

Innovative Practice in Initial Professional Studies for Czech Pre-School Teachers

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, there has been an increase in university level education for pre-school teachers in the Czech Republic. The aim of the paper is to present part of the results of a research study comparing the Bachelor's degree programmes in pre-school pedagogy at ten of the country's universities. Conducted between 2020-2022, the research found that although the national minimum qualification for pre-school teachers remains at secondary vocational level, tertiary level qualifications are much more common among more recently qualified pre-teachers. The democratic transformation of the Czech education system during the last 30 years introduced many improvements such as innovation in the conception, structure, content and organisation of Bachelor's degree programmes. Especially in the last decade, these mainly relate to greater integration of teaching theory, didactics and practical training of students. In some universities these initiatives have also resulted in modularisation of courses and cooperation between lecturers from different subject disciplines and departments. This article presents examples from two Czech universities to illustrate how these new approaches were successfully implemented and resulted in positive feedback from students.

Keywords: Initial professional studies; pre-school teachers; innovative practice; university didactics; interdisciplinary approaches.

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Introduction

One of the key topics of contemporary pre-primary education is ensuring the highest quality as well as finding a way to ensure pedagogical and professional continuity for the transition to primary education (OECD, 2017a, 2017b; European Commission, 2019). In the Czech Republic, pre-primary education has undergone significant changes in the last three decades and one issue that has resulted in the biggest transformation is the awarding of academic degrees for pre-school teacher training (Janík, 2013; Dvořák et al., 2015; Opravilová & Uhlířová, 2017). There is not yet a national requirement for a degree level minimum qualification for a pre-school teacher, as the current minimum is still a higher vocational school with a focus on early childhood education (Syslová, 2017). Nevertheless, there is a major change taking place in the qualification levels of those working in pre-schools, as the number of teachers who have achieved an undergraduate degree in pre-school pedagogy is rising significantly (CSI, 2021). Especially in the age group of teachers between 26-35 years, undergraduate level qualifications prevail. A long-term goal is to raise the minimum level of qualification for Czech pre-school teachers to at least Bachelor's level to be comparable with teachers in other EU countries (Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018, European Commission, 2020). Currently, 29 education systems demand a Bachelor's level for teachers working in pre-primary education (ISCED 02), while four countries (France, Italy, Portugal and Iceland) require a Master's level. Only in eight European education systems (Austria, Czech Republic, Ireland, Malta, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia and Scotland), is the minimum qualification level lower and in the Czech Republic and Slovakia it is the lowest at ISCED level 3 (European Commission, 2020). Therefore, the following detailed comparison of curriculum content focuses only on Bachelor's degree programmes, as part of the ongoing professional debate in the Czech Republic is the question of introducing a compulsory Bachelor's degree for at least one teacher in a classroom or for a teacher working with five-year-old children who complete the compulsory pre-school year.

Study programmes in pre-school pedagogy at tertiary level have a relatively long tradition in the Czech Republic with the first courses existing before the Second World War and then briefly after 1946. Since 1970, pre-school pedagogy has been taught at Charles University in Prague and at Palacký University in Olomouc. Since the 1990s, undergraduate programmes in pre-school pedagogy have gradually become established in the Czech Republic (Opravilová & Uhlířová, 2021).

The Bachelor's degree in Teaching for Pre-schools is currently offered by ten universities in the Czech Republic; these are mainly university faculties of education and award 180 ECTS credits. A two-year follow-up Master's degree

awarding 120 ECTS credits is also offered at four pedagogical faculties however, they are accredited as non-teaching courses, serving to deepen theoretical preparation. The Master's courses are intended primarily for future managers in pre-school institutions, employees of the Czech School Inspectorate, counselling or educational institutions in the CPD system.

The concept of the Bachelor's degree programme is based on the child-centred model of pre-school education, respects the specific developmental aspects of the child's pre-school years and aims at an individualised pedagogical approach. It has a balanced composition of professional theoretical and practical subjects and pedagogical practices which reflect current research and the requirements of education policy by including new study subjects and practices related to the field of inclusive education, differentiation and individualised teaching (MSMT, 2001; 2020).

Bachelor's degree programmes for pre-school teachers at all faculties in the Czech Republic must meet the requirements of the Ministry of Education and stipulate the percentage, credit and hourly representation of each component (see Table 1). These programmes are intended to prepare students to work as teachers within the context of the FEP PE (MSMT, 2021) however, detailed statements of the objectives and contents of Bachelor's degree programmes are not stipulated by the state.

This has led to the development of very different study programmes in terms of their concept, structure and variability of educational content. In the last five years, educational programmes have been undergoing re-accreditation processes characterised by innovations that include efforts to integrate educational content, trans-didactic approaches and multidisciplinary cooperation within individual faculty departments participating in the preparation of pre-school teachers (Syslová, 2017; Wiegerová, 2015).

Between 2020 and 2022, the Faculty of Education at Charles University conducted comparative research on study programmes for pre-school teachers at Czech universities (Loudová Stralczynská et al., 2022). The aim of the article is to highlight some of the findings of this research which focus on innovation within the study programmes and to demonstrate specific examples of innovative approaches from selected faculties of education.

Methodology

The research draws on approaches from comparative pedagogy (Bray et al., 2007), using a qualitative research paradigm. Phillips' (2006) model of comparison was used for the qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) of conceptual and curriculum documents within the wider research project

conducted between 2020-2022. Synchronic, functional, and diachronic perspectives were applied in the analysis so as to meet the contextual provision of comparison (Rabušicová & Záleská, 2016).

The aim of the paper is to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What is the current profile of undergraduate study programmes for pre-school teachers in terms of structure, objectives and curricula content at faculties of education in the Czech Republic?
2. What innovative practices can be identified in undergraduate study programmes for pre-school teachers at faculties of education in the Czech Republic?

In order to answer these research questions, a qualitative content analysis (according to Kuckartz, 2018) of study programmes for pre-school teachers offered in the Czech Republic was conducted. The research sample consisted of Bachelor's degree programmes in pre-school education at all 10 universities that prepare pre-school teachers in the Czech Republic. The analysis focused on the comparison of these study programmes in terms of four main areas – structure, objectives, contents and innovative practices – as no comparable comparative research has been carried out in the Czech Republic.

The system of categories for the analysis of pre-school pedagogy study programmes at individual universities was constructed on the basis of theory and data from the pre-research phase (2019-2020). Deductively, the main categories were determined within the four main areas (Table 1) and in the following more detailed analysis, sub-codes were inductively created.

Table 1 - Analytical categories induced in qualitative content analysis

Categories	Description of categories
Structure	Formal aspects of the study program (modularisation, organisation of practical training, common basis of pedagogical-psychological subjects, permeability with other study programmes etc.), study organization, the number and types of compulsory, compulsory elective and elective courses
Objectives	Educational objectives and their anchoring in graduate profiles or analogous parts of study programmes. The thematic focus and breadth of the individual modules and courses.
Contents	The inclusion of current topics and approaches and their compliance with current findings in the field of preschool education, scope of direct teaching, number of credits for individual components and disciplines, the scope and focus of disciplinary and didactic courses
Innovative practices	Innovative forms of teaching within study programmes (e.g. interdisciplinary approach to teaching students, modularization, innovative ways of linking theoretical, didactic and practical courses). Innovative forms of implementation of pedagogical practice.

Thus, methodologically, a form of deductive-inductive categorical system creation was used within the seven-stage model of content structuring analysis (Inhaltlich strukturierende Inhaltsanalyse) according to Kuckartz (2018, p. 100). In relation to research question 1, the qualitative content analysis focused on examining the formal aspects of the study programmes, i.e. formal analysis (Formale qualitative Inhaltsanalyse) according to Schreier (2014). The categories monitored were, for example, the structure of the study in terms of the number and types of compulsory, compulsory elective and elective courses, the formal division of the study, the forms of the integration of practical teaching within the programmes, etc. This initial analysis (Kuckartz, 2018) allowed a thorough introduction and contextualisation of the individual programmes across the full breadth of their variability in the Czech Republic. The follow-up content structuring analysis (Schreier, 2012; 2014) targeted research question 1 in terms of analysing curriculum objectives and content, and research question 2 in looking at innovation in the degree programmes included in the comparison. The categories monitored were, for example, the thematic focus and breadth of the individual modules and courses, the inclusion of current topics and approaches in the objectives and content, innovative concepts of educational content, innovative forms of implementation of pedagogical practice and its connection with theoretically oriented courses, etc. The qualitative content analysis was performed manually using comparison tables. This research has generated quite a large amount of data; for the purpose of this article only some of them have been selected. As the article is dedicated to an issue of the journal focusing on innovation, we have selected two examples of innovative practice that illustrate partial outcomes of the analysis and are also examples related to research question 2. These examples come from the authors' own pedagogical practice.

Results

Structure, Objectives and Curricula Contents

All faculties of education use a study structure that integrates theory with practical teaching experience in schools. Most faculties allow students to take courses in pedagogical practice in all or most semesters, which apply theoretical knowledge with practical teaching experience. The faculties specifically emphasise the educational objectives, content and structure of the courses to reflect the professional focus of the individual departments, and the underlying concept of the study programmes. Each study programme is accredited partly

as an academic programme and in part as a professionally orientated programme.

The study programmes emphasise the personal and professional development of students and prepare them for an inclusive approach to working with a mixed age group of pre-school children. Students are prepared in basic methodological competences which they use in the preparation of their Bachelor's thesis and when conducting action research for improving their pedagogical practice. The thematic focus of the courses, their credit rating and the proportions of the individual components within the study programme can be within the following ranges (Table 2).

Table 2 - National framework defining the scope of individual components of professional training in the B.A. study programme for pre-school teachers in the Czech Republic

Content	%	Cred its	Hours
Introduction to teaching: pedagogical-psychological preparation and special-pedagogical preparation, e.g. general pedagogy, psychology and didactics, history, school pedagogy, educational psychology, developmental psychology, inclusive didactics, methodology, basic medical knowledge, a foreign language and ICT in relation to teaching for pre-schools, or university foundation.	23-30	41-54	1230-1620
Subject area with didactics: especially Czech language and literature, communication, mathematics, nature and environmental education, physical education, music education, art education, drama education, dance education, etc.	45-50	81-90	2430-2700
Practice: guided and reflective practice (listening, continuous and coherent)	10-15	18-27	540-810
Preparation of the final thesis	5-10	9-18	270-540

Source: MSMT, 2017.

Until recently, the study programme for pre-school teachers had a very diverse range of courses, which was characterised by a high number of courses where the continuity of the sub-courses was not always consistent and there were unintended thematic overlaps. The arrangement of courses in the current study programmes have addressed this long-standing problem. Newly accredited programmes (e.g. in Prague or Brno) are based upon modularisation of courses and greater integration of educational content, disciplinary didactics and cooperation of participating teachers with different disciplinary backgrounds. Nevertheless, the research identified that most study programmes at faculties of education in the Czech Republic still contain a high number of courses, which may pose a risk to the internal coherence of educational content. In comparison with the concept of Bachelor's degree programmes in early

childhood education in Western European countries, there is an opportunity for further development in this area. An overview of individual Bachelor's programmes illustrating the number of compulsory, elective and optional courses at each university is presented in (Table 3).

Table 3 - Overview of the number of compulsory, compulsory-elective and optional courses at individual institutions providing B.A. study programs for pre-school teachers in the Czech Republic

University	Number of courses			Total number of courses in the study programme
	Compulsory subjects	Compulsory electives	Optional subjects	
Brno Masaryk University	64	7	7	78
České Budějovice University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice	59	20	11	90
Hradec Kralove University of Hradec Kralove	71	Not offered	10 (8 music education subjects; 2 art education subjects)	81
Liberec Technical University of Liberec	61	37	Not offered	98
Pilsen University of West Bohemia in Pilsen	59	14	20	93
Prague Charles University	41	4	17	62
Olomouc Palacký University in Olomouc	37	6	36	79
Ostrava University of Ostrava	51	14	Not offered	65
Ústí nad Labem Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem	76	18	29	123
Zlín Tomas Bata University in Zlín	41	26	Not offered	67

Source: Author's own research based upon data provided by the faculties.

As Table 3 shows, the ten study programmes differ from each other, especially in the optional components. The variety of options available to applicants when choosing their study programme is a positive feature as a certain degree of programme diversity allows for the choice of studies that correspond to the applicant's deeper professional interests. Elective subjects are a consequence of either the legal requirements or the focus of the particular study programme. The number of credits for compulsory courses together with the minimum number of credits for elective courses is usually around 90% of the total number of credits.

Innovative Practice

The modularisation and internal coherence of theoretical content combined with the practical training of students is one example of innovative practice at pedagogical faculties in the Czech Republic. The modularisation and integration of theoretical content is applied to different extents, but within professional discourse between faculties and their teaching staff within the Czech Republic, this is considered to be an opportunity for further development of undergraduate study programmes. The following are current examples of good practice and innovation in terms of implementing a transdisciplinary approach and integration of didactic theory with practical training.

Integration of Disciplines and Didactics – Experience from the Faculty of Education, Charles University, Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education

Literacy Development Course.

Literacy and its development is one of the important areas of all levels of education (Fellowes & Oakley, 2010; NICHD, 2000; Shanahan, 2005; Tompkins, 2006) and includes an attitudinal component demonstrating that reading is perceived as valuable and the individual reads because he or she wants to. Therefore, high demands are placed on teachers in terms of literacy development. This is all the more so at the level of pre-primary education, where the foundations are laid for the future development of all the components of literacy – i.e. the attitude towards reading, comprehension and the ability to read and write.

In the preparation of future pre-school teachers at the Faculty of Education of Charles University, the aim was to cover the whole area through 6 different

courses, which students had to spread over three years of study. These were courses entitled Literature for Children I and II, Culture of Spoken Speech, Czech Language in Pre-school Education, Literature for Children with Didactics, and Developing Reading Literacy. These courses had a time allocation of 1 to 2 hours per week and their outcomes were very varied and inconsistent.

In practice, the educational content of individual courses overlapped, and students encountered some content repeatedly on different courses, while other areas remained uncovered in the belief that students had already been introduced to it in a previous course. Another shortcoming appeared to be the fragmentation of the content, where students missed how the areas of literature, language development and the field of pre-school didactics itself were connected. For this reason, a radical change in the preparation of future pre-school teachers in the development of pre-literacy and literacy was undertaken.

The cooperation of teachers from three different faculty departments was necessary – the Department of Czech Language, the Department of Czech Literature and the Department of Pre-Primary and Primary Education. Teachers of these departments thought together how to organise and connect the educational content in a logical way so that students could get acquainted with the area of pre-literacy in its complexity and full breadth. A new course was therefore designed, which students attend for two semesters. The course has been given the title Language, Communication and Literacy Development to emphasise the interconnectedness of the different components. Thus, from the very beginning, students are aware that without the development of language and communication skills and knowledge of children's literature, it is not possible to develop reading pre-literacy.

For the 2021/22 academic year, the new course is four hours per week in the winter semester and two hours per week in the summer semester. The course involves 4 teachers from three different departments who build on each other and each focuses on their area of specialisation. They address topics such as the definition of literacy and pre-literacy, the development of productive and receptive language competence in the pre-school child, the basics of communication theory with respect to the needs of pre-school children, the basics of rhetoric with respect to the needs of pre-school children, and the development of cultivated teacher expression. This is followed by an introduction to and mastery of constructivist teaching methods appropriate for pre-school children. These include the three-phase model of learning and reading strategies with an emphasis on the development of listening comprehension. Undergraduate students are introduced to literary types and genres and characteristics of literary works, as well as criteria for selecting a quality literary text. They learn to navigate current book offerings, are

introduced to campaigns promoting children's reading, and also learn to work with their families. At the end of the course, they learn about the development of children's writing and methods for teaching writing later on in primary school. The course also includes media education for pre-school children.

The course concludes with an exam during which students demonstrate knowledge and skills in the entire field. The content of the exam has been discussed at length by the teachers, who have been looking for a way to verify the competences acquired by the students in the easiest and yet high-quality way. In the end, they agreed on a practical outcome and a subsequent discussion with the student. The students have to develop an educational plan for a class of pre-school children for one week. Within the weekly unit, they work with a children's book of their choice and pursue objectives from all areas of literacy development – developing speech and communication, preparing for future reading and writing, developing children's comprehension and relationships with reading. Students are given set assessment criteria and their work is assessed and commented on by two tutors and together they then meet with the student and the student talks about their work in consultation with the tutors, before responding to questions. Course tutors provide extensive formative feedback on each students' work. The students themselves rate the opportunity to learn more about the issues in the context of real-life practice in pre-schools as the biggest advantage of this innovative approach. This is evidenced, for example, by a statement from a student evaluation: *I would rate this subject as the best subject of this semester. I really have to say that he gave me a lot of new information and perspectives on how it is possible to work with children and with children's literature.* By linking the theoretical language and literature subjects with the didactics of pre-school teaching, students can more easily apply them in practice when designing educational plans and activities. In addition, the course is linked to teaching practice, allowing students to gain practical experience in a pre-school and to test their knowledge and skills in a real-life situation. The student commented: *It was great to try out practical things as part of the tasks, which are fully usable in subsequent practice and therefore make a lot of sense.* Student evaluations show that the changes made have been positively received. In particular, the diversity in the lecturers' perspectives on the subject is appreciated, which students say provides them with an interesting and comprehensive overview. In the teaching evaluations, it was repeatedly stated that the students appreciated *the change of teachers, each of them gave us something different and it was inspiring.* Although the course content puts high demands on students, the decision to create one comprehensive course based on the close cooperation of experts from several fields proved to be a step in the right direction.

Innovative Organisational and Methodological Approach – Experience from the Faculty of Education, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Department of Education

Teaching Practice Component

When preparing students for teaching, it is important that the qualified teacher is seen as a reflective practitioner given the high demands placed on him or her by the profession (Janík & Slavík, 2011; Švec et al., 2016). Therefore, there is a need to develop the ability for self-reflection during undergraduate study programmes. In the Czech Republic, the amount of teaching practice is limited by the methodological guidelines of the Ministry of Education (see Table 1). This amount is not a high proportion of the study programme and so it is necessary to use these practices effectively both in terms of quantity and especially quality.

Teaching practices are distributed evenly throughout the study programme, while gradually increasing in difficulty and length. In the initial practice, students observe education in pre-schools and focus on specific aspects of the educational process and this is later followed by a practice where students carry out their own teaching activities. The final teaching practice lasts 4 weeks when the student is required to teach and manage a pre-school class independently. This is all under the guidance of a mentor who accompanies the student with support for their work in cooperation with university lecturers who are familiar with the structure of the study programme, and are aware of the any changes within current trends in educational trends. Support for students on teaching practice is often in the form of interviews and discussions with pre-school teachers and subject specialists from the university.

In addition, colleagues from the Department of Education, the Department of Music Education, the Department of Art Culture, the Department of Mathematics, Physics and Technical Education and the Department of Computing and Didactic Technology are involved. Lecturers from different didactic disciplines have also been introduced to the content and objectives of the teaching practices and they often spend one day during the teaching practice with the student in their pre-school. Together with the student and the practice mentor, they reflect on the student's outcomes and look for ways to help the student develop professionally and use their theoretical knowledge in practice. As a result of this joint reflection, the student gains professional insight into their teaching practice, has the opportunity to review their own work and improve their own mentoring skills. The teacher gains a realistic picture of contemporary pre-primary education and the possibility of using their knowledge and skills to influence the quality and design of study programmes

for pre-school teachers. This model has been in operation for several years and is positively evaluated by teachers and students who particularly appreciate the effect of practice helping to inform the theoretical subjects of study programmes to reflect the needs of practice and the different ways that the pre-school child learns.

Discussion and Conclusions

Czech pre-primary education has undergone a process of transformation since the significant changes in society after 1989. The White Paper (MSMT, 2001, p. 45) set out a number of areas to be pursued in national educational development that are still valid and relevant today; some of these focussed on the modernisation of initial professional studies. Accordingly, there have been many innovations in curricula of the Bachelor study programmes for pre-school teachers during the last two decades. These changes are a response to a new concept of the child and the curriculum for pre-primary education and have sought to link these more closely to the undergraduate degree programmes preparing pre-school teachers. However, in comparison to other European countries where pre-school teachers require a university level qualification as a minimum (e.g. Finland, Switzerland or Sweden), the preparation of pre-school teachers needs to be further developed.

The quality of higher education programmes preparing pre-school teachers is closely monitored as part of the accreditation process and the requirements for teacher education are becoming more universalised across faculties. General trends such as linking theory and practical training, an emphasis on reflection upon pedagogical practice, inclusive education, formative assessment, and gaining experience in working with other teachers have been emphasised in newly accredited study programmes and are being applied in practice. One of the steps that will also lead to the promotion of quality is the strengthening of cooperation between faculties of education and joint work on the transformation of study programmes, which was signed in a memorandum by the deans of the faculties in September 2021. The qualitative development of pre-service education is a focus of the Education 2030+ Strategy (MSMT, 2020) which identifies the current problems within pre-service and in-service teacher education in the Czech Republic.

The provision of high-quality, theoretically informed and practice-related studies for pre-school teachers is the basis for the Czech education system to ensure quality education for all young children. The professionalisation of teachers is based in the relationship between academic knowledge and practical experience. Therefore, current efforts to innovate at individual faculties of

education in the Czech Republic continue to be focussed on the balance between professional orientation, theoretical and practical training, the focus on disciplines and the integrated concept of undergraduate study programmes.

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