



Regione Toscana
Diritti Valori Innovazione Sostenibilità



THE TUSCAN APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

TO A VIEW ADDRESSED TO 0-6 CHILDREN

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An integrated approach to ECEC: A case study of Slovenia

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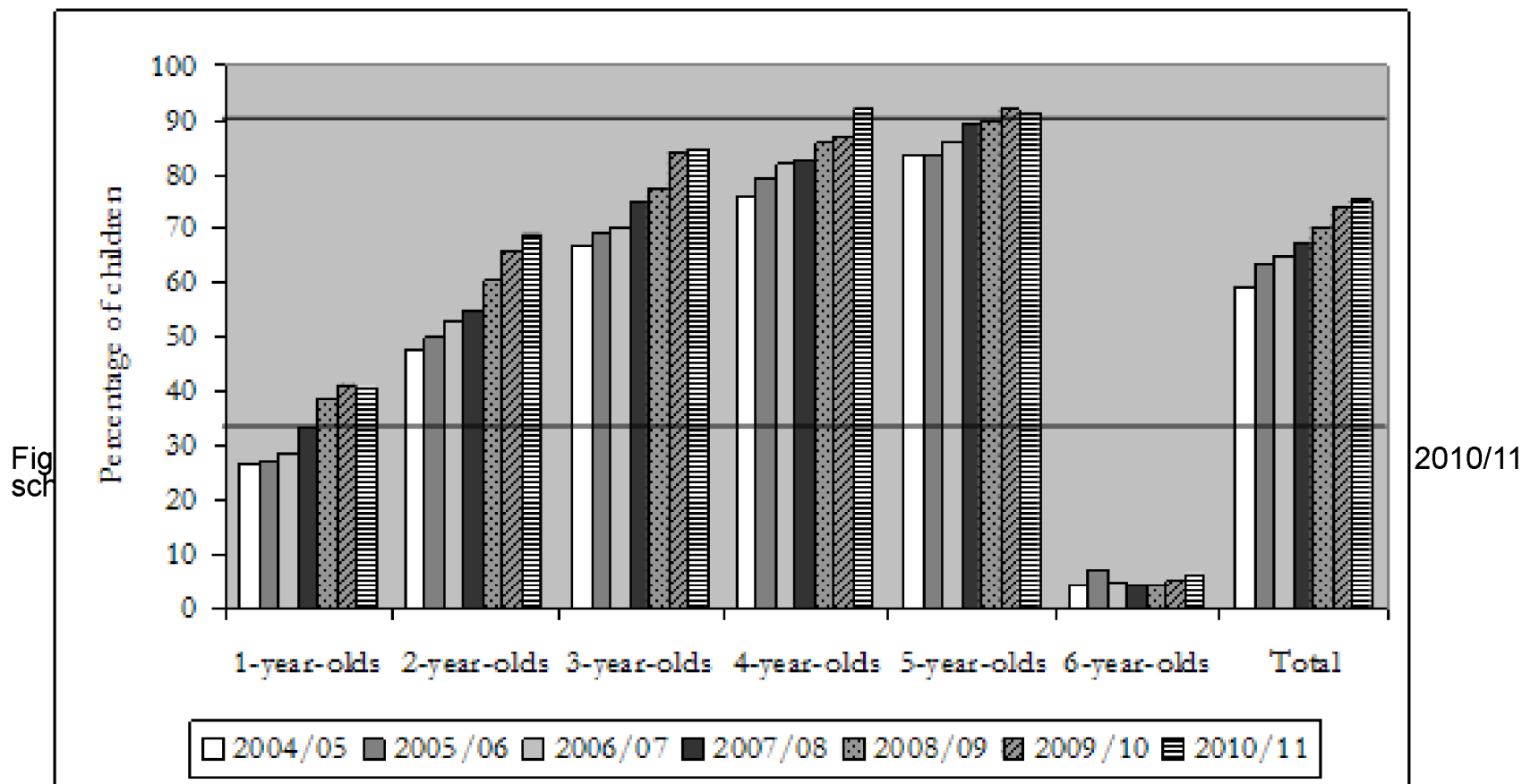
- Slovenian preschools are **included under the Ministry of Education and sport** – representing the 1st level of educational system.
- The *Preschol Law* (1996) defines that preschools are **established and funded by municipalities**.
- Preschools are organised as **integrated**, intended for children from the end of the maternity leave till the entrance to the 1st grade of compulsory school & **internally divided into two age periods**: the 1st age period includes toddlers aged from 1 to 3 years and the 2nd age period includes children, aged from 3 to 6 years.
- Preschools implement **programmes of different length**: full-day programmes (6-9 hours); half-day programmes (4-6 hours) and shorter programs (240-720 hours/year).
- The preschool programmes can also be **organised in a childminder family** (it can be carried out at the home of the preschool teachers or her assistant, employed at a preschool institution, or at the home of a private preschool teacher).

- Preschool **classes** can be **homogenous or heterogeneous** within one age period, or they can be **combined** (they include children of both age periods).
- The **highest number of children** in the classes of the 1st and 2nd age periods is regulated by the *Preschool Law*.
- The **local community is obliged** to initiate the procedure of setting up a preschool if there is sufficient interest of the parents, however it cannot always ensure a sufficient number of admission places.
- According to the *Preschool Law*, in cases where there are not sufficient admission places, **children from socially deprived families** and children **with special needs** are given the **priority**.

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- In recent years, the shares of children attending preschool in Slovenia have increased in all age groups. In the 2010/11 school year, the average was 75.3%: 40.8% of 1-year-olds, 69% of 2-year-olds, 84.6% of 3-year-olds, 91.9% of 4-year-olds, 91% of 5-year-olds, and 6.4% of 6-year-olds.

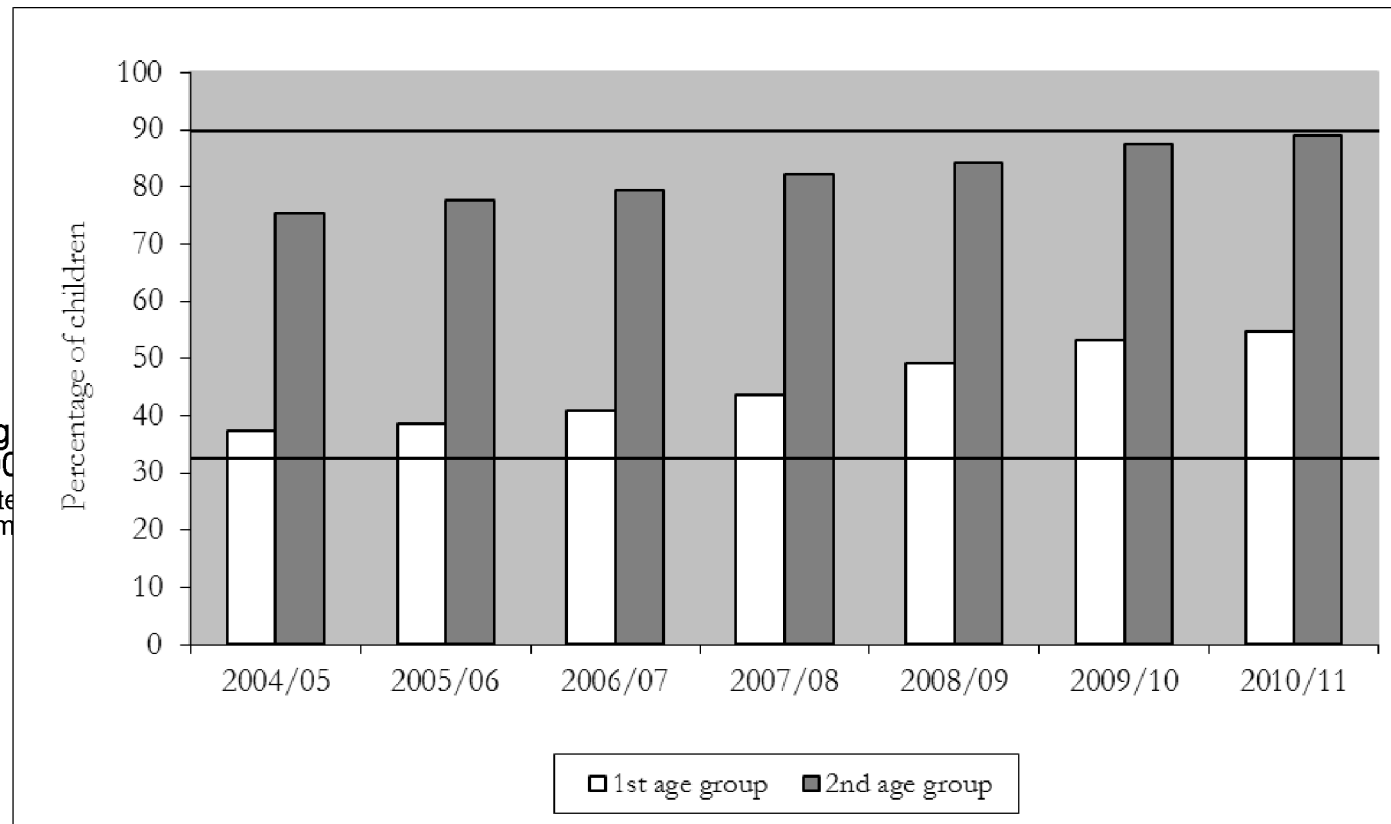


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- In the **2010/11** school year, **54.6% of toddlers in the first age group** (up to 3 years old) attended preschool, which is a significantly higher share than the European Council recommended for 2010 (33%). **89.1% of children in the second age group** attended preschool - the share was approaching the 90% the European Council recommended for 2010.

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- The creation of **private preschools** was for the first time in Slovenia legally regulated by the *Preschool Law in 1996*. Parents have the right to choose between public and private preschools, but there is a relatively small number of private preschools (in the **2010/11** school year, only **4% of preschools** were private - the majority being Catholic preschools, some of them preschools with special pedagogical principles, and some granted the concession by the municipalities for the implementation of the public preschool programme).
- The majority of children with **special needs** are **integrated** in the mainstream programmes (**from 75% to 80%** in the period of the last five years), while only a smaller share of children with special needs is included in the separate developmental classes within the preschool institutions (from 20% to 25% in the period of the last five years).

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The ECEC in the ethnically and linguistically mixed areas is provided in accordance with the *Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia*, educational legislation, and the law regulating special educational rights of the Italian and the Hungarian ethnic minorities. *An addition to the national **Preschool Curriculum*** is provided for these preschool institutions.



In the ethnically and linguistically mixed area of Prekmurje, the children attend *bilingual preschools* from this area. Classes are mixed and the languages of instruction are Slovenian and Hungarian. In the ethnically and linguistically mixed area of Slovenian Istra, preschools offer Slovenian and Italian as the languages of instruction.

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Since 1996, the **BASIC STRUCTURAL INDICATORS** have been defined by the *Preschool Act* – a greater stability in defining the conditions for preschool education. The following indicators are defined:

- the **number of children** in a group (in the 1. age group: max. 12 children, in the 2. age group : max. 22 children);
 - the **presence of both the preschool teacher and a preschool teacher's assistant** in the group (in the 1. age group: for 6 hours, in the 2. age group: 4 hours);
 - **the staff education**: the same for the 1. and 2. age group; a team of a preschool teacher and a preschool teacher's assistant work in each class;
 - **preschool teacher**: a higher education degree in preschool education or a university degree from some other field (pedagogy, art, humanities or social sciences) together with an added programme of preschool education;
 - **preschool teacher's assistants**: an upper secondary school in the field of preschool education or a general secondary school along with a course in preschool education.
- The process of **continuous professional development** is defined by the *Collective contract for education in the Republic of Slovenia*: the professional workers have a right to the continuous professional training and development; preschool has to enable and finance at least 5 days a year or 15 days in every 3 years of the professional training.
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- **Private preschools** do not enjoy a special status of a high quality preschool education, in which only children of well-situated parents could be included.
- Because the *Preschool Curriculum* is prepared as an **open and unstructured national document**, a high degree of autonomy and accountability in the process of implementing the curriculum is given to the professional workers in preschools.
- The **share of the price of the programme**, paid by parents, **depends on the monthly income per family member**, for some children the cost is fully covered by the municipalities (e.g. children from poor families),



the quality public preschool education is also available to children from families of lower socio-economic status.

Preschool curriculum

The new conceptual bases presented:

- the shift from older biologicistic and normative views on child's development to the latest theoretical knowledge, based on the sociocultural theories of child's development and learning;
- the shift from the understanding of preschool care and education as the preparation school to it's understanding as the possibility for preparing children for learning;
- the shift from the traditional emphasis on the contents to the emphasis on the process of preschool education;
- the shift to the complexity of interactions and experiences from which a child can learn within a preschool setting.

Preschool curriculum

- It follows the concept of **combined daycare and preschool** in conceptual terms and is intended for children in the first and second age groups.
- It includes general **goals and principles** for fulfilling them, (e.g. the principle of democracy and plurality, the principle of preschool openness, autonomy, and professional responsibility, and the principle of equal opportunities while taking into account diversity).
- It includes **an introduction to development and learning within a wider social and cultural context**, emphasizing the role of daily preschool activities, the necessity of continuous encouragement of social interactions and the use of language, and cooperation with parents.
- The main body of the curriculum defines **six fields of activity**: exercise, language, art, society, nature, and mathematics.
- Goals, activity examples, and the role of adults are specified for each field separately; the **goals are defined for both age groups together**, whereas **only specific activity examples are defined separately for each age group** (reflecting developmental characteristics of children).
- Several **interdisciplinary activities** (e.g. moral development, healthcare, traffic safety) are included in all the fields and represent part of children's life in preschool.
- Several other documents were also adopted between 1999 and 2006 - making it possible to work with specific groups of children (e.g. with special needs, ethnic minority groups, and Roma children).

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A Slovenian longitudinal study: the effect of preschool on children's development and learning

- From 2002 to 2006, a **longitudinal study** was carried out on the effect of preschool on children's (language, cognitive, social, and personality) development and learning in connection with some other factors of the preschool and family environment.
- 274 randomly selected 3-year-olds that attended preschool in the period between the first and third evaluations, and attended first grade during the fourth evaluation.
- **Half of the sample began going to preschool at age 1, and the other half at age 3.** During the fourth evaluation, when the children studied were 6 years old and started attending first grade, the sample also included children that had not gone to preschool before entering first grade.
- During the third evaluation, when the children were 5 years old, **the quality of the preschool** teachers' work in a group was evaluated (the encouragement of language, cognitive and motor development, and the social interactions).

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THE FINDINGS:

- **Social development:** the younger children were when they entered preschool, the more they were described by their parents and preschool teachers as sociable and having a strong will and fewer internalizing problems (they were less depressed, anxious, isolated from their peer group, and dependent on the preschool teacher);
- **General language competence:** early and later preschool attendance did not have a significant effect on the development of children's language; maternal education proved to have a major effect .
- Early enrollment in a **high-quality preschool** reduced the effect of parental education on children's language development - was a **protective factor** for children whose parents had a lower level of education.

The comparison between 6-year-olds enrolled in preschool and children that did not attend preschool before entering primary school: preschool did not have a significant effect on their cognitive abilities and school readiness assessed at age 6. However preschool decreased the effect of parental education on children's **school readiness**.

Preschool attendance had a positive effect on the school **performance of 6-year-olds in first grade:** higher scores in all three subjects evaluated (i.e., Slovenian, math, and social studies) than their peers that had not attended preschool.



Future directions – achieving higher inclusion & overcoming social inequality

- The debate on how to include more **children with low paternal education** to preschools through systemic and curricular solutions.
- The new *White Book on Education in the RS* (2011):
 - specific measures aimed at **target groups identified as different**;
 - emphasizing the important **role of language** for the development of children's cognitive and social skills and knowledge.

Some possible solutions (*White book on education in RS, 2011*)

children from socially and culturally less favorable environments have **priority** in addition to children with special needs **when enrolling in preschool** and there are not enough vacancies for all the children;

for children that are not native speakers of Slovenian, the preschool must offer **additional classes in Slovenian and their native language** (taking place during their stay in preschool, in accordance to conceptually and methodically developed premises and with appropriately qualified staff).

a preschool can also decide to **additionally encourage the children's language competence** in all or individual groups (for children from less favorable family environment in terms of education, culture, and money).

Starting points for additional language stimulation are prepared and the preschool teacher working with these children receives **additional training**.

Periodic and short programmes for children aged 3-6, who are not included into preschool: different length, free for economically deprived parents, carried out by preschool teacher/assistant/volunteer with appropriate education; ratio 1 adult: 8 children is regulated on a national level.