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Analysis of the Educational Conditions of Two-Year-Old Children in Kindergartens in Slovakia: A Study from Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to find out teachers' opinions on selected conditions of upbringing and education of 2-year-old children in kindergartens in Slovakia. These may influence decisions about the admission of 2-year-old children to kindergarten and the quality of the conditions of their education. The research method was an online questionnaire, created and processed in SURVIO software. The survey was conducted in spring 2023. 594 kindergarten teachers completed the questionnaire. The results of the research showed that the family and the nursery are preferred for the upbringing and education of 2-year-old children (50.5%). If 2-year-old children are admitted to kindergarten, they must have certain prerequisites and be in a class with their peers (57.1%). They cannot wear diapers in kindergarten (79.7%) and have to cope with separation from parents (78.2%). 2-year-olds can be in kindergarten if a teacher's assistant works in the classroom (61.5%). Teachers (55.4%) do not prefer a health worker or caregiver with 2-year-olds (51%). For pedagogical work with 2-year-old children, teachers only need a secondary education (39.2%), some already have a bachelor's degree (27.2%). The results confirmed the insufficient methodological support of the issue by the state (60.5%) and the importance of the development of information and methodological material in the KEGA project No. 001UMB-4/2022. It will be used by teachers to improve the conditions for the education of two-year-old children in kindergartens in Slovakia.

1. Introduction

Institutional care for two-year-old children in the Slovak Republic is provided by two state departments. There is a dual system of early childhood education and care. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Family is responsible for facilities for children up to the age of three, including nurseries (Act No 448/2008). The Ministry of Education, Development and Youth is responsible, among other things, for pre-primary education for children in kindergartens. In this process, 2-year-old children may also be included. The kindergarten must have adequate capacity, personnel, material, and other conditions to admit a 2-year-old child (Act No. 245/2008).

Admission of 2-year-old children to kindergartens is possible, but this issue is not systematically addressed at the state level. There are no information, programme and methodological documents in this area. The headmistress is responsible for the admission of two-year-old children to kindergarten. She may consult the teachers. Two-year-olds have no legal right to a place in kindergarten. The admission of two-year-olds may, therefore, be influenced by the views and experiences of head teachers and teachers. Every kindergarten director in the country works with children. The head teacher is also a teacher and may have experience teaching two-year-olds. Teachers' views and experiences may also influence the quality



of the conditions of their education.

This research responds to this fact. The research sample consists of teachers. Legislation does not specify teachers' educational qualifications for working with two-year-old children. Teachers with secondary and university education work in kindergartens (Decree No. 173/2023). Teachers work according to the school curriculum. They develop it in accordance with the National Curriculum for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens (2022). There is no special curriculum or methodology for the education of two-year-old children at the state level. Teachers can create them for their pedagogical work.

In the school year 2023/2024, there are 8785 children under 3 in kindergartens. This is 5% of the total number of 178694 children in kindergartens in the Slovak Republic (Centre for Scientific and Technical Information of the Slovak Republic, Statistical Yearbook - Kindergartens). This is a high number of children, which gives the research significance. The research also respects the legislative status of addressing this issue so that the findings can be applied in practice. The aim of the research was to find out teachers' opinions on selected conditions of upbringing and education of two-year-old children in kindergartens in Slovakia.

2. Literature Review

Research shows that many teachers are opposed to enrolling two-year-olds in kindergarten. Vasinova et al. (2019) explored kindergarten teachers' views on the education of two-year-olds. They found that teachers' views on inclusion are negative regardless of experience, years of experience, or educational attainment.

Similar findings emerged from a joint study by researchers in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Lipnická et al., 2023). Half of the surveyed teachers in both countries expressed disapproval of enrolling 2-year-olds. Burkovičová's (2023) survey explored generational attitudes towards 2-year-olds in

kindergartens. Interviewees from three generations did not express a strong preference either way, but they did mention reasons why parents might choose kindergarten for their 2-year-olds. Fodorova's (2023) survey focused on kindergarten teachers' experiences with 2-year-olds' adaptation, emotional and social behaviors. Šebianová et al., (2023) investigated the preparedness of future kindergarten teachers to work with 2-year-olds. While students rated their competence positively, they lacked practical experience and expressed concerns about managing specific challenges associated with this age group.

This study, led by Professor Milena Lipnicka's team at Matej Bel University, investigates the opinions of Slovak teachers on selected conditions for educating and caring for 2-year-olds in kindergartens. The research employed various methods within the KEGA project No. 001UMB-4/2022. This study addresses one of the project's research questions: what are Slovak teachers' opinions on these specific conditions?

3. Methods

Applied research was conducted using a quantitative strategy. Its results are one of the bases for the creation of information and methodological materials for kindergarten teachers in the field of education and training of two-year-old children in kindergarten. The questionnaire provided answers to the research question. The questionnaire focused on the key conditions that, according to the school legislation, are considered crucial for the upbringing and education of two-year-old children in kindergarten (admission conditions, child's background, and staffing and material provision).

The research method was an online questionnaire created and processed in the SURVIO questionnaire software. The questionnaire was compiled by the project team. It contained 11 items. The first three questions asked about educational attainment, length of experience and position - director and teacher in the kindergarten. The fourth and fifth items were



dichotomous questions where respondents selected one of the yes/no answers. In five items (6th - 11th), respondents expressed opinions on a Likert scale (from 1-strong disagreement to 5-strong agreement).

The questionnaire was sent to the official addresses of all kindergartens in Slovakia. At that time, 17056 teachers, including principals, were working in Slovak kindergartens (Centre for Scientific and Technical Information of the Slovak Republic, Statistical Yearbook - Kindergartens). We assume that most school e-mail administrators did not forward the questionnaires to teachers' work or personal e-mails. This is a limitation of the research. Over a three-month period (Fall 2023), 904 respondents opened the

questionnaire, but 594 completed it. This represents 3.4% of kindergarten teachers in the country.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the distribution of respondents according to their education level. The majority of respondents (42.7%) hold a master's degree, followed by those with secondary education (42.7%). A smaller portion of respondents have a university bachelor's degree (15.2%), and an even smaller portion holds a doctoral degree (2.4%). It is interesting to note that despite a significant number of respondents having a master's degree, over half (50.5%) believe that 2-year-old children should not be admitted to kindergarten.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents.

Education level	Frequency	Percentage
Secondary education	253	42.7%
University - Bachelor's degree	90	15.2%
Higher education - Master's degree	236	39.8%
Doctoral degree	14	2.4%
The length of teaching experience of the respondents ranged from one year to 49 years.		
According to the respondents (50.5%), 2-year-old children should not be admitted to kindergarten.		

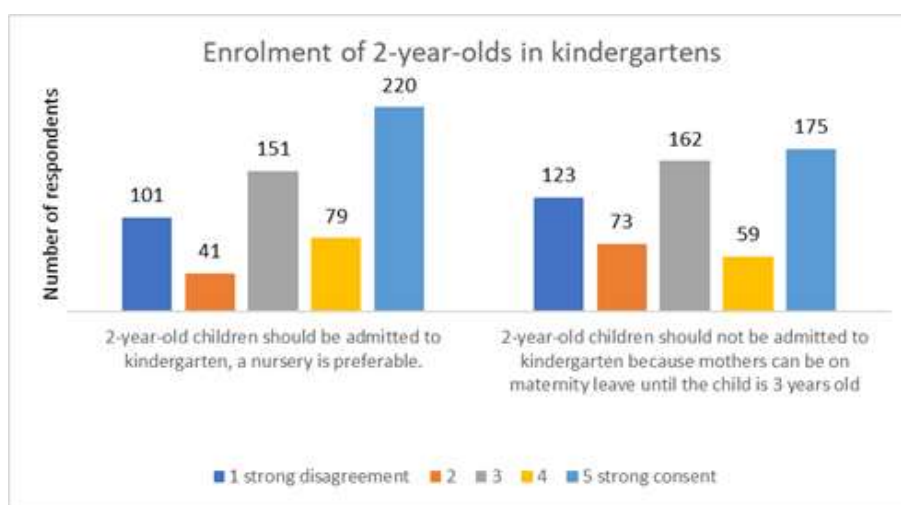


Figure 1. Teachers' views on the admission of 2-year-old children to kindergarten.



This view is similar to findings from a survey of teachers in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic (50%) conducted by Lipnicka et al. (2023). Vasinová et al., (2019) have also expressed their views along these lines. They reported that the majority of teachers (63%) did not perceive a benefit in the inclusion of two-year-old children in kindergarten. Some respondents (24%) were neutral on this issue and 25% disagreed. Potentially (39.6%) thought that children could be in a family. Maternity leave in Slovakia lasts until the child is 3 years old and the state provides parents with parental allowance (Act No. 571/2009). For this reason, Kindergarten may not be necessary for 2-year-old children. A smaller proportion of teachers (33.1%) disagreed with this view and 27.4% had no opinion. This implies that, some kindergartens are willing to accept 2-year-old children, especially in localities where there is a lack of kindergartens. They

cater for parents who need childcare for family or work reasons. This is evidenced by the number of 2-year-olds in kindergartens. They are 5% of the total number of children in kindergartens (state, private, religious).

The education of two-year-old children in kindergartens can appropriately complement family education. It will provide children with social activities with their peers, support the development of their competences and enable them to gain experience in a playful way and actively discover the world (State Educational Programme for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens, 2022). The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Development promotes quality and inclusive education. The principle is equality of access to education, taking into account the educational needs of the child. This also applies to kindergartens (Act No. 245/2008, Paragraph 3).

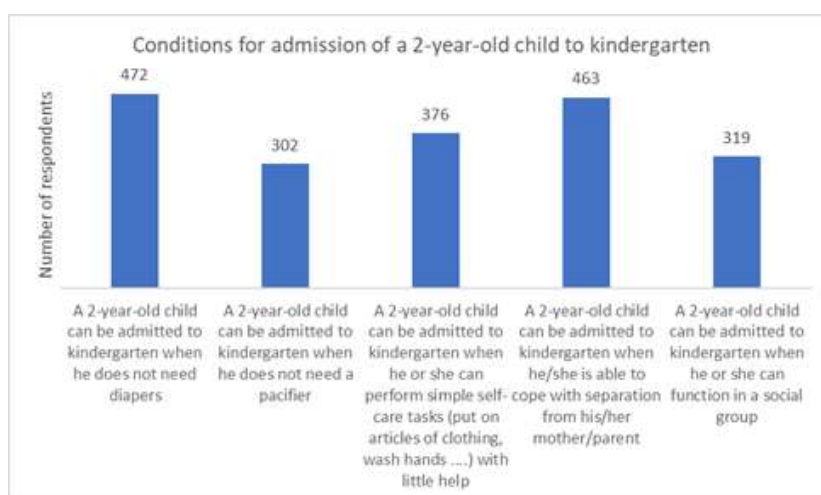


Figure 2. Teachers' views on the conditions of admission of 2-year-old children to kindergarten.

Respondents also commented on the conditions for admitting two-year-olds to kindergarten (Figure 2). The majority (79.7%) think that children should learn to go to the toilet. It was also important for teachers (78.2%) that children should be able to handle being separated from their parents for at least four hours. In addition, they should be able to perform basic self-care

activities with some assistance (63.5%). More than half of the respondents (51%) thought that two-year-olds should not use pacifiers and should be able to function in a social group (53.9%).

Currently, there are no state regulations regarding the readiness of two-year-olds to enter kindergarten. The decision to admit a two-year-old to kindergarten



is made by the principal. He/she may consult with the teachers. He analyses the personnel, material and other conditions that need to be provided for the child. In doing so, it shall take into account the child's needs, his/her abilities and for adaptation in the particular class of children. The child may not, by his/her actions, restrict the rights of other persons in pre-primary education (Act No. 245/2008, Paragraph

144). These research findings can contribute to the discussion on the establishment of such guidelines. Formal regulations would enable parents to prepare their children purposefully to enter kindergarten. Some teachers are likely to have experience with unprepared two-year-olds, which may contribute to their reluctance. This awareness of potential problems with this age group may influence their views.

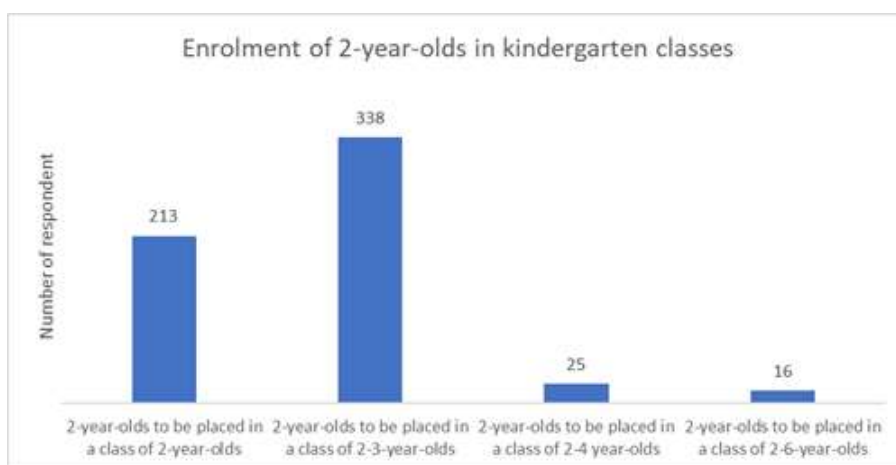


Figure 3. Teachers' views on the inclusion of two-year-olds in classes of children of different ages.

The teachers also expressed pragmatic views on including 2-year-olds in kindergarten classes (Figure 3). The preferred option was an age-mixed class of 2-3-year-olds (57.1%). According to the law (No. 245/2008, § 28), 2-year-olds can be in all kindergarten classes. The condition is that if a 2-year-old child is included in the class, the maximum number of children is reduced by one child. Several respondents (36%) prefer separate classes for 2-year-olds. According to the above law, they cannot be established. Here, the legal ignorance of teachers was evident. Few teachers would integrate two-year-olds into classes for older children.

As Vashinova et al. (2019) found, the problem is the high number of children in classes and the lack of teaching staff. Numbers are also high in Slovak kindergartens. Depending on the age composition,

they range from 20 to 22 children per class (Act No. 245/2008, Paragraph 28). The number of children in a class can be increased by a maximum of three children. There are usually two teachers per class. They alternate between morning and afternoon shifts. Only at lunchtime do their shifts overlap. They usually work alone in the classroom unless there is a teaching assistant. If some respondents have chosen a heterogeneous classroom with children aged 2-6 years, they probably have positive experiences with this model. They could see the benefits, for example, that children learn from each other and older children help younger children. The tradition is to place siblings in age-heterogeneous classes. However, this is not a legislative norm. It is a positive trend for children's emotional and social development.



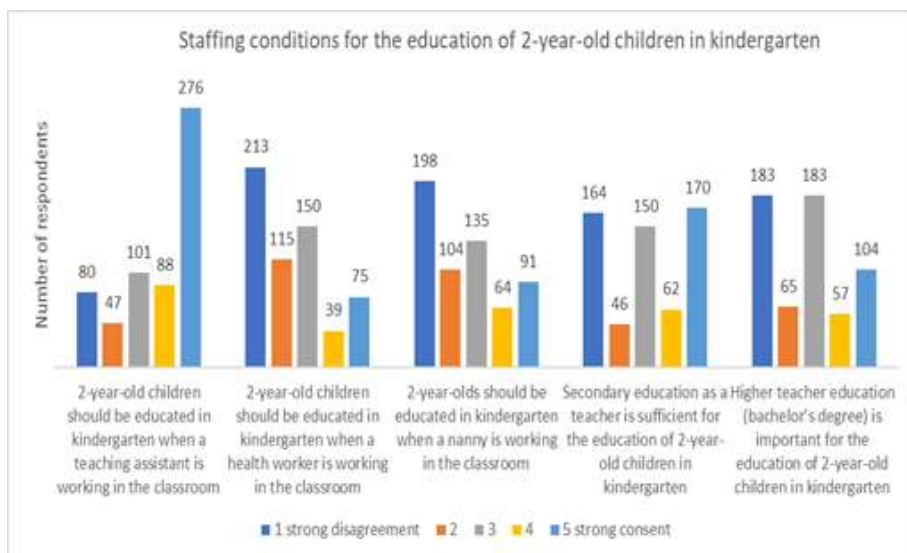


Figure 4. Teachers' views on staffing conditions for the education of 2-year-olds in kindergarten.

Teaching assistants are key to the effective education of two-year-olds in kindergarten (Figure 4). According to the teacher's requirements and in cooperation with professional staff, the pedagogical assistant creates equal opportunities in education and training and assists the child or group of children in overcoming architectural, informational, linguistic, health, social, or cultural barriers" (Act No.138/2019, Paragraph 19). However, a larger proportion of teachers (55.4%) think that a health or care worker is not needed for this age group (51%). In 2023, kindergarten founders may fund health workers in kindergartens. Funding is from the Recovery and Resilience Plan to develop access and quality of inclusive education. Caregivers cannot work in kindergartens. They are professional staff in settings for children under three (nurseries). Some teachers need caregivers of two-year-old children in kindergartens (15.3%). This is apparently related to providing for the specific hygiene, health, and dietary needs of children. Regarding the qualification of

teachers, 39.2% of respondents consider a secondary education to be sufficient, and 27.2% consider a bachelor's degree to be necessary. For the majority of teachers (66.4%), the most important factor was appropriate material and technical equipment for working with two-year-old children.

Their views are in line with Decree No. 541/2023. Both secondary and university-educated teachers can work with two-year-old children. This is the responsibility of the kindergarten director. It takes into account the teachers' personal and professional competencies and their interest in working with two-year-old children. In practice, it is common for teachers to make suggestions to the principal and agree as a team. Based on agreement and reflection on competencies, they do not have to work with two-year-old children. If there are more than ten two-year-olds in a class, three teachers are responsible for their education. They work in shifts and take turns with the children (Decree No. 541/2023).



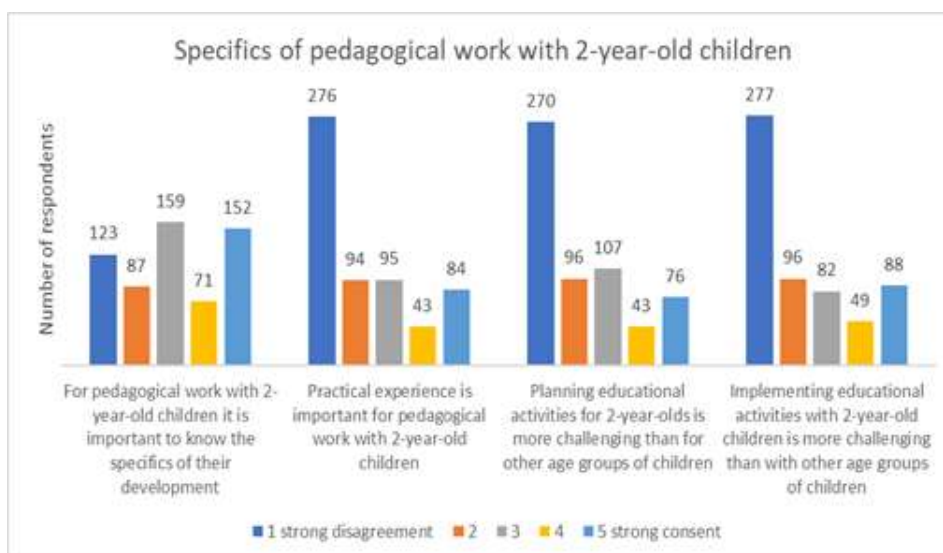


Figure 5. Teachers' views on the specifics of pedagogical work with 2-year-old children.

Teachers identified specific aspects related to pedagogical work with 2-year-olds (Figure 5). An interesting finding was that 62.5% of respondents thought that no previous teaching experience was necessary to work with this age group. Even novice teachers can work with two-year-old children. Two-year-olds work under the supervision of an introductory teacher. At that time, they complete adaptation training, which they complete with a practical examination (Act No 138/2019, Paragraph 31). However, 37.7% of respondents consider theoretical training focused on the developmental needs of two-year-olds to be important. Teachers mainly receive it at universities. Teachers with a secondary education have to undergo innovative training once every seven years of practice. It focuses on pre-primary education, which is related to the developmental specificities of children in early childhood. Each teacher receives refresher training once a year, which may include a theory of child development and needs (Act 138/2019, Paragraphs 55 and 57).

Interestingly, teachers did not perceive planning (63%) or implementing learning activities for two-year-

old children (63%) as more challenging compared to older children. This is natural; in every classroom, teachers carry out these activities, and apparently, their difficulty does not depend on the age of the children. The collective of teachers in the kindergarten develops and updates the school curriculum every year. According to this, teachers prepare educational activities on a daily basis. In the classrooms, teachers may draw up plans for educational activities. Their level varies depending on the teachers' abilities and needs. There is no prescribed structure and content. A class diary is used to record learning activities (Decree No. 339/2023).

There is still a group of teachers who perceived the planning (20%) and implementation of learning activities for two-year-old children (23%) as more challenging compared to older children. This seems to be related to the view that 2-year-olds should be in the family and in the nursery, not in kindergarten. Perhaps these teachers do not have enough experience or knowledge to be confident that they can handle working with them.



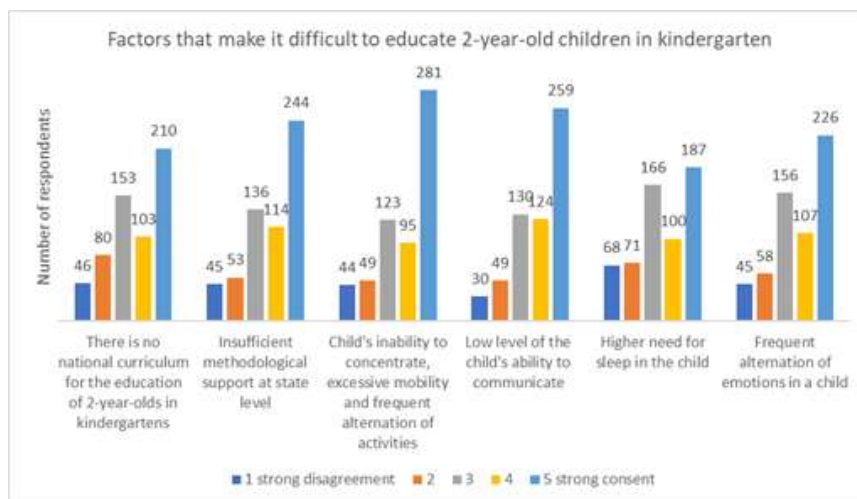


Figure 6. Factors that make it difficult to do pedagogical work with two-year-old children.

Respondents also answered questions about factors that make it difficult to raise and educate 2-year-old children in kindergartens (figure 6). Teachers' views on the difficulty of teaching two-year-olds were certainly influenced by other factors. The questionnaire included those that were found by other methods in the above-mentioned project. In the questionnaire teachers confirmed the importance of the implemented project. They pointed to the lack of curricular (52.5%) and methodological (60.5%) solutions on the part of the state. The materials produced within the project will provide information and methodological support for solving the problem in practice. The analysis of the findings will help in their development.

Teachers agreed that the education of two-year-old children is hampered by other factors. Children's attention is variable, they cannot concentrate on activities (63.5%). Two-year-olds have a higher need for sleep (48.5%). There is an order of daily activities in kindergartens. Children cannot rest or sleep in the morning, only in the afternoon at a set time. Teachers organise games, educational and physical activities, children receive a meal every three and hygiene is carried out as needed. They do outdoor activities every day (National Programme for Pre-primary Education in Kindergartens, 2022). Two-year-olds do not have well-

developed communication skills (64.7%) and often have alternating emotions (56.3%). Some of these findings corroborated the results of observations published by Lynch et al., (2023). Challenges in teaching two-year-olds include maintaining their attention, managing defiance and rapid changes in moods and emotions, and crying when the child is unable to say goodbye to the parent. These specifics of child development condition the pedagogical process.

At present, there are no national regulations on the readiness of 2-year-olds to enter kindergarten. The admission of a two-year-old to kindergarten is decided by the head teacher. He/she may consult the teachers. He analyses the personnel, material and other conditions to be provided according to the child's needs and abilities. Few teachers would integrate two-year-olds into classes for older children. Staffing requirements, especially for teaching assistants, affect this. Material and technical equipment for working with two-year-olds is also important. A large proportion of teachers do not need a university degree and teaching experience to work with these children. They need theoretical training focused on the developmental needs of two-year-olds. Planning and implementing educational activities with these children are not more challenging work compared to older children. However, teachers lack methodological



support from the state. They need to take into account the developmental specificities of children and need materials in which they can learn appropriate methods and strategies. The specifics of children's development also need to be taken into account when creating appropriate conditions at the state and institutional level in education. The results of the questionnaire survey identified some of these. Of course, not all of them, so they need to be further investigated and compared with other countries.

5. Conclusion

Most teachers do not see the benefit of enrolling two-year-olds in kindergarten. There are other alternatives for the care and education of two-year-olds in Slovakia. However, there are still kindergartens that educate two-year-olds. The education of 2-year-olds in kindergartens can appropriately complement family education and develop children's competencies according to the curriculum.

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