



SUBJECTIVELY PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AT THE BEGINNING OF THEIR STUDIES

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Abstract/Izvleček The article investigates students' perception of the importance of education and its rationale at the beginning of their studies. Fifty-seven students from the bachelor's programme Teacher Training for Kindergarten from 2018/2019 to 2021/2022 participated. The sampling was based on convenience. A qualitative approach was used through open verbal statements transcribed into a text. The individual importance of education to students at the beginning of the first semester and their personal justifications for the importance of education were identified, representing several categories. We found the following dimensions for the categories of the meaning of education (personal goal category) and personal definition of education (categories: association with context; from individual to society; on the background of historical development; personality development and evolution; essence; mode of acquisition; value; through the lens of the present; Dionysian conception; general overview; confused definitions).

Pojmovanje pomena izobraževanja za študente ob začetku študija

Članek preučuje, kako študenti na začetku svojega študija pojmujejo in utemeljujejo pomen izobraževanja. V predstavljeni raziskavi, ki je potekala od 2018/2019 do 2021/2022, je sodelovalo 57 študentov dodiplomskega študijskega programa Predšolska vzgoja. Raziskava temelji na priročnem vzorčenju. Uporabljen je bil kvalitativni pristop, ustne izjave udeležencev so bile po glasovnem posnetku prepisane v besedilo. Na osnovi kodiranja besedil smo prepoznali dva sklopa, in sicer pomen izobraževanja (kategorija osebni cilji) in osebno opredelitev izobraževanja (kategorije: povezava s kontekstom; od posameznika k družbi; kontekst zgodovinskega razvoja; razvoj osebnosti in evolucija; bistvo; načini usvajanja; vrednote; skozi prizmo sedanjosti; Dionizovo pojmovanje; splošni pregled; dvoumne opredelitve).

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Introduction

In general, the core of education relates to the whole person. The term “educated person” expresses the quality of personality corresponding to the culture of a given epoch, where we assume that along with the acquisition of a system of specific information and skills, an educated person understands the relations between the knowledge he or she has created from the information and that he or she uses the acquired skills creatively in solving new tasks (Sak, Mareš, Nová, Richter and Saková, 2007).

Education also includes the acquisition of aesthetic and moral values, the formation of a certain attitude towards the world, society and oneself, which is reflected in the ability to think critically, in practical life views and actions (Skalková, 1999).

The European Commission in Brussels has emphasized its view that education is a key factor in a country’s development and that only quality education can increase economic performance and competitiveness in an open economy (Mejer, Turchetti, and Gere, 2011).

Nowadays, the term education is used, in a narrower sense, as the formally recognised results achieved during schooling and, in a broader sense, as the results obtained throughout life in all the environments in which an individual has been influenced by many factors.

Current social processes are characterized by significant, long-term tendencies, such as the pluralization of life styles and social relations, changes in the world due to new technologies and media (Doseděl, 2021), ecological problems (Moldan, 2003), changes in demographic development (CSU, 2019), consequences of migration (Kobeš, 2022), internalisation of living conditions (Berger and Luckmann, 1999), and changes in values and orientations (Skalková, 1999). Amid the changing social, economic, cultural, and political developments, the role, importance, and necessity of education for individuals and society is also changing (Průcha, 2005).

This paper presents findings about assessment of the meaning of education and its justification in students studying for a bachelor’s degree in Teacher Training for Kindergarten (TTK), which combines full-time education with distance education, at the time of their entry into the study programme.

Research on students in the first cycle of the Preschool Pedagogy study program is also taking place in other countries (Šindić, A., Barbarev, K., Gavriloski, M., and J. Lepičnik Vodopivec. (2021).

The following text refers only to teaching in a regular kindergarten. A mainstream kindergarten means an inclusive school, but not a school providing education for children with mental, physical, visual, or hearing impairments, severe speech impairments, severe developmental learning, behavioural disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism. These children are educated in the Czech Republic by a special kindergarten in accordance with Section 16(9) of the Education Act (MŠMT, 2022b).

Education of kindergarten teachers in the Czech Republic

To teach in a kindergarten in the Czech Republic, an individual must obtain a professional qualification in accordance with Section 6 of Act No. 563/2004 Sb., on pedagogical staff and on amendments to certain acts, through education in one of the following accredited study programmes: a bachelor's degree in TTK which lasts three years. The abbreviation of the degree awarded is the same as for all other bachelor's degree programmes, i.e., Bc., written before the name. The master's degree in "Pre-school Pedagogy" qualifies kindergarten teachers for the field of management, school inspection, professional methodological bodies, management of education departments of municipalities and regional education. The duration of the study programme is 2 years. The title abbreviation for the degree awarded is Mgr., which is written before the name, and the title Bc. is no longer stated (MŠMT, 2022a).

Another educational option for working as a teacher in kindergarten is to obtain a university degree in Pedagogy at the bachelor's and master's level. The law also provides for the possibility of obtaining a higher education degree in Primary School Teaching, where students are directly awarded a master's degree; or in either Education or Leisure Time Pedagogy at the bachelor's or master's level. In all three of these cases, it is necessary to subsequently obtain education in a continuing education programme run by a university and aimed at preparing kindergarten teachers. Graduates with a bachelor's or master's degree in Special Education can also join regular kindergartens as qualified teachers (MŠMT, 2022a).

The education offered by the master's degree in all these fields can be subsequently deepened by passing the rigorous (doctoral) procedure in the Pre-school Pedagogy programme and thus obtaining the PhDr. degree, which replaces the degree of Mgr. Kindergarten teachers can also obtain a third-level higher education degree in the Pedagogy doctoral programme. The duration of the studies is 3 to 4 years, and graduates receive a Ph.D. degree written after their name (MŠMT, 2022a).

For future kindergarten teachers, a higher vocational education at a higher vocational school, focusing on TTK, is sufficient. Here, the field of pre-school pedagogy is studied in parallel with extra-curricular pedagogy. It is also sufficient to study teacher training at a higher vocational school, but with subsequent education in a university-based, lifelong learning programme aimed at preparing kindergarten teachers. The length of study in both cases is 3 to 3.5 years. The abbreviation of the title awarded is Dis., written before the name (MŠMT, 2022a).

The most common education for kindergarten teachers is secondary education with a secondary school leaving exam aimed at preparing kindergarten teachers. The duration of the study is 4 years. It should be noted, however, that none of the secondary schools in the Czech Republic provides a non-mixed education. Most often, the education is focused on extra-curricular pedagogy in addition to pre-school pedagogy (MŠMT, 2022a).

Less often, graduates with a secondary school education focused on the preparation of tutors and with a subsequent examination that corresponds in content and form to the profile part of the secondary school leaving exam in a subject focused on pre-school education apply for jobs as kindergarten teachers (MŠMT, 2022a). Thus, education for kindergarten teaching can be obtained in the Czech Republic in several ways, but in terms of content in non-mixed form it can only be obtained by studying three levels: the degree of Teacher Training for Kindergarten, Pre-school Pedagogy and Pedagogy.

Suchodolski (2003) states that there are two groups of university learners. The first group enters their studies with the aim of obtaining a vocational education that will optimally prepare them for the desired occupation. The second group seeks an education because their goal is to satisfy their intellectual needs, which also translates into the goal of achieving the highest possible formal education. Only as a secondary reason does this group of learners cite preparation for a specific profession. Education at universities should also reflect the needs of its students.

If among the respondents there are representatives of both these subgroups, it is necessary to reflect on whether and how this can be projected into the curriculum to meet the educational needs of both groups. This is while ensuring the suitability of the course and the outcome of education in relation to the purpose for which the study programme is designed (Mužík, Löwenhöfferová, and Krpálek 2020). Education is carried out with the same objectives for all learners in an academic year, in a discipline, in a subject, with the same methods, students performing the same tasks, and the organisation and criteria for performance are the same. Only compulsory and elective courses provide some opportunity for personal development, but in the bachelor's degree they are again mainly professionally oriented.

Methodology

Aim

The main aim was to explore the “meaning of education” for learners currently in the first semester of their first year of the Bachelor of TTK and the rationale behind this meaning.

Research question

We have formulated the following research question: What do TTK students see as the importance of education and what is the rationale behind it?

Selection criteria

The selection criteria were: 1) obtaining a secondary education in kindergarten teaching; 2) studying in the first year of TTK, in a combined form of education; and 3) consent to a personal meeting. Simple, intentional selection was used as a method (Miovsky, 2006).

Research period

The investigation took place in the winter semesters of 2018/2019 to 2021/2022.

Participants

Eighty student respondents who met the specified criteria were contacted over the research period. However, owing to COVID-related restrictions in that period, several students could not meet and two dropped out.

The final sample consisted of fifty-seven female students with assigned labels from S1 to S57. The respondents come from all thirteen regions of the Czech Republic except the Ústí region.

Participant characteristics

The respondents all had the same initial formal education, i.e., secondary school TTK. However, it was obtained at different secondary schools in different regions of the country, so there might be individual differences. They had also acquired some pedagogical experience with the education of pre-school children. They had previously been influenced by various living environments, local and family traditions, study conditions and even certain specific distinctions. Therefore, there may be other peculiarities in each respondent's view of the importance of education, in addition to the characteristics mentioned by Suchodolski.

Result application

If the research yields relevant data, it is intended to be used in the reaccreditation of the bachelor's degree programme in TTK. The author of the text agrees with the eminent Czech educator Průcha: "All social practices, including the pedagogical ones, should be meaningful. People have always been interested in the results and practicality of education" (1996, 7), The data can also potentially be used to help students through their studies. Goetze points out that the service provided by universities should be linked to consultancy support (2000).

Methods and Procedure

The students were first informed about the research objectives and the reasons for data collection, then indicated the region of residence and responded to the following request: "Please state what "education" means to you. Justify why and communicate everything you want to communicate about education.

Data were obtained using the free-form method (McGuire and McGuire, 1981), verbally communicated by the respondents, conscious, individual (Hartl, Hartlová, 2015), personal, and subjective. The statements varied in length from 5 to 14 minutes and were related to the subject of the research. The respondents reflected, returned to what they had said, confirmed what they had said earlier, corrected themselves, added to it, or changed their statements.

The respondent's final definition on the importance of education before the end of the study is considered valid. The statements were recorded with respondents' knowledge and consent. The study was not initiated with predefined variables. The environment and psychosocial atmosphere for recording the statements were mutually assessed as relaxed.

Results and interpretation

The statements were carefully converted into written form and processed using a qualitative approach in a paradigmatic model. At the first stage in processing the statements, only those fragments in which the respondents commented on their education were abstracted from the statements. At the next coding stage, it was found that the statements did not always follow the assignment, but that the respondents gave (2) individual, subjective, personal definitions of education in addition to (1) the meaning of education to them. Parts of some statements also contained data fragments that coded (3) factors that influenced the meaning of education for the respondents, as well as coding fragments to reveal (4) changes in the meaning of education for the respondent. All these clusters of data fragments (Miovsky, 2006) relate to the research question. At the next stage, coding within each cluster was performed. Recurrent codes within each cluster were grouped into categories, for which custom labels were used (Švaříček and Šedřová, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1999). Subsequently, subcategories within some categories were also distinguished by coding.

This paper presents the results of coding the data fragments that produced Cluster (1), i.e., the meaning of education for each student as reported by the students in their statements and Cluster (2), i.e., the identified individual, subjective, personal definitions of education reported by each student. These indirectly reveal the importance of education for female students. One of the characteristic fragments is always given as an example, with the label in brackets.

Judging by the glosses that some the respondents uttered before focusing on the answer, the assignment was not easy for some:

"A broad term." (S1); *"It's a difficult question for me"* (S11).

One respondent talked about definition, although the assignment did not ask for a definition: *"It doesn't have just one definition in my dictionary"* (S23).

Even the data fragment, which was included in the thematic Cluster (1) personal importance of education for the respondents, the respondent started with an introductory statement: *“A word that probably has a completely different meaning for everyone”* (S52).

The thematic cluster contains the category personal goal, in which further extensions of the respondents' thoughts emerged, presenting the sub-categories of (a) “future orientation”, where education for the respondent represents the possibility of pursuing a career as a qualified professional: *“For me, education means fulfilling my goal of becoming a good teacher and being able to pursue this profession”* (S41).

“My goal is to get the best education...”, and the respondent justifies her goal in two levels: *“for the reason that (1) I have many opportunities to do what I enjoy, (2) which I think is one of the most important things in life”* (S49).

The next sub-category identified is (b) already “currently fulfilled goal,” the fulfilled wish of the student to become a university student: *“My desire was pushed by the goal of getting into university”* (S15).

In the other data fragments from the statements, one can identify messages corresponding to the question of what education is, rather than messages to the task asked in the research. After coding, a cluster of (2) individual, subjective personal definitions of education were created from the data fragments. The clusters carry other distinctive ideas and form the following categories:

- a) In the fragment, *“The word education first evokes in me that it is an education certificate, secondary school diploma, diploma from a university, a certificate, etc., i.e., a paper certificate that one obtains after successfully completing a study programme”*, the association of education with context can be identified. And the respondent immediately justifies her statement: *“But only because the word education in this sense is often used in various forms in offices, on CVs, etc.”* (S13).

Another respondent states: *“It evokes in me the following concepts: school, family, society, individual, play, tradition, process, levels of education, information, individual difference, universal access and education”* (S43).

Respondents (S17, S22, S14) first said “school” and then continued individually. For example. *“It cannot be limited to the attainment of certain levels”* (S14).

- b) Another category identified by coding is the delineation of education from the individual to the society: *“It is a factor of human uniqueness, of difference,*

which should go hand in hand with respect, education and the resulting effective functioning of society (S33).

- c) Some definitions of education created a category on the background of historical development: *“It influences the future of the individual and society, and, at the same time, it is rooted in our past, in our traditions,”* and one of them linked her statement to her existing knowledge: *“And the Czech nation can also boast of a solid and excellent foundation of pedagogy”* (S20).

At the same time, one respondent asked the question: *“But how was it in those days when schools were just teaching memorisation without sense and without understanding? They couldn’t have produced educated people, could they? And she immediately answered, giving her own explanation: “Or maybe they were just walking books, sort of the precursor to search engines”* (S23).

- d) More respondents gave definitions of education which, after coding, formed the category of personality development and growth:

“It’s the little things we learn throughout our lives, from walking to, for example, dealing with crisis situations” (S9).

“A broad term, because it is connected with our whole life, from childhood to old age” (S5).

“The end point where, when you stop, you should know everything and always know how to do things right” (S32).

“Something I get at school, but also from birth, when my parents taught me to speak or walk, manners, customs and traditions of our family, and many other useful things” (S39).

“Something that is achieved gradually” (S47).

“The sum total of all that a man is capable of learning in his lifetime” (S18).

“The performance of prior learning” (S29).

“A collection of information gathered from years spent in educational institutions” (S2).

The core definitions, which are distinct, form further subcategories: “little things,” “broad concept,” “everything,” “something,” “sum of everything,” “performance of prior learning”, and “set of information”.

In the statements within this category, in addition to the association of the definition of education with lifelong development and personal development, some professional terms used by the respondents, acquired in previous pedagogical education, can also be identified at the declarative level, e.g., skills, abilities,

knowledge, values, experience, and educational outcome, which thus form further subcategories:

“All the experience and knowledge gained in life” (S45).

“A set of abilities and skills that a person should possess in order to be able to continue to shape himself/ herself and move forward in his/ her development” (S16).

“The sum total of the knowledge we acquire during our lives” (S28).

“The set of all the skills and abilities that a person acquires over the course of his or her lifetime” (S7).

This category contains the most fragments of utterances and evokes a link to previous secondary education.

- e) Statements attempting to capture the essence of education were also coded in this cluster. Some statements express the essence in the subcategory “nonspecific”: “Learning something new” (S11). Others in the subcategory “pedagogical categories” and with a link to the subcategory “quantity”:

“A wide range of knowledge and skills” (S26).

“The sum of certain knowledge” (S46).

“A set of acquired knowledge, skills and abilities to learn something, activities, interests” (S19), (S30), (S40), (S3). This statement fragment was identical in content for the above respondents.

In other fragments, the essence relates to the subcategory “quality”:

“The most perfect form of knowledge or quality of man” (S37).

“For me, it means a body of information and knowledge that I can pass on and that enhances the quality of my life and the lives of my children” (S53).

Lopez and Wang (1998) consider the quality and quantity of education to be equally important, from the perspective of both the individual and society.

Moreover, the association of the definition of education with work experience and field of study can be identified in the statements, although a fragment of the respondent’s statement (S6) also contains the subcategory “nonspecific”.

“To find out something and then put it into practice” (S6).

“Improving oneself in the field” (S12).

“Knowledge in a particular field” (S52).

In contrast to the definition of education under (d), in these statements, education is not related to the development of the individual, or to life. It is only defined.

- f) The subcategory “nonspecific” can also be encountered in the category comprising the method of acquisition, namely in the fragment of the utterance: “*Something I can gain through experience, self-development and, of course, studying*” (S8). In the next fragment, the subcategory “effort, striving” can be identified:

“*We have to make an effort to get it*” (S3). In contrast, in the statement fragment,

“*In this day and age of the Internet, it’s not that difficult to get an education*” (S31), this subcategory is devalued to some extent.

The latter part of the data fragment, in which the category was coded, raises the question of what the respondent meant—whether she meant online education or had the idea of getting an education outside of educational institutions.

- g) The education definition cluster further coded the value category, which was identified, for example, in the following fragments of statements:

“*The only value we can acquire and develop is our passion and hard work*” (S10).

“*It has a priceless value*” (S25).

“*It opens a lot of new doors, and it’s one of the most important values for me*” (S48).

“*Added value to life*” (S34).

“*An important value for me*” (S1).

“*The experiences and values that I have accumulated in my life through any educational institution or through any targeted influence on my person*” (S35).

And in a fragment of the statement: “*No one can take my education away from me in any way*” (S55), the subcategory “certainty of value” can be identified.

In the following statement fragments, the subcategory “indirect expression of value” is represented: “*The complement of an intelligent man*” (S51).

“*Privilege*” (S38).

A sub-category of value can also be identified, namely “freedom”: “*Among other things, I see [education] as freedom*” (S57).

- h) The definition of education as a value influenced by age was also identified: “*Acquiring information, whether for its practical usefulness or just to brag to your friends that you know more than they do*” (S49).

Respondent (S4) mentioned the “social background”: “*Everyone in the world should be able to achieve the quality education that is within their reach.*”

The OECD states that education is the largest producer of value, which today constitutes the basis of human capital (2001). It is thus gratifying that the respondents view education as a value.

The definition of education that created the category from the perspective of the present can be found, for example, in the following statement fragments:

“A necessity at the moment” (S56), (S24).

“A lifelong necessity” (S 54).

“A ticket to the whole life” (S21).

“An important part of our lives” (S54).

“Lots of academic titles from certified specialists to doctors, associate professors or professors and endless lying-in books and tedious learning of many concepts” (S50).

“Long run” (S42).

“An important part of life” (S36).

One part of the statement focused on education today: *“An education system that allows us to learn, thereby ensuring one of the most basic human rights.”*

However, apart from the true idea of the provision of human rights by education, no other view of education can be identified in the statement on the definition of education, nor can any other view of education be identified. However, the view of the present can be identified.

- i) In the statement fragments defining education, we can also identify the category of the Dionysian conception of education:

“It’s what you enjoy and what you want to do in life” (S44); *“The basis for material comfort, which most often increases with education”* (S24).

“The key to achieving your goals and dreams” (S27).

- j) Education was also defined as a general overview category, as a phenomenon enabling the respondent to understand social and political events in context, which allows her to be civically responsible, and to make choices in elections:

“I care about having a general overview so I can responsibly carry out my civic duties” (S50).

“...is also related to the overall overview of social events and the understanding of events in context” (S27).

“Thanks to the basics of social sciences, we should be able to understand how our country works. Then we don't have to expect miracles after the elections, since we already knew beforehand which of the pre-election promises were achievable and which were not. And we could vote accordingly” (S53).

- k) Although the respondents had acquired, as indicated, a basic declarative knowledge in the discipline of pedagogy during their secondary school studies, confusion between the concepts of education and the process of education was identified in some statements: *“A lifetime journey”* (S56).

“A journey lasting a lifetime” (S15).

“We learn throughout our lives” (S31).

“A person's willingness to learn” (S3).

- l) As a separate category of acquired, the fragments of utterances were identified as being decoded as the respondent already knew them from the literature:

“...the result of all processes and activities aimed at the cultivation of man” (S14).

“...can be acquired consciously, for example, at school, in various courses or lessons, by self-study, or unconsciously in everyday activities” (S44).

“If an individual goes through the process of schooling, which has a system, certain conditions, and a goal, that is, a kind of expected outcome, he can reach certain levels, primary, secondary, higher. He can choose the direction, the specification of his secondary and higher education” (S38).

These respondents have already constructed some declarative pedagogical knowledge from previous studies.

Discussion

In general, for those students who have entered higher education, education will indeed be important, since they could pursue the profession of kindergarten teacher with only a secondary education, that they will be aware of the importance of education at the beginning of their studies, and by being aware of the importance of education, they will be able to communicate it. Yet the importance of education was found to be only as a personal goal. Other statement fragments carried definitions of education in which the meaning of education could sometimes be identified only indirectly.

Overall, the results do not even identify two groups within the importance of education for the respondents, i.e., education in relation to the work for which the respondents are being trained and the understanding of education as personal development.

With these results as a starting point, it would be useful to repeat the research at the end of the respondents' studies to compare how and in what ways the meaning of education has changed for them during their studies. And with the question of whether and what development the meaning fragments will undergo in terms of clusters, what transformation the categories and subcategories within them will undergo, and whether, once again, definitions of education will prevail over its personal meaning in the statements.

After World War II, similar historical developments occurred in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, as these countries are the closest geographical neighbours with similar educational and pedagogical foundations. Hence, it would be interesting and useful, in collaboration with colleagues in Poland and Slovakia, to conduct a cross-national comparative study to theoretically elaborate the anchoring requirements for the education of kindergarten teachers in each of these countries.

Research limitations

The research involved learners from all but one of the thirteen regions of the Czech Republic, according to the set criteria. However, society is evolving, the political, social, and especially economic situation is changing, and the opinions and attitudes of the students are changing. Given that, the results are representative of the period in which the research was conducted.

Conclusions

Education for kindergarten teaching can be obtained in the Czech Republic in several ways, but in non-mixed form it can only be obtained by studying three levels, Bachelor, Master and Doctoral, namely the fields of Teacher Training for Kindergarten, Pre-school Pedagogy and Pedagogy.

In this paper, fragments of the respondents' statements are presented, from which a cluster was formed based on thematic relatedness, telling (1) about the importance of education for these female students. This cluster of utterance fragments contains the category "personal goal," for which the subcategories "future orientation" and "already fulfilled goal in the present" were identified. It contains a personal value, i.e., to get a quality education.

Most of the statements, however, were not about the importance of education for themselves, but the respondents gave individual, subjective, personal (2) definitions of education in the following categories: association of education with context; from individual to society; on the background of historical development; through personal development and evolution; nature of education; method of acquisition; value; from the perspective of the present; general overview; learned definitions. Another category is the definition of education in the sense of the Dionysian conception of life as related to the education. Some definitions of education confuse the concepts of education and the process of learning; and the category of acquired has been identified as a declared, learned definition. There was also some glossing of the assignment and a statement about the definition of education. According to the ideas that further specified them, some of the categories defining education were coded into subcategories. In this cluster of utterance fragments, a rationale for the personal significance of education could be indirectly identified.

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