



Pedagogical Contexts 2020, No. 2(15)
www.kontekstypedagogiczne.pl
ISSN 2300-6471
pp. 167–182
<https://doi.org/10.19265/kp.2020.2.15.276>



ORIGINAL PAPER

Received: 30.05.2020
Accepted: 29.06.2020



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CONCERNS OF PARENTS OF SIX AND SEVEN- YEAR-OLD CHILDREN STARTING SCHOOL. SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

OBAWY RODZICÓW DZIECI SZĘŚCIO- I SIĘDMIOLETNICH ROZPOCZYNAJĄCYCH EDUKACJĘ SZKOLNĄ. KOMUNIKAT Z BADAŃ

Keywords:

school start, school
education, six-year-
old child, parents'
concerns

Summary: School start is an important moment not only for the child but also for their parents. They need to make sure that their child's basic needs are met in the institution where they would be placed and that all activities would be carried out in consideration of the child's abilities.

The article presents the results of research which aimed to identify the concerns of parents of six and seven-year-old children starting school and to determine the relationship between the occurrence of these concerns and parents' acceptance or rejection of the assumptions of the reform lowering the compulsory school age (expressed by their decision to send a child to school at the age of six or seven).

The experience of the Polish educational system and the reforms it has introduced have shown that if parents do not accept the changes and see them as positive for their children, they are able to block them effectively.

Słowa kluczowe:
start szkolny, edukacja
szkolna, dziecko
sześćcioletnie, obawy
rodziców

Streszczenie: Rozpoczynanie nauki w szkole jest ważnym momentem nie tylko dla dziecka, lecz także dla jego rodziców. Muszą mieć oni pewność, że w miejscu, do którego trafi ich dziecko, zostaną zaspokajane jego podstawowe potrzeby, a wszystkie realizowane działania będą na miarę jego możliwości.

W artykule zaprezentowano wyniki badań, których celem było poznanie obaw towarzyszących rodzicom dzieci sześciu- i siedmioletnich rozpoczynających edukację szkolną oraz określenie zależności między występowaniem tych obaw a akceptacją bądź odrzuceniem przez rodziców założeń reformy obniżającej wiek realizacji obowiązku szkolnego (wyrażonymi decyzją o posłaniu dziecka do szkoły w wieku sześciu lub siedmiu lat).

Doświadczenia rodzimego systemu oświaty i reform wprowadzanych w jego zakresie pokazały, że jeżeli rodzice nie akceptują zmian i nie widzą w nich pozytywnych efektów dla swoich dzieci, są w stanie je skutecznie zablokować.

Introduction

The school is an organised structure whose members are not only students and teachers but also parents. Each of these groups faces important tasks to ensure that the educational process runs smoothly and at the best possible level. Without the involvement of all these parties – and, above all, without their acceptance of the activities conducted in the school and, even more broadly, within the educational system – it seems impossible. “Measures taken for the good of the child and their successful development require a partnership of adults: parents, teachers, representatives of local authorities, and politicians” (Bałachowicz, 2017, p. 15).

Nowadays, it is necessary for the co-creators and school authorities to be aware that parents are needed. This involves changing the rules of cooperation and the attitude towards parents of teachers and those responsible for the shape of education, as well as redefining the whole school philosophy (Dzierzgowska, 2001). Teachers and parents must reformulate their roles and tasks. They undoubtedly have a common goal, which is primarily to support the child in their development and to make the most of their potential. Without the support of parents, it is extremely difficult to achieve this goal.

In light of the constant changes taking place in the Polish educational system, it is also worth noting that every party of the modern school – the headmaster, teachers, parents, and students – should learn to conduct dialogue with the other parties, to construct and implement ideas and action programmes together, and to react appropriately to top-down changes. In-depth understanding and acceptance of these changes will allow for at least partial reduction of fear and resistance to their introduction. Each party should also change their attitude towards the role they have played at school so far – from the closed, formal, and often authoritarian one, to one that is open to and ready for changes and accepting compromises (Banasiak, 2013, pp. 46–47). The parents of students and other people connected with the school's activities form the school community – “an organisational learning environment [that] will not be created without their involvement” (Fura, 2007, p. 220) and without their approval of the activities carried out within the school.

Nowadays, when planning and implementing various educational or reform projects, it is very important to take into account the opinion and will of parents who have the power to block them effectively. This was the case, for example, with the introduction of the reform which lowered the compulsory schooling age from seven to six years of age. Parents have shown that they are a force, and without their consent, it is not possible to implement any measures planned from above. Therefore, it is crucial to learn about parents' concerns in order to be able to minimise them and respond to them in an appropriate way.

State of research on the issue

The results of opinion polls carried out over the last 15 years on the lowering of the compulsory schooling age from seven to six years of age indicate that the vast majority of respondents (not only the parents of the children directly affected) are against this solution. The research also reveals that, with the passage of time devoted to preparing schools for the tasks related to the education of children one year younger, the respondents' perception of the greatest difficulties associated with it has changed. Initially, at the stage of preparation of the reform, attention was drawn to the impossibility of its success due to the unpreparedness of schools; as the years passed, however, this argument gave way to the concerns about the lack of readiness of six-year-old children to start their school education (Romełka-Fraćkiewicz, 2017, p. 69).

A number of studies have also been carried out among the parents of children on the threshold of school education concerning the advisability of an early start in school and the factors determining its effectiveness.

Marta Moczarska and Dorota Rojek (2011) discussed parents' arguments against the idea of lowering the schooling age to six years of age. The respondents pointed out, among other things, the emotional immaturity of the children, shortening their childhood through earlier education, inadequate infrastructure of school premises, problems with safety, and the hindering of the natural need for six-year-old children to move (Moczarska & Rojek, 2011, pp. 21–25).

In turn, the results of Leokadia Szymczyk and Dorota Luber's (2011) study conducted among parents of future first-grade pupils indicate that the majority of respondents consider six-year-old children not yet ready to start school (67% of mothers – $n = 472$; 69% of fathers – $n = 123$). The greatest deficiencies in children were noticed by the respondents in the following areas which determine their preparation for school education: responsibility, taking care of their own and others' safety, mathematical skills and social skills. The areas considered to be highly developed in these children, on the other hand, include physical fitness, language skills and self-service activities (Szymczyk & Luber, 2011, pp. 44–48). Most of the parents surveyed also claimed that the school which the child is to attend is not prepared to admit six-year-olds to the first grade, as it often does not meet the conditions for a successful school start. According to the respondents, the most important of these conditions include having separate classrooms, toys, didactic aids adjusted to the level of six-year-olds, adaptation of lavatories and changing rooms to the child's height, providing many hours of care (from 6.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.) and the possibility to provide food for the child in the form of three meals. Many respondents also considered the high competence of the teacher to work with six-year-old children, and the need to provide the child with specialist care at school (an educator, a psychologist, a speech therapist) (Szymczyk & Luber, 2011, pp. 87–89) as necessary conditions for a successful school start.

Likewise, research carried out by Elżbieta Jaszczyszyn (2010) shows the important tasks that parents believe the school should carry out in relation to their children in order to provide them with an optimal school start. These include, among others the following: guaranteeing children's physical safety and meals; the possibility of using playgrounds; developing children's independence, responsibility and self-confidence; transferring knowledge in a way

adapted to the pupils' developmental capabilities; sharing knowledge which would enable them to effectively continue their education at higher levels of education; and offering high quality education conducted by qualified staff (Jaszczyszyn, 2010, p. 104).

In turn, research carried out by Daria Jakielczyk, Anna Stecka and Ewelina Symonowicz (2014) revealed parents' concerns about their children starting school early resulting from the belief that the level of development of a six-year-old child is insufficient to meet the requirements for learning at school. The authors divided these concerns into five categories: 1) cultural changes (e.g., shortening of childhood, imposing obligations on the child too quickly); 2) insufficient development of the child in the social, emotional and psychomotor sphere (e.g., difficulties in coping with the new situation, misunderstanding the norms prevailing at school, failure to understand the teacher's instructions and lack of the ability to adapt to them, problems with holding a pen to write appropriate signs); 3) the child's activity focused on playing rather than on learning (e.g., development through play and activity rather than through sitting at a desk and carrying out tasks); 4) too much stress and emotional strain on the child (e.g., difficult curriculum, noise in the school building); 5) attachment to parents (e.g., fear of strangers). The surveyed parents also pointed out the inadequacy of the curriculum to the capabilities and needs of six-year-old children, the lack of competence of the teaching staff and poor cooperation with teachers, especially as regards the planning of an individual educational pathway for a particular child (Jakielczyk, Stecka & Symonowicz, 2013, pp. 161–164).

On the basis of her own research, Danuta Waloszek (2013) put forward the thesis that, unfortunately, parents (and not only those of six-year-old children) are afraid of school. Out of 76 parents (mainly mothers) asked about the most important issues related to their child's transition to school, as many as 51 indicated the necessity of abandoning play in favour of learning. At the same time, most of the respondents, when asked about the strengths of their children, were unable to determine what they were most interested in, what they learned with passion and what they learned out of compulsion. Similarly, none of the respondents were able to determine the type of loss associated with lack of play after the child went to school. The parents also did not really know how the school could actually harm their children, but they repeated press and television slogans about it taking their childhood away (Waloszek, 2013, p. 14).

Method

The empirical research presented in this article is part of a larger research project concerning the attitudes of parents and teachers to changes in early childhood education in Poland (based on the example of the reform introducing the lowering of the compulsory schooling age from seven to six years of age).

The subject of the study was the concerns of parents of six and seven-year-old children starting school. Its goal was to identify and present the concerns parents had before their six and seven-year-old children started primary school and to determine the relationship between the existence of those concerns and the parents' acceptance¹ or rejection² of the objectives of the reform (expressed in their decision to send the child to school at the age of six or seven).

The following research problems were formulated:

1. What concerns do the parents of six and seven-year-old children under examination have about their schooling?
2. Is there a correlation, and in what areas, between parents' acceptance or rejection of the educational reform assumptions and their concerns about their six and seven-year-old children starting school?

The research was quantitative in nature. It was carried out using the diagnostic survey method, a survey technique, with the use of a questionnaire. The CAWI method (*Computer-Assisted Web Interview*) and the Internet survey technique were used to collect data. It is usually employed when collecting

¹ Acceptance was expressed by the parents' decision to send their six-year-old child to school in grade one, and concerned children born in 2007 and 2008. The parents of children born in 2007 still had a choice; children born in the first half of 2008 had to start school at the age of six in accordance with the reform; children born in the second half of 2008 could, but did not have to, start school at six in the school year 2014/2015. It was also seen as a sign of parents' acceptance of the reform that children from the first half of 2008 started school although their parents could have taken action to postpone it. The second dimension of acceptance, understood as the perception of the respondents that it is reasonable to reduce the compulsory schooling age from seven to six, concerned the parents of children from 2007, 2008 and 2009.

² Rejection of the reform was expressed by the decision of parents to send a child aged seven to school. It could have concerned the parents of children born in 2007, who started school in the first grade at the age of seven (optional), and the parents of children born in the first half of 2008 – children with postponements (did not start school at the age of six). The second dimension of rejection, understood as recognising the lack of legitimacy of lowering the compulsory schooling age from seven to six in the perception of respondents, concerned the parents of children from 2007, 2008 and 2009.

information in quantitative market research and opinion polls, where the respondent is asked to complete the survey in electronic form. The author decided on this solution due to the conviction that this way the same actions as in traditional data collection can be carried out in a cheaper, faster and more effective way, and that the possibility of obtaining a number of questionnaires guaranteeing a conclusion with a low statistical error rate is greater. This method of data collection also made it possible to obtain reliable information because it was technically impossible to move on to the next questionnaire question without completing the previous one, and also because the respondents could do this anonymously, had the opportunity to concentrate and think, and could complete the questionnaire at a time convenient for them.

The quantitative research involved 524 people – parents of children born in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Among them:

- 130 (24.81%) respondents had children born in 2007;
- 199 (37.98%) respondents had children born in 2008;
- 195 (37.21%) of respondents had children born in 2009.

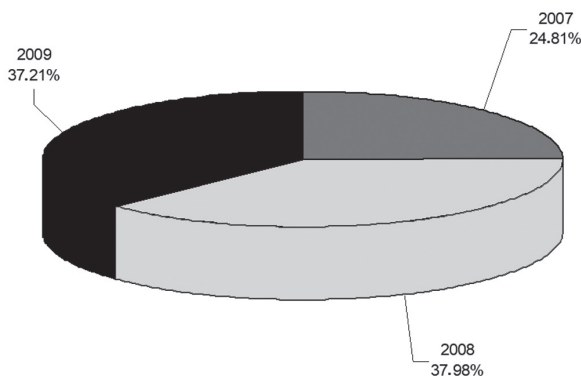


Figure 1.

Percentage distribution of respondents by year of birth of their child ($n = 524$).

Source: own research.

Results

Starting first grade is a breakthrough moment in the child's life. The way in which the child adapts to the new situation at the beginning of their school

education may be important for their further functioning (Klus-Stańska, 2004, p. 15). It is an important moment not only for the children themselves, but also for their parents, who are more and more often aware that the child's educational success is largely determined by a successful school start. These words can be confirmed by the opposition of parents, manifested in many social actions, to the introduction of the reform lowering the compulsory schooling age from seven to six years of age. The arguments put forward against this solution focused mainly on the lack of psychophysical readiness of a six-year-old to start school and the inadequate preparation of schools to carry out educational tasks suitable to the needs of children at this age. It is worth considering which issues were most important for parents and which were at the root of their opposition and decisions. What were parents most concerned about as regards the need to move their children to the next stage of education?

Table 1

Parents' concerns in relation to their children's school start (n = 524)

		Child				2009	Total
		went to school in 2008 as a six-year-old	did not go to school as a six-year-old in 2007	did not go to school as a six-year-old in 2008			
Concern that the child is not emotionally ready	Number	27	87	63	42	140	359
	% in the column	58.7%	65.9%	75.0%	62.7%	71.8%	
	% together with Total	5.2%	16.6%	12.0%	8.0%	26.7%	68.5%
Concern that the child would have difficulties in establishing contacts	Number	11	43	18	17	66	155
	% in the column	23.9%	32.6%	21.4%	25.4%	33.8%	
	% together with Total	2.1%	8.2%	3.4%	3.2%	12.6%	29.6%
Concern that the child cannot cope with learning to read and write	Number	12	48	15	28	87	190
	% in the column	26.1%	36.4%	17.9%	41.8%	44.6%	
	% together with Total	2.3%	9.2%	2.9%	5.3%	16.6%	36.3%
Concern that the child would not have a sense of security	Number	20	67	45	41	133	306
	% in the column	43.5%	50.8%	53.6%	61.2%	68.2%	
	% together with Total	3.8%	12.8%	8.6%	7.8%	25.4%	58.4%

Concern that the child would be overburdened with learning and homework	Number	19	78	44	49	143	333
	% in the column	41.3%	59.1%	52.4%	73.1%	73.3%	
	% together with Total	3.6%	14.9%	8.4%	9.4%	27.3%	63.5%
Concern that the child would not be helped if they have learning difficulties	Number	14	33	38	39	114	238
	% in the column	30.4%	25.0%	45.2%	58.2%	58.5%	
	% together with Total	2.7%	6.3%	7.3%	7.4%	21.8%	45.4%
Concern that the teacher would not individualise work in the class team	Number	14	65	52	49	148	328
	% in the column	30.4%	49.2%	61.9%	73.1%	75.9%	
	% together with Total	2.7%	12.4%	9.9%	9.4%	28.2%	62.6%
Concern that there would be no division between younger and older children in the recreation room	Number	11	38	36	33	108	226
	% in the column	23.9%	28.8%	42.9%	49.3%	55.4%	
	% together with Total	2.1%	7.3%	6.9%	6.3%	20.6%	43.1%
Concern that the quality of the free primer would be poor	Number	9	55	35	38	96	233
	% in the column	19.6%	41.7%	41.7%	56.7%	49.2%	
	% together with Total	1.7%	10.5%	6.7%	7.3%	18.3%	44.5%
Concern that classes would be mixed (six- and seven-year-olds)	Number	11	58	37	36	122	264
	% in the column	23.9%	43.9%	44.0%	53.7%	62.6%	
	% together with Total	2.1%	11.1%	7.1%	6.9%	23.3%	50.4%
Other concerns	Number	3	8	5	4	19	39
	% in the column	6.5%	6.1%	6.0%	6.0%	9.7%	
	% together with Total	.6%	1.5%	1.0%	.8%	3.6%	7.4%
I have not had / do not have any concerns	Number	6	8	5	1	5	25
	% in the column	13.0%	6.1%	6.0%	1.5%	2.6%	
	% together with Total	1.1%	1.5%	1.0%	.2%	1.0%	4.8%
Summary	Number	46	132	84	67	195	524
	% together with Total	8.8%	25.2%	16.0%	12.8%	37.2%	100.0%

Source: own research.

Of the parents surveyed, 68.5% expressed concerns about their child's lack of emotional readiness to start school and 63.5% were afraid that their child would be overburdened with learning and homework; 62.6% of parents were also afraid that the teacher would not be able to individualize the work in a large class team and 58.4% worried that the child would not be provided with a sense of security at school, while 44.5% of the respondents expressed their concerns about the quality of the free primer.

Respondents also expressed their concerns as regards the following factors:

- Both six-year-old and seven-year-old children would be taught in the same classes – 55.4% of respondents;
- A child might not receive appropriate help if they have learning difficulties – 45.4% of respondents;
- There would be no division into younger and older children in the recreation room – 43.1% of respondents;
- The child would not be able to cope with learning to read and write – 36.3% of respondents;
- The child would have difficulties in establishing contacts with other children – 29.6% of respondents.

The respondents also listed their concerns that the child would not sit quietly at their desk during the lesson; that the child would experience discrimination on religious grounds; that the school would prove unprepared (e.g., hangers too high in the cloakroom, toilets of a wrong size, no playground); that the child would not have a suitable, good teacher; that the child would not develop cognitively and intellectually; that the chaos and noise in the school would increase the child's fatigue; that the child would turn out to be the smallest, would stand out and be bullied by older colleagues. In addition, parents were concerned about the lack of the daily walks they have in kindergarten; that there would be chaos and struggles for places in the canteen; that in the higher grades (II–VI) the child would no longer be treated preferentially; that the school would have to adopt a two-shift system; and that the child would feel bored in the recreation room and that their natural curiosity about the world would be hindered. Some respondents expressed concerns that the child would not be interested in learning, that they would be bored at school, and that the teacher would not adapt their requirements to the level of development of the pupil and would, therefore, not understand and satisfy the child's needs. Respondents also had concerns that the child would be assessed and compared with others, and that they would be discouraged from learning because of the

difficulties they would experience. Some parents were also concerned about the low level of education, the need to use a free “tacky” textbook,³ and the lack of proper preparation of the reform.

Less than five percent of the parents surveyed did not have any concerns about their children’s start of school.

Analysing the data (Table 1), it can be seen that parents of children born in 2009 had the greatest concerns. Interestingly, although the parents of children born in 2008 also had a high level of concern, they decided to send their children to school at the age of six.

The next analysis concerned the relationship between the existence of fears/concerns parents had as regards their child’s starting school and their acceptance or rejection of the reform assumptions. Figure 2 shows a comparison of averages. The indices were calculated for the parent groups listed in two dimensions:

- First: acceptance/rejection – group defined by the decision to send or not to send a six-year-old child to school;
- Second: acceptance/rejection – group defined on the basis of their declarations of either the recognition of the legitimacy of lowering the compulsory schooling age from seven to six years of age or the lack thereof.

The data in Figure 2 show a comparison of indices indicating the potential relationship between the concerns of parents in different groups and their acceptance or rejection of the reform as expressed in whether they sent their child to school at the age of six or seven. The indices are a reference to the proportion of responses by a particular group to the responses of the total number of respondents. The greater the deviation from 100, the greater the tendency for a group to differ in opinion from the total number of respondents, which may indicate a dependency. The more the index value exceeds 100, the higher the respondents assessed the significance of a given concern for them in relation to the total number of respondents, which may indicate its impact on their decision.

³ The actual statements of respondents.

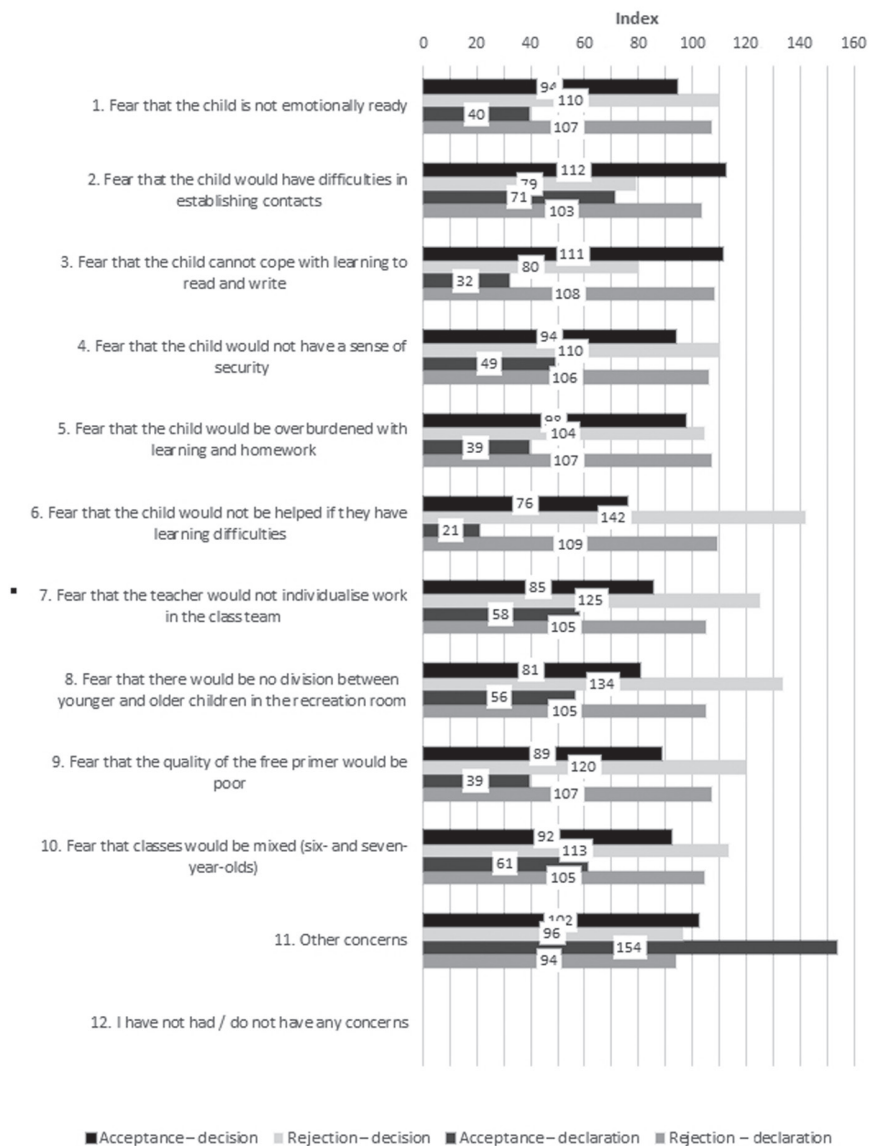


Figure 2.

Acceptance or rejection of the assumptions of the reform by the surveyed parents and their concerns about their children starting education in the first grade – comparison of averages.

Source: own research.

The greatest dependency was observed between the following parents' concerns:

- that the child would not be helped if they have learning difficulties;
- that there would be no division between younger and older children in the recreation room;
- that the teacher would not individualise their work in the class team;
- that the child would have difficulty making contact;
- that the child cannot cope with learning to read and write;
- that the quality of the free primer is poor

– and their acceptance or rejection of the reform, expressed in whether or not the six-year-old child is sent to school. It can be assumed that it was precisely these concerns that largely influenced parents' decisions not to start schooling their children at the age of six.

Interestingly, stronger dependencies between concerns and acceptance or rejection of the reform have been observed in the area of declarations. Particularly noteworthy is the high impact on these declarations of the concern about the child's lack of emotional readiness to start school. This element has a relatively lower impact (than the ones mentioned earlier) on the actual decision on the age at which the child would start school.

Conclusions

The child's starting school can cause a lot of anxiety for parents. The results of the research indicate that most respondents are concerned about their child's lack of emotional readiness for it. However, we should consider whether or not this is a subjective conviction of the parents themselves and what the grounds for this conviction are – is it confirmed by research conducted in a psychological-educational counselling centre or is it a result of social media campaigns conducted on a large scale?

Other concerns that the parents of children starting school had include overburdening children with learning and homework, lack of assistance if the child has learning difficulties, and a failure to adapt methods of work to the abilities and needs of firstgraders. Parents also feared the emergence of difficulties in the child's adaptation to new conditions, which may result in their feeling insecure, and difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships. The concerns of the parents were also connected with the teacher's inability to individualise work in too large class teams in which both six and seven-year-old children would

learn as well as with mixing first-grade pupils with older colleagues during breaks or in the recreation room. A large proportion of the parents surveyed were concerned about the low level of didactic materials that their children would learn from. Only less than 5% of the parents surveyed – 25 people – had no worries about their child starting school.

Although the largest number of respondents expressed concerns about their child's lack of emotional preparedness for schooling, the basic conclusion that can be drawn from the research is that, to a large extent, parents' concerns do not relate to what the children are like, but to what the school is like. It can be assumed that this is largely the result of the school being perceived through the prism of the parents' own experience – as an oppressive institution which is not very learner-friendly and does not take into account their needs and abilities but concentrates solely on the performance of specific tasks and the enforcement of the knowledge transferred.

The relationship that has been observed between the acceptance or rejection of the educational reform assumptions by the parents surveyed and the concerns they expressed about their six and seven-year-old children entering school were related mostly to the school as an institution where the child would not be helped in the event of possible learning difficulties and where the teacher would not be able to personalise their work according to the possibilities and needs of each pupil; an institution that would not provide recreation room activities adapted to the younger children, with the consequent disruption of the sense of security of first-grade pupils. This indicates that parents' concerns about the child and their successful school start are largely due to their lack of confidence in the proper preparation of the school for accepting six-year-old children, and not to their lack of faith in the child's own abilities.

It is worth considering, however, how much the successful schooling of a six or seven-year-old child depends on the preparation of the school, and how much it relies on the proper cooperation between the school and parents and their shared responsibility for the tasks facing the child.

Both teachers and parents describe tasks to the child, show them how these tasks can be done and how to communicate in every new situation. They encourage research, search for solutions and ask questions. They prepare the child for the new situation which school start is. They do not compare school methods and forms to the preschool ones but know what the essence of schooling is. So, they practice task memory, encourage the child to look

for the right strategy to do a task, lead them to the completion of the task, teach them to carefully listen to instructions and to recognize rules and signs. They do not destroy the child's passion and optimism. They know that if the child wants to learn, they need to be helped. They are involved in improving educational conditions. They do not fight for the defence of childhood, thus pushing the child away from the pleasure of learning. (Waloszek, 2013, p. 24)

The child – both at six and seven years of age – should be prepared not only for the role of a pupil at school and a member of a new school community, but also for the role of a pupil at home (Waloszek, 2013). The school cannot be expected to prepare them for each of these roles. On the one hand, one should take into account the expectations of parents, get to know and minimize their concerns about their children's transition from kindergarten to school, and on the other hand, prepare them for co-responsibility and effective involvement in the implementation of activities aimed at ensuring their child's successful school start.

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