed, children from different classes could not meet, sports and music activities were limited. At the time of closure of preschool institutions, parents had to spend more time with their children at home and teachers had to adapt to the current conditions in nursery schools. Children were given assignments from their teachers, completed them and brought them to school or sent them online. Children in Slovakia also attended online meetings via Zoom. In the Czech Republic, teachers shared ideas for activities and made videos. The pandemic also caused some restrictions on the part of

families; parents had their work responsibilities and at the same time, especially during school closure, were responsible for the education of their children.

### **Home preparation with the child**

Due to the measures in the Czech Republic, participant P1 spent more time with her child on home preparation, which turned out to be an additional burden for the family. On the contrary, Slovak participant P2 spent the same amount of time with her child during the pandemic as before. Both participants used the resources provided by nursery schools but supported the preparation of their children for enrolment in primary school by adding their own resources, for example from the internet or books.

### **Changes to communication and cooperation**

After the closure of nursery schools, the only personal contact was between parents and teachers when parents submitted their children's assignments. Electronic communication between the school and the family intensified. Communication with parents depended on the approach of each family. In many cases, it was more frequent than under normal school operation, which partially persisted after school reopening.

### **Limitation of the educational environment**

Both children and teachers were dependent on cooperation with parents. Participants (parents) from both countries agreed that distance education was sufficient to avoid postponement of school attendance. Participants (teachers) in the Czech Republic also agreed that distance education did not have an effect on postponement of school attendance. However, participant P6 from Slovakia believes that the higher number of children with postponement of school attendance was caused by the pandemic. In the case of parent P1, the contact between the child and nursery school was restricted deliberately by the mother in order to avoid mandatory testing. During the pandemic, social and sports events were not allowed.

### **Increased prestige of teachers during the pandemic**

It can be stated that there was only a short-term increase in prestige during the pandemic. All participants agreed that they had received thanks and recognition for their work but primarily for the difficult nature of "babysitting". According to participants-teachers, after reopening of schools, parents appreciated the possibility to place their children in nursery school again but their opinions about the teaching profession did not change much. Participant P6 even says that the situation is even worse after the pandemic because teachers are considered mere babysitters and their work is not appreciated.

## **3 Conclusion**

The text presents a part of a broader research study that analyses and compares the impacts of the measures against the spread of Covid-19 on preschool education in selected European countries. The research study shows that both countries responded to the anti-epidemic measures in nursery schools in a similar way; they were able to adapt quickly and prepare for distance education during the pandemic. Nursery schools were closed for a fixed period of time due to the state of emergency both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Due to the

compulsory nature of preschool education, it was necessary to implement distance education. Parents took care of their children at home and during the period of school closure were primarily responsible for the preparation of their children for enrolment in primary school. Parents had a closer look at the system of education in nursery schools; this gave them an opportunity to change their opinions about teachers' prestige, which according to teachers very low. Following the objective of the research study, it appears that teachers' prestige both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia increased in the short term during the pandemic. However, when things came back to normal, no changes remained. Parents in both countries appreciated the care provided by teachers on a daily basis but not their qualified work. Research question R1 focused on the preparation of children for enrolment in primary school by parents in the home environment during school closure. The research shows that parents completed assignments given by nursery school teachers according to their individual possibilities. According to the interviews, teachers in the Czech Republic do not associate the increase in the number of children with postponement of school attendance with the pandemic, while in Slovakia they do. The reason for postponement may also be caused by parents' benevolent approaches and the higher amount of time spent watching TV or playing digital games during the pandemic.

The anti-epidemic measures in both countries restricted the operation of nursery schools and disrupted the process of education, development of preschool children, educational diagnostics and socialization as well as forced parents to take on the role of nursery school teachers in the home environment.

**The study also identified new challenges for future research in the area of preschool education in both countries:**

- New experiences of parents with preschool education and the transformation of teachers' and parents' roles;
- Supporting new perspectives of preschool education as an indispensable part of the education system;
- Supporting new perspectives of nursery school teachers;
- Highlighting the need for systematic development of preschool children and educational diagnostics in the context of preparation for enrolment in primary school.

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