

# Choosing the right kindergarten: Parents' reasoning about their ECEC choices in the context of the diversification of ECEC programs<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* The sphere of early childhood education care (ECEC) in the Czech Republic has diversified enormously in the last decade. The article describes this diversification process and, drawing on focus group data, analyses parents' choices within this diversified realm. Based on the parents' selection criteria (significantly influenced by constraints and opportunities relating to social background or family status), it identifies four parental groups: pedagogical approach-centered, child-centered, facility-centered and (constrained) non-selective. The issues of ECEC diversification and parental choice are then discussed in light of Annette Lareau's classed cultural logics of child rearing and the potential implications for the reproduction and reinforcement of social inequalities.

*Key words:* early childhood education and care, choice, social reproduction, social inequalities, the Czech Republic.

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## Introduction

Drawing on focus groups with parents using early childhood education and care (ECEC) facilities, this article analyzes parents' reflections on their kindergarten choice.<sup>2</sup> Special attention is paid to the different (often implicit) parental conceptions of what is "the right" ECEC and the role of the adults and children involved in making that choice. Parents usually want the best for their children; however, their definitions of "best" differ significantly and not all parents are able to achieve what they consider best. What is more, not all parents select an ECEC facility based on their concept of what is "best for children". While some parents rely on convenience, others expend enormous energy in choosing a particular ECEC facility. The process of signing up a child to ECEC is informed by conditions such as location, availability of public transport, financial resources. It is also habitually situated and parents base their assessments of the quality of education and care provided by a particular facility on different conceptions of children's needs and the most appropriate approach to them.

In Czechia, the issue of parental choice has gained in importance due to the current diversification of education options. Over the last decade, two key trends have been important in shaping the Czech ECEC system and have led to an unprecedented range of ECEC services on offer.

Firstly, the 2004 school reform provided the head teachers of public kindergartens (for children aged 3-6) with the considerable autonomy to create their own education programs as part of the compulsory central Framework Education Program for Preschool Education. This enabled the internal diversification of the public ECEC system.

Secondly, the significant increase in the birth rate was not accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number of public kindergarten places, but was addressed by encouraging the establishment of private services and hence support for a market based solution.

As a result, there has been diversification in access to care, educational content and the provision of activities, especially in metropolitan areas. As this context determines the limits of parental choice, in the first part of our

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms early childhood education and care (ECEC) facility and kindergarten interchangeably to mean facilities where education and care is provided on a regular basis to children who have not yet reached school age (6 years).

analysis we will describe the current state and extent of diversification. Our analysis is based on data on ECEC demand, admission procedures, fees and education programs at private and public preschool facilities.

Recent studies have shown that unequal opportunities to secure the most desirable option and the range of educational options at various levels of the system have led to stratifying effects (Ball, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2006). It has also been argued that stratification in education begins at the preschool level (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993) and that the education and care provided has a significant early impact on a child's life opportunities (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; Ramey & Ramey, 2004). In this article, we refer to a long tradition of research and theories stressing the fact that education systems and institutions enable the reproduction of social inequalities (see Bernstein, 1975; Blau & Duncan, 1967; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Collins, 1979; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Lipset & Zetterberg, 1959; Willis, 1977). We focus our analysis on parents' conceptions of children's needs and their perception of what is "the right" choice. We discuss the class dimensions of the emerging patterns and what they mean in relation to the current diversification of preschool education. In doing so, we turn our attention to an issue which has not been widely considered in the Czech Republic: the potential reinforcement of social divisions through the increasing need for parental choices and strategies within the diversifying public/private (market) system of preschool education and care.

## Methodology

The analysis draws on three different types of data: 1) statistics on the number of applications and available places in public kindergartens in Brno from an official website [www.zapisdoms.brno.cz](http://www.zapisdoms.brno.cz), 2) a telephone survey of private ECEC facilities in Brno (May 2016) ascertaining the various pedagogical approaches, facility capacity and prices and 3) four focus-group interviews with parents from different social backgrounds (conducted in 2016) who had a child attending a public or private ECEC facility.

Focus groups bring together a group of people who share a common experience and common background on a given issue (e.g. Gamson, 2002; Myers, 1998; Wilkinson 1998), which in our case was the experience of choosing an ECEC facility in Brno. The quasi-natural social situation of conversing with people who have a similar experience stimulates spontaneous comments and reduces the interviewee tendency to respond to the anticipated expectations of the interviewer.

**Table 1** List of focus group participants

| <b>name of parent</b> | <b>ECEC (and trajectory)</b>                    | <b>No. of children (in ECEC)</b> | <b>level of education</b> | <b>profession</b>              | <b>subjective social class</b> |
|-----------------------|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alena                 | private (waiting for a public place)            | 1 (1)                            | doctoral                  | researcher                     | lower-middle class             |
| Alice                 | private (waiting for a particular public place) | 2 (2)                            | doctoral                  | academic                       | lower-middle class             |
| Anna                  | private (trying to find another ideal one)      | 2 (1)                            | master's                  | lawyer                         | did not respond                |
| Antonín               | private   | 2 (2)                            | master's                  | analyst                        | upper-middle class             |
| Bára                  | public  | 2 (1)                            | master's                  | psychologist                   | did not respond                |
| Beata                 | public  | 3 (1)                            | master's                  | project manager                | lower-middle class             |
| Bert                  | public (waiting for a private place)            | 2 (2)                            | master's                  | technologist                   | upper-middle class             |
| Běta                  | public (waiting for a particular public place)  | 1 (1)                            | master's                  | sales assistant                | lower-middle class             |
| Cecilie               | public  | 3 (2)                            | master's                  | lawyer                         | lower-middle class             |
| Celestina             | private   | 2 (1)                            | master's                  | international customer support | lower-middle class             |
| Clara                 | private (now switching to public)               | 1 (1)                            | doctoral                  | academic                       | upper-middle class             |

|          |   |       |                           |                         |                    |
|----------|---|-------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Dana     | public  | 2 (1) | lower secondary education | cleaner                 | lower-middle class |
| Daisy    | public  | 1 (1) | secondary education       | product manager         | lower-middle class |
| Darina   | public  | 1 (1) | secondary education       | administrative worker   | lower-middle class |
| Dominika | public (switching to another public facility) | 2 (1) | master's                  | head of social services | lower-middle class |

In the following section, we draw on these data sources to examine the diversification of ECEC facilities over the last few years. We also look at the implications for parents choosing an ECEC facility and consider their selection process in light of their different ideas about ECEC and their children's needs, especially regarding the relationship between the ECEC institution, the teachers and the children attending. Finally, we discuss the potential implications of the patterns identified for the reproduction and reinforcement of social inequalities.

## Local Context and Theoretical Framework

Under the state socialist regime in Czechoslovakia, public care and education was provided to the vast majority of children aged 3 years and older. This continued once the regime fell in 1989. In the 1990s, there was a large fall in the annual birth rate (Sobotka et al., 2008), which led, together with the extended paid parental leave, to the closure of a number of public facilities. Although the birth rate began increasing in the early 2000s (Sobotka et al., 2008), the capacity of public childcare facilities has not risen correspondingly.

At the time of our focus group interviews, municipalities were obliged to provide places for children reaching the obligatory school age the following year, but provision of places for younger children was subject to the municipality's discretion. For example, in 2009 to 2012, Brno municipality's aim was to provide places for all children aged 4-6 years, but only for about 10-

20% of 3-year-olds (OŠMT 2010). Hence, preference is given to children of preschool age. According to the municipality's data, approximately 38% of applications were not accepted in 2016 (Mateřské školy Brno, 2016).

For parents, the threshold of 3 years of age is parental leave. Until the child reaches 3 years of age, employers are obliged to offer parents returning to work a position corresponding to their qualifications. Thus, parents make greater efforts to find a place for their child as the threshold nears.

The current capacity limits are being compensated for by the establishment of private facilities.<sup>3</sup> The first private institutions began to emerge after the fall of the socialist regime in 1989, but it is only recently that they have started to expand. In Brno, as our data from the telephone interviews indicate, more than half (approximately 55%) of the current private ECEC facilities have been established during the last five years.<sup>4</sup> While the public system provides care that is widely financially accessible, the services offered by the private facilities are unaffordable for a high proportion of the population (more detailed data will be discussed below). Besides this stratification related to access, the diversification also concerns the quality of the education and care. Apart from the conventional markers of quality such as child-to-carer ratios, staff training or facilities available, the institutions differ substantially in style, ethos and pedagogy. While most public kindergartens do not explicitly characterize themselves in terms of their pedagogical approaches, many of the private kindergartens do.

Parents have different notions of quality (in the broadest meaning of the term) and their views are partially shaped by their structural location, among other things. As Vincent and Ball (2006) show, besides the organization of the setting, the structure of the day and the activities provided, middle-class parents pay attention to pedagogical style and ethos (more than working-class parents do). Vincent and Ball follow Bernstein (2004), who argues that even different middle-class fractions have different preferences for particular pedagogies. As Streib (2008) notes, we can also conceive of a "class dimension" in the pedagogies and practices of various childcare institutions. She uses the concept of the "hidden curriculum" in this relation and suggests that different institutions lead children to internalize differential values, attitudes, skills and images of who they might become.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Czech Republic, other possible solutions such as regular individual paid care are not frequent.

<sup>4</sup> These facilities are established either within the framework of the two types of trades related to childcare, or, in the case of non-profit facilities, as "Childcare Groups".

As Ball (2003) and Vincent and Ball (2006) show, the diversification of education options at various levels of the system and the choice available encourage middle-class parents to place their children in what are considered the most exclusive educational institutions. While it is atypical for working-class parents to engage intensively in choosing a preschool place<sup>5</sup>, middle-class parents tend to show personal initiative, as Ball (2003) notes. They exhibit confidence in their contact with educational institutions (being in a position of advantage), but at the same time, education choices involve a great deal of uncertainty for them. This uncertainty, or even anxiety, is related to the perceived importance of education for their children's future. To ensure their child's success, and to maintain or shift the borders of class, middle-class parents deploy various forms of capital and family resources (see also Reay, 2000; Vincent & Ball, 2001).

The idea that class-based parental perceptions of the role formal education plays in children's lives and of the dissimilar ways in which groups with a different socioeconomic status relate to educational institutions can be further developed through the findings of Annette Lareau (2011). This is despite the fact her observations concentrated on families with children already attending school (9 and 10 year olds). Lareau, focusing on the more general perspective of class differences in childrearing, identified two distinct "cultural logics" structuring the organization of daily life, language use, and interactions between families and institutions. She argued that middle-class parents engage in a process of "concerted cultivation", whereas their working-class counterparts view a child's development as akin to "natural growth". The logic of the former emphasizes the importance of deliberately stimulating the child's development and fostering their cognitive and social skills. This means that parents bear responsibility for developing their children's educational interests and that they play an active role in their schooling, looking for the best solutions. In practice, this often means that middle-class children have less control over their time and how they spend it. Working class parents, by contrast, act on the assumption that their child's development occurs spontaneously. Hence, they see no need for deliberate stimulation and strategic support. Their main focus is on providing their children with sufficient comfort and so accept the existing and available solutions to education and care. For the children, this often means having more control over their free time and how they spend it.

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<sup>5</sup> This relative inactivity may reflect the limited scope of options available to them, as well as habitual dispositions related to their socio-economic background.

It is therefore not only the parents' preference for a certain childcare facility or specific pedagogy, but also the underlying conceptualization of the children's needs and child and adult roles in childrearing and care which potentially shape their ideas on early childhood education and care. Each of these aspects seems to be embedded in the parent's habitual dispositions which reflect their socio-economic background.

## The Growing Differences in Programs and Services

The diversification has followed two main lines. On the one hand, within the system there is differentiation in the pedagogical approaches and in the programs, with the number of private ECEC facilities promoting a distinctive pedagogical approach increasing substantially examples are Montessori or Waldorf pedagogy and forest kindergartens. On the other hand, there is a growing group of private facilities offering "unlabeled" early childhood education and care. The education and care program they provide is basically related to the Framework Education Program for Preschool Education (which guides public kindergartens) and is enhanced through additional activities such as early language training, specific talent support, special sports activities, handicrafts, music, and so on. In some cases, the distinctions between these two groups are rather blurred as some of these facilities also include elements of distinctive pedagogical approaches in their programs (e.g. Montessori materials), although they do not use them systematically. Table 2 provides an overview of the quantitative diversification in Brno.

**Table 2** Quantitative diversification of ECEC facilities in Brno

|                       | <b>Number of facilities</b> | <b>Available places per day</b> | <b>Age group accepted</b> | <b>Costs – CZK monthly full-time fee (without meals)</b> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Public facilities     | 136                         | 11,407                          | 3 (2.5)-7                 | 300-800  |
| Private facilities    | 109                         | approx. 2,600                   | 0.5-7                     | 1,000-17,800   |
| Montessori facilities | 11                          | approx. 200                     | 1-7                       | 1,300-9,240  |
| Forest kindergartens  | 6                           | 128                             | 3-7                       | 4,000-6,000  |

These pedagogical approaches have become more prominent in the diversification process and differ in important ways in the key ECEC ideas they represent. A central difference is the way in which they conceptualize children's play and development, as well as the role of children and adults in ECEC. Both Montessori facilities and forest kindergartens with a Waldorf-inspired pedagogical program place great emphasis on supporting children



in their free and self-initiated development. Both approaches presume that children have an innate capacity to learn and to educate themselves within an environment that allows them to work independently. Hence they allow for a high degree of play directed and initiated by the children themselves. Within this, the role of the adult is to carefully guide and observe the child's developments and needs and to react to them accordingly (Miller & Pound, 2011, 74-80, 88-92, 138-142).

The unlabeled ECEC facilities in Brno are very heterogeneous and employ elements from a wide range of different pedagogical approaches, but they do not use them as a "label". Instead they promote additional services and activities such as early language training, special sports activities, handicrafts, music, specific talent support and brain-efficiency training. The most frequently provided type of skills training, offered by half the private ECEC facilities in Brno for all age groups, is basic foreign language skills (English is most important and dominates). The fees charged by these facilities (for full-time care, 5 days a week, 8 hours a day) differ substantially and range from 3,500 CZK to 17,800 CZK per month, depending on the form of language course offered. The costliest facilities are those where the whole program is provided in English. The majority of facilities offer "English lessons" on a regular basis (e.g. once or several times a week), taught both by native and non-native speakers (e.g. English language students). This activity is usually not presented as being related to a specific ECEC approach, but there is a presumption that such early stimulation supports the further development of the child's abilities.

The variety of ECEC institutions present parents with a wide range of possibilities from which to choose a facility that corresponds to their own perceptions and ideas as well as to their organizational needs (e.g. the age of the child to be cared for, opening hours, etc.). At the same time, the range of (market-based) choices that is actually available to parents is highly dependent on their views of the ECEC system and on their having the opportunity and need to choose. Other factors include the willingness and ability to research the existing options (there is currently no central register of private facilities in Brno) and to evaluate them according to their quality criteria (as private ECEC facilities may function within different legislative frameworks which pay little attention to the quality of provided care). Furthermore, some of the facilities with a distinctive pedagogical approach expect families to educate their children at home using the same approach (Montessori, Waldorf) and use this in their selection criteria as they have limited places. Additionally, the fees may limit the choices available. Hence to fully utilize the

range of private facilities, parents have to make use of their cultural and financial capital.

These aspects are usually seen as typical of the private ECEC market, and private diversification is therefore often associated with exclusivity and unequal access. Public facilities, on the other hand, differ. Nonetheless, our data on the number of applications to and places offered by public kindergartens in Brno suggest that variety also exists within the public system. The number of applications per public kindergarten place differs substantially in Brno, ranging from two to ten applications per place. This suggests that there are important differences in parental perceptions of the public kindergartens and the quality of them. Public ECEC facilities are also allowed to set their own individual programs and priorities, within the common Framework Education Program for Preschool Education (emphasizing a healthy lifestyle, ecological thinking, a respectful and democratic approach towards children, etc.). In this sense, the public system – usually associated with uniformity – also offers a degree of choice that may correspond to parents' ideas about ECEC.<sup>6</sup> The extent to which this potential choice plays a role in the parents' selection of public ECEC has to be further explored through qualitative research methods, in this case through focus groups.

## **Parents' Perceptions of the ECEC System and their Choices**

Our analysis draws on data from four focus groups. It suggests that the basic criteria that distinguish the various parental approaches to selecting ECEC facilities (both private and public) are the extent to which parents value and take the opportunity to choose a facility based on their ideas, and the priorities and values they attribute to early childhood education and care. The parents we interviewed not only had differing perceptions of ECEC and the adult and child roles within it and the public-private system of preschool education in the Czech Republic, but these perceptions were also important in the decision making (although external factors or limits could overshadow). We found they had different concepts of quality and related criteria for selecting the “right” ECEC facility and different strategies for successfully obtaining a place for their child, which we will discuss in the following section.

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<sup>6</sup> The choice has been limited by the introduction of kindergarten districts in relation to the compulsory kindergarten year. We will comment on this in more detail in the conclusions of the article.

## **Nourishing the Child's Individuality – Valuing Needs and Potential**

The first group we identified in our focus group data comprised parents who took full advantage of being able to select “their” facility. These parents familiarized themselves with the (different) pedagogical approaches and made deliberate choices in relation to the approach they perceived as best for their children. Antonín, for example, explored Montessori pedagogy for some time before he and his wife decided on an ECEC facility. They attended courses and a parent-child Montessori program with their daughter. Based on their experiences they wanted to continue with the approach and so were looking for an ECEC facility that would allow them to do that.

The facility Antonín chose adopted a respectful approach towards the children and emphasized outdoor activity. Antonín also welcomed the existence of a community of parents who became friends and helped each other, for example, with picking up the children after school. This was also promoted by the ECEC facility, which required the parents to participate in the educational meetings and to help maintain the garden and classroom.

Like Antonín, Anna was also very interested in distinctive pedagogical approaches. At the time her child attended an employer-financed facility which had a Waldorf and Montessori trained teacher. However, the family were looking for a new facility, as her son was becoming by far the oldest child in the class. She mentioned that she was “envious” of the fact Antonín’s children were attending the Montessori kindergarten and that she was on the waiting list for a Waldorf facility. For her the constraint was not financial, but the high demand for ECEC facilities with particular pedagogical approaches. At the same time, it was important for her to be sure she had found the “right” kindergarten (with the appropriate pedagogical approach) before changing.

For Antonín and Anna, the facility’s pedagogical approach was the main selection and quality criterion. The pedagogical approach frames and sets the relationship between the institution, teacher and child. Their choice of pedagogical approach determined both the education program and the position and role of the child and teacher within the ECEC facility (described above). Hence, they had a pedagogy-centered concept of quality and their strategy was to find a private facility which would provide such a program. While for Antonín, the choice of ECEC facility was more the result of his and his partner’s engagement with the Montessori approach (they had already

met some of the teachers and passed the required courses), Anna talked about the demanding admission process to the Waldorf facility.

Similarly to Antonín and Anna, Alice, Dominika, Cecilie, Daisy, Clara and Celestina also put a lot of time and effort into finding the “right” ECEC facility and familiarized themselves with different forms of pedagogical knowledge so they could make an informed decision – for example Clara mentioned she had done extensive internet research scrutinizing the web presentations of various ECEC facilities.

While for the pedagogical approach-centered group (Antonín and Anna), the relationship between the ECEC institution, teachers and children was predefined by the pedagogical approach, this second group of respondents tended to evaluate this relationship based on a variety of ideas, priorities and values related to the provision of ECEC. The relationship between the institution, its teachers and children was a central criterion for choosing the ECEC facility and the parents had a clear idea of how the facility should be run in order to satisfy their children: Alice, Dominika and Celestina preferred a respectful approach to both parents and children, and together with the facility’s atmosphere this was valued even more importantly than the facility’s educational content. For example, as Celestina puts it:

*I’m not at all interested in what kind of exercise they do, if they learn to draw or sing or play the recorder. I don’t care which activities of this kind they do. I’m not concerned about English classes, nor goal-directed education. My emphasis is on the kids’ well-being; I need them to look forward to being at the kindergarten.*

Cecilie, Daisy and Clara emphasized that small groups were an important prerequisite for an individual approach to children (inspired by the Montessori approach among others). Moreover, some of the parents also stressed certain values which they saw as important to the child’s integration within ECEC – ecology (Dominika and Alice) as well as an integrative approach and valuing differences (Dominika and Daisy).

Hence, these parents took the opportunity to select a facility which met their own criteria, focusing especially on the way the facility related to the children and worked with them. They saw choosing an ECEC facility as a key decision which would potentially influence the well-being of their children and their subsequent educational path. In this sense, the parents’

concept of quality is child-centered, focusing on the relationship between the institution, teacher and child, but not related to a particular pedagogical approach.

What is especially important for this group of parents is the fact that the majority of them placed their children in a public ECEC facility or were in the process of changing to their preferred public facility. Hence, this group of parents shows how parental choice and selectivity works in relation to the public system: the parents were aiming for a place in a particular public kindergarten and were aware of the fact that the chances of getting it increased as their child grew older. Therefore they either postponed applying to the public system by finding a private bridging place (as they wished to or had to return to work) or they temporarily accepted a public place which did not fully meet their expectations. As for example, stated by Alice:

*Our younger daughter was not 3 in September. She was born in November therefore she could not get into a public kindergarten. And I have to admit that we really wanted the same public kindergarten as where our older one is. And we decided to wait for that kindergarten, and so we were looking for a private facility and our criteria were how much it was and how far away it was.*

To sum up, these first two groups of respondents with a pedagogical or a child-centered approach to ECEC, focused on finding the public or private ECEC facility which best fit their child's individuality and ideally promised to value their children's needs and potential. To achieve this, they sought the pedagogical knowledge that would enable them to make an informed choice, focusing on the relationship between the ECEC institution, teacher and child. In the next section, we present two groups of respondents who were concerned with more tangible and practical criteria when choosing their ECEC facility.

## **Staying within the Mainstream and Fitting into the System**

Another group of parents also put time and effort into finding an appropriate facility and applying a set of criteria to guide their choice. However, their choice was not necessarily seen as influencing their children's personality and future opportunities – as the following two statements by Beata exemplify:

*I was very surprised that the issue of choosing a preschool was topic no. 1 for mothers from January in the playgrounds. I didn't get it; I assumed the kids were not going to Oxford or Cambridge yet, it's just a preschool. And I treated it accordingly. I thought it will work somehow; it's not a question of the child's life and death.*

*I know they [the children] will have to face so many things in their lives and if we had to think they would be blocked or stopped by the preschool, we would be going mad right now. We need to rise above that and rely on the fact that the child has to get over things sometimes, even if they do not like it. It is necessary for life.*

Nevertheless, this group of respondents also had specific preferences and made active choices, mainly within the public system. Their search for information was predominantly concerned with equipment or other aspects of the ECEC facility as well as practical or organizational concerns – as exemplified by the following statement by Bert:

*For us, it was accessibility... And then references and the catering. In some preschools they give children sweet syrups to drink and we didn't want that. The school that is next to our house does not have a nice garden, so we put them in a farther away one that has a much bigger and nicer garden.*

Similarly, other parents in this group predominantly applied a facility-centered concept of quality, concerned with equipment or other aspects of the facility (e.g. a nice garden, healthy food), the tidiness of the facility and whether it had a rich program (different sports, excursions, etc.) and practical/organizational concerns (proximity to home or the workplace). Hence, they discussed the richness of the program on offer rather than (pedagogical) ideas or values relating to how the institution and teachers should act towards the children. When they thought about the ways the ECEC facilities influence their child, they expected and agreed with a certain normalizing influence which would help the child to fit into the public (schooling) system. At the same time, specific pedagogical approaches differing from those in the (public) mainstream were seen as being exotic, which might be nice for the child, but was not sustainable in the current system or simply did not fit in with their ECEC ideas and values. As explained for example by Bára and Běta:

Bára:

*I like it if a child is respected as a person; has an individualized approach. But I think a child in kindergarten is preparing for the next [stage of the] education system. Even if I wanted my child to go to a Waldorf school, there is just one in Brno, it is difficult to get there, it is far from where we live and probably at one point, unfortunately, our child will go to a normal school and I need the kindergarten to prepare him sensitively for the insensitive education system.*

Běta:

*These kindergartens [general public] are for the children of parents who have a normal approach to childraising. Normal, as they were raised somehow by their parents, and they apply this approach to their children, and so they do not have any special requirements.*

Given these priorities, parents from this group took the opportunity to select a facility within the public system which met their criteria in much the same way as the parents in the child-centered group had. If they were aiming for a particular public school, some of them were willing to wait for it and find a bridging solution.

On this point, the last group of respondents we identified in our data stand out: parents who did not actively select a facility within the public and/or private system. The situation of these parents was partly determined by external circumstances – for example the need to return to work or organizational barriers and financial difficulties related to single motherhood. As was the case with for example Dana:

*I was not looking for a kindergarten, I was looking for a place in a kindergarten. Basically, I only expected to put my child there and have a rest and be able to go back to work.*

The selection process was thus mainly related to practical/organizational concerns; the central selection criteria included for example workplace proximity:

Darina:

*I didn't make my choice based on references but based on my job, where I work. Where we live, there is excess demand and my boy was not three yet. So it was out of kindness that the head teacher took him with regard to the fact that I am a single mother.*

This example in particular shows how external circumstances can potentially overshadow the person's ideas on ECEC selection criteria (however, when parents from this group evaluated their choices, they primarily focused on equipment and tangible quality criteria). As the following excerpt exemplifies, Darina's quality criteria are in fact facility-centered, but she presented her situation in terms of her single mother status acting as a constraint on the choices she would otherwise like to make:

*Darina: It's a shame they did not have someone younger, more active [teacher]. They didn't go out, no trips by public transport. Since he's been in kindergarten, he hasn't been on a tram. And they're in the center, all the activities are to hand.*

*Q: Did you consider changing schools?*

*Darina: No, I wouldn't have managed.*

To sum up, we found these second two groups of respondents had a facility-centered approach to ECEC that focused on finding a public ECEC facility which would best fit the parents' tangible criteria and choices related to external circumstances (returning to work, single motherhood), which were important constraints on priorities and criteria related to the parents' ideas on ECEC and its values and their priorities.

## Discussion

The most important difference we have discovered so far is whether there is a relationship between the ECEC institution, teacher and child and how parents perceive and discuss its importance and potential to influence their children's personality and the development of their (intellectual) potential. We identified and described four different groups. The first two groups of parents related their choice of ECEC facility to this relationship, either within the framework of distinctive pedagogical approaches or based on their own ideals and values. They thought an equal and respectful relationship between the institution, teacher and child was central to the child's further development. While it was crucial for these groups of parents to find a facility which best fit their child's individuality, the second two groups expected their children to fit into mainstream facilities, primarily using tangible facility-centered criteria to make their choice.



Our findings seem to closely reflect Anette Lareau's (2011) distinction between two patterns of childrearing, her differentiation between "concerted cultivation" and "accomplishment of natural growth", which she understands as being significantly class-based: The first two groups of respondents had a pedagogy-centered and a child-centered approach to ECEC that resembles Lareau's concerted cultivation (practiced by middle-class parents). The accounts of these parents center around their concerns about providing their children with the best education and care solutions from an early age. High quality ECEC was related to nourishing the children's individuality, respecting their needs and hence allowing them to develop their full potential. For the parents this meant engaging with (or mostly respecting) pedagogical ideas and the ECEC market, carefully selecting the facilities and investing cultural and financial capital in obtaining their ideal solutions beyond the ECEC (public and private) mainstream.

The emphasis on accomplishment of natural growth (which Lareau finds to be typical of working-class parents) can by contrast be linked to the basic reliance on predominantly public mainstream solutions, which we saw mainly in those respondents who had a facility-centered approach to ECEC decision making. Although they also adopted a particular selection process, they did not consider the relationship between institution, teacher and child to be relevant, nor did they look for the "best" education and care solution. Instead they expected their children to learn to function within the mainstream system and described the normalizing and disciplining effects of the (pre)schooling system as appropriate and in line with their own educational approaches.

Considering Lareau, it was surprising for us to find the rhetoric of natural growth and the promotion of child-initiated play with Montessori, Waldorf and/or forest pedagogies, which were a central issue for many of the parents, whom we otherwise saw as following the logic of concerted cultivation. What differs, however, is the child's position within the framework of natural growth. At this point, Lareau's dual logics of childrearing probably become too flat to capture the subtle (discursive) nuanced meanings of accomplishment of natural growth. In Lareau's work, it is related to sharp authoritative boundaries between adults and children and their realms. While natural growth, as in the pedagogies cited, is associated with a shared space and respectful mutual engagement between adults and children. Within the logic of concerted cultivation this creates a space for children's self-initiated play and development that according to Lareau is often lacking in this logic. From this point of view our pedagogy- and child-centered respondents are not

typical advocates of concerted cultivation and their childrearing logic could be labelled something like “concerted natural growth”. Our findings indicate the need to do more research in this area, to further elaborate on the extent to which Lareau’s logics of childrearing are applicable to the Czech context.

An issue that seems even more puzzling is the class dimension of these logics, which is central to Lareau’s argumentation. Despite the discernable connections in our data between the parental accounts, choices and social background, the situation in the Czech Republic is complicated. The class structure of Czech society was significantly reconfigured under the state socialist regime (job allocation was partly determined by political criteria, the flattened wage hierarchy and weakened relationship between job and wage, low valuation of intellectual work, etc.). Although Czech society today *is* a class society in standard terms, as Katrňák and Fučík (2010) show in their quantitative analyses scrutinizing the relevance of various class schemes in the Czech context (living standards and lifestyles are strongly correlated with a person’s position in the labor market), the historical reconfiguration means we can expect a less strong relationship between a person’s class and orientations.

Nevertheless, despite the cultural specificities, our data still indicate an important correspondence with Lareau’s classed logics of childrearing. There is a significant overlap between the selective pedagogy-centered group and the child-centered group (which can be linked to her concerted cultivation) on the one hand and the group of parents that could be characterized as middle-class (based on education, profession and self-attribution) on the other. These approaches are adopted particularly by parents with a substantial or proportionally substantial level of cultural capital. In contrast, the parents without a university degree (or with lower secondary education) were much more strongly inclined to a facility-centered option and much less selective in their choices (their perspective was close to the accomplishment of natural growth).

The results indicate important differences in opportunities to be able to *freely choose* between diversified public and private ECEC facilities, and these stem from different perceptions of the role of ECEC in general, children’s needs, the related quality of ECEC and the limited accessibility to ECEC (capacity, financial, locational). The data indicate that both points are related to the parents’ socio-economic background and reinforce one another. The first two groups, who perceived the differences between the facilities to be significant and welcomed the fact they could choose, were also more

likely to be able to overcome the potential constraints (based on their available economic and/or cultural capital). Parents from the third and fourth groups expressed less concern about the differences between the facilities and were less selective and at the same time more vulnerable to external constraints and limited accessibility (depending on their situation).

## Conclusion

Recent developments in the Czech Republic have led to considerable diversification in preschool education and care, especially in metropolitan areas such as Brno. The significant shortage of public facilities is accompanied by a growing sector of private providers. This provides greater opportunity for parental choice. However, whether parents can take advantage of these choices remains highly socially structured. Besides the “hard factors” limiting their choices, such as the fees, there seem to be many softer factors shaping both choice and access, such as parents' willingness and ability to research the existing options, or – in the case of kindergartens with particular pedagogical approaches – “proficiency” in the given pedagogy, and their willingness to participate in specific courses. The aim of this article was to analyze parents' narratives of choosing a kindergarten for their child. Drawing on focus groups with parents from different social backgrounds, we focused on the various conceptions the parents had of their children's needs, the role of ECEC generally and the role of the children and adults within it. We regard these conceptions as another important factor shaping parental choice.

The parents significantly differed in the extent to which they cherished and utilized the opportunity of being able to choose a kindergarten based on their ideas and priorities concerning both their children and early childhood education and care. Also their notion of quality varied noticeably; their accounts revealed different configurations of factors they thought important when making the choice. Based on these criteria, we identified four groups of parents: pedagogical approach-centered, child-centered, facility-centered and (constrained) non-selective

As our findings suggest, there is an important difference in perceptions of the child's position between the first and the second group on the one hand, and the third and the fourth group on the other. While the first and the second group of parents shared the assumption that children are malleable and they were very apprehensive about the potential risks associated with making the “wrong choice”, the third and the fourth group considered chil-

dren's psychological and cognitive qualities to be more innate. They wanted their children to be happy and successful, but they did not think kindergartens had the potential to deflect children away from their "given" direction, influence their future opportunities or potentially harm their development. For them, choosing a preschool was not an issue of paramount importance.

This contrast, however simplified, can be traced back to social origin. Despite the cultural differences, it shares basic features, as we have tried to show, with Lareau's classed logics of childrearing. The pedagogy-centered and child-centered approaches to ECEC that we found mainly in parents with substantial or proportionally substantial cultural capital have similar foundations to Lareau's concerted cultivation (practiced by middle-class parents in her research). The facility-centered approach seems to share the presupposition of the "innate child" found in Lareau's accomplishment of natural growth. While she identified this parenting style in working class parents, in our case, the facility-centered approach was by no means limited to this group, nor to the group of parents without a university degree (represented more in our research), although it was typical among them.

Looking into the future, these different parental conceptions with their different views of the child's malleability and thus of the importance of (good) education have clear consequences for social reproduction. From a more general perspective, the diversification of ECEC, classed parental preferences for certain facilities and the actual possibilities open to them regarding child placement (determined by level of financial and cultural capital) seem to lead to a paradox: private and public kindergartens with "alternative pedagogies" and/or respectful approaches that could be characterized as having inclusive ideas of education and as valuing differences, in fact contribute to the widening social gap, precisely because of their social exclusivity. Due to the diversification, children are exposed from a very early stage in their lives to a rather different education experience. A few of them receive the message that they are autonomous subjects entitled to pursue their own preferences, to actively shape interactions and to treat adults as equals. In a society divided into social classes this is not a class-neutral message.

It is important to emphasize that this does not reflect the public/private division. Rather, the current lack of public kindergarten places forces those parents who are dependent on a public kindergarten place to accept what they get when they need to return to work (usually when the child is 2.5-3 years of age). As under the current system the chances of a child obtaining a place in the public kindergarten favored by the parent(s) (often influenced

by respectful approaches and pedagogies) increases as the child ages, these kindergartens are mainly available to children who have spent some time in a private facility and apply for a public place at the age of 4 or 5. The compulsory kindergarten year, which was introduced in autumn 2017, changes this situation to a certain extent, as it limits these parental strategies: from the age of 4, children from within the kindergarten district will have absolute precedence. However, in a system which does not provide public ECEC places for all 3-year olds, the prioritizing of older children and the rise in the number of children attending kindergarten probably further complicates the search for a public place for a 3-year old. And finally, the creation of kindergarten districts is highly likely to lead to further ghettoization, as the district kindergartens will copy the city's social map even more.

Since equal access to education is an education policy priority in most countries and is seen as a tool for strengthening social integration and equal opportunity (Česká školní inspekce 2014; Matějů & Straková, 2003; Rabušicová, 2013), more attention should be paid to this initial stage in the educational pathway. Although in the Czech Republic publicly funded services account for a relatively significant share of the provision, the current conditions are reinforcing social inequalities that have not been sufficiently considered. For some, the growing range of choice potentially boosts their choices, but for the rest, it is illusory.

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