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Innovativeness in Preschool Education in the Light of the Applicable Legal Regulations and Analysis of the Literature on the Subject

Innowacyjność w edukacji przedszkolnej w świetle obowiązujących regulacji prawnych i analizy literatury przedmiotu

KEYWORDS ABSTRACT

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pedagogical
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, innovative
activities, program

Introducing improvements and enhancements aimed at improving the quality of the institution's work is an extremely important and constantly valid challenge faced by contemporary pre-school education institutions. Pedagogical innovativeness implemented by both preschool education teachers and the management of these institutions is in line with the current social expectations and meets the needs and interests of preschool children. The aim of the article is to undertake theoretical considerations and present the definitional difference of program vs. innovation, referring to specific regulations of the Educational Law, with particular emphasis on the stage of preschool education. In addition, the author of the article mentioned the concepts of innovativeness in the educational aspect, discussed by various authors in pedagogical publications. Also, the most important regulations contained in the core curriculum for preschool education were analysed. The binding legal regulations included in the Education Law have been outlined, regarding innovation and the possibility of undertaking innovative activities by teachers, with particular emphasis on preschool education teachers. It was indicated that the purposefulness, planning and innovativeness are among the most important criteria that should be taken into account in innovative solutions. The summary is a terminological definition of the

validity of the selection of the program vs. innovation to be implemented by teachers of preschool education.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

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Wprowadzanie usprawnień i ulepszeń mających na celu poprawę jakości pracy placówki jest niezwykle ważnym i nieustannie aktualnym wyzwaniem jakie stawia współczesna edukacja przed placówkami wychowania przedszkolnego. Innowacyjność pedagogiczna realizowana zarówno przez nauczycieli edukacji przedszkolnej, jak i dyrekcję tych placówek wpisuje się obecnie w społeczne oczekiwania oraz wychodzi naprzeciw potrzebom i zainteresowaniom dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym. Celem artykułu jest podjęcie teoretycznych rozważań i przedstawienie definicyjnej różnicy między program a innowacją, powołując się na regulacje prawa oświatowego ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem etapu edukacji przedszkolnej. Ponadto przywołano pojęcia innowacyjności w aspekcie edukacyjnym, ujmowane przez różnych autorów w publikacjach pedagogicznych oraz poddano analizie najważniejsze regulacje zawarte w podstawie programowej wychowania przedszkolnego. Nakreślono obowiązujące regulacje prawne zawarte w prawie oświatowym, dotyczące innowacyjności i możliwości podejmowania innowacyjnych działań przez nauczycieli, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem grupy zawodowej nauczycieli edukacji przedszkolnej. Wskazano, że celowość, planowość i nowatorstwo to jedne z ważniejszych kryteriów, które należy uwzględnić podczas innowacyjnych rozwiązań. Podsumowanie stanowi terminologiczne określenie zasadności wyboru programu lub innowacji do realizacji przez nauczycieli edukacji przedszkolnej.

Introduction

Pedagogical innovations designed by teachers themselves or by the management of kindergartens as a subject of education are an extremely important and significant challenge for contemporary education. The introduction of new improvements and better solutions is undoubtedly aimed at increasing the quality and effectiveness of pedagogical work in both didactic and educational aspects, but it also concerns self-education.

The multiplicity, diversity and attractiveness of activities undertaken in kindergartens, as well as the high level of competition, indicate that it is even obligatory for contemporary institutions to create a variety of improvements that meet not only current social expectations, but also the interests of children and their parents.

Preschool education programme and core curriculum

Reflections on the difference between the concepts of programme and innovation should begin with a definition of the two, which is based on the core curriculum for preschool education. (Regulation..., 2017).

What we can find in the core curriculum is a compulsory set of requirements related to children's knowledge and skills that are necessary for them to start education at school. These requirements have been grouped into four areas of development: physical, emotional, social and cognitive. In turn, it is the responsibility of the preschool education teacher to implement the conditions, manner and tasks that are included in this document, as well as to prepare children to reach a level of school readiness that is adequate to their psychophysical capabilities. This is done through the implementation of the content included in the selected or independently developed programmes. At this point, it should be emphasised that the core curriculum for preschool education is a legal act that is universally applicable to all kindergartens throughout the country, established by the competent minister of education and upbringing, and all the elements contained therein are to be compulsorily included in preschool education programmes.

In turn, according to Article 3 (13b) of the Act on the Educational System of 7 September 1991 (Act..., 2022), we learn that a preschool education programme is a description of the way in which the objectives of upbringing or education and the content of teaching set out in the preschool education curriculum are achieved. Thus, it should be emphasized that, according to Article 22a, item 4 and 5 of this act, the preschool education programme may include contents that exceed the scope of the contents established in the core curriculum for preschools, but it must be adjusted to the children's needs and abilities.

Preschool education teachers can use programmes offered by publishers or programme development institutions. They may use programmes developed by other teachers or they may construct their own programme. At this point, it should be emphasised that it is the duty of teachers, in accordance with Article 22a (1), (6) and (7) of the Act (2022), to present a preschool education programme to the kindergarten headmaster, and the headmaster, after consultation with other teachers, implements the preschool education programme presented by the teacher (team of teachers) in the kindergarten.

Supplementing the existing regulations with valuable hints contained in pedagogical literature, we learn that the programme establishes what knowledge, skills and habits of permanent cognitive and educational value and in what order the pupils are to acquire them. In addition, it should include introductory remarks, teaching material (basic information, concepts, laws, theories, principles, methods, techniques of

work from the scientific discipline corresponding to the given subject), remarks on the implementation of the programme and indications on methods, organisational forms and means enabling effective implementation of the teaching material covered by the programme (Kupisiewicz, 2000).

To understand the difference between the programme and the core curriculum for preschool education, it may be helpful to note that the core curriculum gives direction, i. e. determines what to achieve and what to teach/learn, whereas the programme indicates and describes how to do it. While the core curriculum for preschool education is a universally applicable document for all preschool establishments in Poland, preschool education programmes can be numerous and their foundations can be a variety of pedagogical concepts.

In summary, the core curriculum for preschool education indicates the goals and achievements of the child necessary for each preschool institution in the country, while in the preschool education programme the content can be structured according to the author's concept, taking into account, among other things, the methodological description, the principles of diagnosis and evaluation, and the expected outcomes.

Innovativeness in educational regulations

Innovativeness is integral to the functioning of a kindergarten. For some time now, undertaking innovative solutions that serve and meet children's needs and interests, and are tailored to their psychophysical capabilities, has become easier and simpler due to the abolition, as of 1 September 2017, of numerous formal requirements related to their widespread implementation in educational institutions. Thus, it is conducive to unleashing teachers' creativity and the creativity of their pupils. As of 2017, the entire procedure – from the moment the idea is conceived, through its implementation and fulfilment, to the conclusion of the pedagogical innovation – is quick and easy. It no longer requires so much external paperwork, and the applicable procedures are created and implemented within a given institution.

Until 2017, teachers were to comply with the Regulation of the Minister of National Education and Sport of 9 April 2002 on the conditions for conducting innovative and experimental activity by public schools and institutions (Regulation..., 2002). However, in accordance with the new act on educational law of 14 December 2016 (Act..., 2021), the issues related to innovativeness were regulated.

Since 1 September 2017, innovative activity has been an integral part of the organisation's work and, by removing formal requirements in its objectives, such activity should trigger the creativity of teachers and their pupils. There is now no longer a requirement to report pedagogical innovations to the school superintendent or to

the bodies that run the organisation, as was the case previously. Each preschool institution decides for itself which innovations it will implement, how it will document these activities and how it will inform interested parties of its innovative endeavours. To this end, it develops its own innovation documentation and procedure within the framework of its internal regulations. The only requirement that currently exists for the notification of pedagogical innovations to the leading authority is due to the allocation of additional funding for its implementation.

The current educational law regulates, at the statutory level, the provisions related to innovativeness, which also apply to preschool facilities (Act..., 2021):

1. Article 1, point 18 points to the need for the educational system to ensure that children develop entrepreneurial attitudes and creativity that foster their active participation in economic life, including through the use of innovative curricular, organisational or methodological solutions in the educational process.
2. Article 44, para. 1 and 2, point 3 inform us that kindergartens undertake necessary actions to create optimum conditions for the fulfilment of didactic, upbringing and care activities and other statutory activities, to provide each child with conditions necessary for his/her development, to improve the quality of work of the kindergarten and its organizational development. According to this, there is an obligation for kindergartens to create conditions for the development and activity, including the creativity of children.
3. Article 55(1)(4) specifies the possibility of supporting teachers in the framework of pedagogical supervision by inspiring them to improve existing or implement new solutions in the educational process, using innovative curricular, organisational or methodological measures aimed at developing children's competences.
4. In Article 68 par. 1 pt. 9 we read that there is a duty on the part of the kindergarten's director to create conditions for the work of: volunteers, associations and other organisations, in particular scout organisations, whose statutory goal is educational activity or expansion and enrichment of the forms of didactic, educational, caring and innovative activity of a school or another educational institution.
5. Article 86(1) provides that, with the exception of political parties and organisations, associations and other organisations may operate in kindergarten, in particular scout organisations, whose statutory objective is educational activity or expansion and enrichment of the kindergarten's teaching, educational, caring and innovative activities.

Thus, legal regulations concerning innovative activity have been transferred to the level of the Act on Educational Law, at the same time resigning from specifying, by way of a regulation, the conditions for its conduct by educational institutions. At present,

each educational institution decides on its own on the formalities for conducting innovation in the kindergarten with a view to improving existing or implementing new solutions in the educational process, using innovative curricular, organisational or methodological activities aimed at developing the competences of preschoolers.

Pedagogical dimension of innovation in preschool education

For a long time, innovativeness has been addressed in various fields of science with both interdisciplinary and multifaceted dimensions. There is a great deal of public interest in innovation, and it is therefore obligatory for preschool institutions to undertake a variety of improvements that meet not only current societal expectations, but also children's interests.

According to Ewa Smak, from the perspective of pedagogy, taking up innovative solutions "consists in the conscious introduction of a novelty to the existing fragment of pedagogical reality, which determines the achievement of better results in relation to the existing ways, means, forms and effort" (Smak, 1997, p. 61). Dorota Ekiert-Grabowska (1989, p. 46) believes that pedagogical innovations define changes containing an element of novelty, consciously introduced into the school system in order to improve educational practice. Józef Pólturzycki (2002, pp. 45, 47) emphasises that when we speak of pedagogical innovation, we mean any change in the field of upbringing and the enrichment of pedagogical practice values with new ideas. He adds that pedagogical innovations may concern the school system, the means of teachers' work, various forms of students' activity, the aims, content and conditions of education. With reference to educational needs, the definition by Agnieszka Leszcz-Krysiak seems to be adequate as it treats pedagogical innovations as:

[...] conscious, new and purposeful action aimed at bringing about positive changes aimed at improving the teaching-learning process, solving educational problems and shaping the student's personality. A teacher who wants to implement pedagogical innovations must therefore be aware of the goals he or she wants to achieve, and the impact that these innovative activities will have on the teaching-learning outcomes of individual students (Leszcz-Krysiak, 2017, p. 154).

A review of the literature on definitional approaches to innovation indicates shortcomings regarding clear definitions of innovation, which are undoubtedly conditioned by the desire to emphasise various innovative aspects. However, it is also possible to find a constant dimension of this approach, which treats innovation as novelty, improvement of activities, purposeful change that results in progress and creative

reflection, as well as constructive criticism of the existing situation and striving for a better quality of life.

The analysed approaches to innovation indicate that already in 1986 Daniela Ruskowska defined innovation as “changes [...] contributing to development” (1986, p. 8). Therefore, already in this view, it should be emphasised that the essence of innovation is that it should be something new, which will express itself in development. Taking into account the innovations undertaken in preschool education, we think about new, better, improved activities that are novel and innovative – first of all for the children, but also for the teachers who want to improve and increase the quality of their work and, consequently, the quality of the institution’s functioning. Therefore, the analysis of this definition points to a twofold dimension of innovation:

1. novelty – reflected in the teacher’s planned and prepared, and then performed tasks;
2. development – reflected, first of all, in children’s knowledge and skills, but also in the teacher’s competence.

Zbigniew Pietrasiński’s definition shows us another important feature of innovation. The author indicates that “innovations are changes deliberately introduced by man [...], which consist in replacing the hitherto existing states of affairs with others that are evaluated positively in the light of specific criteria and which, in sum, make up progress” (Pietrasiński 1971, p. 9). In this view of innovation, attention should be paid to the purposefulness of the changes introduced, which will make up progress. Similarly, in preschool education, according to the cited approach we consider it in two dimensions:

1. Purposefulness of the changes made, i. e. thoughtful, planned, meticulously designed activities that are based on the needs and/or interests and/or psycho-physical capacities of children, and not, as is sometimes done in educational practice, on a more or less justified desire or ability of the teacher resulting from his/her needs and/or interests. Thus, the purposefulness of innovation manifests itself not only in meticulousness in the initial phase, i.e. in the planning and preparation of innovative activities, but also in a reliable and thoughtful diagnosis of the needs and interests of the recipients of the innovative solutions offered;
2. Progress – which is considered in terms of the growth of children’s knowledge and skills, but also in terms of teacher competence. The evaluation of effects is therefore extremely important in this case.

In turn, Stanisław Palka’s approach goes one step further and defines pedagogical innovation as “an intentional introduction of either programme, or methodological or organisational changes, which are an attempt to move away from an integrated, template, routine model of education towards alternative, unconventional activities

that activate students and attract them cognitively” (Palka, 1999, p. 111). Thus, what we have in mind in this case is as follows:

1. Programme innovations in which the changes concern the programmes of educational activities. These may be innovations related to the expansion of programmes with new content (Dubel et al., 2014, p. 58), but they may also involve the whole school system, a level, a field of study, one level at a local, regional or national scale (Przyborowska, 2013, p. 54).
2. Organisational innovations that concern the organisation of education, upbringing or care. These can be changes in the organisation of school/preschool life e. g. the number of children/students in a group/class, the duration of classes/lessons, but also the organisation of activities e. g. changes in the arrangement of tables/benches. This type of innovation also includes cooperation with the community and the organisation of educational management.
3. Methodological innovations, i. e. those in which the changes concern the methods of didactic, educational or caring work. An example of this type of innovation is the use of new teaching-learning methods, a new way of presenting material, new forms of work in the field of introducing, as well as consolidating or checking knowledge and skills. Such innovation includes all kinds of changes concerning the methods and forms of work with children.

Moreover, among the rich variety of approaches and classifications of pedagogical innovations taking into account the preschool education stage, it is worth taking into account the traditional functions of the preschool and distinguishing the following types of innovations:

1. didactic (educational) innovations that improve the teaching-learning process. They may concern all elements of education, i.e. the aims and content of education, principles and methods of work, didactic means used and organisational forms of teaching;
2. upbringing innovations the task of which is to solve educational problems, but also to create situations stimulating the development of pupils’ personalities, building an atmosphere conducive to learning. This type of innovation can refer to any changes in the goals, content, principles, methods, means and forms of pedagogical interactions (Bender, 2016, p. 5).

The above-cited approaches to pedagogical innovation by various authors and their analysis indicate that it is a kind of novelty intentionally undertaken by the teacher. It manifests itself in the reliable and purposeful planning and preparation of innovative solutions that are methodological and/or organisational and/or programme-related, which results from the diagnosis of the needs, interests and psychophysical possibilities of children, and which meets their expectations. As a result, the innovative solutions undertaken contribute to the growth of children’s knowledge and skills,

improvement and enhancement of the teacher's competences, and, consequently, they improve the quality of work in the kindergarten.

Thus, innovativeness is a kind of search for more effective solutions in teaching and learning work, and it involves creativity. It requires creativity and pedagogical reflection at every stage of the teaching work – both at the planning stage and during the implementation and evaluation of the results, which must be kept in mind at the final stage.

It must be emphasised, therefore, that, in pedagogy, innovations are closely linked to the educational innovation of teachers who, in their assumptions, contribute to pedagogical progress. In the period of particular concern for the good quality of the work of kindergartens and preschool teachers, innovations are an important factor in inspiring all subjects of education (teachers, children and their parents) to search for new solutions. It needs to be emphasised that today's preschool education needs professional teachers who are open to rapid changes and who are constantly looking for new ways to foster effective education. It needs people with passion who want to create, act, and meet the needs and expectations of their pupils. It needs people who are passionate about implementing new and better solutions; who show a high level of creativity; who are constantly improving their own work, enriching it with new solutions and ideas, enabling them to improve the quality of their work with pupils, thus contributing to their development and progress. It needs creators of the quality of work who are reflective, creative and willing to act and change the reality. It needs teachers who are not afraid of change, but, on the contrary, who want to be the initiators and creators of change. Contemporary preschool education needs innovators.

Conclusion

Many preschool education teachers wonder and seek justification in making a choice of a programme or innovation. I think that, in accordance with the above regulations, it is necessary to show them and conclude that a programme (in a nutshell) is a description of how to achieve the goals of upbringing and education in terms of children's readiness for starting the primary school. Such goals are established in the core curriculum for preschool education, while an innovation is a conscious, creative introduction of programme-related, organisational or methodological improvements aimed at developing innovative solutions. They may concern:

- changing the existing solutions;
- repairing, transforming or modifying the solutions that require it;
- expanding or supplementing the solutions that are inadequate;

- elimination of undesirable solutions and replacing them with new, different and better ones;
- adaptation of the existing solutions to progressive changes;
- enhancement of good solutions.

Thus, innovation can include programme solutions, and a programme can have the characteristics of innovation. However, innovation is a broader concept than the programme. It does not have to be limited to the guidelines of the core curriculum of preschool education, but it can include other spheres of preschool activities.

In addition, it should be emphasized that every innovation is a change, but not every change is an innovation. Pedagogical innovation is conditioned by the legal, didactic and educational, and personnel status of a particular kindergarten. Therefore, the same activity in one kindergarten will be an innovation, while in another it will not have such a character, obtaining, for example, the status of a programme.

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