

THE IMPACTS OF THE ANTI-COVID MEASURES INTRODUCED IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SPAIN IN THE CONTEXT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

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.

COVID-19

is a highly infectious viral disease caused by coronavirus. The first known case appeared in December 2019. The first cases of Covid-19 in the Czech Republic were observed on 1 March 2020. This was followed by the declaration of the state of emergency. The Government approved a series of emergency anti-epidemic measures pursuant to the Pandemic Act. Nursery schools remained in normal operation during the first and second waves. This changed on 27 February 2021 when the presence of children in nursery schools and other schools was prohibited. Children in the last mandatory year of preschool education enrolled in distance education. Full-time education was first restored for children in the last year of preschool education and on 26 April for all children. The precondition for reopening was strict observance of hygiene rules. 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. 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.

METHODOLOGY

- The aim of the research is to 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.
- The research method is a qualitative text content analysis followed by open coding, formulation of analytical categories, comparison according to the principles 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 – different location in Europe. The second criterion was the management of the school education system. The final criterion was social – different culture and personality characteristics of the population.
- 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.
- The data source will include international and national documents relevant to the research problem.

INFORMATION	THE CZECH REPUBLIC	SPAIN	PRESCHOOL EDUCATION	THE CZECH REPUBLIC	SPAIN
SITUATED	South-Western Europe	Central Europe	AGE OF CHILDREN	first from 2 to habitually 6 let	1. cycle: 0-3 2. cycle: 3-6
CAPITAL	Prague	Madrid	MANDATORY PRESCHOOL EDUCATION	last year of preschool education	is not mandatory
AREA	78 866 km ²	505 944 km ²	CHILDREN IN CLASS	24 + 4 (exemptions)	3 years: 16 – 20 children 4, 5, 6 years: 25 children
POPULATION	10 707 839	47 100 396	EATING	In the nursery school, in the class, all together	in the school canteen, in the classroom, individually
DENSITY	136/km ²	91,2/km ²	CLASS	heterogeneous and homogeneous	homogeneous
GOVERNMENT	parliamentary republic	parliamentary constitutional monarchy	FOUNDER	state → regions, municipalities	state → autonomous communities
LAND MANAGEMENT	centralized	decentralized	PRESCHOOL MANAGEMENT	centralized	decentralized
ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICTS	14 regions (districts, municipalities)	17 autonomous communities a 2 autonomous cities	TEACHER QUALIFICATION	min. secondary with graduation certificate	min. tertiary with a bachelor's degree
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE POPULATION	flexibility, diligence, people orientation, inventiveness, conservative, reserved, they do not like new and unexplored things	very open, temperamental, communicative, energetic, verbally and non-verbally communication, they like entertainment and culinary experience			

RESULTS

Both countries were affected by three waves during which the numbers of infected people increased dramatically. Although both countries faced three waves, they came at different times. While the Czech Republic fought the first wave in October and November, it was the second wave for Spain. 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 number of people infected. During the first wave, both countries completely shut down all services and educational institutions, except nursery schools in the Czech Republic. At the beginning of the following school year, nursery schools in both countries were open under strict hygiene rules. In Spain, nursery schools remained 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 were 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. Although the state of emergency and some restrictions were managed centrally by the state, 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 and an effort to allow the parents of preschool children to go 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 at full capacity. 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 prevention of its spread. When the first wave started to subside, 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 and hospitalized as well as the basic reproduction number in both countries.

CONCLUSION

Both countries always responded very flexibly to the actual pandemic situation. A benefit of this comparison is the information about the reactivity of both countries 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 try to achieve the objectives of preschool education and develop children within the entire scope of their personalities despite the difficult conditions created 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 as little as possible by the restrictions. A benefit for future teachers will be a greater ability to 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. For example, focus more on online learning opportunities and select activities that are applicable in multiple settings.

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