



## Cancellation of School Attendance Deferments: Challenges and Concerns of Educators in the Context of Educational Reform

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### Abstract

*This paper presents partial results of a qualitative research study that is part of a broader study analyzing the impacts of the planned cancellation of school attendance deferments. The aim of the research is to identify the challenges associated with this change and understand the shift in the concept of school readiness – from a model focused on the child's preparedness to a concept where the school must adequately respond to the individual needs of students. Through a case study, we explore the attitudes of preschool and primary school teachers, their expectations, concerns, and suggestions for measures that could support a smooth transition for children into the school environment. The research sample includes educators from various regions of the Czech Republic, providing a diverse range of perspectives influenced by local contexts and school conditions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis. The study reveals significant differences in how teachers perceive school readiness, with some expressing concerns about the premature inclusion of children who are not yet developmentally ready for the demands of formal education. Others emphasize the need for systemic support, flexible teaching strategies, and collaboration between preschool and primary education. The findings provide valuable insights into how the teaching community perceives this reform and highlight the importance of ongoing professional development, interdisciplinary cooperation, and adjustments in school policies and classroom practices. By reflecting on teachers' lived experiences and professional judgments, this study contributes to formulating practical recommendations for educational practice, policy-making, and the development of inclusive educational strategies that support all learners from the beginning of their school journey.*

**Keywords:** school readiness, school attendance deferment, case study, inclusive education, teaching strategies, individual needs of students, educational policy.

### 1. Introduction

The period from birth to eight years of age is a stage of remarkable brain development in children, which affects their development and learning. If children are given the conditions for healthy development at an early age, then they are likely to reach their developmental potential, which is a prerequisite for effective participation in society.

Neuroscience has shown that the environment significantly influences the nature of brain architecture. A child's early experiences can provide either a necessary or insufficient basis for later learning, development and behaviour. In this context, the economic return on investment in early childhood programmes has shown to be greater than that of programmes for adolescents and adults. Educational sciences show that participation in early childhood care and education programmes increases children's school readiness and reduces the early school readiness gap.

These facts provide direction for reforms in many countries. The most important global stakeholder in the field of education is UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). However, in recent years, especially in developed countries, it seems to have less immediate impact on curriculum content compared to more pragmatic and technocratic outcomes. The OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) or the European Union (EU) as supranational organisations have means of governance such as the open method of coordination in education. On the other hand, UNESCO documents are grounded in a deeper philosophical and theoretical foundation, offering a humanistic counterbalance to the economically driven model of education. In this sense, their indirect influence can be highly significant. (Elfert, 2013, 2016 In Dvořák, Holec and Dvořáková, 2018)



The international reports of these organizations serve as a significant indicator of educational quality. For example, the UNESCO report shows that the required level of preschool education and preparation for compulsory education has a number of weaknesses. In its updated report (last update: 20 April 2023) it identifies barriers related to ensuring access to quality preschool education. This includes, for example, a lack of systematic addressing of the needs and rights of families and their children. In many countries, there are no specific regulations and standards for this period. Where such regulations exist, they do not always establish the necessary mechanisms for quality assurance with a strong emphasis on results.

The lack of support for preschool education is especially evident in low-income countries, which allocate an average of only 2% of their budgets to preschool education—significantly below the 10% threshold proposed by UNESCO for 2030.

While the UNESCO report highlights progress in early childhood care in some countries, it continues to emphasize the need to strengthen the capacity of systems in this area.

For example:

Expanding and diversifying access by increasing investment and creating a legal framework for expanding early care and education services;

Improving quality and relevance through a curriculum framework with early learning aspects and an emphasis on preparing children for a smooth transition to school education with basic knowledge, skills and dispositions;

Positioning educators and caregivers in early childhood care in the role of a significant, professionally prepared and supported transformational force;

Establishing systems to monitor and evaluate overall child’s development and create conditions for effective and timely monitoring of programmes, their implementation in the context of the child’s developmental milestones. (Why early childhood care and education matters UNESCO, 2023)

In all the above aspects, the Czech Republic is showing a qualitative shift in preschool education.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is a major stakeholder in international education policy. For the purposes of unifying curriculum evaluation at international level, it has published *System conditions that enable optimal curriculum flexibility and autonomy* (OECD, 2024), which focuses on curriculum flexibility and autonomy as an important prerequisite for quality education.

## 1.2 Curriculum Flexibility and Autonomy for Preschool Education in the Czech Republic in the Past and Today in the OECD Context

Flexibility and autonomy create important conditions for curriculum transformation. The OECD (2024) takes a pragmatic approach to defining these concepts in order to create a common language that will enable global dialogue and mutual learning.

**Curriculum flexibility** refers to the degree of adaptability in a curriculum, allowing it to respond to changing educational contexts and the diverse needs of students, pupils, and children. It represents a comprehensive concept.

The OECD has identified five dimensions of curriculum flexibility.

1. Flexibility in learning goals: flexibility in the “*why*” of the curriculum, including aspirations, aims, purposes, objectives, and intended outcomes.
2. Flexibility in learning content: flexibility in the “*what*” of curriculum, including subjects, concepts, themes, topics and related competences/skills and contexts, and priorities and relationships between them.
3. Flexibility in educational sciences: flexibility in the “*how*” of curriculum, including teaching approaches, learning activities, grouping of students and choice of materials and resources.
4. Flexibility in evaluation: flexibility in the “*what*” and “*how*” in curriculum assessment, including standards and evaluation guidelines, and how evaluation of student learning, development, and progress toward learning goals is implemented.
5. Flexibility in teaching and learning time: flexibility in the “*how much*” and “*when*” of learning, including the duration of learning and the organization of learning time.

Figure 1 Dimensions of curriculum flexibility



Source: OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030

**Curricular autonomy** refers to the degree to which various stakeholders can exert control and make decisions regarding curriculum flexibility.

### 1.3 Introducing a New Type of Curriculum in the Czech Republic – 1990s

Until 1989, the preschool curriculum was determined by the state and implemented through educational work programmes. The programmes outlined the tasks, content, and age groups of children, with strict adherence required at both the school and class levels. The management of education was centralized. In care and education, sociocentric goals were implemented, which did not create conditions for personality-oriented education. Schools lacked the necessary autonomy.

After 1989, the education reform brought fundamental changes related to democratization in society. The education system moved to a decentralised management approach. Schools gained more autonomy. In 2001, a new preschool curriculum was introduced, featuring a completely different structure and concept. The approach to children shifted from a sociocentric model to a personality-oriented approach, emphasizing their interests and needs. This change is also linked to broader transformations in educational practices. The curriculum was piloted from 2001 to 2007 before becoming officially binding in 2007.

Regarding the dimensions of curriculum flexibility, it is evident that they are emphasized at both the state and school levels. The national curriculum establishes a binding framework for education, guiding schools in developing their own educational programs, which are then incorporated into the plans of individual classes. This represents an entirely new system of school and class planning, founded on high-quality educational diagnostics.

The curriculum no longer works with tasks, but with long-term goals, key competences, learning content in the form of educational offerings and expected outcomes. Outcomes –namely, what the child is expected to achieve – are defined for children by the end of preschool education. The content is formulated in the form of an educational offer in general terms. At school and class level, it is



already specified, focusing on themes from the child's life and considering the interests and needs of the particular group of children.

The new curriculum accepted trends in education, but lacked the essential thing, the readiness of teachers to implement it in practice. Our research investigations showed in particular the problems of working with goals with respect to the child's personality. Teachers lacked expertise not only in curriculum planning, but also in developmental psychology and educational diagnostics.

The Ministry of Education provided insufficient support, and training was undervalued, leading to a lack of motivation among teachers to implement a change. Possible risks were severely underestimated, i.e., misunderstanding the nature of the change, fear of making a mistake and uncertainty. The unreadiness of the reform had a long-term impact, as confirmed by our research and the annual reports of the Czech School Inspectorate (CSI).

**In 2008/2009**, the CSI evaluated 1,092 School Education Programmes (SEP) in kindergartens. It assessed the compliance of the document with the national curriculum (FSEP PE – Framework School Education Programme for Preschool Education) according to established, binding principles. Most of the schools had already created their programmes during the pilot, so they had some experience. The School Education Programmes for Preschool Education (SEP PE) varied widely in quality, both in form and content. Only 22% of the SEP PE evaluated were fully compliant with the requirements of FSEP PE. The Inspection identified systemic risks for preschool education, pointing out, among other things, problems with the implementation of the national curriculum with regard to school conditions. Other key observations related to the transition of children to primary education, where there was a lack of linkage between educational stages.

Planning of the SEP has gradually improved, but shortcomings persisted in specifying the goals in the context of educational diagnostics. Personality-oriented education and the associated individualization were insufficiently applied.

**In 2019/2020**, the school inspection focused on this issue in detail. It monitored the documentation of the development and personal learning progress of individual children using educational diagnostics. It confirmed persistent problems in the area of educational diagnostics. It found that the management and use of educational diagnostics is a problematic area in kindergartens. The main problem perceived in schools was the lack of knowledge of appropriate methodology and tools (33.1%), other reasons cited were time consumption, high numbers of children in classes and, surprisingly, the finding that 11.4% of headmasters did not consider educational diagnostics to be essential for the quality of education. Only 8.6% of the kindergartens visited were able to identify procedures for the child's development or for the correction or prevention of social or developmental problems.

It can be concluded that even ten years after the introduction of the new curriculum, teachers were still facing problems related to class-level planning, the application of individualization and the lack of support in educational diagnostics. The lack of support for early intervention in relation to the start of compulsory education was limited. Educators responsible for training kindergarten teachers responded to the situation by addressing and reinforcing problem areas.

#### 1.4 The Current Kindergarten

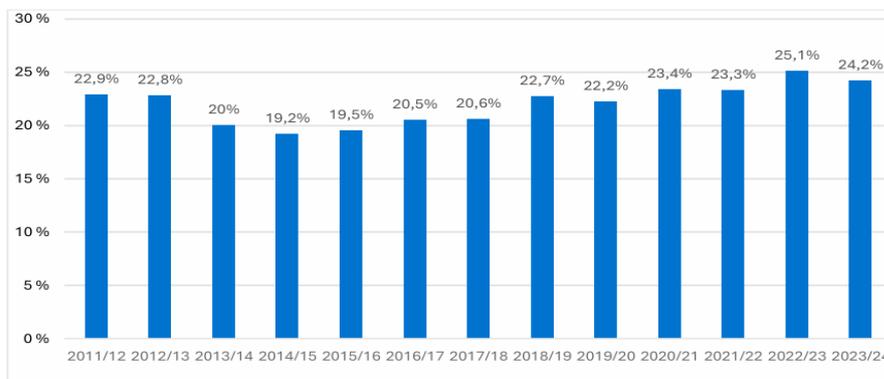
Currently, the Czech education system is undergoing major reform changes that also affect kindergartens and their curriculum. A revision was carried out, in which goal categories, key competences and partly content have been modified. The revision was carried out in cooperation with universities, secondary schools and kindergartens. The revised curriculum is to be piloted from 2025. Based on the analysis, the curriculum can be confirmed as responsive to current educational trends, with a strong emphasis on the dimensions set by the OECD.

Individualization, respecting the interests and needs of individual children, remains a priority in education. In this context, emphasis is placed on preparing children for the start of compulsory preschool education and ensuring a smooth transition to elementary school. The Czech Republic has



been struggling with a high number of postponements of compulsory school attendance for many years.

Chart 1 Elementary school 1st year – pupils over 6 years of age out of the population of 7-year-olds (%)



Source: Analysis of postponement of school attendance: MSMT-2536/2024-1

The rate of postponement of compulsory school attendance is well above the average of other European countries, reaching over 20% in the long term and even approaching 25% in recent years. This fact calls for a systematic and effective solution, as it represents a considerable burden not only for the children themselves, but also for the entire education system. Even the introduction of compulsory preschool education in 2017, enacted for children one year before the start of compulsory education, has not led to the necessary reduction in the rate of postponements of school attendance. (Postponements of compulsory school attendance. CSI, 2024).

The aim of introducing compulsory preschool attendance was to provide maximum training to children with an emphasis on children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and to ensure equal educational opportunities and a fair start in their educational career.

The 2021 OECD report gives the rate of preschool education in the Czech Republic, OECD, EU.

Figure 2 Participation in preschool education from the age of 3 compared to OECD and EU countries

	Czech Republic	OECD	EU
3-year-old	72.5	73.7	80.3
4-year-old	86.9	88	91.6
5-year-old	93.5	95.1	94.7

Source: Education at a Glance 2023 [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2023\\_e13bef63-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2023_e13bef63-en)

According to OECD statistics, the Czech Republic will be slightly below the OECD and EU average in the participation of 3–5-year-olds in pre-school education in 2021.

Despite the existence of a quality curriculum, the provision of quality training and education for future and current kindergarten teachers, it has not been possible to reduce postponements of the start of compulsory school attendance.

From our point of view, we see weaknesses in the lack of cooperation with families, elementary schools and psychological counselling centres. We see persistent limits in the existing system of educational diagnostics, where we have long pointed out that the existing system of records on children in many schools is ineffective and does not meet the needs of individualization. This fails to



identify and eliminate problems related to the child's readiness for school in a timely manner. There are a number of reasons for postponements that are often unrelated to school maturity. For example, parents' fear of their child's failure may reflect a lack of confidence in school. (Šmelová et al, 2022; Kvintová et al, 2022; Kvintová, et al. (2025)

The basis of the reform is not only a revised curriculum, improved preschool education quality, and well-documented child development records to be transferred from kindergartens to elementary schools, but also the maximum elimination of postponements of school attendance.

**Here, we ask the question: Are elementary grade teachers ready for this change?**

The elimination of postponement of school attendance represents a major intervention in the current education system, requiring closer cooperation between kindergartens and elementary schools, families, and, above all, the readiness of elementary grade teachers for entirely new conditions. This means classes that include school-ready children, developmentally immature children, children in inclusive education, gifted children, and others. Czech elementary school teachers are not accustomed to such class compositions.

The CSI interviews with teachers revealed that it is not the child who should be ready for school, but rather the school that should be ready for the child. The role of elementary schools, especially in the early stages of working with the child, should take into account natural differences in children's educational opportunities and performance and appropriately reflect them in the individualization of teaching by utilizing differentiated goals, forms, and methods. More than half of the surveyed teachers strongly agree with this opinion, while two-fifths of them somewhat agree. At the same time, however, the majority believe that differences in pupils' readiness cause significant issues in teaching.

Another upcoming change relates to grading on school report cards. The existing numerical grades are to be replaced with verbal assessments of the child. Verbal assessment for first graders was experimentally introduced in the 1990s but proved effective only for pupils with special educational needs. Teachers raised significant concerns about the time demands, the failure to meet children's expectations – *"I am looking forward to a top grade"* – but also the lack of acceptance from parents, which is linked to tradition in the Czech Republic. **Here too, the question arises: Is the educational and parental community ready for this change?**

## Conclusion

The forthcoming reform introduces positive changes to the quality of preschool education, but also raises a number of questions and uncertainties. Changes in educational trends are certainly important, but we must not overlook the readiness of all stakeholders in education to collaborate. We believe it is most important to approach the upcoming changes with the child's well-being and quality of life as the primary focus.

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