

Identification of Common Indicators of Family Environment of Pupils of Alternative Schools

Yveta Pohnětalová, Veronika Nováková, Lucie Hrašová

Abstract—The paper presents the results of research in which we were looking for common characteristics of the family environment of students alternative and innovative education systems. Topicality comes from the fact that nowadays in the Czech Republic there are several civic and parental initiatives held with the aim to establish schools for their children. The goal of our research was to reveal key aspects of these families and to identify their common indicators. Among other things, we were interested what reasons lead parents to decide to enroll their child into different education than standard (common). The survey was qualitative and there were eighteen respondents of parents of alternative schools' pupils. The reason to implement qualitative design was the opportunity to gain deeper insight into the essence of phenomena and to obtain detailed information, which would become the basis for subsequent quantitative research. There have been semi structured interviews done with the respondents which had been recorded and transcribed. By an analysis of gained data (categorization and by coding), we found out that common indicator of our respondents is higher education and higher economic level. This issue should be at the forefront of the researches because there is lack of analysis which would provide a comparison of common and alternative schools in the Czech Republic especially with regard to quality of education. Based on results, we consider questions whether approaches of these parents towards standard education come from their own experience or from the lack of knowledge of current goals and objectives of education policy of the Czech Republic.

Keywords—Alternative schools, family environment, quality of education, parents' approach.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE topic of this project proposal is to examine family environment of pupils of alternative and innovative education systems. By doing a research, we wanted to disclose key aspects of the family environment (e.g. level of education and economic level) and identify common features of the families examined. At present, many civil and parental initiatives have been created in the Czech Republic establishing schools for their children and the resent research by the NMS Agency [1] revealed that 30% of parents are not satisfied with contemporary schools. There is not enough space devoted to this issue in the Czech Republic despite to the fact that the demand for alternative education increases.

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II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It can be assumed that parents looking for an alternative school for their children miss something in the standard schools. It comes to light that they expect more effective and progressive education, individual approach and different methods of teaching [8]. In the Czech Republic assumptions that alternative and innovative schools bring higher quality are not backed by research and comparative studies. As Průcha notes, from the international OECD report [5], it follows that evaluation of the quality of schools is one of the priorities of the education policy; however, there are doubts about what indicators to use to measure quality. Improvement in the quality of education is possible only if not only teachers but the whole society understands the goals and needs of education. One of the main goals of the Strategy for Educational Policy until 2020 [9] is to improve the communication among those involved in education, including the general public. The document mentions the obsolete views of the majority of parents who „do not know or understand the present goals of education and the plans of educational policy“[9] as one of the obstacles of achieving the school system transformation.

A resent sociological survey [8] examining the views of Czech parents on contemporary school and way of education showed that half of the public addressed by the survey perceived the quality of the Czech schooling as average, one third gave it the mark B and 10% of respondents gave it D or F. Those critics reasoned by poor quality of schooling (approach and skills of teacher, problem with authority). Further, they saw problems in methods of learning and marking system, in outdated curriculum and in low motivation and low salary for teachers. Moreover, they sensed the indifference of parents and children towards school.

The question is whether the parents who seek an alternative schooling for their child know enough about the current state of standard primary education and its goals or whether they base their decision on their own school experience when they were children? In this research, we were interested in the reasons which lead parents to choose alternative of innovative education.

First of all we see the necessity to define the concept of alternative school. Alternative schools are usually viewed as the synonym of open or free schools. Basically it involves all types of schools with the same characteristic: they differ in some way from the standard schools of a given education system [5]. The differences are perceived as being progressive and promising; however, it is not possible to categorize alternative schools based on their features also because they

have different forms in different countries. Průcha [5] established three main types of alternative schools from different perspectives:

1. Educational and political aspect: division in state and non-state schools. From this perspective, alternative schools are all schools that function independently of state schools but side by side with them (e.g. church, private schools)
2. Didactical and pedagogical aspect: alternative schools are those schools that apply new, unconventional methods of learning, reformative curriculum, i.e. new didactical approaches (state and non-state schools).
3. Economic aspect: alternative schools are those schools where parents pay a tuition and so they are alternative because the schools offer exclusive service for the tuition (state and non-state schools)

The distinction of alternative schools can lie in curricular programs, other ways of organizing teaching and children's time at school, learning environment (psychosocial factors, different way of communication, architectural arrangement of the class and furniture), ways of performance evaluation and relationship with families and the community. The criterion of alternative schools is a certain pedagogical specificity. There are school also with the present school system try to react to new demands and are introducing some innovations. These innovative schools try to transform within the boundaries of common school (e.g. improvement of the education process), are launching innovations in methods of schoolwork or they are coming with methods for the educational process in order to improve its quality. Innovation can then influence both content and methods of schoolwork and the values the educational process focuses on. Thus we can term a school as alternative school when it applies the methods of work that fulfil the pedagogical principles of alternative schools with focus on natural and healthy development of children and minimization of negative social phenomena [7].

Alternative schools, apart from their individual features, have many common features like for example: focus on complex child's education and his active integration in the educational process, use of new unconventional methods and forms of work (integration, individualization, differentiation, cooperative forms of teaching), change in teacher-pupil relationship, emphasis on rights of others and own opinion, respect to the natural needs of pupils, emphasis on the inner motivation of pupils, supporting creativity, active learning, and ability to assume responsibility for own education [6].

A legal alternative to mandatory school attendance in the Czech Republic is the home schooling which was enacted for the first stage of primary school; teaching children at the second stage of primary school at home is being tested. A parent teaching a child at home has to have at least secondary education with the school-leaving exam (GCSE exam) (a university degree is required for teaching a child in the second stage of primary school) and must educate his child in accordance with the norm in effect for basic education. The child is examined twice a year at a basic school.

III. RESEARCH SURVEY

The aim of the research survey is to identify key aspects of the family environment of pupils of alternative and innovative educational systems. The issue of alternative education as such, which has not been researched in the Czech Republic, was the main motivation to do the research survey. Another reason was to get a deeper insight in the motivation of families observed and later use the results to prepare future teachers better for their profession.

A. Research Goal

The goal of the research survey is to identify key aspects of the family environment of pupils of alternative and innovative educational systems. These sub-goals follow from the main goal:

1. To find out what reasons lead parents to enroll their child for alternative or innovative schooling.
2. To find out the key aspects of the family environment of pupils of alternative and innovative systems and identify common factors of the families observed.

Research questions:

1. What reasons parents have for enrolling their child for alternative or innovative education?
2. What are the key aspects of the family environment of pupils of alternative and innovative educational systems?
3. Do common factors of the families observed exist?

B. Methodology

We carried out a qualitative research for which we compiled a semi-structured interview. The in-depth study of each participant in the research is one of the characteristics of qualitative research. The aim of the qualitative research survey is to describe the peculiarities of each participant [3] and one precondition is to do the interview in the natural and authentic social environment. The above mentioned could give a wrong impression that we get only a description of reality but we want to understand how people understand, live out, and create social reality. It is a process of examining phenomena in order to acquire a complex picture of these phenomena based on detailed data and a specific relationship between the researcher and the research participant [11]. Qualitative research serves for discovering and deep understanding of what is the essence of certain social phenomena, so it is suitable for a research trying to uncover the essence of somebody's experience with a certain phenomenon. Experience - subjective and sensualistic - plays an important role during an interview; a relationship arises between the researcher and the participants. Qualitative research can help to obtain detailed information which quantitative research is not able to get.

Owing to the nature of the research aim and questions, we chose an in-depth interview as the main research method. Usually one researcher interviews one participant in non-standardized way using open-ended questions. In our case it was an in-depth semi-structured interview which followed from topics and questions prepared in advance. The structure of the interview was based on research questions from which

we composed more specific (detailed) research questions. These questions were further split into inquiry questions which were adjusted during the interview. The interviews were done in various time intervals and a total of 18 parents whose children attend an alternative school were interviewed. We tried to set up a pleasant atmosphere during the interviews. Unfortunately, we were not able to interview all parents at the authentic environment of their homes (only 5 interviews were done in the homes of parents), which was caused by the fact that the parents were not acquainted with the researcher. The rest of the interviews were conducted in schools or on quiet public premises. All interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone, written down and coded. The interviews lasted between 15 and 40 minutes. For the analysis of the interviews we chose the open coding technique (paper and pencil) which is popular for qualitative research due to its simplicity and effectiveness. The codes represented certain phenomena, term or were written down into a data sheet. The list of codes was gradually modified and supplemented. The terms were grouped into categories based on their meaning. We took notes about ideas and relationships in addition to coding.

An important ethic aspect of our research was to ensure voluntary participation. We received an informed consent from all participants which means a voluntary consent in the pedagogical research practice [2]. Apart from acquainting them with the research topic, all participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality.

C. Research Sample

In quantitative design we always talk about deliberate choice, where research goal and research questions represent key factors [10]. The research sample consisted of 18 parents of pupils of alternative and innovative educational systems, which are mostly widespread in the Czech Republic. As seen from Table I, specifically there were parents of pupils from Montessori schools (8), from Waldorf schools (5), from educational program Začít spolu (has been taken from America, known as Step by step) (3) and from home schooling (2). A great part of the interviews were made with mothers of children, only 4 interviews were made with fathers. The absence of fathers can be very likely explained by greater involvement of mothers in the area of children education.

TABLE I
STRUCTURE OF RESPONDENTS

Age	Frequency	Percent
Montessori	8	44,4
Waldorf	5	27,8
Step by Step	3	16,7
Home schooling	2	11,1
Total	18	100,0

Table II shows age structure of the respondents. Most respondents (44,4%) were in the second area that is represented by age between 29 up to 35 years, which corresponds with mothers' average age at birth of a child.

Table III shows the highest level of respondents' education. From the total of 18 respondents there are 50% with secondary

education, 16,7% with higher professional education and with full university degree and 11,1% with bachelor degree. Only one respondent had apprenticeship (5,5%). Primary terms for selection of respondents were represented by their child's alternative education and also availability of alternative schools. We did not choose respondents according to their achieved education, however in our sample there are respondents with secondary and higher education.

TABLE II
AGE OF RESPONDENTS

Age	Frequency	Percent
21 - 28	3	16,7
29 - 35	8	44,4
36 - 42	5	27,8
43 - 49	2	11,1
Total	18	100,0

TABLE III
ACHIEVED EDUCATION

Education	Frequency	Percent
1	1	5,5
2	9	50,0
3	3	16,7
4	2	11,1
5	3	16,7
Total	18	100,0

D. Results

During data analysis, there was gradually beginning to open repeated responses that we divided into four categories according to the message and for results clarification: reasons of child's placement in alternative education, needs, pros and cons (Table IV).

TABLE IV
BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE MOST STATEMENTS

Reasons	Safe environment Ways of evaluation: children are not being compared between each other, Curriculum develops the whole person Positive references from friends Good experience with older child Chance to participate on school's life
Needs	Versatile development of child's personality Respect for child's personality and his needs Not only to acquire knowledge, but to cope with life, to manage different situations, to find one's own place in life
Pros	Child is not evaluated, but his work Child can make mistakes Child learns to think logically Child is motivated and supported Individual approach
Cons	Inability to continue in the same school at second grade of Primary School (in most case there is no adequate continuity at 1st grade of Primary School)

According to responses, there is mainly safe environment that belongs among reasons that lead parents to enroll their child in alternative education, (safe environment was stated by 13 parents, i.e. 72%), where the child does not perceive any stress and to be compared with others, where there is not only emphasis on knowledge gathering but also where integral child's personality is developed. Examples of statements:

“School does not have pigeon-holes, develops individuality in safe environment, affects thinking, feeling, will“(mother J, Montessori school). Another example: “What is also important that how teacher stands and manages his/her life. Importance is enthusiasm, life happiness, ability to find its own place and not to worry about life itself which is s/he gives to a child. To go into challenges, take risks. To know what I want, why I want it and what I do for it. To give sense to what I do. The fact, there will be not enough theoretical knowledge to be passed on and that at Secondary School children would have to learn something more and keep up with is not important. School itself not only just prepares for Secondary School entrance exam, but also to be able to manage common life situations. The fact that we and our children could experience the community of people (teachers, parents and children) is important for us. Also the fact, that children always make something and give meanings to their actions. They do it with enthusiasms, happiness and this is the most important”(mother P, Waldorf school).

Five respondents enrolled their child in alternative education due to reasons that occurred with specific issues at a common school, for example bullying, dissatisfaction with a teacher, unreasonable demands on a child related to loss of motivation in one case and in another case with increasing stress.

The interviews revealed that the key aspect of a family environment of our respondents is their higher level of education (Table III), that is probably linked with wider outlook and deeper consideration about education, which represents unquestionably important value for well-educated parents. Another common aspect is parents' effort to provide their children such environment that would motivate them to learning and development of their whole potential. It revealed that parents want to provide for them their more creative and friendly school environment, than we they had experienced themselves. We ask a question if parents have adequate information about contemporary education in common schools, because mainly first grade of Primary Schools provide safe environment for pupils with the use of various alternative and innovative educational forms, based on several research from last years, for example a research from 2010, that gathered public views on education [12].

Higher level of respondents' education is linked with higher economic level that enables families to pay school fee and to choose for their child so called “a tailor-made school”. Higher educational level represents a basic common indicator of our respondents.

Home schooling presents a special category. Reasons why parents choose this type of education is besides safe and well known environment: flexible curriculum layout, faster and more efficient management of curriculum, which brings more time for other important activities, such as hobbies, sport, musical instrument and others. There were no worries from respondent's point of view as far as lack of social contacts with peers that are very often considered by critics of home schooling. On the contrary. Example of a mother's response (mother A, home schooling): “According to that our daughter

can manage the curriculum tasks within a short time, she has a greater chance for her free time activities, with regular social contacts with other children. In any case, I have don't feel that she would suffer from anything.”

IV. CONCLUSION

The topic of the submitted paper is research of pupils' family environment of alternative and innovative educational systems. It has been shown that our addressed respondents do not trust common educational system; therefore they search for alternatives for their children. However, the Framework Education Programme for Primary Education (educational curriculum) enables variable creation of school education programmes, based on specific school conditions and reflects children's and parents' needs. In the current system the schools have space for application of creative work with the use of effective teaching methods and by the variable ways of assessment they tend to be closer to alternative school but yet do not fit to any trends. The question is whether current division of schools (common) and alternative is sufficient enough and satisfactory. Like Kartous [4], we take into consideration future development of school system in the Czech Republic, if education system will be able to adapt to demands of better educated parents, or if elite schools are established for better economically situated ones.

By this research survey, we wanted to reveal key aspects of family environment and to identify common indicators of investigated families. According to the number of respondents the obtained results cannot be generalized on the entire population of parents on alternative education, but provided us primary data for further research survey based on quantitative research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper was supported by the Specific research of Faculty of Education of University Hradec Králové, 2016.

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